



EMBARGOED UNTIL MAY 18, 2010

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Early Warning: 3 out of 4 Arizona 4th Graders Are Not Proficient in Reading

(Phoenix) Children's Action Alliance today released alarming national reading proficiency data that spells trouble for the future success of Arizona students. The latest National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reports that 75% of Arizona fourth graders are not proficient in reading. This dismal statistic ranks Arizona 45th out of 50 states and puts our economy and prosperity at high risk. The national rate was also frightening, with 67% of children below proficient.

Nationally, the NAEP reading scores point to great disparities across race, ethnicity and family income. However, Arizona's poor scores ranged across all categories. For white children and Hispanic children; for children living in cities, suburbs and rural areas; for children in low-income families and children in higher income families – more children in Arizona scored below proficient than the national rate.

“Far too many of our students from all kinds of family backgrounds don't have the basic skills they need to succeed. It's an Arizona problem – not an immigrant problem or a minority problem,” said Jacob Moore. Moore is a member of the State Board of Education and serves on the Board of Directors of Children's Action Alliance.

Fourth grade reading levels are a strong indicator of success in school and life. A new report by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, *Warning: Why Reading by the End of Third Grade Matters*, points out that a lack of reading proficiency cements educational failure and poverty into our next generation. “The research is clear and compelling. And it affirms what common sense tells us,” said Michael L. Eskew, Casey Board Chair and former CEO of UPS. “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.”

The Annie E. Casey report joins a wealth of research in the fields of economics, criminal justice, social science and education that points to early childhood as a key period to build school readiness and the foundation for literacy and school success. Yet in Arizona, the health services and educational opportunities for young children have been especially vulnerable to budget cuts.

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This year state lawmakers approved legislation that requires schools to hold back third grade students for another year if they fail the third grade AIMS reading test. But they simultaneously eliminated or drastically weakened proven tools that improve reading skills.

“Waiting until third grade is not a smart use of taxpayer dollars,” said Dr. Eugene Garcia, Vice President for Education Partnerships at Arizona State University and a nationally respected expert in the area of language teaching and education. “It is much more effective and less expensive to help prevent problems early on and to help parents and child care teachers prepare young children for a lifetime of reading.”

“Many lawmakers have been talking the talk about the importance of early reading skills, but they have literally been walking in the other direction,” said Dana Wolfe Naimark, President and CEO of Children’s Action Alliance. “While they point fingers at parents and schools and demand that they do better, they try to duck all responsibility for their own decisions that sabotage children and school success.”

Governor Brewer and the legislature cut funding for public schools, including funding for teachers, classroom supplies, and curriculum. And all state appropriated funding has been completely eliminated for

- Full-day Kindergarten
- The Early Childhood Block Grant that was used by school districts for preschool and other educational services, like reading aids
- The Family Literacy program for parents and young children
- The Healthy Families parent coaching for struggling families

The legislature is also asking voters to repeal the First Things First early childhood services that were funded by a new voter-approved tobacco tax in 2006 to help children start kindergarten healthy and ready to succeed. The state budget for fiscal year 2011 signed by Governor Brewer assumes this funding will be diverted to the state general fund.

Other budget cuts mean that qualified children in low-income families are no longer able to participate in child care assistance or KidsCare health coverage. More than 11,000 children have been turned away from child care since February 2009 and 40,500 children have been frozen out of KidsCare already.

Naimark concluded. “We ask all state lawmakers to become part of the solution by giving students, teachers, parents, and families the best tools possible to succeed.”

Attached is a list of state lawmakers who voted to require the retention of third graders who don’t pass the AIMS reading test, but who also voted to ask voters to repeal First Things First, to eliminate KidsCare (which was subsequently partially restored), and to cut funding for full-day Kindergarten, Healthy Families, child care subsidies, Early Childhood Block Grant and Family Literacy.

**ARIZONA LAWMAKERS WHO VOTED FOR THIRD GRADE RETENTION BILL
AND ALSO VOTED TO CUT EARLY EDUCATION SERVICES THAT PROMOTE READING SKILLS**

Governor Janice Brewer*

Senators

Sylvia Allen
Frank Antenori
David Braswell
Ed Bunch
Robert "Bob" Burns
Ron Gould
Chuck Gray
Linda Gray
Jack W. Harper
Barbara Leff
Al Melvin
John Nelson
Russell Pearce
Steve Pierce
Thayer Verschoor

Representatives

Kirk Adams
Cecil P. Ash
Ray Barnes
Nancy K. Barto
Andy Biggs
Tom Boone
Judy M. Burges
Steve Court
Rich Crandall
Adam Driggs
Doris Goodale
David Gowan
Laurin Hendrix
Russell L. Jones
John Kavanagh

Debbie Lesko
Lucy Mason
John McComish
Nancy McLain
Steve B. Montenegro
Rick Murphy
Warde V. Nichols
Frank Pratt
Michele Reagan
Amanda Reeve
Carl Seel
David W. Stevens
Andrew M. Tobin
Jerry Weiers
Jim Weiers
Steven B. Yarbrough

Lawmakers are included on this list if they voted YES or didn't vote on all the bills listed below:

- First Special Session, 2009, SB 1001 and HB 2001, mid-year budget cuts, with cuts to child care subsidies, Healthy Families, and K-12 education
- 7th special session, 2010 HCR 2001, repeal of First Things First
- 7th special session, 2010, HB 2010 and SB 1010, repeal of KidsCare
- 7th special session, 2010 SB 1008 and HB 2008, cutting funding for full-day K
- 7th special session, 2010 HB 2001 and SB 1001, FY 2011 budget with elimination of funding to Early Childhood Block Grant and Family Literacy and cuts to K-12
- 2nd regular session, 2010, HB 2732, 3rd grade retention for failing AIMS reading test

Lawmakers are not included on the list if they voted NO on any of the bills listed above.

*Because HCR 2001 is a referral to the voters, the Governor does not have a decision-making role in this bill. The FY 2011 budget that Governor Brewer signed assumes that First Things First will be repealed and the fund balances and tobacco tax revenues are diverted to the general fund and appropriated from there.

Children’s Action Alliance (www.azchildren.org) is an independent voice for Arizona children at the state capitol and in the community. CAA works to improve children’s health, education, and security through information and action.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation is a private charitable organization, whose primary mission is to foster public policies, human-service reforms, and community supports that more effectively meet the needs of today’s vulnerable children and families. For more information, visit www.aecf.org.

The Casey Foundation will release the report during a webcast on May 18th at 1:00 PM Eastern time. The live webcast will include featured speakers and a panel discussion, moderated by Michel Martin with representatives from the education, government, and business sectors. To register for the webcast, please visit www.visualwebcaster.com/casey-foundation-briefing.

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