



Testimony to the House Education Committee on HB 5111 Mandating Retention for Third-Graders Based on MEAP Reading Performance

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Tuesday, November 5, 2013

Good afternoon, Chair Lyons and members of the committee. I am Jane Zehnder-Merrell, Kids Count in Michigan project director at the Michigan League for Public Policy. Thank you for the opportunity to express our concerns with HB5111 that mandates retention for third-graders who do not demonstrate proficiency on the MEAP reading test.

While we totally support the intent of the bill to increase the numbers of third-graders reading proficiently, we would contend the roughly \$262 million that this proposal could cost could be better spent. (This amount is based on an extra year of K-12 foundation allowance of \$7,500 x 35,000 students.) Furthermore, the cost could double when the state implements common core standards: Almost seven of every 10 Michigan fourth-graders do not demonstrate proficiency on reading skills on the National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP). More costs could be incurred for students retained for more than one year—the mandate is silent on this issue.

While the resources are one concern, there are several others. First multiple studies have demonstrated that grade retention actually has harmful results for students—they are more likely to become disengaged in school and ultimately drop out during their high school years. Those costs would affect the economic viability of the state, which needs more highly educated workers. Furthermore, grade retention, in and of itself, won't increase the likelihood of student achievement. States such as Florida and Ohio that have implemented mandatory grade retention have also put in place several other well-financed supportive initiatives like intensive summer reading camps, tutoring, smaller classes and reading specialists.

Secondly, marginal students lose on this policy. One or two incorrect answers on a single test could push a child into a retention, while those with one or two correct answers over the margin would not get access to any specialized supports.

Thirdly, children in schools with disproportionately high proportions of low-income students would be more adversely affected. Students in low-income families are two to three times

more likely to demonstrate reading skills below proficient. Children in low-income families not only struggle with reading skills, they are less likely to have the social emotional development, engagement in school and overall physical well-being as their peers in high-income families. They are also more likely to have less experienced teachers, larger classes and multiple other disadvantages outside the classroom than their peers in families with higher income. Data show an almost direct correlation with income and MEAP achievement.

And lastly, the potential harm and disruption precipitated by this mandate would disproportionately affect children of color in Michigan. They are three times more likely to live in families with income below the federal poverty level (\$23,000 for a family of four with two children) and 10 times more likely to live in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty.

Some of these findings were reflected in the just released report by the Annie E. Casey Foundation on a longitudinal national study of children entering kindergarten in the late '90s. The Foundation has launched a 10-year Campaign for Grade-Level Reading, which targets addressing barriers to regular school attendance in early elementary grades and expanding enriching activities to promote summer learning as strategies to address improvement in reading skills.

If the Michigan Legislature seeks to improve reading proficiency among third-graders, it might consider supporting intensive, evidence-based, well-financed and guaranteed interventions that begin long before children reach the third grade. Unfortunately, funding for education has been cut rather than expanded to address the need for supporting initiatives to promote better outcomes for students. Since 2008, Michigan has cut its education budget by 9%—deeper than 33 other states.