

## Developing Effective Early Learning Programs: Thinking Strategically

### Third Grade Reading Goal: Why It's Important

Nationally, there is growing recognition among educators of the importance of children reading at grade level by the end of third grade. This recognition is the result of research over the past 20 years showing the correlation between students' reading ability at the end of third grade and their subsequent academic success. Most recently, the National Research Council concluded: "Academic success, as defined by high school graduation, can be predicted with reasonable accuracy by knowing someone's reading skill at the end of 3rd grade. *A person who is not at least a modestly skilled reader by that time is unlikely to graduate from high school.*"<sup>1</sup> (Emphasis added)

Given this research, and the requirements of the federal No Child Left Behind legislation and Washington State's Education Reform Act, it is not surprising that school districts in the state are increasingly committing to the goal of children reading at grade level by the end of third grade. More importantly, they are using this goal to drive K-3 program improvements that are aligned with the goal. Typical areas of focus for program improvements include: language and literacy curricula, instructional practices, professional development, class size, and full-day kindergarten.

**"Reading well by the end of third grade is the window of opportunity where we need to focus. We work a lot harder for smaller gains at later grade levels."**

Dr. Abbie Pack,  
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Districts with the most comprehensive strategies for achieving their third grade reading goals are looking at not only K-3 improvements but also pre-kindergarten interventions for families and children, birth to kindergarten age. Pre-kindergarten strategies include school-based programs, parent/family outreach, home-based programs, and collaborations with community early learning providers and other community partners. Maximum benefit is achieved when these strategies are aligned, with each effort contributing to the common goal of every child reading at grade level by the end of third grade. See ["Aligning Efforts to Achieve Third Grade Reading Goal"](#)

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<sup>1</sup> National Research Council. Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children. Edited by Catherine E. Snow, Susan Burns and Peg Griffin, Committee on the Prevention of Reading Difficulties in Young Children. Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 1998. Other reports citing the correlation between third grade reading ability and high school success include: Richard C. Anderson, Elfrieda H. Hiebert, Judith A. Scott, and Ian A. G. Wilkinson, "Becoming a Nation of Readers: The Report of the Commission on Reading," Champaign-Urbana, IL: Center for the Study of Reading, 1985; and D. J. Francis, S. E. Shaywitz, K. K. Stuebing, B. A. Shaywitz, and J. M. Fletcher, "Developmental Lag Versus Deficit Models of Reading Disability: A Longitudinal, Individual Growth Curves Analysis," *Journal of Educational Psychology*, Vol 88, No 1, 1996.