

Did you know that a student can graduate from high school, with a regular high school diploma, and not be able to read at or near grade level? I recently discovered that there are a large number of kids who graduate but cannot read. The basic job of public school is to teach kids how to read. So, I began asking a basic question: why are so many kids graduating who cannot read? Why are these kids allowed to graduate? How long has this been going on? How can we expect kids to be successful if they cannot even read?

I am a strong believer in the public-school system. Horace Mann, a pioneer of American public schools in the 19th century, famously stated that education was the “great equalizer of the conditions of men.” I have always believed that this idea was true. The opposite is also true. Students who receive a poor education, or who drop out of school before graduating, can end up on the wrong side of a lifelong gap in employment, earnings, and even life expectancy. I have spent much of my professional career working to ensure that students get an equal opportunity to succeed in school.

In the state of Florida there were 2.9 million public school students in the 2019-2020 school year.¹ Looking at just one school district in Florida, Miami Dade County had 347,327 public school students during the 2019-2020 school year.² Currently, whether students are successful is often measured through standardized testing. In Florida, the state utilizes the Florida Standards Assessment (FSA).³ The FSA measures students’ education gains and progress. It is administered every year beginning in the 3rd grade. If a student does not receive a 3 or above on the test in the 3rd grade there is an automatic retention and the student is required to repeat the third grade and enroll in a remediation or intensive reading/math class. If a student does not receive a 3 or above in the 10th grade they are not allowed to graduate. On paper this appears as if kids will be caught in third grade and then again in 10th grade so that no student will fall through the cracks. But the reality of implementation does not match what was probably a well-meaning plan when it was first developed.

In reality, many kids fall through the cracks and there is no real system in place to ensure that these students catch up and obtain basic skills in reading, writing and math. The intensive reading and math classes are generally computer-based programs like “I Ready” without much of any direct instruction from a teacher. The computer programs are not good at closing the gap between where kids are functioning and where they should be functioning at grade level, so kids fall further and further behind each year. If these same students were actually getting direct instruction from a highly qualified teacher in math or reading, perhaps the gaps would be smaller. There are also a number of waivers that can be utilized to move a student along from year to year without gaining any more knowledge.

¹ <https://edstats.fldoe.org/SASWebReportStudio/gotoReportSection.do?sectionNumber=1>

² <https://edstats.fldoe.org/SASWebReportStudio/gotoReportSection.do?sectionNumber=2>

³ <http://fldoe.org/accountability/assessments/k-12-student-assessment/fsa.shtml>

The disparity of how many black, brown and disabled students fall behind is shocking. In Miami, 19.5% or 67,729 were African American students last school year.⁴ Miami Dade County School District reports a significant achievement gap between were African American students are performing when compared to other students.⁵ There is a 37 point gap in English Language Arts and a 35 point gap in Math.⁶ When the numbers for reading are looked at closer the disparities are alarming. For English Language Arts (ELA) they reveal a 36 point discrepancy for 3rd grade girls and a 37 point discrepancy for 10th grade girls.⁷ The numbers are worse for boys. There is a 39-point difference in 3rd grade and a 43 point difference in 10th grade.⁸

	White Girls	Hispanic Girls	AA Girls
3 rd Grade	83%	68%	47%
10 th Grade	80%	62%	43%

	White Boys	Hispanic Boys	AA Boys
3 rd Grade	82%	66%	43%
10 th Grade	73%	52%	30%

The numbers are even worse if you look at students who have disabilities. The data reveals that just 19% of African American boys and girls are proficient in 3rd grade and just 8% in 10th grade.⁹

	White Girls	Hispanic Girls	AA Girls
3 rd Grade	36%	32%	19%
10 th Grade	19%	25%	8%

	White Boys	Hispanic Boys	AA Boys
3 rd Grade	43%	36%	19%
10 th Grade	35%	24%	8%

⁴ Id.

⁵ https://edstats.fldoe.org/SASStoredProcess/do?_action=form,properties,execute,nobanner&&_program=%2FARM%2FPERA%2FEIAS%2FDISTRICT+REPORT+CARD%2FSTORED+PROCESSES%2FReport+Card

⁶ https://edstats.fldoe.org/SASStoredProcess/do?_action=form,properties,execute,nobanner&&_program=%2FARM%2FPERA%2FEIAS%2FDISTRICT+REPORT+CARD%2FSTORED+PROCESSES%2FReport+Card

⁷ Id.

⁸ Id.

⁹ Id.

What these charts also reveal are the number of white and Hispanic students that are also being left behind. 20% of white girls are not proficient and 27% of white 10th grade boys are not proficient readers. In Miami, over 4,500 white girls and 95,000 Hispanic girls are NOT proficient readers while over 6000 white boys and a stunning 120,000 Hispanic boys are not reading at or near grade level with proficiency.

When children cannot read, they suffer long term consequences.¹⁰ Academic, emotional and social issues are common for children who are poor readers. Children who are behind their peers in reading struggle with low self-esteem and feelings of inadequacy. Low achievement in reading is also the common denominator in school discipline, attendance and dropout problems, and juvenile crime. This bears out in the discipline statistics in Miami Dade County where African American students are just 19.5% of the student population but make up 38% of the district's expulsions; 24% of the districts out of school suspensions; 31% of the students restrained; and 35% of the students involved in criminal offenses on school campuses.¹¹

I recently asked a school administrator why he was not more concerned that the 12th grader was reading at a third-grade level and he said, "my priority is ensuring he has enough credits to graduate." This is one of the main reasons students can graduate without reading. If the student has credits, they can obtain a diploma. A student can earn a credit with a grade letter of D. Students often pass classes with a D for participation in class or otherwise having seat time (being in the classroom during direct instruction). There is no one ensuring the student can read or are actually gaining knowledge for that credit earned towards graduation. This is most disappointing when students earn a credit in math and reading even though the student is functioning well below grade level. Most people, and parents, believe that if the student earns a credit for 10th grade math or reading, that the student is functioning at or near a 10th grade level. But the numbers do not support such a belief, and neither does my own experiences. The districts are pushing kids through the system with very little accountability for what knowledge the student actually has upon graduation.

I am a big supporter of public schools but I worry that the years of voucher programs, and the use of standardize testing and computer based programs to measure success have shifted the focus from a basic tenant of education which is ensuring that children can read before they leave school.

¹⁰ <https://www.readingfoundation.org/the-impact#:~:text=Academic%2C%20emotional%20and%20social%20issues,dropout%20problems%2C%20and%20juvenile%20crime.>

¹¹ <http://www.fldoe.org/safe-schools/discipline-data.stml>

I think the first step of assessing our priorities in public education is having the knowledge or awareness that there is in fact a problem. We have a problem of students graduating without being able to read at or near grade level. Now let's get to work. Let's take back our public schools.