

Voices for VI Children

Daily News, the Avis – June Op-Ed column, Judith Richardson, columnist (*photo on file*)

Title: ***Success Starts with Reading***

According to the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), two out of every three fourth graders in the nation are not proficient in reading. An alternate test-measure (VITAL) used in the USVI shows that more than half (55%) of our own public school fourth graders are not reading at grade level.

Being able to read with proficiency by the end of third grade is a strong predictor of school success and graduation. Reading is the basis of most learning that follows -- in fourth grade and beyond -- whether in math, history, science or any other subject. Studies show that those who haven't mastered reading skills by the time they enter fourth grade are likely to have a hard time keeping up.

"Until third grade, children are learning to read. After third grade, they are reading to learn. When kids are not reading by fourth grade, they have a steeper hill to climb the rest of their lives," says Ralph Smith, Executive Vice President of the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

Alma Powell of America's Promise Alliance, a national organization founded to encourage high school graduation, finds her work increasingly focused on early school success. "The National Research Council has shown that a child who is not at least a modestly skilled reader by the end of third grade is unlikely to graduate from high school," says Powell. "We must intervene early to make a difference."

The ability to read is central to a child's success in school, life-long earning potential, and the ability to contribute to the nation's economy and its security.

Brigadier General Velma Richardson, U.S. Army (Ret.), of Mission: Readiness says the pool of high school graduates is neither large enough nor skilled enough to meet our national security needs. "The Defense Department estimates 75 percent of Americans aged 17 to 24 are ineligible to join the U.S. military because they are poorly educated, involved in crime or physically unfit. Even with a high school diploma, 30% of potential recruits fail the entrance exam due to inadequate math and reading skills," says General Richardson. "We must get today's kids on track to become tomorrow's leaders."

The Annie E. Casey Foundation has just released a special report, [*Early Warning! Why Reading by the End of Third Grade Matters*](#). Its call to make reading by the end of third grade a national priority is supported by a broad coalition including United Way Worldwide, America's Promise Alliance, and Mission: Readiness.

The special report notes that various challenges, beginning at birth, contribute to students' falling behind in becoming proficient readers. Challenges include health or poor nutrition problems that interfere with early learning. Many children lack adequate parental supervision, and the early interactions from adults that foster language and learning development. Young children may have limited access to high-quality early childhood and pre-K programs that support and encourage learning. Older children may suffer chronic absences from school, summer learning loss, or low-performing schools.

Recognizing these and other challenges, the Casey Foundation's *Early Warning! Why Reading by the End of Third Grade Matters* has identified four steps to close the gap and raise our children's ability for success:

- 1. Develop a coherent system of early care and education that aligns and coordinates what happens from birth through third grade so children are ready to take on the learning tasks associated with fourth grade and beyond.**
- 2. Encourage and enable parents, families, and caregivers to play their indispensable roles as co-producers of good outcomes for their children.**
- 3. Prioritize and invest in results-driven initiatives to transform low-performing schools into high-quality teaching and learning environments in which all children, including those from low-income families and high-poverty neighborhoods, are present, engaged, and educated to high standards.**
- 4. Develop and utilize solutions to two of the most significant contributors to the under-achievement of children from low-income families: chronic absence from school and summer learning loss.**

"The research is clear and compelling, says Michael L. Eskew, Casey Board Chair and former CEO of UPS. It affirms what common sense tells us. In a knowledge dependent world and global economy, no city, no region, no nation -- including our own -- can compete successfully without attending to the basics. And that starts with reading."

For more KIDS COUNT state and local data, visit <http://datacenter.kidscount.org/>. To read the Annie E Casey/KIDS COUNT special report, visit <http://www.aecf.org/readingmatters.aspx>.