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SUCCESS STARTS WITH READING

*Annie E. Casey Foundation, Vermont Department of Education, and Voices for Vermont's Children
Cite Need to Improve Reading Skills Among Low-Income Students*

The Annie E. Casey Foundation is focusing attention on the critical importance of achieving grade-level reading proficiency for all children by the end of third grade through the release of a special KIDS COUNT report: *Early Warning: Why Reading by the End of Third Grade Matters*. “Our nation’s future rests on the preparation of all students to meet new challenges and opportunities in the coming decades. The ability of all students to read proficiently is central to this future,” said Ralph Smith of the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

But recently released National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data indicate that nationwide two out of every three fourth graders (67 percent) are not proficient in reading. Fourth grade is a critical period when students learn to read for content and knowledge. Until third grade, children are learning to read. After third grade, they are reading to learn. When kids are not ready to read by fourth grade, they have a steeper hill to climb the rest of their lives.

In Vermont, our NAEP reading scores are among the best in the nation. According to *Early Warning*, Vermont ranks 3rd in the country in the number of 4th grade students who are proficient in reading. Yet, while we enjoy higher student achievement than most other parts of the country, we struggle to close proficiency gaps between students who are living in poor and low-income families and those who are not. *Early Warning* documents that 74 percent of Vermont’s low-income 4th graders are below proficient in reading, compared to 51 percent of their higher income peers.

In the struggle to close proficiency gaps, Vermont is not alone. As *Early Warning* demonstrates, the challenge of closing these gaps has not yet been met by any state in the country. The good news is that in recent months, Vermont has taken steps to tackle that challenge. Both the Vermont Department of Education and Voices for Vermont's Children released research that outlines strategies to eliminate the poverty-based proficiency gap in the state. The DOE’s *Roots of Success: Effective Practices in Vermont Schools*, identified eight practices of schools successfully meeting the challenge of improving outcomes among low-income students.

“The *Roots* report revealed that schools where students—including those from low socioeconomic backgrounds—achieve at high levels provide early learning opportunities like pre-kindergarten and have a strong K-3 focus on literacy. While Vermont’s strong performance on assessments like NAEP is a testament to the commitment teachers, administrators, and school boards have to their students’ success, our persistent achievement gaps demand that we do more to guarantee that all students - especially those from low-income families - have the foundational literacy skills they need to succeed,” said Susan Hayes, Vermont’s NAEP Coordinator and *Roots of Success* author.

Voices for Vermont's Children echoed this call to action in *Bridging the Gap: Pathways to Success for all Vermont Students*, and found that while systems of educational excellence are critical,

schools alone cannot address the problem of poverty and inequitable achievement. Because families living in poverty face many obstacles – from lack of access to livable wage jobs, affordable and quality child care, social services, and medical care, to short supplies of safe, affordable housing and reliable transportation - Voices found that a comprehensive system of family support structures is also necessary to help ensure all children have the opportunity to succeed.

“The more supports struggling families can access, the better equipped they will be to give their children strong foundations at home,” said Nicole Mace, Research Coordinator at Voices for Vermont's Children. “The stronger a child’s foundation, the more likely it is that she will come to school ready and able to learn.”

The Casey Foundation’s *Early Warning: Why Reading by the End of Third Grade Matters* highlights how critical early literacy skills are for later learning and draws attention to the reality that many students, particularly those from low-income households, struggle to attain grade-level proficiency in reading by third grade, the repercussions of which are severe. It also affirms what we know here in Vermont about what makes schools and students successful. In order to improve outcomes like reading proficiency among students from all socioeconomic backgrounds, we must work together to:

- Expand the capacity of schools to create systems of educational excellence, characterized by a culture of high expectations for all students, strong leadership, and a web of best practices that support student achievement;
- Provide supports to parents, including affordable quality early care and education, parenting education classes, and paid family leave; and
- Strengthen community supports, such as effective afterschool and summer programs, physical and mental health services, and increase collaboration among governmental and community agencies serving low-income families.

“We all have a stake in improving educational outcomes for all students,” said John Nelson, Executive Director of the Vermont School Boards Association. “A statewide focus on eliminating proficiency gaps in critical skills like reading provides us with an opportunity to work together to expand the capacity of families, communities, and schools to support student success.”

Voices for Vermont's Children is a statewide child advocacy organization, whose mission is to promote public policies that enhance the lives of children and youth in Vermont. *Voices’ Bridging the Gap* report is available online at: <http://www.voicesforvorkids.org/policy/bridging-the-gap-pathways-to-success-for-all-vermont-students/>.

The Vermont Department of Education’s *Roots of Success* report is available online at: <http://rootsofsuccess.wordpress.com/>

The Annie E. Casey Foundation is a private charitable organization, whose primary mission is to foster public policies, human-service reforms, and community supports that more effectively meet the needs of today’s vulnerable children and families. For more information, visit www.aecf.org.