

Third Grade Literacy Policies: Identification, Intervention, Retention

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Introduction

Students not reading proficiently by the end of 3rd grade are four times more likely than proficient readers to drop out of high school.¹ This fact and other recent research on the importance of early literacy skills have culminated in an intense focus on improving 3rd-grade reading proficiency. The challenges of improving literacy are, in turn, causing more state leaders to confront the difficult question: *Should students who do not have the requisite knowledge and reading skills to succeed in the next grade be retained?*

The growing number of state initiatives aimed at addressing 3rd-grade reading proficiency include three elements:

- 1) Early identification of reading difficulties
- 2) Interventions that occur as close to the point of need as possible
- 3) Retention.

While states such as Florida and major cities such as New York City have enacted so-called “promotion gates” in the past decade, it is the less-contentious aspects of their policies — early assessments to identify reading difficulties and the provision of “whatever-it-takes” interventions for struggling students — that are the most effective drivers of achievement. That said, proponents of retention credit the threat of retention as the mechanism that helps to ensure that reading difficulties are identified and interventions do occur.

Research asserting that birth to age 5 are critical years for brain development is also encouraging a growing number of state leaders to target literacy development in the earliest years as well as the early grades. We address here the strategy that is causing the most angst across the states: retention. We also stress the importance of and need for early identification and intervention strategies. To illustrate, we describe the experiences of both Florida and New York City. Finally, we outline strategies to help ensure that a far greater number of young readers leave the early grades at a proficient level of knowledge and skills.



Background on Grade Retention

Research is mixed on the efficacy of grade retention, mirroring the mixed opinions of educators and parents. While some researchers have found that retained students “can significantly improve their grade-level skills during their repeated year,” others have found that less than half of retained students meet promotion standards after attending summer school and repeating a grade.^{2,3} Some research points to other negative effects, including a greater likelihood of bullying and victim behavior, or dropping out of high school.^{4,5}

On the other hand, promoting students who don’t have the requisite skills to succeed leaves students at risk of failure. And while many fear children will be worse off if they are promoted to the next grade without the needed knowledge and skills, others contend that retention can damage children’s self-esteem and force them to repeat programs that are not meeting their needs. Concerns about damaging students’ early feelings toward school and their attitudes toward their own abilities are especially pertinent, as most children are held back in grades K-3, the majority in kindergarten or 1st grade.⁶

Further concern about grade retention policies stems from the fact that retention disproportionately affects disadvantaged students. While nationally about 10% of K-8 students are retained for one or more years, the figure ranges from just 5% for non-poor children to nearly 25% for poor children.⁷ Further, retained students are more likely to be male, minority and of lower socioeconomic status (SES).^{8,9} This raises serious questions about equity and the potential for prejudicing teachers’ attitudes toward the academic capabilities of retained students. Given these disparities, some view grade retention as punishing disadvantaged students who also may not have received the same quality of instruction as their more advantaged peers.



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Finally, grade retention is not without cost. Assessment and identification costs aside, retaining a child costs an average of \$10,297 per year.¹⁰ In a school district of 1,000 students, if 10% of all students were retained in a year (100 students in total) it would produce a cost of almost \$1.3 million. In addition to the direct costs to school districts, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has found that student retention creates another cost to our society — that of a delayed entrance into the labor market. Each year that students are retained in school is a year that they are not participating in our labor force.

In a meta-analysis of studies of student retention policies, the RAND Corporation found that the most successful retention policies, as measured by student outcomes, are characterized by early assessments and numerous interventions.

In a recent report, OECD notes that retention rates vary widely by country, with 13 out of 65 OECD countries and OECD partners listing 97% or more of their students as never having repeated a grade (primary through upper-secondary) but 12 of 65 countries reporting that over 30% of students repeated at least one grade. The United States falls in between with a K-8 retention rate of about 10% (see **Appendix B** for a full list of countries). OECD researchers point out that countries with low retention rates use other strategies to deal with struggling students, such as granting schools more autonomy to establish student-assessment policies, deciding which courses are offered, designing course content and choosing textbooks.¹¹

When coupled with strong identification and intervention components, grade retention policies can have positive effects on student achievement. In a meta-analysis of studies of student retention policies, the RAND Corporation found that the most successful retention policies, as measured by student outcomes, are characterized by early assessments and numerous interventions. Where outcomes were most positive for students, remediation often included individualized education plans, continuous evaluation of academic performance, low student-teacher ratios and other intensive interventions. This analysis suggests that while retention policies may generate public interest and a sense of urgency for improving early reading proficiency, similar improvements in student achievement might well be achieved through identification and intervention — without the need for retention.

Current Policies and Future Initiatives (State of the Nation)

Some states (such as Ohio) have had laws in place for years that require that no pupils be promoted without reaching 3rd-grade-level reading skills, while others (such as Iowa, Wisconsin and New Mexico) are proposing similar initiatives in 2012. Florida is the most cited model of a strict 3rd-grade retention policy but Florida retains students as a last resort and only after identification of difficulties and provision of interventions for struggling readers. In addition, Florida statute also includes “good cause” exemptions.

Based on the Rand research cited earlier, provisions for early identification of difficulties and numerous interventions should form the basis of effective state policy. ECS staff have identified 22 states and the District of Columbia that have policies centered on 3rd-grade reading and that have at least one of these policy elements. The following section summarizes details embedded within these two key elements and in the more controversial “sister” element — student retention.

Early Identification

Decisions states need to make:

- ✦ Identify at which levels children should be assessed: Pre-kindergarten, kindergarten through grade 3, or just grades 1-3.
- ✦ Decide who will select key assessments. The legislature might require the state board to select a single assessment or to put together a “bank” of recommended assessments from which local schools could choose.
 - Utah, for example, directs the state board to determine the appropriate state tests and to set the standard for mastery. Utah law even requires that the selected test must be downloadable to portable technology devices.
 - In a number of other states, the assessments are a mix of state-mandated and locally-determined approaches.
 - An important question is, who pays?
- ✦ Assessments could be formative or summative in nature, or a mix of both.
- ✦ Consider how often and when evaluations should be administered, and whether they are required or simply recommended.
 - Four states, for example, require annual reading assessments for all students grades K-3, and one of those states, Arizona, also includes preschool.

Early Intervention

Decisions states need to make:

- ✦ Interventions should add to instructional time. Some states target after-school hours or intercessions or the summer months.
 - Ten states require or recommend participation in summer school for students with reading deficiencies
 - An additional eight states specify additional instructional time outside of the regular school day (after school) or extending the school year to provide supplemental instruction.
- ✦ Consider how to ensure implementation of multiple, evidence-based, effective interventions.
 - Six states require the development of individualized instruction plans for struggling readers.
 - Also consider whether schools or districts should be required to adopt plans for implementation.
- ✦ Consider how the most effective language and reading teachers or tutors (those with evidence of success) will be assigned to struggling readers.



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Nine states explicitly require parental notification of their child's difficulties, the interventions that are planned and the potential for retention.

- ✦ Decide whether students will be required to attend after-school programs, Saturday or summer interventions. Consider mechanisms to hold parents accountable for student attendance.
- ✦ Think about the point at which parents need to be notified of their child's reading difficulties and what influence they should be granted over interventions, or retention.
 - Nine states explicitly require parental notification of their child's difficulties, the interventions that are planned and the potential for retention.
 - Arizona allows parents to select an intervention strategy.
 - Indiana requires schools to provide parents with strategies to assist their children.
 - Colorado requires parents to agree to implement a home reading program.
- ✦ Determine whether the state will provide additional funding for interventions and whether funding will vary by level of student need.



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Retention

Decisions states need to make:

- ✦ Decide whether students whose scores do not meet expectations will be retained in grade.
 - Nine states require students to meet a literacy benchmark through traditional or alternative assessment in order to be promoted to the 4th grade.
 - Colorado currently retains 3rd-grade students only in reading, allowing students proficient in other subjects to move ahead with their peers in those areas, but pending 2012 legislation would fully retain students in grade.¹²
- ✦ Decide whether parents can override retention decisions. Expect broad resistance if parents are not provided a voice in retention decisions.
- ✦ Determine whether or not student promotion should hinge solely on a test score. Stakeholders are likely to push back if it does. Consider specifying what constitutes a rich body of evidence to be used for making such retention decisions.
- ✦ Consider whether full participation and a level of improvement in interventions should reduce the likelihood that a student will be retained.
 - Five states require that students either meet a literacy benchmark or that they participate in remediation or an individual improvement plan before moving on to the 4th grade.
 - Two states explicitly authorize retention but allow promotion if students participate in remediation and improve their performance.
- ✦ Define "good cause" exemptions.
 - Of the states that list specific potential exemptions from retention, four allow students to be promoted based on alternative assessments or portfolios, or if a principal and reading teacher otherwise agree that a student is prepared for the next grade.
 - Five states exempt students with disabilities, English language learners (ELLs), or students with other "good cause" exemptions similar to Florida's (see **Appendix A**).
 - Several states allow promotion of students whose skills remain below grade level standards but who have previously been retained for two years and received intensive remediation.
 - At least one state explicitly allows for parental appeals, which are then reviewed by a grade placement committee who will determine if a child is academically prepared to advance to the next grade.

Florida: A Case Study in Early Identification, Intervention and 3rd-Grade Retention

In 2002, the Florida state legislature passed S.B. 20E. This law required 3rd-grade students to attain a score of level 2 (of 5) on the Florida Comprehensive Achievement Test (FCAT) before being promoted to 4th grade.

Though labeled by most as a 3rd-grade retention policy, it is important to note that this law also sets clear requirements for early identification and intervention for struggling readers in kindergarten to 3rd grade. Once a student's difficulties are identified, schools are required to develop academic improvement plans that describe the specific areas of reading deficiency, desired levels of performance in these areas and necessary support services. Next, schools are required to detail for parents of struggling readers the steps they are taking to help the student, what intervention is proposed and the consequences of continued poor performance (3rd-grade retention). Notably, if students are retained, the law is explicit in requiring that they must be provided with an intensive program that is different from the previous year's program and that takes into account the student's individual learning style.

Florida also offers flexibility through six clear "good cause" exemptions from retention such as disabilities, limited English proficiency, or performance demonstrated via alternative assessments or portfolios. While the state uses a benchmark score of 2 or above on the FCAT for promotion to 4th grade, teachers and principals have an array of options for promoting students who are able to demonstrate reading proficiency by alternate means such as locally determined assessments and portfolios of student work. See **Appendix A** for a full list of exemptions. It is important to note that the state of Florida has assessed student achievement for over 40 years, and has a database of student data upon which to base its FCAT test and retention threshold.

Since implementation, the Florida 3rd-grade retention policy has been studied by a number of researchers seeking to measure the impacts on students in terms of K-3 retention rates, academic gains and future performance. The Florida Legislature's Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability (OPPAGA) has produced two reports, and researchers at the University of Alabama examined the impact of Florida's policy in a series of reports published by the Manhattan Institute.



Takeaways from studies of Florida's retention policy include:

- ✦ **Florida experienced a large jump in retention rates in the first year of implementation, followed by a gradual decrease in the percentage of students retained.**
OPPAGA researchers found that in 2003, the 3rd-grade retention rate rose from 3.3% pre-policy to 14.4% post-implementation. By the 2006-07 school year, the percentage of students retained was down to 8.1%.¹³ Researchers also found an increase in the number of children retained in grades K-2 (from approximately 29,500 children in 2001-02 to 40,000 in 2003-04).¹⁴
- ✦ **Since the retention policy went into effect, 3rd-grade FCAT Reading scores have increased steadily.**
In the 2001-02 school year, 27% of 3rd graders scored a level 1 (at risk for retention) and 59% scored a 3 or above (proficient), according to a 2008 OPPAGA study.¹⁵ In the 2007-08 school year only 16% of children scored below the level 2 benchmark, with 72% achieving FCAT proficiency.
- ✦ **Most students who were retained in the 3rd grade improved in their 4th-grade year.**
OPPAGA's 2006 comprehensive study of Florida's 3rd-grade retention policy found that 62% of students who were retained in 3rd grade after scoring at level 1 on the FCAT improved their performance to a level 2 or higher in 4th grade.¹⁶
- ✦ **Students who were retained under Florida's 3rd-grade retention policy outperformed similar students who were "socially promoted" in earlier years.**
University of Alabama researchers found that low-performing students subject to the retention policy made gains in reading greater than those of similar students not subject to the policy promoted in earlier years.¹⁷ They also found that students made significant reading gains relative to socially promoted students two years after being subject to the policy. Benefits in reading grew substantially from the first to the second year after retention.¹⁸
- ✦ **Students promoted on the basis of a good cause exemption outperformed students who were promoted despite scoring a 1 on the FCAT before the retention policy went into effect.**
This suggests that students receiving "good cause" exemptions were better prepared for 4th grade than socially promoted students. Of pre-policy 3rd graders who were promoted despite scoring a level 1 on the FCAT, only 29% improved to a level 2 or above in 4th grade, versus 44% of "good cause" exempted 3rd graders in year one of Florida's retention policy.
- ✦ **Students with exemptions based on alternate assessments/portfolios outperformed students who received other types of exemptions (70% scored at/above level 2 in 4th grade in 2003-04).**
This suggests that students who demonstrate proficiency despite scoring a 1 on the FCAT are ready for 4th grade regardless of their difficulties with the assessment. Providing this type of exemption is important for students who have difficulties with standardized tests.

- ✦ **The use of portfolios and alternative assessments increased over time, as educators became more familiar with the policy.**
The percentage of children scoring at level 1 but receiving a good cause exemption for promotion based on alternative assessments or a student portfolio increased in year two of policy implementation.¹⁹
- ✦ **Schools reported providing earlier assessments and remediation after the retention policy was adopted.**
Schools often reported assessing students beginning in kindergarten as well as providing more intensive reading instruction than they had before the policy went into effect.²⁰ Researchers also found that schools were adopting technology aids (such as reading software capable of tracking student progress) and that 90-minute reading blocks were established in many classrooms.
- ✦ **Strong leadership led to improved outcomes for students under Florida's 3rd-grade retention policy.**
OPPAGA researchers found that the schools that were most successful in improving the performance of retained 3rd graders set higher academic expectations for all students and had stronger instructional leadership than less successful schools. Florida schools did better in remediating 3rd graders if leaders clearly communicated goals, ensured learning strategies were implemented and set a climate of high expectations.²¹

Lessons learned from Florida:

- ✦ Strong early identification and intervention are a crucial component of any retention policy.
- ✦ States can expect a jump in K-3 retention rates in the first years of policy implementation.
- ✦ As the benefits of early identification and intervention are felt, test scores are likely to improve, and retention rates likely to decline.
- ✦ A mandated retention policy with identification and intervention guidelines provides urgency around 3rd grade reading and leads to earlier assessment and intervention.
- ✦ Good-cause exemptions allowing students to demonstrate proficiency through alternative assessments and/or portfolios appear to adequately screen for children who would benefit from promotion, despite low scores on statewide assessments.
- ✦ Strong school leadership is important to the success of an early identification, intervention and retention policy. Particularly helpful are setting high expectations for children, communicating goals and processes clearly to teachers, and providing adequate support to staff.

New York City: A Case Study in Early Identification, Intervention and Retention

In 2003, New York City (NYC) adopted promotion and retention guidelines for 3rd graders (followed by 5th graders in 2003, 7th graders in 2005 and 8th graders in 2008).²² NYC requires students to be retained if they score at level 1 of 4 (signifying “serious academic difficulties”) on the New York State assessment of English Language Arts (ELA) or mathematics. The policy also has strong identification and intervention components, emphasizing early identification, additional instructional time and continuous assessment of student progress. Schools identify students needing services at the beginning of each year, based on teacher or principal recommendations, previous test results and/or in-class assessments. Students identified as struggling in one of the tested subjects are ensured access to Academic Intervention Services (AIS), including differentiated instruction in the classroom, small-group instruction, small class sizes and summer school. NYC’s retention policy applies only to general education students and offers students opportunities to be promoted based on a portfolio of student work, summer standardized assessment or an appeals process.

Takeaways from studies of NYC’s retention policy include:²³

- ✦ **Intervention services were offered to all students identified as struggling, as well as stronger readers who requested AIS.**
RAND Corporation found that schools served not only Level 1 students needing remediation, but also extended services to students scoring at Level 2 and Level 3 (not at risk of retention) as space permitted.²⁴ Most schools relied mainly on reading and mathematics specialists and AIS leaders to provide intervention services.
- ✦ **Schools varied in the type and intensity of interventions offered to students.**
Nearly all schools provided small group tutoring during the school day and provided after-school programming (37.5 minutes of small-group instruction). More than two thirds of schools provided one-on-one tutoring. Less than half provided instruction during school

breaks, with most schools offering services two or more times per week. Many different people were involved in providing AIS, including coaches, administrators, aides and parent volunteers.

- ✦ **School leaders utilized additional strategies to improve student performance.**
Schools studied by RAND provided professional development to teachers on differentiated instruction and using assessment data to guide instruction in order to better serve struggling readers. Some principals also required teachers to use highly structured curricula with detailed daily plans, and/or use materials that teach test-taking strategies.²⁵
- ✦ **The overwhelming majority of principals and AIS leaders felt that interventions enhanced student performance.**
Over 95% of principals and AIS leaders rated small group and one-on-one tutoring as moderately or very effective in improving student performance. Over 90% of principals felt that Saturday school programs improved student reading, mathematics and test-taking skills.
- ✦ **5th-grade students who were identified for intervention and retained under NYC’s policy improved their skills, even two years later.**
Researchers found that retained students outperformed the comparison group on 7th-grade assessments and would be expected to score a Level 2 and be promoted to 8th grade. (Note: RAND focused on interventions and results of New York City’s 5th-grade retention policy.)
- ✦ **Researchers found few differences in socio-emotional well-being between students who were retained and those who were promoted.**
Comparing at-risk students who were promoted to retained students, researchers found student attitudes toward reading and mathematics generally comparable. Retained students, however, reported a “greater sense of school connectedness” than at-risk promoted students and not-at-risk students, even four years after the retention decision.

Lessons learned from New York City:

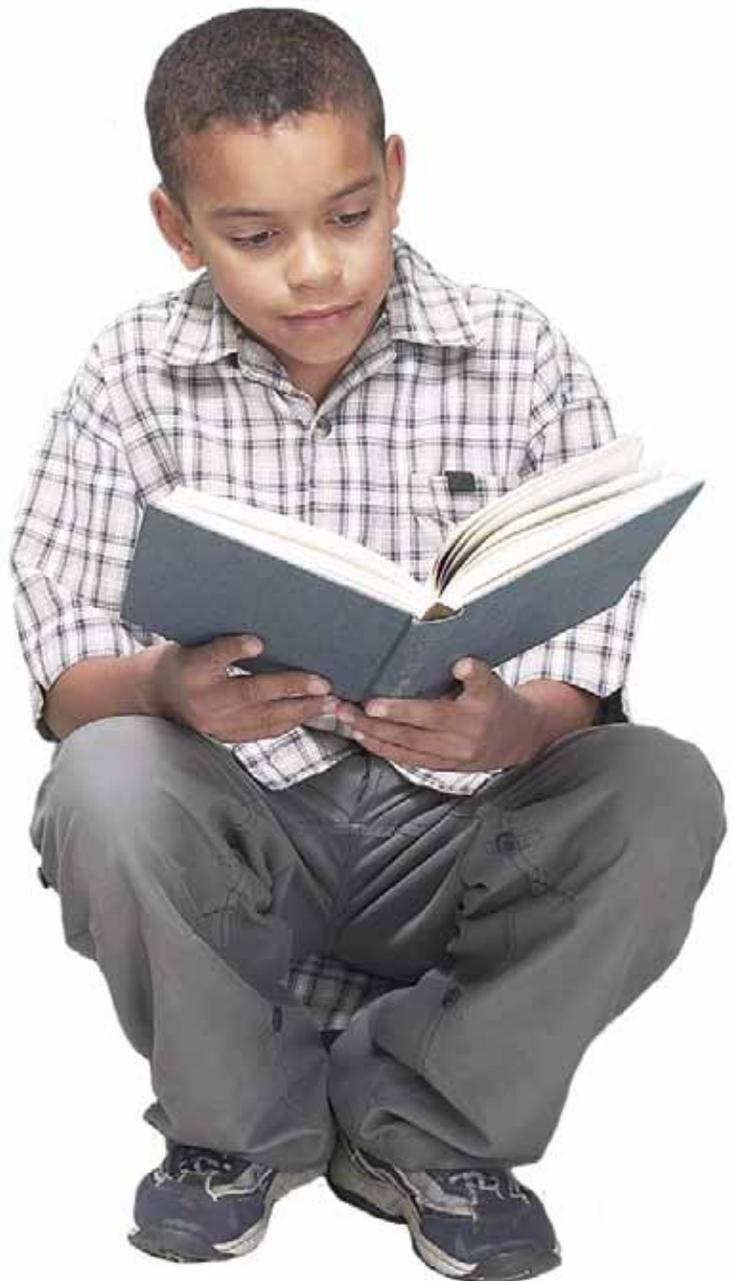
- ✦ Intensive remediation such as small group and one-on-one tutoring as well as Saturday and summer school can improve students’ reading skills for many subsequent years.
- ✦ Interventions can also be useful to students scoring in the mid-range on state-wide assessments, though they are not at immediate risk of being retained.
- ✦ Professional development for teachers in the areas of differentiated instruction and teaching test-taking strategies can help teachers better identify and intervene with struggling readers.

Moving Forward

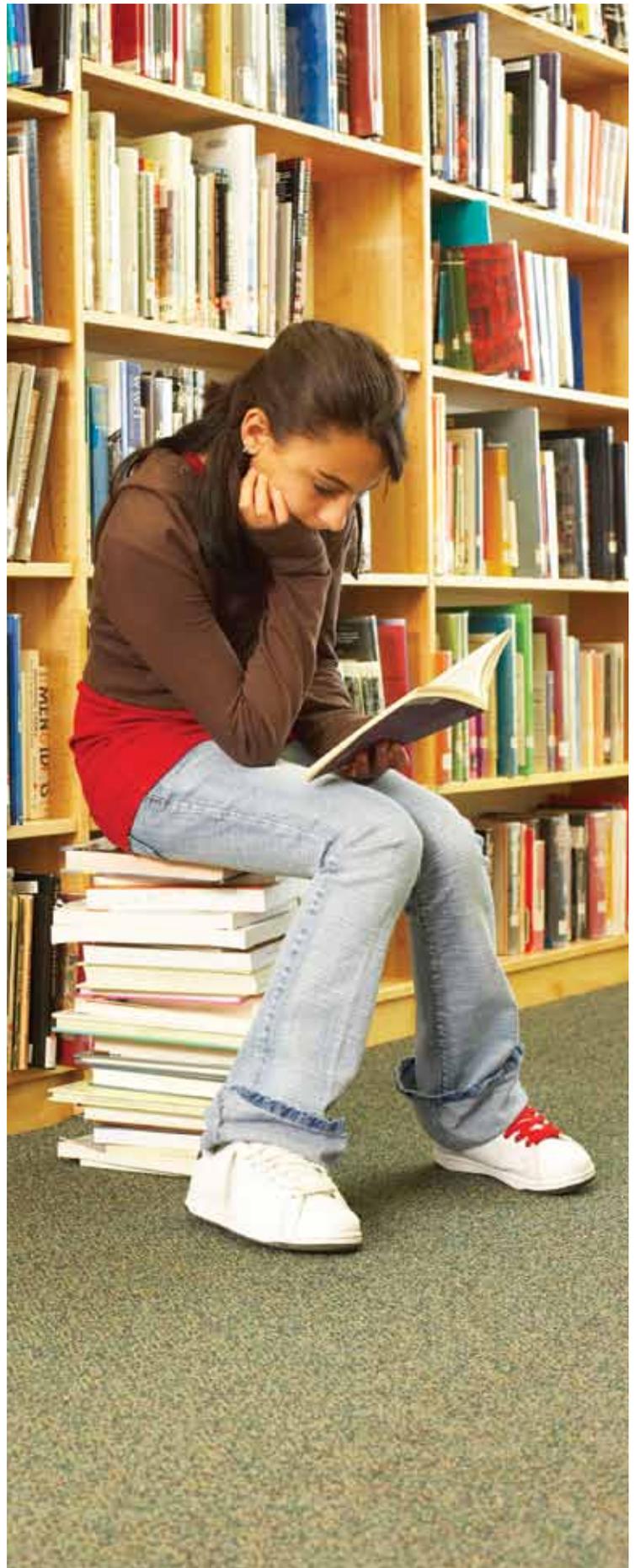
In this document, we have discussed various actions that states are taking to ensure students have adequate literacy skills by 3rd grade. Below are guidelines for states to follow as they work toward improving 3rd-grade reading proficiency.

1. Create a sense of urgency around 3rd-grade reading, emphasizing the benefits of early identification and intervention. While implementing a 3rd-grade retention policy is one way to do this, consider alternatives:
 - a. Set annual goals for improvement and publicly report on how well those goals are met.
 - b. Publicize evidence-based literacy resources, including best practices for parents and educators to improve early reading skills (pre-K-3).
 - c. Initiate a statewide campaign for grade-level reading proficiency that includes what early literacy looks like and empowers parents and educators to help young students acquire reading skills.
2. Expand access to quality pre-K and full-day kindergarten programs to give young learners ample opportunities and assistance to develop literacy skills. Providing low-cost or needs-based programs also speaks to equity concerns, as low-income and minority children are disproportionately retained.
3. Ensure all early learning opportunities are built around language-rich, rigorous and engaging curricula to develop students' knowledge, vocabulary and skills. Require selection only of materials, systems and programs for which independently reviewed impact data is available. Selection and implementation of any components should be limited to those that allow for frequent and ongoing review for whether they are resulting in student growth.
4. Assess knowledge and reading as early as possible (pre-K or kindergarten), and provide numerous avenues for identifying struggling readers. Teacher recommendations and a mix of local and state assessments will cast a wide net. Utilize Early Warning Systems to make use of data to keep students on track to 3rd-grade reading proficiency.²⁶
5. Require immediate, evidence-based interventions in K-3 for struggling readers. Ensure that remediation is targeted and personalized, and that students are getting additional instruction, versus redistributing class time. Develop a body of information on research-based intervention strategies proven to enhance student achievement. Require impact analyses that identify where interventions are getting results and where they are not. While intensive interventions may be costly, the cost of providing remediation to a student is lower than that of having him/her repeat a grade.

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6. Implement strategies to strengthen human capital:
 - a. Require assurance that teacher preparation programs include robust development of oral language and vocabulary.
 - b. Take advantage of Common Core State Standards to provide all teachers (including content teachers) with professional development in teaching reading to world-class benchmarks of content and performance, differentiating instruction and using assessments to guide instruction.
 - c. Identify those teachers who are most successful at teaching reading and leverage their talents in multiple ways, such as teaching reading to children from multiple classrooms.
7. Involve parents and communities in improving reading proficiency
 - a. Make sure parents are well-informed if their child is a struggling reader. Provide information on intervention strategies, help them to develop a home literacy plan and be sure they are aware of any retention policy in place.
 - b. Parents should receive information about how to work with teachers to find classroom accommodations for their children. Provide information on intervention strategies, help them to develop a home literacy plan and be sure they are aware of any retention policy in place.
 - c. Promote partnerships with families that are focused on language and learning. Inform parents of the importance of early literacy, and arm them with strategies and resources to help their children learn to read.
 - d. Partnering with local media outlets, states could create a website and establish an aggressive communications campaign aimed at parents. Such a resource could provide research on early literacy, book recommendations, links to vocabulary building exercises and other research-based interventions.
8. Provide professional development opportunities for school leaders, including training on how best to identify and intervene with struggling students, and how to successfully evaluate reading teachers. Emphasize the importance of early identification and intervention, setting high expectations for children, and communicating with and supporting teachers.



Conclusion

While retention policies are receiving a lot of attention due to a push to improve 3rd-grade reading, early identification and intervention are more likely to improve student performance. Mandates from 3rd-grade retention policies in both Florida and NYC appear to have motivated school leaders and teachers to intervene earlier and more intensively, but states might be able to achieve a similar sense of urgency without implementing promotion gates. Given the potential negative effects of holding children back, grade retention is not a policy to be entered into lightly, especially without strong early identification and intervention initiatives in place. Both Florida and New York City provide good examples of assessment and remediation programs that can help students improve their early literacy skills. Retention is one means of creating a sense of urgency around 3rd-grade reading; policymakers should consider others as well.

What is clear from the examples of Florida and NYC is that retention should not be the first or only step taken to improve the skills of struggling readers. The earlier children are identified for services and receive specialized attention, the more likely they are to improve their knowledge and skills. Given the importance of birth to age 5 in brain development, and research surrounding the positive effects of quality pre-K, it follows that successful 3rd-grade literacy initiatives should expand access to quality pre-K and promote programs that include rich, rigorous bodies of content. Strong leadership, professional development for teachers and parental involvement are also important in helping educators identify and successfully intervene with struggling students.



Appendix A

Florida's "Good Cause" Exemptions for students scoring below a 2 on the FCAT (Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test):

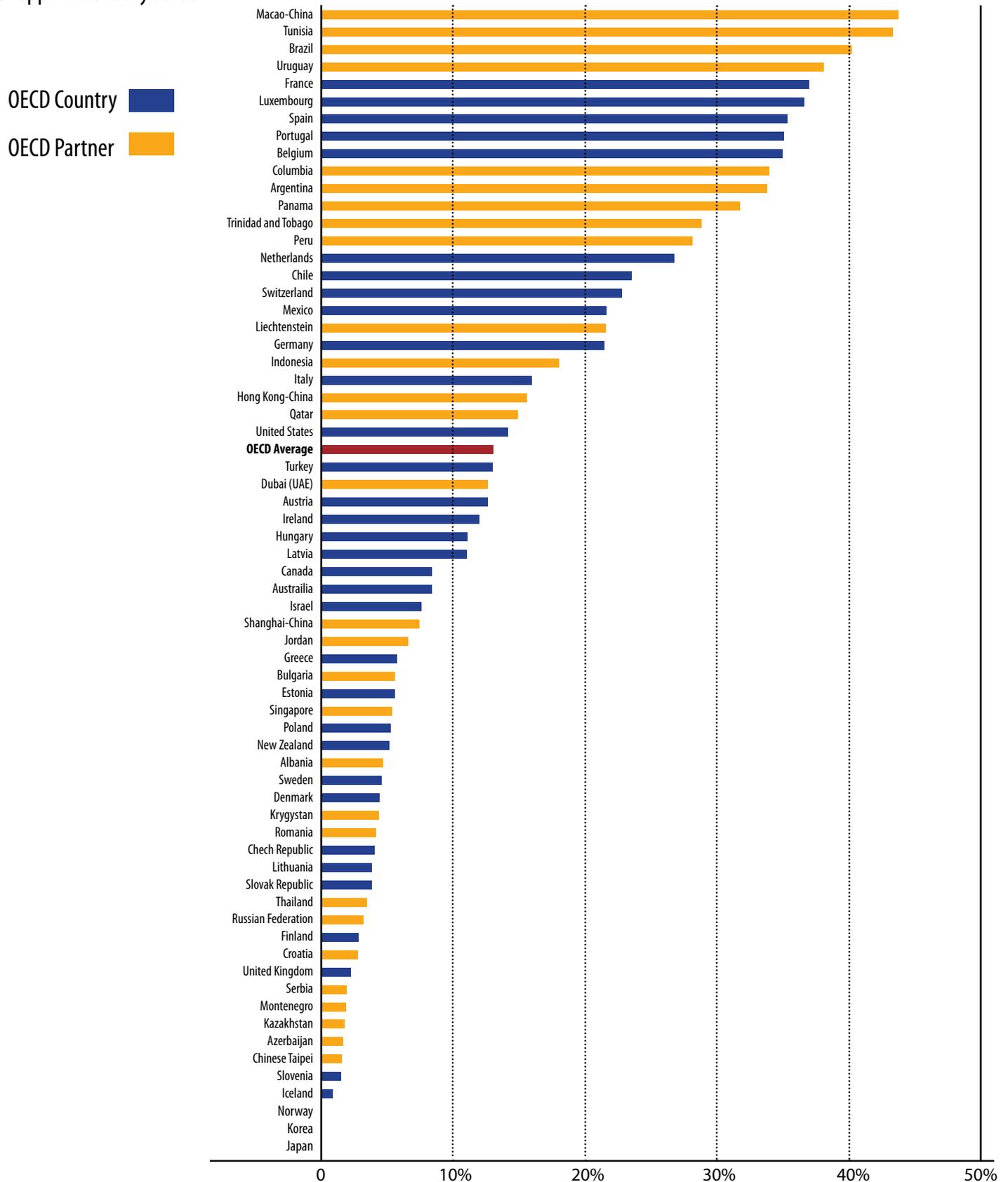
1. Limited English Proficient students who have had less than two years of instruction in an English for Speakers of Other Languages program
2. Those with disabilities whose individual education plan (IEP) indicates that participation in the statewide assessments is not appropriate
3. Those who demonstrate an acceptable level of performance on an alternative standardized reading assessment approved by the State Board of Education
4. Those who demonstrate, through a student portfolio, the mastery of the Sunshine State Standards in reading equal to a Level 2 performance on the FCAT
5. Students with disabilities who were previously retained in kindergarten, 1st or 2nd grade, who participate in the FCAT and whose IEP or 504 plan shows a remaining deficiency after intensive remediation in reading for more than two years
6. Students who have received the intensive remediation in reading for two or more years but still demonstrate a deficiency or who were previously retained in kindergarten, 1st or 2nd grade for a total of two years.



Photo courtesy of Pew Center on the States

Appendix B

Percentage of students in OECD countries reporting that they have repeated a grade at least once in primary, lower secondary or upper secondary school ²⁷



Source: OECD, PISA 2009 Database, Table IV.3.1.

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