

NEWS RELEASE

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New Study of Third Grade Reading Guarantee Highlights Value of Retention Requirement

COLUMBUS – Ohio third-grade students who were retained as part of the state’s Third Grade Reading Guarantee showed substantially higher test scores in English language arts (ELA) and math in grades 4-7 than academically similar third-grade students who were promoted, according to a new study underscoring the importance of the guarantee.

The Ohio Education Research Center (OERC) looked at how academically similar third-grade students performed on Ohio’s ELA and math tests in each following grade up to seventh grade. The study compared the future performance of third-grade students scoring just above the cut score (who were not retained) to students scoring just below the cut score (who were retained). The analysis starts with third grade students during the 2013-14 and 2014-15 school years and uses state test results through the 2018-19 school year.

The research had three major results:

1. **Retained students score higher in ELA and math in grades 4-7.** 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.
2. **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.
3. **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.

“The analysis provides yet more evidence of the value of the Third Grade Reading Guarantee and its impact on students’ future learning outcomes,” said Ohio Excels President Lisa Gray.

“The business community believes there is no more significant benchmark in education than ensuring that our students are proficient readers before they leave elementary school,” said Pat Tiberi, president of the Ohio Business Roundtable and chair of the Ohio Excels board.

Ohio Excels, an education advocacy group backed by state business leaders, continues to call on the General Assembly and Gov. Mike DeWine to ensure that the retention element of the Third Grade Reading Guarantee remains part of state education law.

“Removing the retention component without ensuring that adequate resources, supports, interventions, transparency, and accountability are in place to support Ohio’s struggling readers – regardless of their grade level – will only lead to worse academic outcomes,” Gray said.

“Ohio’s future economic strength relies upon our students having the necessary skills to succeed in our diversifying economy, and that requires our state doing all that is possible to strengthen literacy outcomes,” said Kenny McDonald, president and CEO of the Columbus Partnership and a member of the Ohio Excels board.

Already, Ohio’s youngest schoolchildren appear to be some of the worst affected by learning declines, a downward trend exacerbated by the pandemic, according to state and national assessments. Third graders in Ohio experienced a 22% reduction in reading proficiency during the pandemic, from 67% in the 2018-19 school year to 51.9% in the 2020-21 school year, according to a report from the Ohio Department of Education.

Findings from the [Annie E. Casey Foundation](#) show that 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. If the student is economically disadvantaged this risk is multiplied, and they 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.

“Early literacy is critical for learning and comprehension, especially for children beyond the 3rd grade who must be able to learn content as well. The ongoing literacy deficit, magnified by the pandemic, has left far too many Ohio students reading below grade level,” said State Senator Andrew Brenner. “This research provides a clear indication that retention and reading supports beyond third grade are critical components of a comprehensive strategy to improve academics throughout the state. I appreciate Ohio Excels for researching this important issue, and hope that my fellow policymakers do not disregard this study when considering how best to help Ohio’s struggling readers.”

Benefits of the Third Grade Reading Guarantee identified by the OERC study align with reviews of numerous other states' third-grade retention programs.

A [2015 analysis in Florida](#), for example, concluded that third grade retention increased retained students' GPAs once they entered high school, limited the number of remedial courses they needed, reduced additional retention in future school years, and did not negatively affect graduation rates.

In Indiana, a [2022 Brown University study](#) determined that third grade retention immediately and significantly boosted ELA and math achievement, increases that continued into middle school. The study found no evidence that retention affected attendance or discipline through middle school.

In Mississippi, [a 2023 Boston University report](#) found that the state's retention policy led to significantly higher ELA scores when students were tested again in the sixth grade. The study also found no evidence that, down the road, third grade retention affected students' math scores, absences, or the chance of being eligible for special education classes in the sixth grade.

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