A CALL TO IMPROVE THIRD-GRADE READING PROFICIENCY IN NEW ORLEANS
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Letter from Leaders ................................................................................................................. 3

Introduction ................................................................................................................................. 4

The State of Third-Grade Reading in New Orleans ................................................................. 6

How many New Orleans Children are Not Reading at Grade Level by the End of Third Grade ........................................................................................................................................ 8

Call to Action ............................................................................................................................... 10
Dear Reader,

With a new school year upon us, educators are embarking on a fresh opportunity to achieve academic outcomes for the students of New Orleans. It is also an opportunity to bring attention to the increasingly urgent issue of early literacy among our children and the effect reading proficiency can have on future success.

Over the last decade, New Orleans has seen dramatic improvement in educational achievement for children, emphasizing the collective effort required to ensure all children receive an excellent education. Now, eleven years after Hurricane Katrina, New Schools for New Orleans reports that more students are performing on grade level, fewer students are trapped in low-performing schools, and more students are graduating on time.

However, even with this progress, a large percentage of our children are not achieving crucial milestones. In 2015, just over half of the third graders in Orleans Parish achieved a score of Basic or above on the reading section of the state assessment, the iLEAP, and only 31% received a score of Mastery or above (Louisiana Department of Education). The ability to read at or above grade level by third grade has been documented as a significant indicator of child development and a child’s future academic and social success. Third grade marks the turning point between learning to read and reading to learn. We know that if children do not read well by the end of the third grade, they are less likely to catch up, less likely to graduate from high school, and less likely to find good jobs. Too many third graders in New Orleans do not read proficiently. For children of color and children in low-income families, the stakes are even higher. Statewide, Louisiana’s KIDS COUNT data shows that 83% of Black or African-American fourth graders were behind in reading in 2015.

New Orleans is ready to join a national call to action from the National Civic League for the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading and put a stake in the ground on the issue of early literacy. The national Campaign for Grade-Level Reading, launched in 2010, is a national partnership to ensure that more children in low-income families succeed in school and graduate prepared for college, a career, and active citizenship. It is a collaborative effort by foundations, leading social-sector organizations, business leaders, government agencies, states and communities.

The Campaign is based on the belief that schools must be accountable for helping all children achieve, but that schools cannot succeed alone. Decades of research confirm that parents have the most influence on a child’s healthy development and learning. A parent is the child’s first teacher, first advocate and first coach, setting the stage for outcomes in the early years and early grades. The process of learning, and specifically learning to read, begins long before a child enrolls in kindergarten. We need to make sure that children are born healthy; that parents understand child development; that every child has access to good childcare, preschool and summer learning programs; and that we align what we are teaching in preschool with learning benchmarks of the early grades, based on research in child development and literacy acquisition. Any work promoted by the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading will support the work of our educators, allowing them to concentrate their efforts on curriculum and instruction in the classroom.

The United Way of Southeast Louisiana and Institute of Mental Hygiene are committed to developing a citywide, cross-sector campaign to improve third-grade reading and related outcomes for New Orleans’ children. We will be working to support the development of a strategy to improve outcomes based on what has worked locally as well as in comparable cities across the country.

We are choosing to take on this initiative knowing that it requires collective action and that it will be a long and sustained process during which all education and community stakeholders will have to participate. We need to engage as a community to address this issue because reaching these children early on means our community as a whole can go a long way toward closing the achievement gap, reducing the dropout rate and breaking the cycle of poverty – ultimately building a stronger New Orleans for all.

Michael Williamson
President/CEO
United Way of Southeast Louisiana

Ron McClain
Executive Director
Institute of Mental Hygiene
INTRODUCTION

IN 2015, ONLY 31% OF THIRD GRADERS RECEIVED A SCORE OF MASTERY OR ABOVE ON THE ILEAP ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS ASSESSMENT, ACCORDING TO THE LOUISIANA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION.

OUR GOAL IS THAT ALL NEW ORLEANS CHILDREN WILL READ AT OR ABOVE GRADE LEVEL BY THE END OF THE THIRD GRADE.

Why Third-Grade Reading?

Third grade is a pivotal point in a child’s cognitive and academic development. During this time, students transition from learning to read to reading to learn, which prepares them for future success. Studies show that students who do not achieve reading proficiency by third grade are less likely to graduate high school and pursue higher education and are more likely to be incarcerated or live in poverty. If we want to raise healthy children, close achievement gaps, strengthen New Orleans schools, and better prepare our city’s future workforce, we must ensure that every student in New Orleans is a proficient reader by the end of third grade.

Our Future

If all New Orleans children were reading on grade level by third grade, research shows that our city would:

• Increase high-school graduation rates
• Increase post-secondary educational attainment
• Create jobs, specifically with an increase in higher-paying family sustaining jobs, as the job market expands in response to a more skilled workforce
• Grow the local economy as higher incomes build a higher tax base
• Decrease crime and improve our overall quality of life

How Can We Increase Third-Grade Reading Proficiency?

It is harder for schools to help children succeed if the students arrive at school unprepared, miss too many days of class, or lose significant academic gains over the summer months. Therefore, the campaign’s work is focused on helping communities and policymakers promote school readiness and quality teaching, tackle chronic absence, improve summer learning, and engage parents as their children’s first teachers.
School Readiness
Students entering kindergarten with vital skills—vocabulary, letter recognition, number sense, social-emotional skills and others—are more likely to read proficiently by the end of third grade. Too many children from low-income families are already behind when they enroll in kindergarten. Research shows that these children are less likely to be read to or spoken to regularly or to have access to books, literacy-rich environments, high-quality early care, and pre-kindergarten programs.

In 2016, 86% of eligible New Orleans four-year-olds have access to a free pre-kindergarten program. These participation numbers drop off dramatically for three-year-olds. Access to high-quality early childhood programming is critical for literacy. In his work with the Perry Preschool project, Nobel Prize-winning economist James Heckman found a return of seven dollars to every one dollar of public investment in high-quality preschool programs.

School Attendance
Attendance is critical to academic success. When children attend school regularly in kindergarten and first grade, they are more likely to read proficiently by the end of third grade. Children from low-income families often miss significantly more days of school due to health issues, family instability and other effects of poverty.

Chronic absence is defined as missing 10% or more of the school year for any reason, excused or unexcused. Nearly 30% of students between kindergarten and third grade are considered chronically absent (Louisiana Department of Education, 2012). In New Orleans, a secondary cause of school absence is out-of-school suspensions as a means of disciplinary action. In 2012, 87% of all issued suspensions were out-of-school suspensions rather than in-school suspensions, contributing to the minutes spent outside of the classroom (Education Research Alliance, 2012). These students cannot afford to miss critical time in the classroom, especially in the early years when reading instruction is a central part of the curriculum.

Summer Learning
Summer can be a time of academic enrichment for children or a time of learning loss. Unless children read or participate in quality summer programs, they risk losing two to three months of reading skills. An estimated 37% of school-age children who are living in poverty have access to a summer program run through the New Orleans Recreation Development Commission (NORDC) in 2016, but many of these programs do not focus on building literacy or academic skills. Approximately 13% of all children ages nine and under were enrolled in the New Orleans Public Library’s summer reading program in 2015.
THE STATE OF THIRD-GRADE READING IN NEW ORLEANS

Who Are the Children of New Orleans?

In 2014, there were 46,303 children, birth through age nine, living in Orleans Parish (Data Center, 2015). The live birth rate in recent years has been relatively consistent, demonstrating a cohort size of approximately 4,600 children of each age (Kids Count, 2011).

The majority (73%) of children in Orleans Parish are Black. Within Orleans Parish, 43% of children live in poverty, compared to 28% of children statewide and 22% nationally. 52% of Orleans Parish children live in a single parent household (Data Center, 2013).

Racial Breakdown of Children in Orleans Parish

- **Non-Hispanic Black**: 73%
- **Non-Hispanic White**: 19%
- **Non-Hispanic Asian**: 3%
- **Hispanic**: 5%
- **Non-Hispanic American Indian**: <1%
THE STATE OF THIRD-GRADE READING IN NEW ORLEANS

Birth Weights

12% of Orleans Parish children are born preterm and/or with low birth weight, a number that is 50% higher than the national average (KIDS COUNT, 2011, Data Center 2015).

Health

Just over three-fourths of children are publicly insured (KIDS COUNT, 2012), and 76% are immunized (Department of Health and Hospitals, 2014).
HOW MANY NEW ORLEANS CHILDREN ARE NOT READING AT GRADE LEVEL BY THE END OF THIRD GRADE?

In 2015, 44% of third graders in Orleans Parish were not reading at grade level. These students achieved a score of Unsatisfactory or Approaching Basic on the reading section of the state assessment, the iLEAP (Louisiana Department of Education).

In 2015, only 31% of third graders received a score of mastery or above on the iLEAP English Language Arts assessment (Louisiana Department of Education).

HOW MANY NEW ORLEANS CHILDREN ARE NOT READING AT GRADE LEVEL BY THE END OF THIRD GRADE?

**School Readiness**
In the four charter management organizations that serve the most kindergarten students, the percentage of students who enter kindergarten already behind ranges from 40% to 90%, as measured by DIBELS or STEPS (Louisiana Department of Education, 2015).

Approximately 53% of Orleans Parish children birth through age four who live in poverty are currently being served through publicly funded early care and education programs (Louisiana Department of Education).

**Attendance**
Nearly 30% of students between kindergarten and third grade miss more than 10% of the school year (Louisiana Department of Education, 2012).

**Summer Learning**
An estimated 37% of school-age children who are living in poverty have access to a summer program run through the New Orleans Recreation Development Commission in 2016. Approximately 13% of all children age nine and under were enrolled in the New Orleans Public Library’s summer reading program in 2015.

Source: NORDC Summer Camp Capacity Projections 2016 provided to the Verbena Group, calculated against age cohort size and poverty rates.

Source: 2016 City of New Orleans Adopted Budget, calculated against total number of children ages 0-9.
CALL TO ACTION

To meet the goal of all children in New Orleans reading on grade level by the end of third grade, it is vital that we work together as a community to support our parents and providers. Our initiative will require families, educators, service providers, business leaders and policymakers to come together and heed this call to action.

Various educational and economic benefits are possible for the city of New Orleans if we are able to achieve an increased rate of third-grade proficiency, including improved literacy rates, higher graduation rates, economic benefits and a more educated workforce.

To achieve our shared goal, we must engage families, invest in high-quality early childhood education, make sure children are in school every day and provide quality summer learning programs. While classroom instruction is a huge part of the equation, the balance must come from all of us. There is a role, whether small or large, for everyone to play in ensuring our children read well.

While the United Way of Southeast Louisiana and the Institute of Mental Hygiene work to bring together stakeholders to foster systematic change on grade-level reading and its associated indicators, each of us can contribute every day. Parents, grandparents and community members can immediately impact a child’s trajectory by getting involved in the following ways:

School Readiness:

- Engaging in nurturing and affirming “back and forth” interactions with children
- Enriching their child’s vocabulary and promote a love for reading
- Tracking and assessing progress toward early developmental milestones

Attendance:

- Recognizing and addressing health needs and environmental hazards in the home
- Monitoring absences and seeking support at the earliest signs of attendance issues
- Establishing an expectation and a plan for daily school attendance, even when families move

Summer Learning:

- Engaging children in enriching summer and afterschool activities in the home or the community
- Using technology to facilitate ongoing learning, especially during the summer months
- Encouraging, supporting, and modeling healthy eating and fitness

There is no single answer to solving the grade-level reading crisis. Join us as we embark on a collective effort to design a campaign that will set all children on a path to reading proficiency by third grade, paving the way for lifelong success.
ABOUT THE PARTNERS

Converge is a values-based consulting firm that works with community organizations, non-profits, philanthropic institutions, and government entities to increase the self-efficacy, power and justice for communities working against inequity across the country.

For more information, visit: http://convergeforchange.com/

IMH’s mission is to promote optimal mental health for children and their families in New Orleans. We believe that mental health must be defined broadly and recognizes that the development of optimal mental health (sometimes referred to as social-emotional development) is affected by many factors. We believe that it is important to build on successes by promoting best practices and innovative approaches that offer promise. We believe that issues of race and culture affect mental health and the provision of services and should be addressed. We believe that our grants should support programs that intentionally and specifically address the social-emotional development of low-income, and/or underserved children and their families in Orleans parish. We believe that early intervention and prevention are the most effective approaches to promoting optimal mental health in children and their families in our community. We believe that families are fundamental to their children’s social and emotional development and should be supported in their parenting.

United Way of Southeast Louisiana has a Blueprint for Prosperity to eradicate poverty in our region. We are strategically investing in programs, initiatives, collaborations and advocacy efforts to meet our community’s greatest needs. We have a bold vision of equitable communities where all individuals are healthy, educated, and economically stable in Jefferson, Orleans, Plaquemines, St. Bernard, St. Tammany, Tangipahoa and Washington Parishes.

For more information, please visit unitedwaysela.org or call (504) 822-5540.