

Nearly half of all students in the Triangle cannot read on grade-level by the end of third grade. And the number is higher for kids in low-wealth communities.

I'd like you to think about why that is, and what that means, for a minute. Because while policies, and funding, and methodology do make up a portion of that statistic, I'd like us to explore the fact that there are structures in place and other significant barriers standing in the way of our kids and their access to education.

- We know that it means our kids are coming to school hungry, making it harder to learn. Over 20% of our region's children are at risk of hunger, or hungry.
- We know that it means that our kids have parents who are struggling to make ends meet, and unaware of support programs available to them. Between 11 and 20% of residents in each of our counties are living below the federal poverty level. And that percentage is much higher for families of color.
- We know that it means that we have a growing population of our kids that are speaking different languages, and do not have access to the resources they need to help them succeed in speaking, and reading in English. In each of our counties, over 10% of our residents are foreign born, and that doesn't account for the hundreds of thousands who were born right here, but speak English as a second language in their homes.
- We know that it means that in the Triangle, some of our kids are homeless or living in such desperate poverty that they aren't worried about reading by the end of third grade. They are trying to find a place to sleep at night. At the point in time count in 2015, 100 children in Durham, 19 in Orange, 11 in Chatham and 185 in Wake were experiencing homelessness.

Now I'd like to ask that we think about what that predicts.

- It predicts that a significant number of our kids won't graduate from high school, or pursue secondary education, because they can't – even when we know that by 2020, 67% of jobs will require it.
- It predicts that our future workforce will have to come from somewhere else, because our kids aren't prepared.
- It predicts that we perpetuate a structure currently in place that keeps our kids in poverty, stifles their attempt to increase their wealth, and sets them up for failure – so that they cannot reach their full potential and attain success.
- We rank 95th out of 100 major commuter cities for economic mobility. That means if a child is born into poverty, only one third of them will make it out of poverty in their lifetime. Only one third.

We can do better than this. We have to do better than this. Now that we recognize what will happen if we don't help our kids, what can we do about it? Because we need to do something.

As a parent, an invested member of this community, and the President of Triangle Community Foundation, I feel strongly that we have to do something. I need you to join me. And I hope that's why you're here today, why we're all gathered here to learn from each other, to find those similar threads that move us to say – Yes! I want to join you, I want to share my passion, so that we can learn about and work to address this problem for the good of our kids and the whole community.

Today we are gathered here, rallied here, around our kids. Around the notion that it is up to all of us to help them – to ensure that they all have access to the educational opportunities they need to succeed, to ensure that they have the tools and programs in place to so that they can read by the end of third-grade, to ensure that they can and will become successful members of our community, for their future and ours.

Lori O'Keefe
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Excerpt from What Matters: Our Kids