

Bridge

News & Analysis from The Center for Michigan

Making early literacy a priority for Michigan

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Reading is the gateway to future academic success. A national consensus of research proves that and no other single factor is more critical in predicting future success or failure in education than 3rd-grade reading proficiency.

We know that students in kindergarten through 3rd grade are learning to read, and starting in 4th grade students begin reading to learn. According to the Annie Casey Foundation, students who are not proficient 3rd-grade readers are four times more likely not to graduate from high school than proficient 3rd-grade readers.

Today in Michigan, we're investing \$4 billion per year in K-3 education, yet nearly one-third of 3rd graders in Michigan are not proficient readers. According to recently released data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the nation's report card, Michigan ranks 40th in the U.S. in 4th-grade reading literacy. In 2012, however, less than 1 percent of 3rd graders in the state were retained; that is, held back for a year.

Early literacy is so important that 35 states currently have policies in statute to improve 3rd grade reading through early assessment and intervention and 15 states require retention of students on the basis of reading proficiency. Michigan is not among these states, however.

In 2000, nearly 30% of Florida 3rd graders couldn't read but only 3% of students were retained. Its legislature passed a 3rd Grade Reading Guarantee in 2002 and, in the first year, 14% of students were retained and within 5 years illiteracy rates were cut in half for young students.

A number of studies in Florida and New York have found retention policies improve academic performance – especially among minority students – while enhancing students' sense of school belonging, confidence and school connectedness.

Two important bills have been introduced in Michigan, HB 5111, sponsored by Rep. Amanda Price (R-Holland) and HB 5144, sponsored by Rep. Thomas Stallworth (D-Detroit). These bills provide a comprehensive approach to improving early literacy in Michigan by focusing on a number of key strategies that have worked for students in grades K-3. These strategies include: screening in first 30 days of the school year; parental notification for students with early literacy delays; intervention, mentoring and tutoring for struggling readers; retention for those still not proficient after 3rd grade (as a last, but necessary, resort); and intensive intervention for retained students.

Additionally, these bills will go into effect for students enrolled in 1st grade in fall 2014, which means no students currently in school are subject to these provisions and no retentions will occur until spring 2017.

The bills also allow students to re-take the state assessment and provide "good cause" exemptions for students who pass an alternative assessment; students who demonstrate proficiency through a portfolio of work and assignments; students with disabilities; and English Language Learners. Under these bills MDE will also research and sponsor pilot programs to increase early literacy.

These bills are currently being debated in the House Education Committee. We urge the legislature to pass these important bills, which will increase early literacy and put more Michigan students on a path for success in school and life.

Gary Naeyaert is executive director of the Great Lakes Education Project, a nonpartisan advocacy organization supporting quality choices in public education.

