



## A Look at Third-Grade Reading Retention Policies

BY MATT WEYER

Research demonstrates that students not reading proficiently by the end of third grade are **four times more likely to not finish high school**. Third grade marks an important turning point, when the focus shifts from *learning to read* to *reading to learn*. During this transition, students spend less time learning new reading skills and are instead learning new content and concepts that the reading conveys.

According to the [National Assessment of Educational Progress \(NAEP\)](#), 37 percent of all U.S. fourth-graders were reading at or above proficiency in 2017, up 1 percent from 2015. However, data from subgroups reveal that, on average, only 20 percent of African-American and American Indian/Alaska native fourth-graders, and 23 percent of Hispanic fourth-graders, scored at or above proficiency. Whites and Asians scored higher at 47 percent and 59 percent proficiency, respectively. On average, 22 percent of students from [low-income families](#) are reading at or above proficiency, compared to

52 percent of their peers from middle- and higher-income families. With third-grade reading ability linked to graduation rates, and thus indirectly to [subsequent economic outcomes](#), some lawmakers are introducing bills to improve reading skills and close disparities.

Retaining students—not promoting them to fourth grade without reaching a certain proficiency level—has become a popular strategy for states and districts looking to improve literacy skills and prevent struggling readers from moving on. [Studies of grade retention](#) have shown some positive effects in the short term, but negative in the long term, including increased risk for dropping out of high school. A [study of Florida's third-grade retention policy](#), however, has demonstrated success when comparing the outcomes of retained students to those who were promoted.

Researchers opposed to this approach argue that retaining students can be [expensive](#) and can also have negative impacts on their social and emotional adjustment. Instead, they argue for [earlier identification and intervention](#).

### Did You Know?

- In 1998, [California](#) became the first state to require retention for students not reading proficiently by the end of third grade.
- Of the 16 states plus Washington, D.C., that require reading retention, students in three—Connecticut, Florida and Indiana—rank in the top 10 for fourth-grade reading on the [2017 NAEP](#).
- By age 3, children from low-income families [hear roughly 30 million fewer words](#) than their more affluent peers. This “word gap” has been linked to deficiencies in third-grade literacy skills.

## State Action

Since 1998, states have been actively considering and enacting legislation to address retaining third-graders. Currently, 16 states and Washington, D.C., require retention. Eight states allow retention, but do not require it. There are several exemptions to retention, allowing the student to move onto fourth grade if they have:

- Been identified as an English language learner with generally less than three years of English instruction
- Been identified as having a disability
- Demonstrated proficiency on an alternative standardized reading assessment or through a portfolio of assessments and classwork
- Been previously retained prior to third grade
- Participated in an intervention, such as a summer reading program
- Received approval for promotion, based on parent, principal and/or teacher recommendations

Three states introduced, but did not pass, third-grade reading retention legislation during 2017 and 2018 sessions. [Nebraska](#) and [New Mexico](#) introduced bills to require retention. [Florida's](#) legislation would have removed the state's retention requirement.

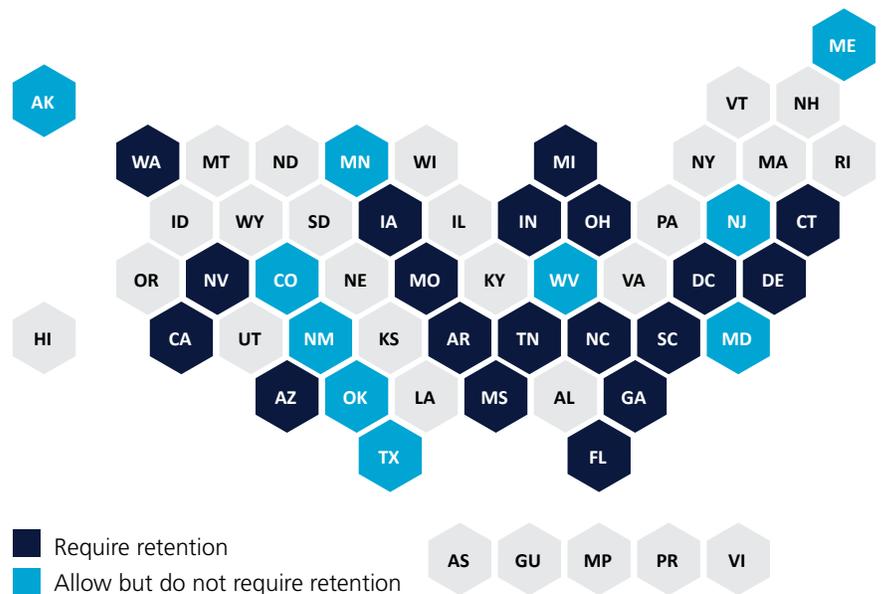
Several states have enacted legislation that takes a comprehensive approach to addressing literacy development beginning in kindergarten. Idaho passed two bills in 2016, setting up a [reading improvement plan for students in grades K-3](#) with a reading deficiency and requiring that they receive an [extra 30 to 60 hours of reading support](#). Oklahoma empowers parents by including them on the K-3 reading proficiency team, responsible for developing reading instruction and intervention plans and retention decisions. [Connecticut](#) created a position within the state department of education responsible for improving literacy in grades K-3. The goal is to close achievement gaps and create a professional development program for teachers in scientifically based reading research and instruction.

The [Colorado READ Act](#) focuses attention on improving literacy in grades K-3 through early identification and individualized intervention. The program includes a resource bank of assessments, instructional programming and professional development. Recently enacted [Colorado legislation](#) would ensure that assessments and programming are evidence-based, aligned with state standards and reviewed regularly.

## Federal Action

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) allows states to set aside a small percentage of Title I funds for student interventions, including

## States Requiring or Allowing Third-Grade Reading Retention



**Note:** Implementation will begin on July 1, 2019 in Nevada and during the 2019-2020 academic year in Michigan.

Source: NCSL 2018

improving literacy in the early grades. ESSA also streamlined two existing federal literacy programs, incorporated a new one from previously introduced federal legislation, and focused them on research-based approaches. These programs, summarized below, aim to improve literacy skills for children from birth through 12th grade, especially in high-need districts:

■ **Literacy Education for All, Results for the Nation (LEARN).** This program authorizes a state grant program, administered by the U.S. Department of Education, for states to develop or enhance comprehensive literacy instruction plans. LEARN also provides educators with professional development in literacy instruction and assessment.

■ **Striving Readers Comprehensive Literacy Program.** This competitive grant program creates a comprehensive curriculum to advance literacy skills, including preliteracy skills, reading and writing, and includes English language learners and students with disabilities.

■ **Innovative Approaches to Literacy Program.** This competitive grant program takes a comprehensive approach by promoting early literacy for young children, motivating older children to read, and increasing student achievement by using school libraries as partners. Through this program, free books are distributed to children and their families and school libraries offer high-quality literacy activities.

## Additional Resources

- [NCSL webpage, Third-Grade Reading Legislation \(2015-2018\)](#)
- [NCSL webpage, 2018 Preschool Through Third-Grade Education Legislation Tracker](#)
- [Why Reading Matters and What to Do About It, Business Roundtable](#)

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