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CENTERPIECE

Turning the Page

## Monterey County kids lag in literacy scores. Nonprofits are stepping up to help close the gap.

Celia Jiménez

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On Mondays, 1-year-old Jeremias and his mom, Elizabeth Merino Salvador, attend Read to Me's early literacy program in Greenfield. Last year, Read to Me served 84 classes with more than 3,100 students from Seaside, Marina, Greenfield and Salinas. Students enrolled in Read to Me programs do better on standardized tests than their peers who are not.

CELIA JIMÉNEZ

**BEFORE THEY GET TO READING A BOOK CALLED *ANIMAL ADAPTATION***, third-graders in a classroom at Laurel Wood Elementary School in Salinas are working on pronunciation. Teacher Kelly Rae Swanson writes vocabulary words on the chalkboard. “Everybody say ‘traction,’” Swanson says. The students respond in unison: “Traction.”

The book is displayed for everybody on a projector. As they move together slowly through the pages, illustrating unique animal features – webbed feet for ducks, webbed toes polar bears use to swim – Swanson pauses at new words. She and the students highlight the vocabulary. The group reads aloud, slowly, together. “That makes it fair for everybody,” she says.

On its face, the book is about animal physiology. “Almost everything about an animal’s body is a physical adaptation,” the book opens. But this lesson is about developing the underlying skill that will enable kids to advance their knowledge well beyond this lesson or this classroom: reading.

Educators say as soon as kids step into a classroom, they start learning new words – including through song and play, even before they can read – and they should progress as they move through grades, learning about letters and sounds and how to group them together to form words and sentences. Transitional kindergarten to third grade are the formative years where students should learn how to read, and by third grade they should make the switch from learning to read to reading to learn – using reading as a tool to gain knowledge about new subjects.

Reading is a skill that educators say takes at least five years to learn. And it starts even before kindergarten. [A 2010 report from the Annie E. Casey Foundation](#) says children should learn how to read by the end of third grade, and if kids are behind at this stage, they are less and less likely to catch up. That means these younger years are a pivotal stage: “If you’re struggling in reading in the third grade, it increases your dropout chances, and [not] graduating high school,” says Ted Knight, superintendent of Carmel Unified School District.

Besides graduation rates, reading is a door that opens infinite possibilities: It exposes people to new concepts and helps them navigate their everyday lives. Literacy at this age also correlates to better outcomes much later, in students’ adult lives. Multiple studies show low literacy in third grade corresponds to increased chances later on of being incarcerated, lower life expectancy, fewer job opportunities and lower income.

The Golden State ranks as the fifth-largest economy in the world, yet has a failing score in literacy. Just over half of California students, 51.1 percent, in third through 11th grade, met or exceeded reading and writing standardized test standards for the 2018-2019 school year. Monterey County was below the state average, with just 39.8 percent of students meeting or exceeding standards.

In Monterey County, only 1 in 4 kids are kindergarten-ready, according to the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment, conducted by United Way in 2014. Educators say it becomes more challenging for students to catch up with their reading skills the older they are. Increasingly, educators and nonprofits are looking to the earliest years, before school starts, to help close the gap.

Mary De Groat, director of development and marketing at the Read to Me Project, a nonprofit that provides an early literacy program, says 70 percent of kids in Monterey County are at least two years behind in their reading skills. “The problem is, kids are entering kindergarten way behind,” she says.

This gap grew exponentially during the pandemic, DeGroat adds: “Children have returned to school further behind than ever, and our schools are reporting they’re really struggling to get them to catch up.”

She says the absence of an early literacy program countywide to prepare kids before they enter kindergarten is to blame. “The root cause of this crisis in Monterey County is the lack of early literacy development before a child starts school,” she says.

That’s where initiatives like Read To Me – along with educational institutions and other nonprofit efforts – come in, with different strategies to close this literacy gap.



Volunteers with the Kiwanis Literacy Club of Salinas delivered copies of *Yo Puedo Ayudar* to first-graders at Los Padres Elementary School in Salinas. It is one of several nonprofits that helps children develop their own at-home library.

CELIA JIMÉNEZ

**LAST SPRING, EDUCATORS AND EMPLOYERS WERE BUSILY WORKING WITH GRASSROOTS ORGANIZERS** toward a goal for the Nov. 8 election. On June 13, supporters convened at Hartnell College to announce they had gathered enough signatures – over 10,000 – to get [Measure Q](#) on the November ballot, a \$49 annual parcel tax that would generate an estimated \$5.5 million per year for childcare for those critical age 0-5 years. (As of press time, early election returns show Measure Q failing with just 40.5 percent of the vote.)

[This year, California started rolling out its universal transitional kindergarten program](#), which will be fully implemented by 2025-2026, at a cost of \$2.7 billion per year. The state also provided \$490 million this school year to build or upgrade preschool, transitional kindergarten (TK) and kindergarten facilities across California.

Gov. Gavin Newsom announced this investment in early childhood in May of 2021 at Elkhorn Elementary School in Castroville, calling it a “blueprint over the next five years for the total transformation” of the state’s educational system.

These are efforts to close the gap – and there is a big gap. Not all students are behind on literacy targets.

Taking a closer look at literacy test results of third-graders in different school districts across the county, the results are wildly divergent. In the 2018-19 school year (before Covid) in Carmel Unified School District, 74 percent of third-graders met or exceeded the state standard, while in Salinas City Elementary School District, only 29 percent of third-graders achieved their English reading and writing standards.

There are some underlying differences between these districts, both in terms of student demographics and income levels, and school funding. CUSD spent [\\$25,918 per student last year](#). Salinas spent about half that – \$13,216 per student. That influences teacher-to-student ratios, which educators say impacts learning. “We are blessed with resources, so the lower the grade level, the lower the class sizes,” Knight says.

There are factors outside of the classroom that also correlate to literacy attainment. Lower-income kids have been shown to start school behind their peers and have lower standardized test scores.

In 1995, Betty Hart and Todd R. Risley published the book *Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experience of Young American Children*. They recorded and analyzed parent-child conversations in 42 families with different socioeconomic backgrounds. They found there was a difference of 300 words per hour spoken between 3-year-old kids in high-income families and low-income families. By age 4, the word gap between the two groups would increase to 30 million.

In CUSD, 12.5 percent of students last year received free and reduced-price meals, compared to 72 percent at SCESD. And within CUSD, low-income third-graders underperformed compared to their peers: 55 percent were at or above grade level on standardized tests, while 78 percent of more affluent students achieved the mark. The same pattern holds true at SCESD, where 25 percent of low-income students met or exceeded grade-level standards, compared to 48 percent of their peers from higher-income families.

Another factor is language. Last year, of the 2,335 students enrolled in CUSD, just 61 students, or 2.6 percent, were English learners. In SCESD's predominantly Latino student population, 52 percent are English learners. Education experts say it takes five to seven years to gain English-language proficiency.

"By third grade, many of these children will be at an English language development level that is halfway there," says Aldo Ramirez, assistant superintendent of educational services at SCESD. "Expecting them to be at grade level on an English test isn't realistic."

Both Ramirez and Knight emphasize that collaborative, community-scale efforts to get kids reading – in any language, not just English – are needed to boost literacy. Ramirez points to data showing that Asian students perform better than any other ethnic group, and notes a cultural emphasis on after-school programs and children learning to read from their parents. "If we can help our other communities be involved like this, I think we'll get better results," he says.

Knight adds, "Your parents, your community and your school, working in unison for kids, is without a doubt one of the best things you can do to help all kids learn at high levels."

It's at the community level where a number of local nonprofits step in.

**LOADED WITH BOOKS, NINA WOLFF AND BECKY DAVIS WALK DOWN THE HALL** of Los Padres Elementary School. Both are members of the Kiwanis Literacy Club of Salinas, which comprises retired teachers who want to instill a love for reading in children. In each first-grade classroom, kids are waiting in line to get their own copy of a book in Spanish: *Yo Puedo Ayudar* by Edison Mena. Once they get their books, they return eagerly to their seats, flipping through the pages, before posing for a photo, proudly lifting their new book.

"When children have their own library at home, it's proven that they become readers," says Clifford Gilkey, a Kiwanis member who carefully selects the books his club delivers. Gilkey has delivered books at Los Padres Elementary several times and he says his favorite part is seeing the kids' reactions: "It's really exciting to see their faces light up and have their own book, and [they ask], 'Can I write my name in this book?'"

Other local nonprofits work in collaboration with school districts including, Salinas Area Reading is Fundamental and the Read to Me Project.

With Reading is Fundamental, school districts provide a \$1 per student toward book purchases; the nonprofit gets the balance from grants and other forms of fundraising (such as Monterey County Gives!; see insert in this week's edition, or [mcgives.com](http://mcgives.com)). The nonprofit purchases books and makes two or three distributions per year, serving 12,000 kids in 30 schools, in grades kindergarten through sixth grade in Salinas and North Monterey County.

Students whose schools are part of RIF are invited to Gavilan View Middle School to browse a book fair and pick out books they like and keep them for their own private library – all for free.

“Nobody tells a student what they can or can't get,” RIF board member Mary Alicia McRae says. “Sometimes the sixth-graders choose a book that's below their grade level because they want to read it to their younger brothers and sisters,” she adds.

That concept – of letting young, aspiring readers teach even younger would-be readers – is a model that educators say is effective in boosting literacy.

**AT READ TO ME PROJECT**, the goal is to supply books for kids during the first five years of their lives. “We aren't teaching little ones how to read – we're preparing them for teachers to teach them how to read,” De Groat says.

Read to Me's strategy is to get colorful, inviting books to underperforming students in fourth through sixth grade. These books may be in English or Spanish, and the idea is to get kids reading to their younger brothers and sisters.

De Groat says that when kids read to their siblings they are learning the basics – things like language structure, decoding (matching letters to sounds), syntax – but also developing imagination and a love of reading.

[According to a 2019 study published in the journal \*Social Science Research\*](#), having a library at home has a long-lasting impact for adolescents. It improves adult literacy and mathematical and technological skills, developing a base to succeed later in life in educational and professional settings.

And it helps educators succeed when students are in their classrooms, helping them transmit concepts, with reading as a foundation. “The whole notion of teaching reading or a child learning to read isn't something that just starts when they enter the school system,” says Caryn Lewis, assistant superintendent of educational services at the Monterey County Office of Education.

Lewis adds that there are ways for adults to help children develop reading skills, other than reading – that include singing, rhyming and simply having conversations (see resource box, left).

Lewis adds that learning should be fun: “[It] allows them to relax in that environment, and really accelerate their learning and language acquisition as they’re moving forward.”

Sometimes this looks more like play than study.



Transitional kindergarten teacher Tiffany Kellogg has games in her classroom that are used to teach basic math and early literacy. Building games that use letters can help kids learn the alphabet, and shapes and sounds of each letter.

CELIA JIMÉNEZ

**AT ALISAL VIRTUAL ACADEMY**, kindergarten teacher Shawn Quiane is reading a book about how plants grow with Jesus, one of her students, during an in-person meeting in August. Once they finish the book, Quiane quizzes Jesus: “What do our plants need?” “It is soil!” Jesus responds excitedly. “What color is the soil?” Quiane asks. “Brown,” he responds.

That day, besides following along as his teacher reads, Jesus also learns how to use a magnifying glass and plant a seed, starting with filling a cup with soil, putting a seed in and watering it. Soil also became his favorite word, and he repeated it several times.

Jesus was lucky to get one-on-one instruction, as the only student in the virtual program to attend in-person class that day. This kind of one-on-one instruction on this day happens by chance, but it is exactly the kind of highly personalized learning that reading specialists and intervention teachers say helps students catch up.

While bringing kids to grade-level skills is the ultimate goal, progress works differently for every student. Luke Samuels teaches in North Monterey County School District's Center for Independent Study, an alternative educational program where students complete their education outside of a traditional school setting. "The more a kid is struggling, the smaller the group needs to be. The more individual attention they need," Samuels says. He adds that a conventional classroom can be a waste of time for kids who are struggling, because they miss out on most of the lesson.

Samuels works with high school students one-on-one, enabling him to really get to know them. For those who struggle with reading, he asks them to read a book that resonates with what they like to make reading more enjoyable and less intimidating. "It can be about art, sports, history. If adults won't keep reading boring books, kids won't, either."

## **LIBRARIES ACROSS THE COUNTY OFFER A RANGE OF READ-TOGETHER**

**PROGRAMS**, meant to show children that reading can be fun. Participants might listen to stories with princesses and dragons, or about animals or cookies. In some groups, librarians play and sing songs with kids. In the Dads Read program at the Marina branch library of Monterey County Free Libraries, men (mostly, but not exclusively dads) read books aloud to kids in the playground. At Toddler Tales at Cesar Chavez Library in Salinas, little kids listen to a story – in English and Spanish – and play, sing and rhyme. MCFL's bookmobile called the Lean Green Reading Machine roams around the county, delivering reading kits to classrooms.

In addition, the MCFL system offers adult literacy education.

MCFL Library Director Hillary Theyer says this creates an ecosystem between kids and adults: "Children learn to read by having adults around them who read, and by being read to."

Foundations that support local libraries also see the value in support early reading education. Through Monterey County Gives!, Monterey Public Library Friends and Foundation seeks to create a new children's area at Monterey Public Library. The space the nonprofit envisions is colorful, fun and interactive, designed as an inviting space for kids (and their adult caregivers) to explore learning.

Friends of the Salinas Public Library's Books at Birth Year (BABY) program is all about encouraging early literacy, by helping babies start their own at-home library. Families who participate in the Salinas Public Library's related programs (like story time) are invited to choose six free books in a child's first year.

Velma Veith of Salinas City Elementary School District says this whole network of reading opportunities can help build enthusiasm among both kids and adults for reading, which is critical for all ages – and the more reading adults do at home, the more it will benefit children. And reading, she adds, expands everybody's world, at any age: "It's an opportunity to visit places that you haven't been, and get ideas that you've never thought of."



DANIEL DREIFUSS

## More Information

# Tips for helping your child learn to read. (Hint: They do not all involve reading.)

Some literacy-boosting solutions that are so simple that adults might not even realize they are connected to reading. Monterey County Superintendent of Schools Deneen Guss remembers literacy-boosting activities she did as a child with her mom: “Every time we were in the car, she was singing with us. We would sing with her. We had no idea we were building pre-reading skills, but that’s what we’re doing.”

Pre-reading skills that help children grasp vocabulary come from everyday experiences, like singing and conversation. Velma Veith of Salinas City Elementary School District recommends making reading a special activity. “You’re pairing the feelings and the experience – a positive experience – with reading,” she says. “Then they’re going to be more motivated to read.”

Besides reading to kids, experts recommend some other ways of boosting literacy among the youngest children. A few of their suggestions are included below.

- **READ TO YOUR CHILDREN.** And encourage children to read to each other, even to the youngest kids who are not even speaking yet ( they can read the book or “read” by describing what they see on the pages.)
- **KEEP BOOKS IN YOUR HOME.** And remember that public library membership allows you to sign out books for free.
- **ATTEND STORY TIME** at the library or with other groups of kids.
- **SINGING AND DANCING, INCLUDING NURSERY RHYMES.** Rhyming is especially important as a tool for teaching kids how language works.
- **CREATE OPPORTUNITIES FOR KIDS TO EXPRESS THEMSELVES.** This might be asking questions about their day at school, a movie they saw or a book they read. “The main idea is that students are practicing even answering questions,” Veith says.
- **ENCOURAGE KIDS TO USE THEIR LANGUAGE SKILLS.** This may be something practical, like helping you with the grocery list.

- **THE LANGUAGE YOU USE FOR SPEAKING OR READING AT HOME DOES NOT MATTER** – even if English is not spoken at home, these tactics will help children advance. “When children learn in their parents’ primary language, they learn a lot faster,” says Aldo Ramirez of SCESD.
- **FOR MORE READING RESOURCES TO USE AT HOME**, check out Monterey County Free Libraries Calendar [bit.ly/mcflcalendar](https://bit.ly/mcflcalendar), your city’s library or [first5monterey.org/learning-resources-for-families.htm](https://first5monterey.org/learning-resources-for-families.htm)

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