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Make or break

Editor,

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A popular African proverb states, "You don't touch what you cannot see." Simply put, this means you cannot solve a problem unless you understand its underlying causes. This way of thinking explains many of West Virginia's frequent attempts to improve its education system and, more specifically, its high school graduation rate.

Without question, recent high school interventions—credit recovery, graduation coaches, the in-school GED option, ninth-grade academies, and others—help West Virginia students complete high school. However, these interventions—as good as they may be—are reactive, not proactive. It is like rescuing a struggling swimmer from a rapidly moving

river; the most successful tactic is to keep the swimmer from falling into the river in the first place. Likewise, these high school interventions try to save students after they are already in trouble and caught in an education system they are ill prepared to handle. They are figuratively drowning. The education system needs to adapt and address the causes of the problem and not wait for the problems to develop.

So, why are so many students academically unprepared for high school and high school-level course work? The root cause of the problem arises long before most students reach high school.

In 2010, KIDS COUN-T's comprehensive report *Early Warning! Why Reading by The End of Third Grade Matters* identified the following fac-

tors that affect student learning in elementary school:

- By fourth grade, most children begin using reading skills to learn other subject areas.

- Up to half of the fourth-grade printed curriculum cannot be understood by fourth graders because of their limited reading skills; consequently, achievement gaps widen as students progress through school.

- Three of every four third-grade students who are poor readers remain poor readers in high school.

Most significantly, a student's chances of graduating from high school can be predicted reasonably accurately by examining his or her reading level at the end of third grade.

In other words, third grade is the "make or





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break” point for children to learn to read sufficiently to ensure their future academic success. Still, despite the broadly recognized importance of third-grade reading levels, most students are promoted from second to third grade despite their reading level.

Each year, West Virginia’s third-grade students participate in the WESTEST 2 reading/language arts assessment; scores fall into one of five categories (from lowest to highest): novice, partial mastery, mastery, above mastery, and distinguished. In 2011, less than half (46 percent) of West Virginia’s third graders scored at mastery or above in reading/language arts. Yet, all but 274 of the state’s 20,884 second graders were promoted to third grade for the 2010-2011 school year.

The WESTEST 2 statistics are even more troubling for low-income students. In 2011, only 35 percent of students receiving free or reduced-priced lunches scored at mastery or above in reading/language arts. The report from KIDS Count

indicates that this is a national trend, “For low-income children in particular, a ‘readiness gap’ fuels much of what has become known as the achievement gap. Readiness includes being in good health; having the support of a strong family; feeling safe; and having positive social interaction skills, language skills, the motivation to learn, emotional and behavioral self-control, and physical skills and capacities.” Many low-income students need the same kind of support that most middle- and upper-middle-class students receive at home when they struggle with their reading, comprehension, writing, and speaking skills.

Research confirms that because of these factors, many low-income students require more instructional and practice time and more support to master certain academic skills. When instructional time is maximized, extended learning opportunities provide low-income students, and other struggling students, with the proper support to ensure their academic

development is on track. Early childhood educators understand that this readiness gap is real, yet they lack the time (during the school day, year and summer) and resources to help struggling students master the critical reading/language arts skills.

Time is one of the few learning variables over which policy makers have some control. Students’ cognitive growth, particularly during early school years, should dictate the length of the instructional cycle. However, too many West Virginia students are not well served by the current 180-day school year requirement. Findings from a January 2012 audit report of West Virginia’s primary and secondary education system found students are not even receiving a full 180 days of instruction. During the 2009-10 school year, no school systems in the state were open for 180 days, and 27 of the 55 systems were open less than 170 days. One school system operated for only 160 days.

Some West-Virginia schools have tried another concept: year-round schools that are still limit-





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led to 180 days. This approach may lessen the summer-break learning loss, however, WESTEST 2 reading/ language arts results do not indicate students attending these schools perform on par with middle and upper middle class peers.

As the recent Audit notes, the first step is to ensure all school systems offer their students 180 instructional days. The next is to expand the school day or school year, particularly for schools and districts serving low-income students. Nationally, nearly 700 schools operate with an expanded school day, and 11 states require schools to be open more than 180 days per year. In Europe, students attend school between 190 and 210 days per year, and, in Japan, the school year is 240 days—some researchers point to this factor to explain why many European and Asian students outperform Americans in mathematics and science.

Results from the WESTEST 2 do matter. They provide parents, educators, students, and the public with early

warning signs. Parents need to understand what the results indicate about their children's academic progress, particularly in third grade. Educators must acknowledge what the results indicate about the effectiveness of their school's current reading/language arts curriculum and instruction and work with school and county leaders, parents, community members, and students to improve students' preparation and outcomes. Finally, educators and policy-making bodies at the local and state levels must examine West Virginia's student achievement data with a critical eye. More importantly, they must hold

themselves accountable for their roles in the education system's shortcomings. Governor Tomblin is modeling this type of accountability by establishing an Early Childhood Development Council. The Council will lead West Virginia's efforts to obtain a Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge grant.

As the proverb says, "You don't touch what you cannot see." Expanded time for learning and

quality reading instruction can address some of the unseen, yet powerful factors inhibiting students' pre-k through third grade reading success. Investments in expanded reading/language arts learning opportunities for pre-kindergarten through third grade students could potentially improve the quality of West Virginia's entire pre-k through 12th grade schooling system.

Imagine a West Virginia where high school completion rates and state assessment, SAT, and ACT scores continuously increase. Research shows that this could lead to a West Virginia with a dwindling prison population, decreasing unemployment and significantly lower substance abuse rates. West Virginia could demonstrate for the nation how a true commitment to early learning, particularly in reading and language arts, powerfully improves the educational trajectory of all children and positively transforms lives and communities.

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