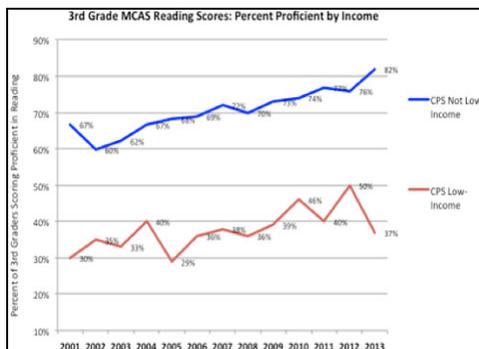


Can Cambridge close the third-grade achievement gap? We'll need a plan

By [Emily Dexter](#)

Closing the third-grade achievement gap in Cambridge's public schools is critical if we want to provide equal opportunities for all students to learn in grades 4-12 and beyond. But can it be done? The answer, for two reasons, is: "We don't know." First, no diverse urban school district in this country has been able to teach 80 percent to 90 percent of its low-income children to read, write and do math on grade level, as measured by a test as difficult as the third-grade MCAS or fourth-grade National Assessment of Educational Progress test. Cambridge, in fact, already has better achievement outcomes for low-income students than most cities in Massachusetts and the U.S., but we're nowhere near closing the gap.

Second, as a city, we haven't yet tried to close the third-grade achievement gap. This has never been an explicit citywide goal. Many groups and sectors in Cambridge are trying to close gaps at all age and grade levels – teachers, parents, students, the school department and other city departments, elected officials, community groups, the universities, denominational groups, philanthropies, local businesses. But there is no strategic plan for all the sectors to work together to ensure that all Cambridge children are reading, writing and doing math on grade level and learning at least one additional language by the end of third grade. Our efforts have had positive effects, which is why our student outcomes are better than in most cities, but the third-grade achievement gap has not substantially narrowed over the past dozen years. In fact, because of growing wealth disparities in Cambridge, it is getting wider. We do, however, know what we need to do:



- Focus on early childhood education (ages 0-5) *and* early elementary education (grades K-3); on children *and* their families; and on children's cognitive development *and* socio-emotional development.
- Build on our extensive multi-sector infrastructure of high-quality programs, preschools and elementary schools.
- Honor our history being the go-to school district and go-to city for progressive thinking about how to support families and educate children.

Our dozen elementary schools already use common frameworks for literacy and math instruction and have shown steady progress in increasing MCAS scores over the past decade for all groups of students. (All boats have lifted, but the gaps remain just as large.) Three of our elementary schools already offer the opportunity to learn an additional language starting in kindergarten. There is a lot to build on.

But closing the third-grade achievement gap in Cambridge will require more than focused intention and common frameworks. It will require additional private and public resources in the form of people, materials and physical space. We need to expand, strengthen and fill in the gaps in our early childhood, pre-kindergarten, family support, mental health, summer and afterschool programs so they serve every child who is at risk of not reaching grade level in reading and math by the end of third-grade. We need to ensure small enough class sizes and adequate intervention staffing in grades JK-3. We need to reduce absences in these grades. We need to offer JK-5 world language instruction in the nine remaining English-only schools. And we need to attract and retain more of those lucky families whose parents have extra time and energy to give to the schools.

We don't know if we can close our third-grade achievement gaps in language, literacy and numeracy because it has never been done before in any comparable school district. But 2014 would be a very good year to start trying. Remember this idea: third grade and beyond.

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