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Young Minority, Low-Income, Limited English Proficient Students Lag in Literacy*Prekindergarten, Targeted Interventions Can Help Close Gaps***Executive Summary**

Minority, low-income and Limited English Proficient students in Maryland lag behind their peers in literacy skills from an early age, setting the stage for ongoing achievement gaps. Improved access to quality prekindergarten programs can help more children enter school ready to read. Targeted, personalized interventions in the early grades can help struggling readers catch up before it is too late.

Background

Children who begin school ready to learn are likely to continue on a path of success. A preliminary study from the Maryland State Department Education found that “fully ready” kindergartners are eight times more likely to later score in the advanced range on the Maryland School Assessment (MSA) than the least ready kindergartners.¹

Early literacy skills are among the most important skills that children develop before and during the early years of school. Children are unlikely to become strong readers if they have not become proficient readers by the third grade.

Maryland students’ literacy and early reading skills are assessed in kindergarten and then in third grade. As a result of increased access to quality early childhood education and parental awareness, more children are entering school with basic literacy skills. In 2001-02, only 36 percent of entering kindergartners were rated as “fully ready” in the language and literacy domain, compared to 62 percent in 2008-09.²

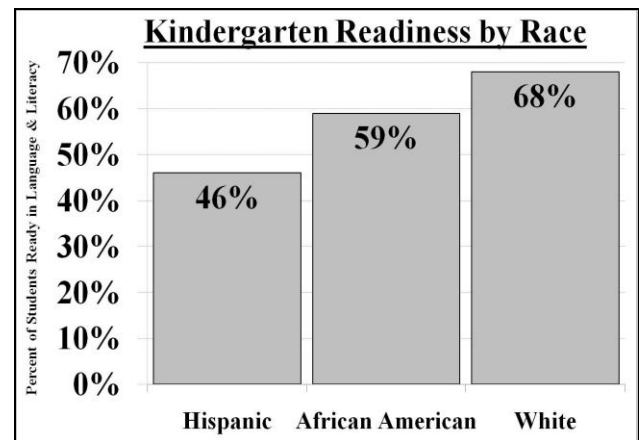
Despite this progress, significant gaps in school readiness remain. Minority, low-income, and Limited English Proficient students lag far behind their peers as they enter kindergarten. When students enter third grade, considered a critical transition year for students’ reading success, these gaps remain.

¹ Maryland State Department of Education, *Getting Ready: What the 2008-2009 School Readiness Data Mean for Maryland's Children*. (March 2009)

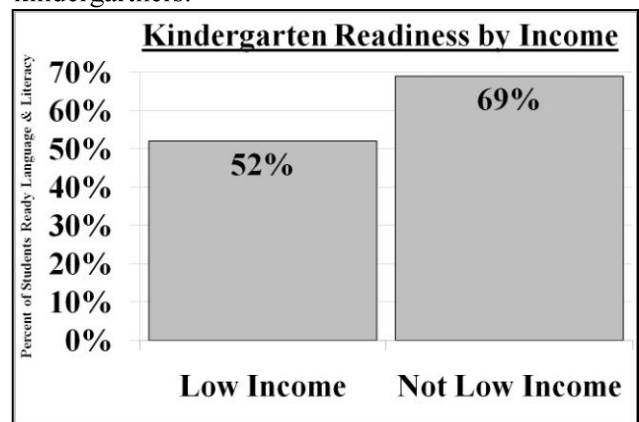
² Maryland State Department of Education, *Children Entering School Ready to Learn 2008-2009*.

Findings*Gaps at School Entry*

While 68 percent of White kindergartners are fully ready in the domain of language and literacy, 59 percent of their African-American classmates and 46 percent of their Hispanic peers are fully ready.

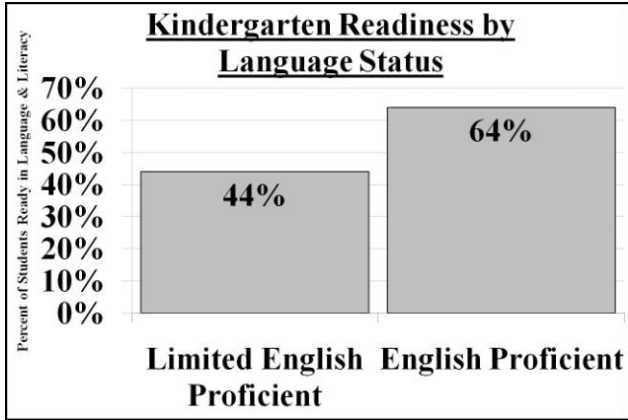


Sixty-nine percent of middle and higher-income children have the early literacy skills they need, compared to 52 percent of lower-income kindergartners.³

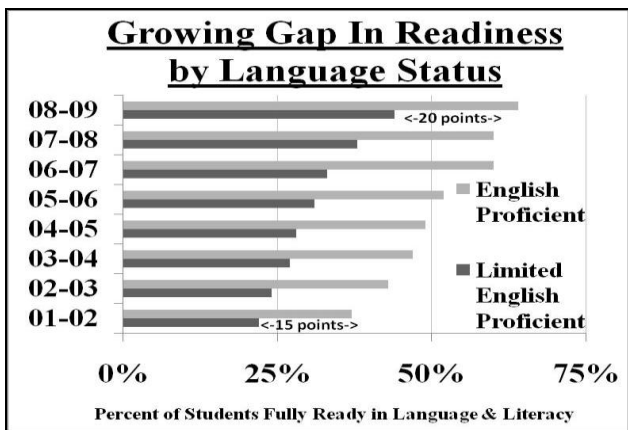


Similarly, children new to the English language, known as Limited English Proficient (LEP) students, lag behind their English proficient peers by 20 percentage points.

³ Low-income defined as eligible for Free and Reduced-price Meals or family income under 185 percent of the federal poverty level.



Readiness gaps by race have narrowed over the last several years. However, the income and language-based gaps have not. For example, the gap between Limited English Proficient and English proficient kindergartners was 15 percentage points in 2001-02. By 2008-09, the gap widened to 20 percentage points.



Local Successes and Challenges

In some areas, minority and Limited English Proficient students actually arrive at school with better literacy skills than their peers. For example, 75 percent of African-American kindergartners in Somerset County arrive ready for school, compared to 69 percent of White students. The County attributes its strong results largely to its prekindergarten program, which serves all students who want access. Eighty-eight percent of the program’s students are rated as fully ready for kindergarten across seven readiness domains.⁴

But in other areas, the disparities are even greater than the state average. In Caroline County, not a

⁴ Somerset County Public Schools, 2008 Master Plan Update.

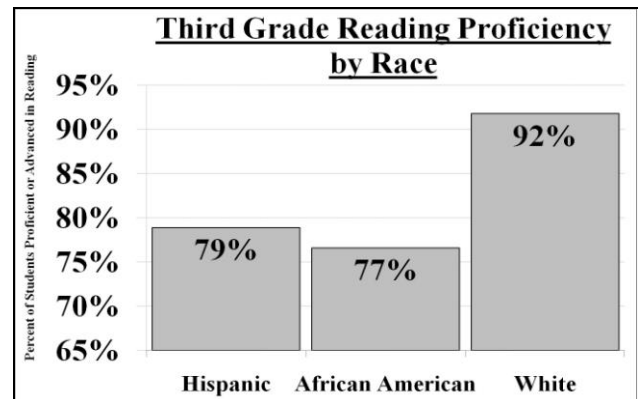
single Limited English Proficient student had the literacy skills needed for kindergarten, while half of English proficient students were ready. In Kent County, there was a 45 percentage point difference in readiness between low income and non-low income students. The largest disparities appear to be concentrated on the Eastern Shore.

The largest jurisdictions vary widely in terms of which gaps are most troublesome in their area:

Percent Ready - Literacy	Balt. City	Balt. Co.	Mont. Co.	Prince George’s
White	57%	73%	75%	64%
African-American	55%	67%	59%	62%
Hispanic	37%	56%	45%	48%
Limited English	36%	54%	46%	28%
English Proficient	55%	71%	72%	60%
Low Income	53%	62%	48%	54%
Not Low Income	58%	75%	73%	64%

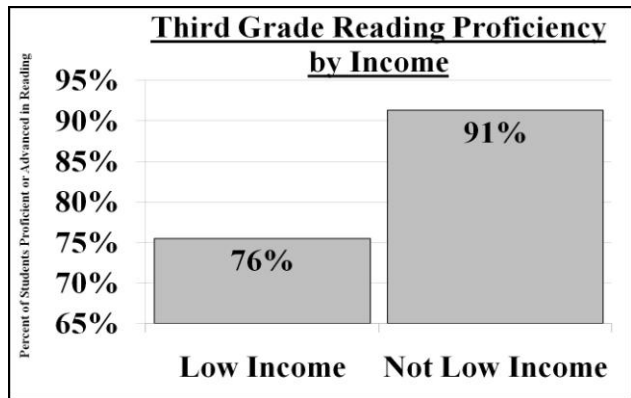
Gaps at Third Grade

Unfortunately, too few schools provide the interventions needed to close these gaps when children enter school. Large performance gaps can still be seen among third grade students. Ninety-two percent of White third graders are proficient in reading, compared to 79 percent of Hispanic students and 77 percent of African-American students.⁵

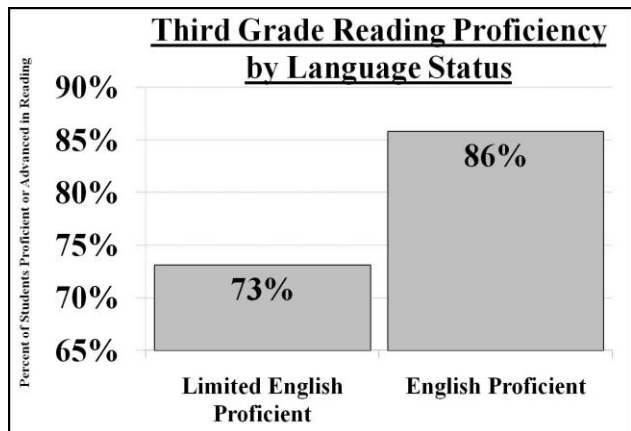


⁵ Maryland State Department of Education, 2009 Maryland Report Card.

There is a 15 percentage point gap in third grade reading proficiency between students from low income families and those from families with higher incomes.



Gaps by language status also remain in third grade, with 73 percent of Limited English Proficient students reading at grade level, compared to 86 percent of students who are English proficient.



This gap is still significant, but it is a great improvement from the 42 percentage point gap between these two groups of students in 2002-03.

National Tests

Achievement gaps are even more pronounced on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, a more rigorous, nationwide test. The NAEP only begins testing students in fourth grade, but at that point there is a 32 percentage point gap between White student proficiency and African-American student proficiency. Hispanic students lag 28 percentage points behind White students.⁶

⁶ U.S. Department of Education, *Maryland Profile for National Assessment of Educational Progress*.

Local Successes and Challenges

In Kent County, there is less than a three percentage point difference in the proficiency of White students and Hispanic students. But elsewhere there are significant gaps, such as the 34 percentage point difference between Limited English Proficient Students and their peers in Cecil County.

Other data include:

Percent Proficient – 3 rd Grade Reading	Balt. City	Balt. Co.	Mont. Co.	Prince George’s
White	86%	93%	95%	89%
African-American	79%	82%	80%	73%
Hispanic	74%	81%	83%	74%
Limited English	67%	88%	78%	70%
English Proficient	77%	71%	91%	75%
Low Income	75%	81%	78%	80%
Not Low Income	88%	93%	94%	69%

Discussion and Recommendations:

Gaps in students’ literacy skills should be addressed as early as possible to prevent further achievement gaps.

Maryland currently provides prekindergarten services for low-income children. It is critical that access to quality early educational programs also be extended to Limited English Proficient students and others who may have limited literacy skill development. Maryland should extend high-quality, free or low-cost prekindergarten to any four-year-old at risk of school failure.

Maryland schools must also be more aggressive about intervening earlier with students who are struggling to learn to read in kindergarten through third grade. Differentiated instruction and tiered intervention strategies like Response to Intervention can help ensure students receive the supports they need to become successful readers by third grade.