

Ohio Third Grade Reading Guarantee Works: Study Shows Academic Gains for Retained Students



Background

Ensuring students are proficient readers before they leave elementary school is a critical benchmark for student success. According to the [Annie E. Casey Foundation](#), students who do not read proficiently by the third grade are four times more likely to leave high school without a diploma compared to proficient readers. Students that are economically disadvantaged are actually six times more likely to not graduate. Research by the [Ohio Department of Education](#) found that students who are proficient in reading by third grade were five times more likely to be college and career ready.

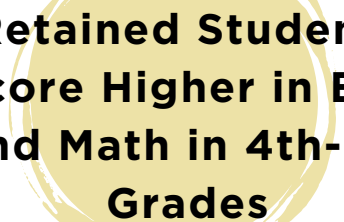
Ohio established the Third Grade Reading Guarantee in 2012 to ensure more students read proficiently. Students now take diagnostic tests in grades kindergarten through three, and if they are found to be not on track for reading proficiency, students receive reading improvement plans, additional interventions, and specially trained teachers. Starting with third grade students in the 2013-2014 school year, if a student does not reach the cut score - set below proficiency - on either the state's English Language Arts (ELA) test or an alternative test, the student is retained in the third grade unless they meet an exemption. Roughly 2.5% to 4.0% of third grade students are retained each year. Students retained in third grade are required to receive intensive interventions to help them reach proficiency.

Policymakers and stakeholders have debated the Third Grade Reading Guarantee for many years, with a special focus on the retention component of the policy. Ohio Excels partnered with the Ohio Education Research Center at The Ohio State University to study the learning outcomes of retained students to help inform the policy debate.

Research

The Ohio Education Research Center looked at how academically similar third grade students during the 2013-14 and 2014-15 school years performed on Ohio's ELA and math tests in each following grade up to seventh grade. The study compared students scoring just above the cut score (who were not retained) to students scoring just below the cut score (who were retained). The U.S. Department of Education recommends this approach when a randomized controlled trial is not possible.

Key Findings



Retained Students Score Higher in ELA and Math in 4th-7th Grades



The Gap Between Retained and Non-Retained Students is Substantial



Retained Third Grade Students Improve Quickly

Results

The research has three important findings, which are consistent with research conducted in other states with a similar retention policy ([Indiana](#), [Florida](#), and [Mississippi](#)):



Retained Students Score Higher in ELA and Math in 4th - 7th Grades:

Third grade students who were retained performed better than similar students who originally scored just above the cut score in ELA and math in every grade studied, fourth grade through seventh grade.



The Gap Between Retained and Non-Retained Students is Substantial:

In fourth and fifth grade, for instance, the average retained student scored at least one performance level better than a similar non-retained student. The retained students performed better, however the gap between retained students and non-retained students decreased each year.



Retained Third Grade Students Improve Quickly: In retained students' second time through third grade, 90% increased their score on the ELA test, 53% increased an entire performance level, and 21% achieved proficiency. It is worth noting that 90% of retained students scored at the very bottom test level - Limited. It is possible to miss the improvement of our lowest performing students by just looking at proficiency rates and not considering student growth.

Policy Implications

Maintain Retention for Students not Reading at Grade Level: The research shows that there are clear academic benefits, for both reading and math, to retaining students that do not meet the cut score for the Third Grade Reading Guarantee for several years after third grade.

Expand Requirements for Interventions to All Students Below Proficiency, Regardless of Grade: The academic benefits to retention shrink over time. While this research does not identify specifically why, it is likely that reading interventions are still needed for students beyond third grade. Reading interventions should be available to any student reading below grade level until they graduate high school.

Work to Improve Reading Instruction and Professional Development: All students, starting on their first day in a classroom, should receive reading instruction based on researched best practices and strategies aligned to the science of reading. Educators should also receive high-quality preparation and professional development to effectively teach these strategies.

Visit www.OhioExcels.org for the full report