



# At a Glance

## Third Grade Retention Based on Student Reading Performance: *Lessons Learned in Florida and Elsewhere*

**December 2012**

### Introduction

A growing number of states are making policy decisions requiring the retention of third graders who lack adequate reading skills. According to the Education Commission of the States, 32 states now have statutes in place intended to improve reading proficiency by the end of the third grade. According to a November 2012 article in *Education Week*, the following states passed laws in 2012:

**North Carolina:** Schools must retain 3rd graders not reading on grade level, based on a state assessment, unless they meet one of several exemptions, including demonstration of proficiency through an alternative assessment or portfolio. Prior to retention, students must be provided summer reading camps and have one more chance to demonstrate proficiency. The measure also stipulates regular diagnostic assessments and early interventions for struggling readers beginning in kindergarten. This law passed in 2012, overriding the Governor of North Carolina's veto.

**Arizona:** Tightening up a recently adopted policy for retaining 3rd graders who score "far below" their grade level on a state reading test, Arizona closed what advocates called a "loophole" that allowed parents to override the retention. The state policy calls on districts to provide one of several options to assist both retained students and struggling readers in earlier grades, including assignment to a different teacher for reading instruction, summer school, or other "intensive" help before, during, or after the school day.

**Colorado:** The state is requiring schools—in partnership with parents—to craft individual plans for struggling readers to get them on track. For 3rd graders with significant reading deficiencies, the parent and teacher must meet and consider retention as an intervention strategy, but the final decision must be jointly agreed to and approved by the district. A special per-pupil fund was created to support specific reading interventions, such as summer school and after-school tutoring.

**Connecticut:** The new law instructs the state education agency to develop new K-3 reading assessments for districts to use in identifying struggling readers. It also mandates that K-3 teachers pass a reading assessment each year beginning in 2013. And it compels the state to devise an intensive program that includes "scientifically based" reading instruction, intensive reading-intervention strategies, summer school, and other features that will be offered for a limited number of schools to use.

**Iowa:** Iowa law now requires 3rd graders with an identified "reading deficiency" either to attend an intensive summer reading program or be retained, except for those eligible for several good-cause exemptions. The law also requires, if state funds are appropriated, for districts to provide such students in grades K-3 with intensive instructional services and support to improve reading, including a minimum of 90 minutes of "scientific, research-based" reading instruction and other strategies identified by the district, such as small-group instruction, an extended school day, or tutoring and mentoring.

**Ohio:** Ohio now requires 3rd graders meet a certain threshold on the state English/language arts test to advance to the 4th grade, but the law makes exceptions for some students. Districts must annually assess and identify students reading below grade level, and develop a reading improvement and monitoring plan for each pupil. Such students must receive at least 90 minutes of daily reading instruction and be taught by a "high-performing" teacher.

**Virginia:** The state mandates that local districts provide reading-intervention services to third graders who demonstrate deficiencies on a state reading test or other diagnostic assessment. The measure does not include any requirements for retention.

### Lessons from Florida

Many states have based their plans on Florida's experiences with retention policies tied to reading. In 2001, Florida Governor Jeb Bush established Just Read, Florida! to ensure all Florida students would be able to read at or above grade level by the year 2012. Bush recognized reading as "the most powerful common denominator in education and paramount to an individual's success." Since that time, a number of statewide policies have been implemented in Florida to maintain the former Governor's commitment to high reading achievement creating a comprehensive and systemic approach to reading that involves several key components:

#### **Retention of Third Graders Not Reading on Grade Level**

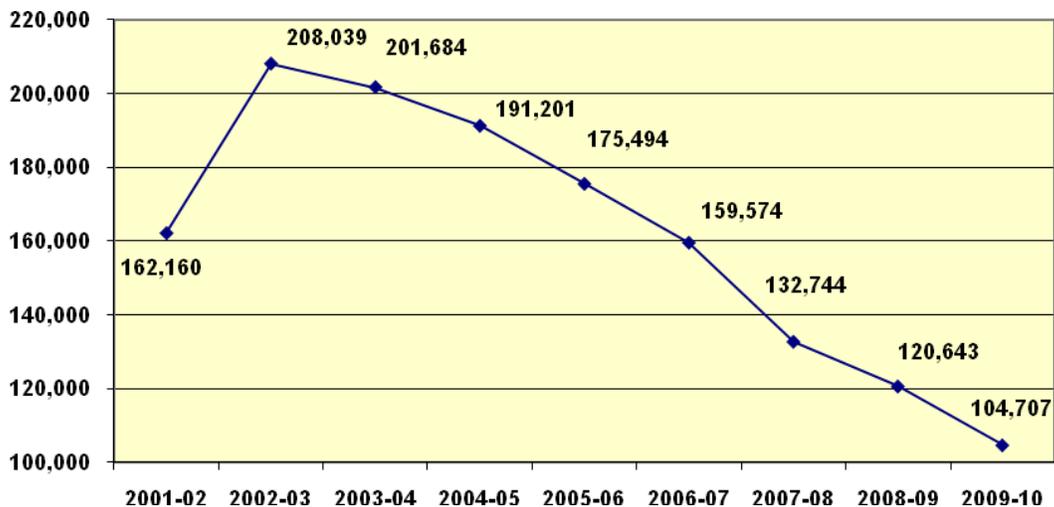
The Florida retention policy was first implemented in 2003 when 21,799 (14%) of third graders were retained for scoring below Level Two (of five performance levels) on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT). Level 1 is the lowest level on FCAT. For the PASS, Not Met 1 identifies students who need additional opportunities to meet grade-level expectations. As specified by statute, students qualifying for retention can be promoted if they qualify for one of six "good cause exemptions." The exemptions include:

- students with disabilities whose Individual Education Plans (IEPs) indicate that the state test is not an appropriate measure of performance;
- students with disabilities who were retained twice previously in third grade; Limited English Proficiency (LEP) students;
- students retained twice previously; and
- students who can demonstrate proficiency through an alternative assessment or portfolio of their work.

In the first year of the retention policy, Florida retained 57 percent of students whose Level 1 test scores would have caused them to be held back; the remaining students were promoted due to "good cause exemptions." The majority of Florida students retained in the third grade make gains in reading when compared to a control group of socially promoted students. The improvements were seen more dramatically after the second year following retention. In a report conducted by the Manhattan Institute, the effect of the reading scores after one year of retention is small but statistically significant (four Developmental Scale Score points.) Two years after students are retained, "their reading achievement outstrips their counterparts who were promoted by 40.9 Developmental Scale Score Points" (Greene & Winters). Students retained have had one entire year of additional instruction when compared with those not retained and tested in third or fourth grade a year earlier.

The number of students retained in Florida has dropped significantly since 2003. Since 2006, more than 90 percent of third grade students have been promoted each year. In 2011, 16 percent of third graders scored at the Achievement Level 1 on the FCAT but only seven percent of those students were retained. Figure 1 shows the decline in the number of pre-kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade retentions in Florida since the 2001-02 school year.

**Figure 1: Florida PK-12 Non-Promotions, 2001-02 to 2009-10**



Source: Florida Department of Education

**Table 1: Percent Change in PK-12 Non-Promotions from the Prior Year**

Year	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10
<b>% Change</b>	+28.3%	-3.1%	-5.2%	-8.2%	-9.1%	-16.8%	-9.1%	-13.2%

Source: Education, Information and Accountability Services, Florida Department of Education, Series 2011-22D May 2011.

The short-term effects of Florida's policy are well-documented; however, the long-term effects require further study as the initial gains are often not sustained. Table 2 shows the average NAEP Reading scores for Florida fourth and eighth grade students, compared to the national average. With the exception of 2009, students in eighth grade fell below the national average because Florida did not effectively address content area reading comprehension and writing.

**Table 2: Average NAEP Reading scores for Florida and U.S., 2002-2011**

	Reading, 4 <sup>th</sup> grade						Reading, 8 <sup>th</sup> grade					
	2011	2009	2007	2005	2003	2002	2011	2009	2007	2005	2003	2002
Florida	<b>225</b>	<b>226</b>	<b>224</b>	<b>219</b>	<b>218</b>	<b>214</b>	<b>262</b>	<b>264</b>	<b>260</b>	<b>256</b>	<b>257</b>	<b>261</b>
US	<b>220</b>	<b>220</b>	<b>220</b>	<b>217</b>	<b>216</b>	<b>217</b>	<b>264</b>	<b>262</b>	<b>261</b>	<b>260</b>	<b>261</b>	<b>263</b>

Source: National Center for Education Statistics

### **Emphasis on reading professional development within K-12 and higher education**

Before the implementation of the third grade retention policy, Florida had made significant systemic changes to be better equipped for the level of intervention required to help these students. Multiple tiers of reading intervention, along with daily core reading instruction, are required to help these students succeed.

In 2001, Florida created a K-12 reading endorsement for teachers. The endorsement, or K-12 Certification in Reading, is now required for elementary and secondary teachers who teach reading and for reading coaches. The standards set forth in the competencies, which focus on strategic instruction that support student achievement in reading, are currently incorporated into *all* teacher preparation programs in Florida.

Teachers in grades 6-12 are currently required to become proficient in applying scientifically-based reading strategies through their content areas. As the data in Florida and elsewhere show, progress among students in the early grades often falls flat after fourth grade as shown by the eighth grade NAEP scores. These students, who often cannot sustain the initial gains they make, do not need instruction in decoding and text reading efficiency; they struggle with vocabulary and comprehension instead. The Florida, Just Read! office has developed a content area reading professional development package to focus on the unique, differentiated level of intervention needed for students in grades 6-12.

### **Focus on supporting advanced literacy and intervention early, preventing the literacy achievement gap from starting**

As is emphasized in the Florida Dept. of Education Statewide Literacy Plan, "it is easier to prevent literacy achievement gaps from starting during the early literacy years than it is to close achievement gaps once they have emerged." School readiness is promoted statewide as Florida currently enrolls 149,000 children in a Voluntary Pre-Kindergarten Program (VPK) in approximately 6,000 private and public providers.

Florida statute requires that a statewide kindergarten readiness screening be administered within the first days of kindergarten in all public schools. The Florida Kindergarten Readiness Screening (FLKRS) is designed to gather information on a child's overall development and to "specifically address the readiness of each student for kindergarten based on the VPK Education Standards. Schools in Florida have reported providing earlier assessments and remediation to students following the retention policy implementation" (Rose & Shimke).

### **Sustained interventions aligned with District Plans**

Because of the flexibility given to districts with the reading funds allocation, there is an array of intervention options available. Districts must write a K-12 Comprehensive Research-Based Reading Plan each year outlining how they plan to spend their allocated funds. Some of the intervention approaches include:

#### *Literacy coaches*

Florida officials feel that the job-embedded professional development provided by literacy coaches within schools have been integral to the success of the statewide reading initiatives. Districts can choose to hire literacy coaches for schools determined to have the greatest need based on student performance data; experience and expertise of the school's administration and faculty in reading assessment, instruction and intervention; and receptiveness of administration and faculty to the coaching model. All literacy coaches have a K-12 Reading certification or a Reading Endorsement, and they must implement a professional development model created by the Just Read office.

#### *Summer reading camps*

The majority of Florida school districts choose to offer summer reading camps for students who score at Level 1 on FCAT Reading. Districts are required to submit a plan to the Just Read Florida office prior to implementation.

#### *Lesson study and state-level professional development*

Lesson study is a form of professional development that is designed to assist schools in developing capacity. It is job-embedded and brings teachers together in a team approach focused on formulating lessons that focus on how students think and learn. The state also provides professional development, many of which are online, for many different audiences focused on literacy. Two resources, the FAIR Student Center Activities Search Tool, and the Literacy Essentials and Reading Network (LEaRN) provide teachers with examples of activities and videos they can access to support learning in literacy. Both resources were created by the Just Read, Florida Office and the Florida Center for Reading Research at Florida State University.

In 2002, Florida was awarded \$52 million in federal Reading First funds, totaling over \$300 million for six years. In 2006, the Florida legislature passed a statute to incorporate in their Education Finance Program allowing for a Research-Based Reading Instruction Allocation. School districts are provided an allocation of state funds based on student enrollment but requiring that they submit a comprehensive reading plan to the Just Read, Florida! Office outlining their use of the funds. The plan must be approved before districts can draw the funds.

### **Emphasis on data-driven decision making and a statewide structure devoted to reading**

Monitoring and improving reading instruction is something that happens at the state, district, school, classroom, and individual student levels in Florida. A Reading Leadership Team works within each school to analyze data which drives decisions and appropriate research-based instructional materials and strategies used to address individual student needs.

In 2002, the Just Read, Florida! Office and the Florida Center for Reading Research created a web-based data management system that focuses on the reporting of student progress in reading. The Progress Monitoring & Reporting Network (PMRN) produces data reports at the class, school, district, and state levels on individual student FAIR assessments in the classroom as well as the annual FCAT results.

In 2009, Just Read, Florida! and the Florida Center for Reading Research created the Florida Assessments for Instruction in Reading (FAIR) and make these available to schools and districts for free. Ninety percent of districts in Florida use FAIR, and the data is available on PMRN for use by all teachers, coaches, principals, district office staff, and state level officers.

### **Statewide support structure devoted to reading**

To emphasize the state's commitment to literacy as a statewide priority, several offices have been established in the last decade to support student reading development:

#### *Just Read, Florida! office*

- Established in 2001
- Housed at Florida Dept. of Education; 6 full-time staff
- Creates and administers the professional development options and credentialing piece for teachers, administrators, and coaches
- Works with postsecondary teacher preparation programs
- Develops instructional materials specifications for programs and materials related to reading

- Provides oversight to Florida Center for Reading Research
- Reviews and approves district reading plans before receipts of state reading funds

*Florida Center for Reading Research (FCRR)*

- Created in 2002
- Housed at Florida State University
- Maintains PMRN
- Creates and refine assessment, create sample pools of students, and analyze data for schools, districts, and system. Currently updating FAIR to FAIR 2.0 based on Common Core State Standards.
- Maintains a Help Desk which is staffed to address teacher and administrator issues with the data systems.

### **Parental Engagement and Support**

Additionally, Just Read, Families! is a partnership between Just Read, Florida!, the Florida Department of State's Division of Libraries and the Panhandle Area Education Consortium that focuses on providing information and training to parents about their role in helping their students succeed. The group also runs a summer literacy initiative that targets summer reading loss in students.

### **Lessons to Consider**

- Florida recognized that identifying students with reading difficulties early is critical so that students can receive remediation before third grade. South Carolina does not currently require continuous text-based assessment of reading skills and comprehension in K-3, starting with a readiness assessment for students at the end of preschool or entering kindergarten, making early identification difficult.
- As Florida has learned, students in grades 6-12 require a relentless focus on content area comprehension through approaches that incorporate strategies readers use to create meaning and comprehension with texts.
- For a retention plan to be successful, the infrastructure must be in place so that students have the proper supports and resources after they are retained.
- The highly effective intervention required for struggling readers to avoid retention emphasizes the importance of involving post-secondary state teacher preparation programs early on.
- A statewide structure promoting reading must be in place, recognizing literacy as a statewide priority. Key constituencies include parents, early care and education providers, teacher training programs, and the state legislature. Florida officials recognize they still have to make in-roads in this area. For example, they recognize the need to partner and collaborate more effectively with public libraries in Florida.

### **Sources**

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Rose, Stephanie and Karen Shimke, "Third Grade Literacy Policies: Identification, Retention," Education Commission of the States, March 2012, Accessed September 17, 2012, <http://www.justreadflorida.com/pdf/StrivingReaders.pdf>.

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