



Florida's Education Revolution

Reading for Learning

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What challenges did Florida face implementing the third grade promotion policy?

A major challenge when implementing the third grade promotion policy was clear communication on the specifics of the policy and effectively communicating that the policy was an opportunity for a struggling reader to get the assistance he or she needed to become proficient reader.

Providing and defining good cause exemption options to the policy was also challenging. Providing an open hearing and laying out the good cause exemptions clearly is critical to the acceptance of the policy. In addition, having clear expectations on the student portfolio of work option is critical.

Establishing a strong professional development program and reading coaches to mentor teachers to teach reading was also important to the policy's success. Florida provided resources, such as parent workshops, that included student activities and support to parents about how they can support reading at home in the evenings. The strategy of working with parents showed that the state was committed to do something for their children to help them become successful, not just working with teachers and relying on the education system, but also the parents themselves, to change the culture to ensure student success.

Is retention "cruel to children"?

The status-quo is cruel to children. Educators who retain children and teach them how to read are doing them an enormous favor. The RAND Corporation's study of the New York City retention policy found positive psychological benefits for retained students.

How does Florida measure early reading proficiency?

Florida provides several options to measure early reading proficiency. The Early Reading Diagnostic Assessment K-3 (ERDA) and the Diagnostic Assessments of Reading K-12 (DAR) are available through the Florida Department of Education's Office of Assessment and School Performance free of charge for the school district's lowest-performing 15 percent of all K-12 students. Developmental screeners, like Early Childhood Observation (ECHO) (colors and shapes), Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) and now the Florida Assessment of Instruction in Reading (FAIR) provide schools' options for assessing early

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literacy. These assessments focus on phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension and identify areas in which the student is struggling. For a comprehensive list of reviewed assessments that meet psychometric standards, visit www.fcrr.org.

How much does a literacy-based promotion policy in third grade cost?

Implementing a literacy-based promotion policy in third grade will not incur additional costs on the state. The federal government requires all states to have a statewide standards-based assessment in third grade. Educators use this assessment to determine if students have acquired the necessary reading skills to advance to 4th grade. However, states should consider investing or leveraging existing resources to provide reading coaches who can assist teachers to learn the new science of teaching reading.

How do elementary schools deal with the extra students from a facility standpoint?

There are no extra students. The retention policy results in greater numbers of 3rd graders, but smaller numbers of 4th graders. Policy implementation sometimes involved changing a teacher assignment from 4th grade to 3rd grade.

What was the fiscal impact of this policy in Florida?

The amount of funding spent on ensuring kids know how to read, even if it takes them an extra year, is by far made up for in less costs remediating them for the next nine years in the K-12 system, if we are lucky, or as dropouts. Primary grades are the least expensive options to remediate students and the most realistic time to make it happen. An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.

Any cost incurred with a test-based promotion policy should be regarded as an investment in child literacy, not a by-product of retention. Retention has been tried in other states before as a policy to address illiteracy and failed, as have efforts to fund literacy efforts without test-based assurance of its effectiveness. It was the unique combination of retention coupled with effective interventions that define Florida's policy and ensured its success. The key to the financial viability of this policy is making better use of existing local, state and federal funds. With a national average level of spending of \$10,000 per child per year, a typical American student has had \$40,000 invested by taxpayers by the time they reach the end of the 3rd grade. Taxpayers provide that money to *educate* rather than merely babysit the child. A child's future hangs precariously in the balance during the early grades, and we must fiercely pursue the maximum bang for every buck invested whether or not you decide to dedicate additional state funds for literacy interventions.

What about studies that show in other states that retention "does not work"?

Florida's model is very different. Researchers have subjected the Florida policy to three rigorous statistical evaluations and found both times that the policy helped retained students to gain literacy skills. As noted, educators and lawmakers have tried and failed with retention policies around the country previously. Florida's was different in that it targeted K-3, and that it only

used objective data as the basis for retention. The Sunshine state also had an appropriate balance of good cause exemptions only students who could benefit found themselves included in the policy.

Retention itself is not the goal here, it's remediation and intervention coupled with the test-based promotion that makes it a successful combination. In addition to Florida data demonstrating increases in proficiency on the statewide-standardized assessment and the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP), several research studies (listed in detail in the following question's answer) provide evidence that Florida's policy is working.

A third grade promotion policy may help temporarily, but where is the long-term evidence? Does retention cause students to drop out?

The first class of retained students in Florida has not yet graduated high school. Evidence of the policy's impact on high school graduation and dropout rates will first be available in 2013 for third graders retained for the first time under the policy in 2003.

Reading proficiency in Florida, at every grade level and all subgroups (white, black, Hispanic, students with disabilities, etc.) has steadily been increasing over the last decade. Florida's graduation rates have been consistently increasing and they are at the highest rate ever. Likewise, Florida's dropout rates have been consistently decreasing and are at the lowest rate ever.

Research conducted on Florida's retention policy by the Manhattan Institute in three separate studies has shown there are statistically significant positive effects of the policy over time. Their currently published findings studied the program for the first three years of implementation and the Manhattan Institute has already secured data and begun work on a longer-term study of the policy with results anticipated next year.

Why can't we just fund literacy efforts without a retention policy?

A literacy program or policy is not enough because it does not provide the necessary pressure for the adults in the system to help kids that are not proficient. A literacy policy needs to be student-focused with specific help for students that are not proficient, like non-promotion to the next higher grade, coupled with literacy strategies. Florida did not just retain students for the sake of retention -- the state implemented improved professional development for teachers and principals in the research on reading and put reading coaches in place, among a number of other interventions to truly change what was happening in the public schools. Policymakers need a test-based promotion policy like Florida has to ensure teachers and students have the accountability for learning and mastery that children need to succeed.

Could a third grade progression policy jeopardize federal funds?

Not if districts observe the strict rules around supplanting (where the state is currently funding an initiative then federal funding comes into the state). For example, Florida's policy requires that students retained at 3rd grade receive supplementary learning experiences such as a summer

reading camp. Districts will have to think creatively about their funding sources for some activities, but it is not an insurmountable dilemma and has not resulted in Florida losing any federal funds.

Does the Florida policy retain students for demonstrating deficiencies in all of the subjects or only in reading?

The Florida policy bases promotion and retention decisions solely on reading. In Florida, as is typical in most states, performance on the reading statewide assessment is highly correlated with performance on the math assessment. Also, reading is the foundational skill students need to be able to learn.

Do the interventions associated with this policy require new funding sources or can we provide them with reallocations of existing dollars?

Both. A large portion of funding in Florida, previous to this policy, was typically used for summer school and post-failure remediation. Lawmakers reallocated these funds and allowed them to be used for “preventative care.” Florida lawmakers also focused the federal Title I and Title II funds on ensuring students can read. In addition, the timing of the implementation coincided relatively well with the infusion of Reading First funds from USDE, which was used to hire reading coaches to mentor teachers.

Does the state mandate which instructional and support services are to be utilized as interventions?

No, the state does not mandate specific services, but, the services selected by the district must be consistent with scientifically based reading research. The Florida Center for Reading Research (FCRR) www.fcrr.org has extraordinary information about the materials that educators use to provide these services. Additionally, Florida has a statewide textbook adoption cycle that requires districts to select scientifically-based reading research (SBRR) materials consistent with research and Florida’s literacy-based promotion policy.

What is the timeline for notifying students of retention?

The statewide assessment is administered in April; results are back to the school and parents before the end of the school year in May. Students cannot retake the statewide assessment to meet the third grade promotion policy. Instead, students may demonstrate proficiency on an approved alternate measure like SAT10, through a student portfolio or, the following year as a third grader if retained.

If a student moves into the school district from out-of-state at the beginning of 4th grade (or any grade after 3rd), must that student meet the third grade promotion requirements?

No. In addition, the third grade promotion policy does not apply to students not enrolled in public school for third grade.

How does the state ensure consistency in student portfolios to demonstrate a consistent standard across districts?

The state has a framework for what needs to be included in a student portfolio and it is comprehensive, as outlined below. Having a consistent policy statewide has alleviated the concern about students leaving one district for another because the portfolio is rumored to be easier.

Portfolio requirements:

- Be selected by the student's teacher;
- Be an accurate picture of the student's ability and only include student work that has been independently produced in the classroom;
- Be inclusive of evidence that demonstrates the grade 3 Reading FCAT have been met. This includes multiple choice items and passages that are approximately 60 percent literary text and 40 percent information text that are between 100-700 words with an average of 350 words; Such evidence could include chapter or unit tests from the district's/school's adopted core reading curriculum that are aligned with the Sunshine State Standards or teacher-prepared assessments that are aligned with the Sunshine State Standards;
- Be an organized collection of evidence of the student's mastery of the Sunshine State Standard Benchmarks for Language Arts that are assessed by the grade 3 Reading FCAT. For each benchmark, there must be at least five examples of mastery as demonstrated by a grade of "C" or above; and
- Be signed by the teacher and the principal as an accurate assessment of the required reading skills.

In small, rural schools where there may only be one third grade teacher, what happens to retained students?

In cases where there is only one third-grade classroom, it is imperative that teachers collaborate and use school support to provide a strategy to ensure these students receive intensive interventions and appropriate remediation. The state also makes online options available to students.

Is there a specific curriculum for the retained students?

Retention alone will not solve the problem of teaching students to read; these students will require differentiated curriculum and instruction. Florida knows that doing the same thing for another year will not produce different results. This is why Florida and the U.S. Department of Education provided funding for Scientifically-Based Reading Research (SBRR), so we know what is effective to help struggling readers. Educators must provide retained students with additional intensive instructional time using SBRR, materials and strategies, please visit www.fcrr.org for all the information. Districts are required to use SBRR materials with retained third grade students.