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Our view

A new plan to boost literacy

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Reading is the gateway to learning. Learning is the pathway to success.

That's the premise behind an initiative by retiring state schools Superintendent Dr. Joe Morton aimed at improving the reading proficiency of public school students in Alabama.

Although programs like the nationally acclaimed Alabama Reading Initiative have helped boost reading proficiency, too many children slip through the cracks until it's too late to help.

If students aren't reading well by third grade, they'll face tremendous learning hurdles as they progress through school -- and life.

The 62-page "Action Plan for Literacy: Birth through Grade 12" -- compiled by nearly two dozen educators, legislators and consultants from across Alabama -- outlines how the state Department of Education, teachers, parents and the community can reach targets to improve student literacy.

"The theory is that the gateway to all learning is literacy," Morton said at the state school board meeting Tuesday. "If young people can't read and read well, they'll be behind forever."

Indeed, one in three Alabama schoolchildren who go on to college need remedial help. A report by the Alabama Commission on Higher Education showed that more than 34 percent of 2010 high school graduates who attended a state public four- or two-year college needed at least one remedial course, and many of them needed two. Much of that can be attributed to learning impaired by poor reading skills.

That costs the state's economy about \$80 million in direct costs and lost earnings, the non-profit Alliance for Excellent Education, told The Birmingham News recently.

Not to mention what it does to students' self-esteem.

The plan outlines five stages of literacy development and suggests ways family members can help children at each stage. It assumes, rightfully so, that tackling literacy is a bigger task than the state Department of Education or local school boards can undertake alone.

Morton noted kids are only in school 6 1/2 hours a day starting at age 5. "The idea is to take it out to the community and to build the model, and engage civic clubs, churches, private day cares, grandparents, aunts, uncles and siblings," he said.

For children who don't have a supporting home environment, mentors and volunteer tutors can step in.

Reading advocates need to find ways to make reading more fun. School leaders throughout the country are on similar missions. In New London, Wis., a program called "Spotlight on Literacy" has students setting personal reading goals and teachers, mentors and parents helping them reach those goals. Those who do are given treats, highlighted in school video announcements, and have their performance sheets plastered on school walls.

In Chicago this summer, nearly 7,000 struggling student readers are taking part in a reading literacy program that includes parent involvement and book giveaways for good attendance.

Excessive TV and video game choices have diminished the desire to simply sit down and read. Those who struggle with reading are even more apt to find other activities. Reading can be equally as gratifying, and it must be reinforced more at home. Programs like Alabama's latest Action Plan for Literacy can reach children who don't have that home support.

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