

# Three IRA Literacy Research Panel Members Comment on Third Grade Retention Laws

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*Editors' Note: With permission from the International Reading Association, the following memo is reprinted with slight modifications from the original article that was published in Reading Today Online in February 2014. Please note that this memo was based on an earlier version of Michigan House Bill 5111 and is not a direct response to the article by Representative Price in this journal. The purpose of the following memo is to report research findings on retention laws as well as to discuss research-supported policies and practices for improving literacy education. We thank the authors, Nell K. Duke, Elizabeth B. Moje, and Annemarie S. Palincsar, for allowing us to share this memo with MRJ readers.*

In response to research demonstrating that students who are not reading at grade level by the end of third grade are at risk of school failure, the legislatures of several states, including Michigan, have considered legislation mandating retention for any students who do not score above a certain level on the state's third-grade reading test. Here we share a memo we submitted earlier this year [February, 2014] in response to this trend. To learn more about recommendations for state reading policy, please see: <http://www.reading.org/reading-today/research/post/lrp/2013/10/31/nga-report-on-early-childhood>.

## Memorandum

Thank you for the opportunity to provide commentary on legislation mandating third-grade re-

tenion for students not reaching proficiency on standardized state tests. Please note that our commentary draws in part from commentary generated by Albert Wat, senior policy analyst in the Education Division of the National Governors Association (NGA) Center for Best Practices, with whom one of us (Duke) worked on the NGA Early Literacy Expert Roundtable and co-served on the Education Commission of the States Early Learning Caucus.

We share legislators' aim to improve literacy outcomes for Michigan's public school students. However, as discussed below, a focus on retention is not supported by research, and many research-supported policies and practices for improving literacy education are more promising solutions.



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**The focus on retention is not supported by research.** The preponderance of research evidence from many different research fields does not support mandatory retention as an effective approach to addressing the problems of low levels of literacy achievement. Most studies find either no effect or negative effects (e.g., Jacob & Lefgren, 2009; Jimerson, 2001; Shepard & Smith, 1990). Although a few studies point to short-term gains following retention, these gains do not endure (e.g., Reschly & Christenson, 2013; Silberglitt, Appleton, Burns, & Jimerson, 2006; Wu, West, & Hughes, 2008). There is no evidence that retained students “catch up” to their peers and stay caught up (e.g., Alexander, Entwisle, & Dauber, 2003). Males, minority students, and students from low-income families are the most vulnerable, with respect to retention. In fact, there is an extensive body of research that points to possible negative long-term impacts of retention (e.g., Chen, Liu, Zhang, Shi, & Rozelle, 2010; Jimerson, Anderson, & Whipple, 2002; Pagani, Tremblay, Vitaro, Boulerice, & McDuff, 2001). Retention in grade—especially after third grade—is a powerful predictor of dropping out of school (although the mechanism for this is not well understood) (Roderick, 1994). In fact, studies conducted by economists indicate that for all demographic groups grade retention is significantly linked to lower earnings in the workplace later in life (e.g., Eide & Showalter, 2001). Moreover, recent research suggests negative impacts of retention on the classmates of retained students (Goffried, 2013). Even Michigan families whose children are not at risk for being retained should be concerned about the ill effects of a mandatory retention policy.

Literacy achievement in Florida is often cited as evidence that a heavy focus on retention is advisable. However, Florida instituted a number of reforms aimed at literacy improvement—including reforms that do have a solid research base—thus it is unclear whether retention specifically contributed to Florida’s levels of literacy achievement. A longitudinal study of one of Florida’s

largest districts determined that retained students experienced neither short- or long-term gains when compared to those who had been administratively promoted; neither retained students, nor their administratively promoted peers, reached proficiency on the reading assessment of the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test. Further, 60% of the students retained in this study were male, 43% were Black, 31% were Hispanic, and 81% received free- or reduced-cost lunch (Dennis, Kroeger, Welsh, Brummer, & Baek, 2010).

State policymakers should be strongly discouraged from instituting retention in the face of a preponderance of evidence that retention will not, in the end, serve Michigan students and families well. They should, instead, be strongly encouraged to invest in early education, in improving K-3 instruction, and in maintaining literacy instruction through grade 12 and, specifically, in the subject areas of middle and high school.

If the legislature proceeds with a focus on retention despite contrary research evidence, Michigan policymakers should consider a more flexible use of the strategy than offered in the current version of the bill. Dr. Wat notes that in Colorado, essentially, a student not scoring at a proficient level at the end of third grade would trigger a meeting between the teacher, the parents, and any other critical school personnel, in which retention is raised as a possibility. The group would then make a decision together, which has to be approved by the school district superintendent or a designee. This approach has the advantage of involving key stakeholders and allowing local flexibility with some state-level oversight. You can read the language in Section 22-7-1207 of the legislation. At the same time, the law requires the district to track how children do whether or not they are retained and report to the state (see Section 22-7-1213). Oklahoma also has a similar provision.

**Investing in early education has much stronger support in research.** Prevention, for example in the form of pre-kindergarten programs, is a much more effective strategy for improving literacy (e.g., Barnett, 2001). Among other benefits, early education addresses the fact that by the time children reach kindergarten, there are already significant achievement gaps, most notably by socioeconomic status, in language and literacy development (e.g., Lee & Burkham, 2002). Moreover, early intervention can substantially reduce the need for retention. For example, here in Michigan, a state-subsidized pre-kindergarten program (formerly MSRP, now GSRP) was shown to improve literacy and math achievement at grade 4 and make it much less likely that students are retained (saving the state \$11 million per year, according to a 2005 report from Lamy, Barnett, and Jung). States such as Oklahoma and Wyoming have been successful at providing universal pre-K education and have begun to see ways in which they can close the gap in the language and reading skills of children from low- and middle/high SES as they begin kindergarten. The successful pre-K programs include a home component in which parents and caregivers are provided with support to learn how to support the development and learning of young children.

**Improvement of teacher preparation and professional development is strongly supported by research.** There is a great deal of research evidence that improving the quality of teacher practice around literacy improves students' educational outcomes (e.g., Darling-Hammond, 2010). Many of the states that have enacted 3rd grade reading legislation have some provisions that speak to this issue. In addition, districts such as those in Washtenaw and Livingston counties, that have invested in middle- and high-school literacy professional development for teachers and in literacy-rich subject area curricula have shown gains in their students' overall and subject-specific literacy achievement.

Some states have focused heavily on teacher quality and teacher professional development in their legislative efforts around literacy. For example, for a subset of particularly underperforming schools, Connecticut's law requires one literacy coach and four reading interventionists for each school. The legislation from Connecticut also requires the state education agency to devise a new professional development plan for teachers and principals around literacy instruction. New Jersey's state education agency invested in a corps of literacy coaches as part of its strategy in the early 2000s to raise reading proficiency in the lowest-income districts in the early grades. Coaching is also part of Florida's strategy—with this component enjoying research support.

States can also use the teacher certification and literacy specialist certification processes to increase the rigor of teacher preparation and professional development. The literacy standards for teachers and reading specialists in Michigan are out of date and not aligned with the International Reading Association Standards for Reading Professionals (2010). Massachusetts is one example of a state that has engaged in legislative efforts to increase the rigor of requirements for educator licensure and preparation program approval. "Performance based" certification requirements, in which candidates demonstrate their knowledge and skills in real classrooms, are also an avenue some have identified as promising.

Policies should be sensitive to the distinct knowledge and skills that teachers need with different age groups of students. Effective teachers of early elementary-age students need expertise that is different from expertise necessary to successfully support adolescent students' literacy learning.

**Research supports attention to continued and subject-specific literacy development across the grade 4-12 span.** Many sources erroneously imply that there is something magical about third grade, but a robust body of evidence indicates that it is ineffective to attend only to reading de-

velopment in the early years with the hope that students can apply those early literacy skills to increasingly complex texts and literacy tasks. Continued support for learning to read even after students have demonstrated basic word reading and comprehension skills is essential. Indeed, many specific approaches to improving literacy after third grade have been shown to be effective (e.g., Greenleaf, Schoenbach, Cziko, & Mueller, 2001; Guthrie et al., 2004; Pearson, Moje, & Greenleaf, 2010; Romance & Vitale, 1992; 2001; Schoenbach & Greenleaf, 2012; Snow, Lawrence, & White, 2009).

Some sources argue that reading by the end of third grade is so important because after third grade, students “read to learn” rather than “learn to read,” but this is an outdated notion that no longer describes education in the United States. With the Common Core State Standards, students are expected to read to learn from kindergarten. First they learn through teacher read aloud and then, by the end of first grade, by reading informational texts themselves. And to meet rigorous expectations for end-of-12th grade literacy skills, students will need continued instruction in reading throughout their school career. Similarly, while some have thought that instruction in K – 3 should focus on learning to read words, and instruction in grade 4 and above on comprehension and learning from text, a federal panel reached a consensus that comprehension instruction, including instruction in reading to learn, must occur in K – 3 (Shanahan, et al., 2010). Further, some students will need instruction in word reading even in grade 4 and beyond (e.g., Biancarosa & Snow, 2006; Carnegie, 2010; Snow et al., 2009). Unfortunately, in policy and practice K – 3 often sees more attention to contributors to word reading, such as phonics, alphabet knowledge, phonemic awareness, at the expense of meaning-based skills, including oral language development (speaking and listening), comprehension, and vocabulary (e.g., Duke & Block, 2012). This may partially explain poor performance on the MEAP, which requires not

only word reading but comprehension as well. Many states thus include definitions of reading that entail comprehension as well as word reading skill (see, e.g., the language from Massachusetts bill, lines 28-37).

## Moving forward in state literacy policy

The National Governors Association is actively working with states on policies to support early literacy (<http://www.nga.org/files/live/sites/NGA/files/pdf/2013/1310NGAEarlyLiteracyReportWeb.pdf>) and would be very happy to provide assistance in the further development of policy in this area (although the governor’s office would need to be involved in the request). The three of us are each called on to inform literacy policy in other states, and would also be happy to contribute to the development of policy initiatives here in Michigan. As policymakers continue to shape the state strategy, some of the questions that may be worth considering include the following:

- Can changes be made to state policies related to child care subsidies or licensing to enable more quality services and instruction in child care settings?
- Is there a way to expand pre-K services? In Minnesota, they offer matching funds and technical assistance to targeted school districts to use Title I money for pre-K.
- Can the state further invest in home visiting programs to increase parents’ capacity to support literacy and language development at home?
- Can the state increase attendance in full-day kindergarten programs? (The Education Commission of the States paper on kindergarten could be helpful in considering this.)
- Michigan law requires that every student who does not show proficiency on the reading portion of the MEAP in 4th or 7th grade shall receive “special assistance reasonably ex-

pected to enable the pupil to bring his or her reading skills to grade level within 12 months.” MCL 380.1278 (8). Can the state do more to implement this existing law?

- Can summer reading programs, which have been shown to improve and help close gaps in literacy achievement, be encouraged from the state level?
- Can adolescent and subject-area literacy development be foregrounded and supported with requirements for more course work in teacher education and for sustained professional development on adolescent literacy for academic subject-area teachers?
- Can middle- and high-school curricula and course offerings be developed to better support adolescent students’ continued literacy skill development?
- Can better and more plentiful text materials be made available throughout all schools in the state to ensure that our children and youth are provided opportunities to read high-quality, challenging, and engaging texts in a range of subject areas?

Again, thank you for the opportunity to comment on third-grade-retention legislation and for all you are doing for Michigan’s children. If you require any further assistance, please do not hesitate to contact us.

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