

Jackson County child advocates seek to improve kids' reading skills in wake of Kids Count report

By [Bob Wheaton | Jackson Citizen Patriot](#)

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A new report shows 70 percent of Michigan fourth-graders scored below proficient on federal reading tests, and child advocates in Jackson County and the state say schools alone can't fix the problem.

They said it's crucial that parents, child-care providers, preschools and others make sure children are prepared to learn to read before they start school.

"There's so much that not only could be helpful, but absolutely has to happen before the child enters school," said Sheri Butters, director of Jackson County's Great Start Collaborative. "There's so much that can be done in the home, or a child-care setting or (in a setting with) any loving, caring adult."

Seventy percent of Michigan fourth-graders scored below the proficient level on 2009 National Assessment of Educational Progress tests, according to a report being released today by Kids Count, a national project for improving the well-being of children.

Michigan ranks 34th among the states in fourth-grade reading proficiency, the report says.

Nationally, 67 percent of fourth-graders were not proficient at reading, which Kids Count says leaves too many children "on the dropout track."

"Clearly, it's not enough to start thinking about this in high school. And we can't even start thinking about it in middle school or elementary school," said Jane Zehnder-Merrell, director of the Kids Count in Michigan project and a senior research associate at the Michigan League for Human Services. "What this report is telling us is that we have to think about it at age zero."

That's why Jackson County and other Michigan counties formed Great Start Collaborative groups.

"We're focused on birth to (age) 5, because that's where a majority of the foundational literacy skills are really developed," Butters said. "So we know what we do in those five years prepares a child to be successful."

The local Great Start program participates in Imagination Library — a Dolly Parton-founded organization that mails free books monthly to children of all income levels — and offers early literacy training for child-care providers and preschools, Butters said.

Many local schools offer Reading Recovery, an intervention program for children who are struggling with reading. But in some districts, that program has fallen victim to budget cuts. Jackson Public Schools axed the program in 2006 but restored it in 2009 after receiving federal funding.

The Kids Count report also says that proficiency standards for the [Michigan Educational Assessment Program](#) fourth-grade reading test don't meet federal standards.

That means many students can score proficient on the MEAP reading test but fail to meet the federal proficiency standards. In 2007, the MEAP proficiency standards were the fourth lowest among 48 states for which state assessment data were available.