

Borsuk: On the education front, one way to move from anger to action would be to make sure all youngsters are proficient in reading

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Alan J. Borsuk (Photo: Milwaukee Journal Sentinel)



Many past episodes show that, even as anger and peaceful protest are justified when atrocities such as the killing of George Floyd occur, they aren't enough in themselves to bring substantial change. Just look at how little meaningful progress happened after those past events.

If this time is to be different, what is needed?

It's a formidable list, covering everything from anti-racism education to changes in policing practices to stable housing and health care to creating more genuine opportunities for a good education and good jobs.

Permit me to add one thing that also is formidable, but could draw broader support and, if successful, would have great impact: Getting a lot more kids to read on grade level by the end of third grade.

There is close to consensus among educators that if a child can't read before beginning fourth grade, the child's prospects for success in school and ultimately as an adult are seriously reduced.

In short, getting more kids a better start in life, including getting them up to speed on reading, would get more on track for better long-term futures. And the ones who are not getting on track now are disproportionately African American, which is a plain injustice.

Here are two of the things that are most important and disturbing about the Wisconsin education landscape:

First, success in reaching proficiency in reading is shockingly low among students from low-income homes and those who are black or Hispanic. The Wisconsin gap between white kids and black kids has often been measured as the worst in the United States.

Only 13% of black fourth through eighth graders in Wisconsin were rated as proficient or better in reading in 2019. For Milwaukee, it was 10%. Same for Madison.

Second, this has not changed for at least two decades. I've gone over results on the National Assessment of Educational Progress going back to the 1990s. Same story, every time: Wisconsin at the bottom.

Despite some (but too few) very good early childhood programs, many thousands of children each year walk into kindergarten already behind their better-off peers. Many thousands walk out of third grade not really ready for what's ahead.

Has anything been done to try to make reading outcomes better? Well, sort of.

In 2011 and 2012, a Wisconsin "Read to Lead" task force was created to figure out how to get more kids to proficiency in reading by the end of third grade. The chair was then-Gov. Scott Walker and the vice-chair was then-State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tony Evers. It was a tepid effort and it certainly didn't lead to improving things



A child holds some new books. One way to translate the anger and protests of today into action that will lead to meaningful change is to commit to making sure all students read at a proficient level by the end of third grade. So far, Wisconsin isn't close to that.

(Photo: Ariel Cobbert, The Commercial Appeal)

Starting around then, the Greater Milwaukee Foundation launched Milwaukee Succeeds, an everyone-at-the-table effort of civic leaders. It made third grade reading a top priority. It moved slowly, backing a few modest, even if good, efforts. Overall, nothing changed.

Even as nothing improved, the reading education establishment in Wisconsin stuck pretty much to doing the same things. Maybe the philosophy is: If it's not working, don't try to fix it. There's been some increase in teaching kids how to sound out letters and words (phonics), but it has hardly been a full and energized effort.

How important is reading? Very.

Consider a fresh voice: I read this past week an article in the New York University Review of Law and Social Change by McKenna Kohlenberg, a Milwaukee area native who is in the home stretch of getting both her law degree and a master's degree in educational leadership and policy analysis from the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

It uses Madison as a case study in what Kohlenberg calls the "illiteracy-to-incarceration pipeline." She cites research that 70% of adults who are incarcerated and 85% of juveniles who have been involved with the juvenile justice system are functionally illiterate.

“Literacy strongly correlates with myriad social and economic outcomes, and children who are not proficient by the fourth grade are much more likely than their proficient peers to face a series of accumulating negative consequences,” Kohlenberg writes.

She advocates making functional literacy a constitutional right under the citizenship clause of the 14th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. In short, the post-Civil War amendment says everyone is entitled to full citizenship, and, Kohlenberg says, you can’t access your full citizenship in the 21st Century if you’re not literate.

Courts have rejected arguments in this vein for many years, but a current case that arose in Detroit put the idea in the spotlight. Plaintiffs argued that students were being denied their right to learn how to read because Detroit schools were so bad. A federal district judge castigated the school system, but said there was no such constitutional right.

A three-judge federal appeals panel recently reversed that decision, which led to a settlement between the plaintiffs and the state of Michigan which held the possibility of fresh emphasis on literacy instruction. But a few weeks later, the federal appeals court put the brakes on the three-judge ruling, saying a larger panel of appeals judges should consider the issue.

Establishing a constitutional right to learn how to read is a long shot. But it shouldn’t take that kind of force for everyone, including private and public leaders, educators, and citizens in all roles, to see the justice and benefit for really making a push to do this.

I don’t have easy proposals for how to do this. The problems of young kids are sweeping and deeply ingrained.

But I know we haven’t tried very hard, not when it comes to early childhood education, not when it comes to really pushing for success in reading in early grades. There has been so little attention paid, so little urgency, so little intensity shown in seeking better outcomes, even as our black children overall lie at the bottom of the nation in this critical skill.

And I know that other states are doing better. I know that some schools, even in our midst, are doing better. Has anyone gotten to 100% success? No. But they’re doing better. Why aren’t we learning from them and striving to be like them?

If we’re serious about opening new paths to equity, racial justice and fair opportunity, education is a forefront issue. And reading is at the forefront of the forefront.

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