

# *Get Georgia Reading*

By Sandra Deal

Sixty-eight percent of fourth graders in Georgia are not reading proficiently.

Take a moment to consider that statistic. It is an enormous one. Two-thirds of Georgia's children have missed the first major milestone of a successful education: the ability to read by the end of the third grade.

Third grade is a critical transition point, the period when children should be making the shift from learning to read to reading to learn. Children who miss this milestone and are unable to read by the end of third grade are four times more likely to drop out of high school than proficient readers. They will then enter a job market with a 15 percent unemployment rate for those with a high school diploma or less. Proficient fourth-grade readers, on the other hand, are more likely to be high school graduates and be economically successful adults.

This is about more than stumbling over words. Reading proficiency affects a child's entire educational future.

So, how do you solve a problem with an array of causes, and an array of consequences, both public and private? My husband, Gov. Nathan Deal, has prioritized reading on grade level by third grade, and the [Get Georgia Reading Campaign](#) is taking up that charge. A public/private partnership of more than 100 organizations is working to ensure that children have access to everything they need to achieve reading proficiency by the end of third grade. That means books, of course, but also food, vaccines, high-quality language-rich learning environments, engaged parents, and effective teachers. We cannot expect children to learn to read when they are hungry, sick, or in harmful environments.

Our goal is that, in 2020, all Georgia's third-graders will be reading proficiently. This requires careful attention to four basic pillars:

- \* First, language nutrition. On average, children born into low-income families arrive in kindergarten having heard 30 million fewer words than their peers from more financially stable homes. In order to achieve our goal, all children must participate in language-rich adult-child interactions, which are as critical for brain development as healthy food is for physical growth.

- \* Access. All children and their families must have access to high-quality educational opportunities, including Pre-K, Head Start, childcare, K-3, afterschool and summer learning. They must also have access to support and intervention services that will allow them to take advantage of that education -- safe housing, healthy food, safe transportation, and health and dental care.

- \* Productive learning climates. All educators, families and policymakers must understand and address the impact of learning climate on children's social and emotional development, school attendance, engagement and, ultimately, student success. All these stakeholders must take seriously their responsibility to focus attention not only on curriculum, but on the environmental quality of the school, as well.

- \* Teacher preparation and effectiveness. Teachers of children ages birth through 8 make a tremendous impact on the language and literacy development of their students. This means all educators must provide high-quality, evidence-informed instruction and effective learning experiences tailored to the needs of each child, regardless of the child's background. Early childhood teachers must view themselves as change-makers, rather than caretakers. System and school leaders must be committed to ensuring teachers have the skills and resources to be effective.

When we discuss the ability of our children to read -- and to read proficiently, by the end of third grade -- we are, of course, discussing education. We are also discussing the future of our state -- its business prospects, its vibrancy and the experiences it is able to offer to its citizens. Reading begins in the classroom, but it stretches far beyond it. We must ensure that Georgia's children are not left behind.