

# Double Jeopardy: How Third-grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation

*Donald J. Hernandez*

## **Introduction**

It is well-established that students who do not master reading by the end of third grade struggle in later grades and have a higher dropout rate. Studies have also shown an influence of poverty on dropout rates. In this study, researchers divided children into proficient, basic, and below basic groups, as well as three income categories. Influences of these variables on academic success are established, and implications for policy and program strategies are discussed.

## **Background**

Between third and fourth grade, children shift from learning to read, to reading to learn. Therefore, reading intervention conducted at or before the third grade level is much more effective than intervention conducted later. NCLB required states to test reading skills annually for all students, and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act has increased federal funding for scientifically based early reading instruction. In 2009, 33% of fourth graders read proficiently, 34% read at the basic level, and 33% read below the basic level.

## **Findings**

One in six children who were not reading proficiently by third grade did not graduate high school on time. This is four times the rate for children who were reading proficiently by third grade. Children who have lived in poverty in addition to not meeting the third grade reading criteria were three times more likely than those who have never been poor. Black and Hispanic children who do not meet this criteria are twice as likely to dropout than white children at similar reading levels.

## **Conclusion: Policy and Program Strategies**

Policies and programs can foster children's success in schools, within the family, and in federal, state, and local policy. It is cost-effective to invest in high-quality early education. For every \$1 invested in the first four to six years of school, there is a long-term societal return of \$8.24. This is particularly true for low-income, black, and Hispanic children.

Studies have shown that the effects of quality PreK programs can fade out unless these programs are linked with the elementary grades. This requires aligned curriculum, consistent instructional approaches, availability of programs for all children, certified classroom teachers, small class sizes, and family involvement. Supporting families is of importance because by simply talking to and reading to their children, parents serve as the child's first teacher.

Federal, state, and local governments will need to take the lead in developing funding efforts to support these programs.

Hernandez, D. J., & Annie E. Casey, F. (2011). Double Jeopardy: How Third-Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation. *Annie E. Casey Foundation*, Retrieved from EBSCOhost.