

Majority of Minnesota fourth-graders struggle with reading; Proficiency rates worse for kids of low-income

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Thursday, 06 February 2014 13:31



Reading is the cornerstone of a good education and future success, but in Minnesota and across the country, more young children than not are struggling with it. A new report finds that 59 percent of kids in the state are not proficient in reading when they reach fourth grade. That figure balloons to 77 percent for children from low-income families, according to Peggy Flanagan, executive director of Children's Defense Fund-Minnesota.

"We know that brains are built from the bottom up and 90 percent of brain development happens in the first years of life, so we need to ensure that kids in our state are getting what they need early and that families are economically stable," she said.

Flanagan said one way to increase family stability is by raising the minimum wage. Proposals to do so will again be debated at the State Legislature this year. Nationally, President Obama is expected to repeat his push for a higher minimum during tonight's State of the Union address.

As far as direct efforts to improve reading proficiency among children in Minnesota, Flanagan said that among those finding success are "freedom schools," which are after-school and summer programs that mainly focus on literacy for children in need.

"Twenty-four percent of the achievement gap is related to the summer slide," she said. "And what we found through our programs is either that kids maintain their reading level or excel their reading level. I think that's another opportunity for us to look at and lift up as we're talking about reading proficiency in the state of Minnesota."

Nationally, the report from the Annie E. Casey Foundation says about half the pupils from higher-income families are reading proficiently by the time they reach fourth grade, compared to just one in five of children from low-income households. If the trend continues, the report predicts, by the end of the decade the U.S. will not have enough skilled workers.

The report, "Early Reading Proficiency in the United States," is at AECF.org . Information on Freedom Schools is at CDF-MN.org