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## Gov. John Kasich's budget blueprint needs a literacy focus: Elizabeth A. Grove and Robert Paponetti (Opinion)



File Photo (Ramona Stewart)

By [Guest Columnist/cleveland.com](#) March 29, 2015

The exciting advancements in our region, including the transformation of downtown, will not be enjoyed by all if a large segment of Cuyahoga County residents cannot read, write, compute and solve problems at a level required for functioning on the job and in society. Like a weight shackled to the ankle of a tired swimmer, **Northeast Ohio's alarming low literacy rates** threaten to pull our community under.

Research indicates 44 percent of Cuyahoga County residents over the age of 16 may not be able write a brief letter to explain a credit card billing error, **or interpret a bus schedule to get to work on time**, or determine the discount on a car insurance bill if paid in full within 15 days.

The economic impact of this crisis cannot be overstated. Adults lacking basic skills have more difficulty gaining and keeping employment, business growth is hampered for lack of qualified applicants, and the social support system is bursting at the seams trying to accommodate the massive need.

The good news is, it's not too late to turn the tide, but we must act now.

Gov. John Kasich is promoting a "**Blueprint for a New Ohio**" as inspiration for his proposed state budget. He wants to help Ohioans move up and out of poverty and into jobs. Unless improving literacy rates is a central part of the plan, this worthy goal will fall short.

While many of the 3.8 million Ohio residents living at, or below, 200 percent of the federal poverty level might achieve employment that gets them off public assistance, few will earn enough to escape poverty and move towards genuine self-sufficiency. They will merely move into the status of "working poor" with limited prospects and discouraging earning potential. Helping these citizens increase their levels of literacy (and associated wage possibilities) is a fundamental way of empowering them to help themselves.

We believe that working specifically to increase literacy rates should be a major priority of the governor's plan, since doing so is central to achieving many of his goals. The investment in comprehensive literacy education for all Ohioans in need -- at every age -- could have a profound impact for every resident of our state, and be the governor's greatest legacy.

Rather than focus on the issue as a social problem, we believe in targeting improved literacy levels as a powerful, positive strategy. Our report, "The Economic Case for Literacy" (available at [literacycooperative.org](http://literacycooperative.org)), demonstrates the profound financial benefits the individual and society enjoy when higher literacy rates are attained. Estimates based on nationally recognized studies suggest that current low literacy in Cuyahoga County results in more than \$706 million per year in expenses for health care, public assistance, corrections and education.

As Kurt Karakul, president of the Third Federal Foundation, said **in a recent blog post**: "We cannot have a conversation about our region's workforce -- how to improve it, how to better connect it to available jobs -- without first talking about literacy." We know that when educational levels go up, productivity goes up, too. More people making more income pay more taxes and help support the society as a whole. Greater literacy levels are essential to promote this economic engine.

"Major reforms to get people off welfare and back to work faster than ever" is one essential element of the blueprint. This objective can be enhanced by a literacy focus. We support an array of strategies that work toward these ends to empower individuals, and encourage the governor and his leadership team to specifically identify literacy directly in the plan.

The mission of The Literacy Cooperative is to help support those delivering worthy content, and act as a conduit to funding, awareness and community engagement. We ask the governor to consider the benefits of this powerful strategy. And we invite everyone to read "10 things you can do right now to increase literacy in Greater Cleveland" at our website.

This crisis belongs to all of us. The problem is fixable. The answer is found in shifting to a realization that improved literacy is a business strategy capable of delivering an astounding return on investment. The time to focus on, fund and integrate literacy education is now.

*Elizabeth A. Grove is board president and Robert Paponetti is executive director of The Literacy Cooperative.*