

Opposition to House Bill 4020 and Senate Bill 12

Modifying the requirements related to the retention of certain third-grade students would put struggling early readers in jeopardy of falling further behind.

Developing early literacy is critical to a student's future success, but Michigan schools are failing to prepare many students with this essential life skill. According to annual, statewide M-STEP data, at least 50% of third-grade students scored partially proficient or not proficient in English language arts since 2014. This suggests that about half of third-grade students may be at risk of not developing sufficient reading skills. More evidence to this effect is that Michigan's fourth-grade reading performance on the National Assessment of Education Progress has consistently remained below the national average for nearly two decades.

The disruption to learning during the COVID-19 pandemic only exacerbated this problem. Compared to the previous school year, 20% more third-grade students were eligible for retention in 2021-2022 based on their reading proficiency on the M-STEP assessment. However, even with the current law in place, districts only retained one in 10 retention-eligible students last year. Findings from a recent report by Michigan State University attribute this retention rate in part to administrators finding the retention process "burdensome."

While the retention process may pose an extra burden for schools, it provides an important support measure when other prescribed interventions have proven ineffective at improving a student's reading proficiency. The current law outlines extensive interventions that should be implemented prior to retention being considered, and students are given several opportunities to demonstrate reading proficiency. In addition, the law allows for school leaders to make good cause exemptions for certain students, such as English Language Learners, students with disabilities and students who have already been held back.

Socially promoting students who cannot read does not help them. On the contrary, promoting students who lack basic literacy skills puts them in jeopardy of falling further behind. In states with similar retention policies, evidence from a Manhattan Institute study suggests that retained third-grade students demonstrate greater achievement compared to their retention-eligible peers who are socially promoted to fourth grade.

The current retention policy serves to hold schools and parents accountable for developing proficient readers. Schools must make every effort to ensure that third-grade students develop the literacy skills necessary to be successful in fourth grade and beyond. If this seems a hard line and a high standard, it is because early literacy is so important for students. Michigan's Third Grade Reading Law makes clear that schools must prioritize early literacy. The status quo, where one in two Michigan students struggles in reading, is not acceptable.

Keeping retention as an option for students who do not respond sufficiently to other prescribed interventions provides them with the best chance of developing the literacy skills needed for future success.