



VT kids reading, leading

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MONTPELIER – Vermont kids are among the most voracious readers in the country, according to a new report, although education experts worry about the lack of reading proficiency for low-income students.

The Green Mountain State ranks third among the 50 states for fourth-grade reading proficiency, the grade that is tested in national school achievement tests. That means that 75 percent are at or above the basic expectation for reading skills and 41 percent of students are proficient in their skills.

The number that is concerning to Vermont educators is the number of children from low-income families who are failing in basic reading skills.

"We're not alone here," said Susan Hayes, the National Assessment of Educational Progress coordinator for the Vermont Department of Education. "Schools in small rural states across the country see their low-income students test low for reading proficiency."

About 74 percent of students who are on the state's free or reduced lunch program – the economic indicator for public school students – aren't reading at their appropriate level. This includes 58 percent of students from rural communities (compared with 47 percent from cities), 89 percent of students with disabilities and 71 percent of students who are black or African American.

Students on these lunch programs comprise about 36 percent of Vermont's total student population in the 2009/2010 school year. And that number has been on the rise – partly due to increased exposure of the program, but also because of need – with a 10 percent increase in the last year and a 38 percent increase since 2000.

Nicole Mace, research coordinator for the organization Voices for Vermont's Children, said there are a number of reasons why low-income students read less than students of moderate or higher incomes.

Some don't have parents read to them growing up – a habit that many experts say leads to children reading more later in life – while others may not come from stable households, she said.

"If families are worried about where they might be staying or how they are going to

get that night's dinner ... those factors can lead to students with below average reading proficiency," Mace said.

The low literacy level of rural students is of concern to organizations like the Children's Literacy Foundation, a Waterbury-based non-profit group that uses donated funds to sponsor author visits and projects at public schools in Vermont and New Hampshire.

Jennifer Esser, communications coordinator for the foundation, said it especially tries to bring in local children book writers and illustrators to show students that "these people are real and could be your neighbor."

"Our hope is that when we go to the schools and introduce a writer/illustrator to the students, then that inspires them to go out there and read and write," she said.

Voices for Vermont's Children and the Vermont Department of Education are working on a plan to address the disparity in reading skills. Hayes recently completed a report, *Roots of Success: Effective Practices in Vermont Schools*, that compiles what successful Vermont schools have done to increase reading skills in low-income students.

"There's no magic bullet," said Mace. "It will take leadership and a concerted effort to make this a priority."

The literacy report was released by the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

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