



To: Lindsay Huddleston, Brett Barley, Tim Melton, Tracey Weinstein
From: Mike Ambrose
Re: MI Third Grade Reading
Date: August 26, 2015 (Updated)

Bill: Third Grade Reading

Position: Support (*with reservations*); SF strongly supports the early literacy supports and interventions that this bill provides and believes they provide a strong foundation to assist Michigan's schools in meeting the early literacy needs of all students, especially when coupled with the funding allocated to support early literacy in the Governor's Budget. We do, however, have reservations about the mandatory retention component for 3rd graders who are reading at least one year below grade level. For these reasons we would like to see some changes to the mandatory retention component. While our support for this bill is not contingent on these changes to the retention language being made, we do believe that including these changes will greatly improve the effectiveness of this bill in improving the early literacy outcomes of Michigan's students.

Michigan 3rd Grade Reading Bill Analysis:

Bill Components:

Tests

Under the bill, the Department will approve 3 or more "valid and reliable screening, formative, and diagnostic reading assessment systems" for districts and public school academies (i.e. charter schools) to use.

SF Position: Support

Reading Coaches

The Department will recommend or develop a reading coach model to provide initial and ongoing professional development (PD) to teachers. The bill lays out the types of PD and interventions that a reading coach should perform (see pages 2-4) and states a reading coach shall not be asked to perform administrative functions or be assigned to a regular classroom teaching assignment. The bill lays out the expertise a reading coach should have as well (page 4). This is all seemingly good language that tries to ensure the reading coaches are qualified and focused on improving teacher practice and specific interventions to raise the reading levels of K-3 students (and not just existing classroom teachers or administrators with an additional title).

SF Position: Support

School Board/Charter Responsibilities

Beginning in the 2016-2017 school year, the School Board or Board of Directors of the charter school shall:

- Select one screening, formative, and diagnostic reading assessment system (from those chosen by the Department) for K-3 students. Assess pupil progress in reading at least 3 times per year in grades K-3.
- Provide an individual reading plan for any student in K-3 who "exhibits a deficiency in reading at any time, based on the reading assessment". Plan created by teacher, principal, parent, and other pertinent school personnel. Pupil shall get "intensive reading intervention" until the pupil no longer has a deficiency in reading.

- If a pupil is identified as having an “early literacy delay or barrier to reading”¹, the school/district will provide written notice to the parents of the delay/barrier and “provide tools to assist the parent ... to address or correct any barrier to reading at home.”
- Submit “early literacy data” to the department.
- Require the principal to target “specific areas of professional development based on the reading development needs data for incoming pupils”. It’s not clear how this is done or if this creates a different process for PD.

Districts/charters are “encouraged” to offer summer school/summer reading camps staffed with “highly effective teachers”.

SF Position: Support

Mandatory Retention

If a student in 3rd grade is rated one full grade level or more behind in reading, as determined by the Department based on the reading portion of the grade 3 state English language arts assessment, the school board “shall ensure that the pupil is not enrolled in grade 4 until 1 of the following occurs:”

- student achieves a grade 3 level reading score on the test
- student achieves a grade 3 reading level on an alternate standardized test
- student demonstrates a grade 3 reading level through a portfolio (mastery of all grade 3 state reading standards through work samples)

Retained students shall receive effective instructional strategies, including:

- reduced student-teacher ratio *or* 1-to-1 reading intervention with a volunteer.
- Assigning the student a highly effective teacher (as determined by evals)

Students who are behind in reading but on grade level for other subjects can be in split classes (e.g. 4th grade instruction/classroom for math).

SF Position: Support w/Amendments

Exemptions

The superintendent of the school district or chief administrator of the charter can grant a “good cause exemption” from retaining the student for the following:

- student has an IEP plan makes them ineligible to take the standard grade 3 state test.
- Student is limited English proficiency with less than two years of instruction in an ELL program.
- Student has received “intensive reading intervention for 2 or more years but still demonstrates a deficiency in reading and was previously retained.”

Superintendent/admin can grant a good cause exemption only at the request of a parent/guardian or the teacher (to be approved by the principal). Students cannot be retained in 3rd grade more than one time.

Students may retake the test to show they are less than one year behind in reading. Note: “deficiency in reading” is not defined in the bill.

SF Position: Support

Bill Analysis:

Retention of third grade students can be beneficial for those students most in need academically of additional remedial literacy work. Further, retention can act as a motivator for schools to ensure student literacy. However,

¹ Barrier to reading means a physical, emotional, or developmental impediment to a student’s ability to read at grade level.

retention is a complicated and high stakes decision. Retention should be a last resort and should only happen after a student has received intensive intervention from Pre-K through 3rd grade. StudentsFirst does not want students retained who have not been given a high enough quality education, and does not want students retained who are not good candidates for retention (for academic or nonacademic reasons). If a student is retained, instruction should include personalized, intensive, evidence-based strategies that are targeted to the area of need.

If a third-grade reading policy is still resulting in a large percentage of students not reaching proficiency on the third-grade assessment, that is an indication of a larger systemic problem within the schools, districts, or state and the reading program. Teachers must be implementing high-quality reading well. If schools find a significant number of their students eligible for retention in third grade, schools and districts must identify the factors causing reading deficiencies for this large number of students and remedy the problem. Further, if we are not seeing improvements in test-based academic progress as a result of these interventions, it seems unfair and counterproductive to retain students given the lack of success of the interventions.

Given the nature of third-grade retention, safeguards are crucial to effective implementation of this policy. This is especially true in an education system that is currently failing too many students in Michigan. If Michigan does not provide all of its students with effective teaching, many of those students will inevitably fail to achieve reading proficiency by third grade. Mandating retaining students one grade below proficiency “punishes” those students who are already being failed by Michigan’s education system, instead of fixing the system that is failing them. In part because of this dichotomy, StudentsFirst does not categorically support third-grade retention bills. StudentsFirst does, however, have a list of safeguards we’d like to see in states before adopting policies that would retain third grade students who are not proficient in reading, though not all of the qualities are absolutely necessary:

- (1) Stronger teacher preparation programs and accountability, *especially with regard to training teachers how to teach reading*;
- (2) Stronger literacy-specific professional development for existing teachers.
- (3) Early identification of literacy problems;
- (4) Early interventions for students; and
- (5) Universal pre-K

The Michigan bill provides for many of these supports including: stronger literacy-specific professional development for existing teachers (2), early identification of literacy problems (3), and early interventions for students (4). It does **not** provide for stronger teacher preparation programs or accountability, or with additional access to pre-K. However, companion bill HB4823 does capture the teacher preparation supports leaving only additional access to Pre-K still missing. We do also want to be cognizant of the transition to Common Core in Michigan and the potential for a drop in test scores that do not reflect a drop in student achievement (because of more challenging standards and tests).

Recommendations:

- Include transparency about the number of students being retained in each school.
- Include more safeguards to ensure that students are not retained who are unlikely to benefit from the retention. This may include allowing for parents and teachers to jointly decide not to retain students who, although they have not scored up to the necessary level on the 3rd grade test, would be poor candidates for retention because of other academic or nonacademic reasons.

- Include more safeguards to ensure that students will not be retained if the literacy interventions are not implemented with fidelity in schools. If schools are not showing meaningful improvement in student test scores, it likely reflects that the school is not implementing successful early literacy interventions for students – retaining students at schools that have not shown improvement therefore “punishes” students for the failures of the school itself. Students should not be retained if schools have not successfully implemented the literacy interventions that this bill calls for.
- *(9/3/15 Added recommendation)* Delay the retention provision in the bill for three years – retention is a backstop but it is not the most intervention in this legislation. Retention should not be used until the interventions in place are implemented with fidelity and are having a positive impact on student achievement. Specifically, retention should not begin as part of the legislation until the 2016-2017 kindergarten class is finishing 3rd grade (the first group that will have received the early literacy interventions in the bill from kindergarten through third grade) – the 2019-2020 school year.

Additional recommendations (that may not be on the table and are not deal breakers):

- If possible, provide additional access to pre-K, particularly for those students in the highest need areas of the state. When South Carolina passed its third grade reading bill, it created the “SC Child Early Reading Development and Education Program,” a full day, four-year old kindergarten (pre-K) program for at-risk children. This program must be made available to qualified children in all public school districts in SC. No parent was required to pay tuition or fees. Additional access to pre-K inevitably costs money, but we think the tradeoffs for students, particularly those students most in need in Michigan, are more than worth it.

*****Of Note on the Governor’s Budget:**

The Governor’s budget, per Andrea’s email, already has the following in place apparently:

“Sec. 35 & 35a Early Literacy Initiative (NEW)

\$26.4 million for efforts to improve early literacy.

- implementation (\$1 million)
- Pilot parenting programs (\$1 million)
- Professional Development (\$950,000)
- Teacher Conformation Tests (\$500,000)
- Diagnostic Tools (\$1.5 Million)
- Teacher Coaches (\$3 million)
- Added Instructional Time (\$17.5 Million)
- MI Education Corps Grant (\$1 million)”