Students have made only meager gains in reading despite the state's full-fledged focus on the subject, education officials lamented Wednesday. The trouble, some said, might lie in teacher training at colleges.

``We've made progress, but we need to make a lot more progress,' said Mark C. Christie, the president of the state Board of Education. ``I think we can do better than a 35 percent failure rate.' The percentage of third-graders who passed the Standards of Learning test in English rose from 55 percent in 1998 to 65 percent in 2001. By contrast, the third-grade pass rate for math went up from 63 percent to 77 percent.

Jo Lynne DeMary, the state superintendent of public instruction, said Virginia has tried tactics ranging from forums with experts to an ``early reading initiative' targeting problems as early as kindergarten. ``We've been paying a lot of attention to reading,' she said, ``and we haven't seen the improvements we should.'

Christie led a meeting Wednesday that served as a prelude to a study the board plans to help sharpen reading instruction in Virginia.

On Wednesday, the finger was repeatedly pointed at teachers who are either untrained by colleges to reach students with reading problems or unable to decipher test data.

``We have this enormous gap between what we know about how our children learn to read and what our teachers know,' said G. Reid Lyon, one of the nation's leading researchers on reading.

Looking at the dais of board members, Lyon asked: ``Are you spending money to teach your teachers how to teach reading? Do you have to do that?'

DeMary nodded.

``That's unconscionable,' Lyon said.

In an interview, DeMary said, ``We have large anecdotal examples of teachers saying, 'I really don't know how to teach reading,' and these are teachers who are coming out of our teacher education programs.'
Virginia education deans fiercely defended their programs. At Old Dominion University, would-be elementary teachers must take at least 6 credit hours of classes in reading, said William H. Graves III, the education dean.

``We believe every teacher in the commonwealth should receive a heavy dose of reading pedagogy so that their pupils read at grade level or beyond,' he said.

Several deans also said they train student teachers to spot student weaknesses and to figure out how to correct them. ``Our candidates become researchers,' said Delores R. Greene, the dean at Virginia Union University.

Across the nation, educators have latched onto reading as perhaps the most crucial subject a student must master. ``If you don't learn to read, you're not going to make it in life,' said Lyon, a researcher for the National Institutes of Health and an education adviser to President Bush.

In Virginia, the efforts within the past decade have ranged from toughening the curriculum requirements to launching the `early reading initiative.' Under that program, virtually all school systems administer a reading exam to students at least once between kindergarten and third grade. The state provides money to help students who do poorly.

Marcia A. Invernizzi, a University of Virginia professor who designed the test and has helped monitor the results, reported that roughly half the kindergartners who don't do well in the fall pass the test in the spring.

But she noted problems with the program: The state doesn't know how exactly the schools are using the money, and too few teachers and principals are sifting through the test data. ``Until this year,' Invernizzi said, ``we had very few principals even activating their accounts on the Internet.'

Under the new federal No Child Left Behind education law, about $1 billion will be distributed for reading programs, Lyon said. Virginia has sought a $17 million `Reading First' grant, which would include mandatory refresher sessions for every teacher from kindergarten through third grade. DeMary said the grant request has been rejected because Virginia did not include enough administrators.

Lyon said the commonwealth is in good company. ``No state has been successful in its first application,' he said.

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