

Reading to learn

Early childhood should be focus

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A new study reports that more than two-thirds of Utah fourth-graders cannot read well. While state education officials stand by a smaller figure, there is no doubt Utah must do more to make sure all Utah children are literate.

Former Gov. Jon Huntsman supported full-day kindergarten and early-grade reading initiatives, both of which were funded by the Legislature prior to the state's budget collapse last year. As education funding rebounds along with the economy, legislators should boost reading instruction.

Far too few schoolchildren in the Beehive State are reading well enough by the fourth grade. And if they aren't proficient readers by then, it's nearly impossible to catch up later. That means anywhere from a fourth to two-thirds of Utah students, depending on how reading skill is measured, won't be able to read textbooks, test instructions or information sources like the Internet as they move into higher grades.

Eventually, many of these early underachievers will drop out of school and join the ranks of the unemployed or underemployed who need social services provided by taxpayers.

The 2009 National Assessment of Educational Progress, says a startling 69 percent of Utah fourth-graders cannot read at grade level. By state measures, about a quarter of fourth-grade students lag in reading skill.

The state tests all students based on Utah curriculum, while NAEP tests a representative sample of students in a variety of ways, not necessarily on Utah curriculum. So you might expect the results to be different.

But, no matter how it's measured, Utah children's reading ability is far below where it should be. And minority students continue to score substantially lower than their white classmates. By NAEP standards, a whopping 90 percent of Latino students, 86 percent of blacks, 83 percent of Native American, 70 percent of Asian and Pacific Islander students and 64 percent of white children are not proficient in reading. That's especially worrisome because Utah schools welcome a growing percentage of minority children each year.

Nevertheless, schools continue to promote young students who can't read. Only 2 percent of Utah children are held back, while the national average is 11 percent. The state's class sizes, largest in the nation, are to blame for both poor reading skills and for the reluctance to keep a child in first grade if he can't do second-grade work.

Utah's high minority drop-out rate and its shameful achievement gap separating white and minority students both have their roots in early-grade learning. We've got to do better for all the youngest Utahns.