



# COMPREHENSIVE EARLY LITERACY

## Policy Summary

ExcelinEd Policy Toolkit - 2024

The goal of a Comprehensive K-3 Reading Policy is to ensure all students read on grade level by the end of 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. [A White Paper by the Center for Public Education](#) explains why 3<sup>rd</sup> grade “marks a pivot point in reading,” where students go from learning to read to reading to learn. A comprehensive policy ensures early identification of struggling readers and establishes intensive reading intervention for K–3 students who need more support to become successful readers. The policy focuses on demonstrated readiness for promotion, requiring 3<sup>rd</sup> grade students to demonstrate sufficient reading skills for promotion to 4<sup>th</sup> grade. Retention can provide struggling readers the additional time and intensive interventions they need to catch up with their peers and be successful in 4<sup>th</sup> grade and beyond.

### WHY IS A K-3 READING POLICY NECESSARY?

In 2011, the Annie E. Casey Foundation released a report titled, [Double Jeopardy: How Third-Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation](#). The study analyzed the reading scores and graduation rates of nearly 4,000 students over 10 years. The study found that:

- Children who are not reading proficiently in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade are four times more likely to drop out of high school.
- Poor black and Hispanic students who are not proficient readers are eight times more likely than proficient readers to drop out of high school.

It’s not only an education problem; it’s an economic and social problem, too. According to the [U.S. Department of Education](#), more than half of U.S. adults aged 16 to 65-years-old (54% or 130 million people) lack proficiency in literacy, reading below the equivalent of a 6<sup>th</sup> grade level.

The Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy recently released [a report](#) on the economic gains of eradicating illiteracy in the United States. The key findings included:

- The average annual income of adults who reach the minimum level for proficiency in literacy (Level 3) is nearly \$63,000, significantly higher than the average of almost \$48,000 earned by adults who score just below proficiency (Level 2) and much higher than those at low Levels of literacy (Levels 0 and 1), who earn just over \$34,000 on average.
- The nation could be losing up to \$2.2 trillion annually due to low adult literacy rates.

Literacy is linked to better health, higher levels of civic engagement and higher earnings in the labor market. It is imperative to address the illiteracy problem in our schools early; our students’ futures depend on it.

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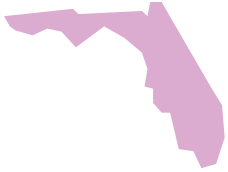
**“The Third-Grade Reading Guarantee is going to be the very heart of education. If you aren’t reading proficiently by the end of 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, you are going to struggle throughout the rest of your school years.” ~ Senator Peggy Lehner, Ohio State Senate**

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## WHERE IS THE EVIDENCE?

Since passing a comprehensive early literacy policy:



Florida is ranked **3<sup>RD</sup> IN THE NATION** in 4<sup>th</sup> grade reading achievement.



Mississippi moved from **49<sup>th</sup> to 21<sup>st</sup> IN THE NATION** in 4<sup>th</sup> grade reading improvements from 2017-2022.

Source: National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)

## RESEARCH

**Key Findings from Guido Schwerdt, Martin West & Marcus Winters, [The Effects of Test-based Retention on Student Outcomes Over Time: Regression Discontinuity Evidence from Florida, 2017](#)**

- Retention in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade reduced retention probabilities in future years.
- After six years, the achievement gains from retention remain substantial when compared to peers in the same grade.
- Retention in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade increased students' high school GPAs and led them to take fewer remedial courses.

**Key Findings from Marcus A. Winters, [The Costs and Benefits of Test-Based Promotion, 2018](#)**

- The threat of retention led to statistically significant and substantial increases in student math and reading performance within the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, prior to the retention decision.
- On average, treatment under the policy led to significant and substantial gains in 8<sup>th</sup> grade math and reading test scores and increased the probability that students earn a regular diploma.
- The cost of test-based promotion for both taxpayers and treated students is substantially less than suggested in prior research.

**Key Findings from Kirsten Slungaard Mumma and Marcus A. Winters, [The Effect of Retention Under Mississippi's Test-Based Promotion Policy, 2023](#)**

- For students who were in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade in 2014–15, being retained under Mississippi's policy led to substantially higher ELA scores in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade.
- By 6<sup>th</sup> grade, **students who were retained had substantial and sustained literacy gains on their ELA scores** compared to their peers who were promoted to 4<sup>th</sup> grade.
- Literacy **gains were especially significant among African American and Hispanic students** in the cohort.
- Retention under the policy had **no significant impact on other outcomes** in 6<sup>th</sup> grade, including math scores, absences, and special education identification.

**Key Findings from [Holding Back to Move Forward: The Effects of Retention in the Third Grade on Student Outcomes, 2022](#):**

- In Indiana, 3<sup>rd</sup> grade retention increased achievement in English Language Arts (ELA) and math immediately and substantially, and the positive effects persist into middle school.



**Being retained did not have a negative effect on student attendance or disciplinary incidents in later grades. “Student achievement accelerated more rapidly since 2013, after the statewide implementation of the Literacy-Based Promotion Act (LBPA), higher academic standards with aligned assessments and a strong accountability system, and a significant investment in professional development for educators.” *Dr. Carey Wright, Former State Superintendent, Mississippi Department of Education***

## WHAT IS A COMPREHENSIVE EARLY LITERACY POLICY?

A successful policy includes early identification, parent involvement, teacher training, intensive reading intervention, retention as a last resort and more intensive intervention in the event of retention. Fundamental principles include:

### Supports for Teachers

1. **Statewide science of reading training** beginning with K–4 teachers and elementary school administrators
2. Ongoing, job-embedded science of reading training and **support for teachers via literacy coaches**
3. Ensuring Teacher Prep Programs are **preparing teacher candidates** to have the knowledge and skills to teach all kids to read based on the science of reading
4. Requiring a minimum/passing score on a teacher **licensure test** which is grounded in the science of reading
5. **Funding** and reprioritization of existing local, state and federal funds for early literacy

### Assessment and Parent Notification

6. **Early literacy screening** administered three times per year and progress monitoring for K–3 students
7. Characteristics of dyslexia screening administered at the end of Kindergarten and the beginning of 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> grades for all students
8. **Parent notification** when reading deficiency is identified and continued parent engagement with each progress report

### Instruction and Intervention

9. **District adoption of high-quality instructional materials** grounded in scientifically based reading research and aligned to state standards
10. **Elimination of the three-cueing systems model** of instruction
11. **Individual reading plans** for K–3 students identified with a reading deficiency and 4<sup>th</sup> grade students promoted for good cause
12. **Regularly monitor student progress** and adjust instruction using proven strategies for closing opportunity gaps according to student need
13. **Evidence-based interventions** for struggling students and supports for special populations (i.e., ELs, special education, students with dyslexia, etc.) during school, and before/after school
14. **Summer Reading Camps or approved innovative summer reading programs** provided to all K–3 students struggling in reading or potentially facing retention
15. **Parent Read-at-Home Plan** for students identified with a reading deficiency and a list of vetted online resource hubs for all parents to support literacy at home



## Retention and Intervention

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16. **Retention with increased intensive intervention** in addition to a highly effective teacher and other supports for 3<sup>rd</sup> grade students severely below grade level who do not meet promotion requirements
17. **Multiple opportunities** to ensure one test on one day is NOT the sole determining factor for promotion to 4<sup>th</sup> grade (state test, alternative test, portfolio)
18. **Good cause exemptions** for students meeting established criteria

## Learn More

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Every state can impact our nation's literacy crisis. Find out which state statutes and regulations align with ExcelinEd's Comprehensive Policy and make a plan for future improvement by reviewing the heat map at [Early Literacy Matters](#).