

House passes bill in effort to raise reading proficiency

BOSTON — State Rep. Denise Andrews (D-Orange) joined her colleagues recently in the Massachusetts House of Representatives in passing legislation aimed at having all students in the Commonwealth reading proficiently by the end of third grade. This legislation creates an "Expert Literacy Expert Panel," chaired by the secretary of education and an outside expert on children's early language and literacy development, which will help to streamline different initiatives and create a cohesive system that will directly help close the achievement gap by third grade for all Massachusetts students.

Although Massachusetts remains a national leader in public education, many of the Commonwealth's students are falling behind. According to the 2011 MCAS scores, 39 percent of Massachusetts' third graders do not read at grade level, an alarming statistic given the research that indicates 74 percent of students with less than proficient reading abilities by third grade have a dramatically reduced likelihood of graduating from high school. The legislation passed by the House of Representatives seeks to strengthen the implementation of literacy programs in public schools across the state by requiring the expert panel to advise the Department of Early Education and Care, the Department of Elementary

and Secondary Education, and the Department of Higher Education on aligning and coordinating current initiatives.

Despite dedicated teachers and family members, the implementation of numerous educational programs, millions of dollars funneled toward improving schooling and a general desire to succeed, a significant gap in achievement persists here in M a s s a c h u s e t t s . Underperformance in reading is not a phenomenon peculiar to any one region of the state; it is present across the Commonwealth, in cities, suburbs and the most rural areas.

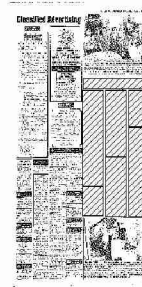
There is, however, significant commonality when considering testing results alongside household income. Sixty percent of third graders from low-income households scored below proficiency, up from 57 percent in 2010. Current data suggests that the achievement gap is actually growing and this is occurring not simply in low-income households. The gap among Latino third graders grew to 64 percent, up from 62 percent just two years earlier. Among African-American third graders, the gap grew at an even faster pace, up five points to 63 percent over the same period.

In passing this education bill, the House of Representatives took what some would say is the first step toward remedying the

problem, suggesting that the issue of reading proficiency in Massachusetts will no longer be ignored. The Early Literacy Expert Panel is expected to make recommendations on things such as comprehensive curricula changes, effective teaching practices to promote children's language and literacy development, family engagement strategies, and professional development and training for educators on language and literacy development.

In addition to these recommendations, the panel must also advise the Department of Early Education and Care, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, and the Department of Higher Education on utilizing new and existing federal grant funds, as well as private funds, to support language and literacy development. The panel will be led by the secretary of education as well as an additional eight appointed experts on early childhood education and literacy.

Acknowledging the importance of this issue, Rep. Andrews was among many that were glad to see the bill passed, but noted that it alone will not fix the issue at hand. "I commend Chairwoman Peisch, Speaker DeLeo's leadership and the members of the House for addressing this critical issue," she said. "This is vital work and reading proficiency at the third grade level is a strong early indicator of the future



academic success of our children. This is a challenge that we need to solve collectively. Academic achievement cannot only be the responsibility only of our schools; it relies on support from the entire community and solutions must also include parents, relatives, family friends and an engaged community.”

She added, “The issue did not arise overnight. The decline in early literacy rates happened over some time, and the Legislature, along with parents, schools and all those involved in the education of our children bear the responsibility to insure our children are educated to reach their full potential and contribute to our society. If third grade reading proficiency is to improve, and the hopes, dreams and frankly fortunes of our children along with it, then change needs to start now. The Early Literacy Expert Panel is just the beginning, but as a society we have an obligation to help improve reading proficiency in every community across the Commonwealth.”

Anyone interested in being considered for the Early Literacy Expert Panel is invited to forward their resumes to Rep. Andrews at denise.andrews@mahouse.gov. Her office has offered to forward these materials to the appropriate office.