MICHIGAN READING JOURNAL

Michigan Reading Journal

Volume 52 | Issue 2 Article 5

January 2020

Don’t Leave Us Behind: Third-Grade Reading Laws and Unintended Consequences

Gabriel P. DellaVecchia
University of Michigan

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj

Recommended Citation
DellaVecchia, Gabriel P. (2020) "Don’t Leave Us Behind: Third-Grade Reading Laws and Unintended Consequences," *Michigan Reading Journal*: Vol. 52: Iss. 2, Article 5.
Available at: https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj/vol52/iss2/5

From The Teachers & Writers Guide to Classic American Literature, edited by Christopher Edgar and Gary Lenhart, 2001, New York, NY: Teachers & Writers Collaborative. Copyright 2001 by Teachers & Writers Collaborative. Reprinted with permission.

This work is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Michigan Reading Journal by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

Don’t Leave Us Behind: Third-Grade Reading Laws and Unintended Consequences

by Gabriel P. DellaVecchia

Gabriel P. DellaVecchia

Over the past two decades, nearly 30 states have adopted laws that either suggest or require retention for third graders who fail to reach a benchmark score on a standardized reading assessment. What are the consequences of these laws for teachers, students, and families? Are these laws an effective intervention to support struggling readers? If not retention, then what?

My journey into this maze of questions began when I started teaching in the fall of 2013. With a freshly minted Master’s degree and a teaching license, I moved to Colorado, eager to start my new role as a third-grade classroom teacher. In my very first week in the classroom, I was confronted with the state’s *Reading to Ensure Academic Development Act* (READ Act), which had gone into effect only one month before I started my new position.

The new law had appeared seemingly out of nowhere and was just as impenetrable to my administrators and my more seasoned colleagues as it was to me. While this gave me some small comfort, the collective confusion did not help as I tried to comply with the new law.

What we could glean was this: The state legislature was concerned about literacy achievement. As a remedy, they had voted for a sweeping new law to try and hold teachers and families more accountable for students not meeting literacy goals. For every child in my classroom who was identified as one or more grade levels behind in reading, as determined by their score from the end of second grade on the *Developmental Reading Assessment* (DRA2; Beaver & Carter, 2006), I had to create a READ Plan. Basically, I had to document my intervention strategy for that child and meet with the child’s family to gain their approval and partnership. This part made good sense and was consistent with my intended practice.

However, in my classroom that first year, 11 of my 29 students were required to have READ Plans. So, in addition to getting my classroom off the ground, in addition to administering the DRA2 to all of my students, I also had to take an hour or so per child to create 11 READ Plans. I had to input the information into a hastily programmed and non-user-friendly online system maintained by my large urban district to verify compliance with the law. As far as I know, my planned interventions were never reviewed, and if they were, I never received any acknowledgement or feedback. In the

end, I was scrupulously documenting everything I was already going to do with each child, but losing hours of planning time and actual contact time with my students to satisfy paperwork requirements.

Near the end of the year, I had follow-up meetings with the families of every child on a READ Plan. For those students whose test scores were still below the benchmark, I was required to inform families that retention was an option. This seemed like a severe consequence, but it was a provision of the law.

Luckily, the district I worked for did not view retention as an effective solution for reading difficulties. They provided us with letters stating that retention was a choice, but not one supported by research or the district. After reviewing the letter, families were asked to opt in or opt out of retention for their child. In my three years of teaching in Colorado, not a single one of my families chose retention. I dutifully filed the retention letters away with the rest of the READ Plan documentation.

Overall, the READ Act felt like yet another entry in a long line of well-meaning bureaucratic checklists; it required time that I really didn't have to spare, but it was basically harmless.

You can imagine my surprise when, three years later, I moved to Michigan to start a doctoral program and discovered that Colorado's READ Act had a twin… with a twist. Not only was the intention similar, but the language of the law itself was nearly identical. What was the twist? While Colorado's law *mentioned* retention for struggling readers as an option to be discussed with families, the third-grade reading law in Michigan specified that retention was *mandatory*.

Disturbed by this higher-stakes and punitive variation on Colorado's comparatively innocuous reading law, I started doing research. I quickly discovered that it was not only in Colorado and Michigan. Twenty-nine states, plus the District of Columbia, have third-grade reading laws. Only 10 of them specify retention as a *suggested* intervention. For the rest, retention, without a good cause exemption, is mandatory (Table 1).

How Did We Get Here?

The first third-grade reading law was passed in 1998 in California (Weyer, 2018). Politicians, relying on an outdated idea of third grade as a line in the sand between students *learning to read* and *reading to learn*, decided to send a message to school districts and parents that "social promotion," students moving to the next grade based on age, would stop. In its place, students would

Table 1

Third-Grade Reading Legislation

States with Mandatory Retention (19)	States That Allow Retention (10)
Alabama[a], Arizona, Arkansas, California, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Iowa, Michigan[b], Mississippi, Missouri, Nevada[c], North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, (also, Washington, DC)	Alaska, Colorado, Maine, Maryland, Minnesota, New Jersey, New Mexico, Texas, Washington, West Virginia

Note. Legislation information provided by the Education Commission of the States (2018) and the National Conference of State Legislatures (2019).

[a]Alabama's law was passed in July, 2019. Retention decisions will begin during the 2021-22 school year. [b]Michigan will begin making retention decisions at the end of the 2019-20 academic year. [c]Nevada began implementation on July 1, 2019.

be required to take gatekeeping assessments to progress past third grade.

This emphasis on third grade as a critical predictor of future success gained traction in 2011 with a widely cited report from the Annie E. Casey Foundation called *Double Jeopardy: How Third-Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation*. In that study, the author concluded that students not reading proficiently by the end of the third grade were four times more likely not to graduate high school.

In the wake of that report and a nationwide call for increased accountability in education, third-grade reading laws have spread across the country. Considering their consistent proliferation over the last decade, for those states that do not already have a reading law, it may only be a matter of time.

The concern expressed by legislators is well founded: Many students in the United States do struggle with reading. According to the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress, the only nationwide reading assessment at the elementary level, only 37% of fourth-grade students performed at or above the *Proficient* level and only 68% of students performed at or above the *Basic* level (NAEP Reading Report Card, 2017).

Coupled with a shift in standardized testing to Common Core-aligned instruments which prioritize higher-order thinking like analysis and evaluation over simple identification, like the Smarter Balanced assessment upon which the Michigan Student Test of Educational Progress (M-STEP) is based, it is clear that American students need substantial support to meet the demands of being literate citizens in the 21st century. However, while proficient reading is obviously a worthy goal and a foundational component of a successful education, using retention as an intervention comes at great cost, with benefits that are murky at best.

What are the Potential Costs?

With so many states having already traveled down this path, I had plenty of prior examples to research. The more I dug into the data, the more I was unsettled. Looking to our demographically similar neighbor Ohio, which enacted a nearly identical reading retention law in 2012, 5% of students did not meet the promotion threshold on the 2017–18 assessment—nearly 6,000 students (Ohio Department of Education, 2018). Even at a very conservative estimate of $6,000 per year in per-pupil spending (Applegate, 2018), that is an additional $36 million to provide one additional year of instruction.

The financial burden in Michigan could be much greater. Statewide, only 44.4% of Michigan's 102,000 third graders scored *Proficient* or above on the 2017-18 M-STEP ELA assessment (Michigan Department of Education, 2018a). Depending on how far below proficient those students were, without granting any "good cause" exemptions (a list of ways to sidestep the law—with its own set of problems which we will explore shortly), Michigan could be forced to retain nearly 60,000 students. Again, estimating a conservative $6,000/year per pupil, that is a potential cost of *$340 million*. It is doubtful that every student who does not receive a *Proficient* score would be retained; the Michigan Department of Education estimates that "only" 5% of third graders per year will be retained due to the law (Keesler, 2019); nevertheless, interventions for Grades pre-K–2 seem like a more worthwhile investment than requiring local districts to spend millions of dollars on retention.

More troublesome, statewide averages mask the disproportionate impact that reading retention laws have on minoritized students, particularly students of color, attending under-resourced urban districts. Consider the case of Ohio: although their statewide retention average last year was 5%, the rate of retained children, even after excluding "good cause" exemptions, was about 18% in Dayton, 16% in Cleveland, and nearly 15% in Columbus (Ohio Department of Education, 2018). Cleveland and Columbus alone accounted for almost 1,000 of the 5,854 students retained statewide (Ohio Department of Education, 2018). Since students of color comprise between one third and two thirds of the student populations in each of those cities (US Census Bureau, 2010), and because the retention rates in the

cities are so much higher than the statewide average, it can be inferred that students of color are consequently being retained at higher rates than White students.

A similar disproportionate impact on urban districts, resulting in a disproportionate impact on minoritized students, can already be predicted in Michigan. Using Detroit as a telling example, 82% of students who attend the Detroit Public Schools Community District are African American and 13% are Hispanic (Michigan Department of Education, 2018b). However, only 11.3% of students in the district scored *Proficient* or above on the spring 2018 M-STEP ELA assessment (Levin, 2018).

In light of these statistics, it is instructive to look back at the title of the widely cited Annie E. Casey Foundation report *Double Jeopardy: How Third-Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation*. While third-grade reading laws are intended to improve reading skills, they do nothing to address the wide-ranging effects of intergenerational poverty or the resulting inequities in school resources. Rather than lawmakers viewing low reading scores as an *outcome* of attending under-resourced schools, these low reading scores are instead identified as the *cause* of students failing to graduate high school. As a consequence, rather than being provided with the resources they have been denied, students and families are threatened with mandatory retention.

Because of disproportionate impacts, particularly on students of color, these laws are not only about literacy. Retention and its use, or misuse, becomes a question of justice. Is retention truly an effective intervention for literacy outcomes? In addition to the significant financial costs we have explored, what are the potential social and emotional costs of retention? Are there additional unintended consequences? To answer these questions, we can refer to the significant body of research on retention.

What Does the Research Say?

In the April 2003 issue of *The Reading Teacher*, Shane Jimerson and Amber Kaufman presented "A Primer on Grade Retention Research." Even when that article was published a decade and a half ago, retention was on the rise. The authors projected that, if the trend continued, an estimated 30-50% of students would likely be retained at least once by ninth grade (p. 622). That was *before* the spread of third-grade reading laws nationwide.

The justification for retention does not seem warranted based on the available data. As Jimerson and Kaufman (2003) reported in their meta-analysis of studies from the previous 75 years, nearly 700 analyses from over 80 studies failed to support the use of grade retention as an early intervention to enhance academic achievement (p. 625). Furthermore, over 300 analyses from over 50 studies failed to support the use of grade retention as an early intervention to enhance socioemotional and behavioral adjustment (p. 626).

Research released in the fifteen years since the publication of Jimerson and Kaufman's article has consistently demonstrated that retention is a neutral intervention at best, and potentially damaging at worst (Jimerson & Ferguson, 2007; Silberglitt, Appleton, Burns, & Jimerson, 2006). Even when it comes to increasing high school graduation rates, a common justification for the necessity of reading legislation, a literature review of 17 papers by Jimerson, Anderson, and Whipple (2002) found that retained students were consistently more likely to drop out during high school than non-retained students. Despite the research evidence, however, reading retention laws continue to proliferate.

This trend compelled the literacy research community to voice their concerns. According to a policy brief from the Literacy Research Association (LRA) published in 2013, "retention policies and initiatives are not consistent with the research literature, which overall does not support any long-term academic benefits for retention, but does suggest that there are negative social ramifications of such policies" (p. 2). The LRA policy brief recommended that states "suspend the use of policies mandating test-based grade retention until further research is conducted to examine the efficacy and ramifications of such policies" (p. 2).

Since the publication of the policy brief, some of that "further research" has been conducted, and it has only strengthened the argument against mandatory retention based on reading test scores.

A 2017 article by Schwerdt, West, and Winters examined longitudinal outcomes in Florida. This study is of particular interest, as the third-grade retention law passed in that state was among the first in the current wave of reading laws, meaning that students retained under the law were included in their analysis. The researchers found that students who were retained showed a large initial increase in achievement, but it faded to statistical insignificance within five years. They also found that, while retention had some relation to increased high school GPA and enrollment in fewer remedial courses, retention did not increase the probability of students graduating from high school.

As those with the most to gain or lose from retention, we cannot neglect the student perspective. In a striking study by Yamamoto and Byrnes (1987), sixth-grade students rated retention as being more stressful than any event other than losing a parent or going blind. In a replication of the study, students rated grade retention as *the single most stressful life event*, more stressful than even the loss of a parent (Anderson, Jimerson, & Whipple, 2002). If the majority of young people share these feelings, then retention is indeed a drastic method for improving reading outcomes.

To review what we know from a significant, consistent, and robust body of research, 90 years of studies suggest that retention provides short-term gains at best, and neutral or even harmful effects at worst. Retention has not been shown to enhance academic achievement or support socioemotional or behavioral adjustment. Recently conducted longitudinal analyses (Hughes, West, Kim, & Bauer, 2018), along with earlier studies, indicate strong correlations between retention and increased rates of students dropping out. Retention has difficult-to-quantify, but very real, impacts on the social and emotional lives of affected students. Most concerningly, for an intervention with a long list of possible negative consequences, retention does not appear to support sustained improvements in reading growth. Taken all together, the research does not provide compelling evidence to legally mandate retention in order to improve reading outcomes.

What Are More Effective Solutions?

So, if retention is not the answer, what is? Luckily, decades of literacy research point to more effective instructional practices and interventions, many of which are positive components of the current law. While there is not space in this article to describe particular strategies in detail, I will provide a few broad categories of practices backed by strong evidence from research. Rather than carrying the negative connotations of retention, the majority of these ideas posit that increasing motivation to read is the key to helping students reach their full reading potential (e.g., Gambrell, 2011; Guthrie et al., 2004).

Before focusing on practices for specific grade-bands, two strategies can be implemented for students of all ages: 1) supporting learners to spend more time with "eyes on print" and 2) strengthening collaborations between schools and families.

More "Eyes on Print"

One of the simplest, cheapest, and perhaps most effective interventions involves providing all learners with ample exposure to high-interest reading material (Allington, 2014; Kamil, 2008; Neuman, 1999). These opportunities can be provided out of school, either in the home or with frequent trips to the local public library. In school, it is not enough to have a classroom library; children need to be provided with time to read for pleasure (Gambrell, 2011).

Even if a school spends significant money on a research-based reading curriculum or a well-reviewed literacy intervention, it is unlikely to make a lasting difference unless students are supported to foster a positive attitude towards books and reading. Without experiencing reading as a pleasurable activity, children will avoid it (Marinak & Gambrell, 2008). Teachers and families may find it useful to refer to the strategies of Concept-Oriented Reading Instruction (Guthrie et al.,

2004) for ideas about how to support students' motivation to read.

Strengthening Collaborations Between Schools and Families

Perhaps the biggest flaw in the logic behind reading laws is the artificial antagonism that they foster between families and schools. Rather than viewing the relationship between the school and the family as a seamless support network, mandatory retention becomes a threat to punish families by retaining their children for struggling with reading.

Schools can do their part to repair their relationships with families by creating and promoting parent-involvement programs (Sénéchal & Young, 2008). Like many states, including Colorado, Michigan's law also requires the creation of a "Read at Home" plan—tools to assist the family in providing interventions.

Family involvement has a clear and positive impact on children's reading acquisition (Crosby, Rasinski, Padak, & Yildirim, 2015; Sénéchal, 2006). The state can do its part by funding programs, run by schools or literacy nonprofits, to increase the capacity of families to promote a culture of reading at home (Jordan, Snow, & Porche, 2000).

In addition to the two interventions mentioned above for students of all ages, specific interventions may be instituted in three age bands: early childhood, during the first years of elementary school, and for the years of schooling between the end of Grade 3 and high school graduation.

Increasing Focus on Early Childhood Education

As with many things, prevention is the best medicine. A growing body of research indicates the effectiveness of early literacy instruction (e.g., Barnett, 2001). This could involve easier access to quality childcare through subsidies or streamlined licensing of childcare providers who focus on exploration, language development, and play (National Early Literacy Panel, 2008; Slavin, Karweit, & Madden, 1989).

A push for increased early education could also involve legislation for universal pre-kindergarten or at least increased attendance for full-day kindergarten. These programs should develop language and prereading skills using structured, well-organized, comprehensive approaches with activities including, but not limited to, building phonological awareness, explicit instruction in letter-sound relationships, developing vocabulary, and practice with concepts of print (Michigan Association of Intermediate School Administrators General Education Leadership Network [MAISA GELN], 2016).

Improving Instruction, Interventions, and Assessment in Grades 1-3

Thirty years ago, while reviewing effective programs for students at risk, Slavin, Karweit, and Madden (1989) noted that early identification and intervention was key to successful remediation. Consistent with that still-valid assertion, Michigan's law stipulates that students should be put on an individualized reading plan within 30 days of being identified as having a reading deficiency.

While early identification is critical, long before a child is in need of intervention, we need to make sure children receive high-quality literacy instruction every day (MAISA GELN, 2016). Illustrative examples of these essential practices, which include strategies for fostering motivation to read (Gambrell, 2011), include:

- Cultivating a supportive literacy community in the classroom, involving student choice and meaningful and personally relevant reading/writing activities
- Performing interactive read-alouds using high-interest and culturally-responsive mentor texts
- Varying instructional groupings in both size and instructional level, including time for individual, pair, and group work
- Providing ample time for extended, authentic writing
- Building vocabulary and content knowledge in the context of instruction, not as a stand-alone activity
- Supporting students to be successful with challenging texts
- Providing specific and elaborated feedback for reading and writing tasks

While these practices can be implemented by a single teacher, their power is magnified when embedded within a comprehensive, schoolwide literacy program. This includes thoughtful integration and collaboration between regular, remedial, and special education services (Jimerson & Kaufman, 2003).

Ironically, the push for high-stakes summative assessments has obscured the essential role that ongoing *formative* assessment plays in tailoring instruction to each student's needs. Michigan's reading law, like those in many states, stipulates that students should be assessed "at least three times per year" in Grades K–2. However, this increase in required diagnostic tests will only be effective if teachers use the data to adapt instructional strategies along the way. Also, mandated assessments should not replace systems of classroom-level formative assessments. Rather than relying solely on print-outs from computer-adaptive tests, teachers should continue to perform informal reading inventories and engage their students in one-on-one conferences to learn more about each child's strengths, interests, and struggles as a reader (Taylor, Pearson, Clark, & Walpole, 2000).

Summer Intervention

If intervention within the classroom and remedial services are not enough, summer school is a potential option that is preferable to retention (Cooper, Charlton, Valentine, & Muhlenbruck, 2000), and offering summer reading camps—staffed with highly effective teachers of reading—is encouraged within Michigan's reading law. A targeted summer program could provide the smaller class sizes and one-on-one attention not logistically feasible during the regular school year. Summer instruction would also have the benefit of preventing "summer slide," the loss of instructional gains often observed at the beginning of a new school year (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2013).

If formal summer school is unavailable, students can also be provided with books to read over the summer, accompanied by comprehension strategy instruction taught over several lessons at the end of the preceding school year (Kim & White, 2008).

Looking Beyond Third Grade

With all of the focus on third-grade reading, attention has been diverted from the fact that we learn literacy across our lifespans (e.g., Greenleaf, Schoenbach, Cziko, & Mueller, 2001). It may be indisputable that early literacy is important, but a fatal flaw of reading laws is the mistaken idea that literacy instruction ends in third grade. In fact, much of the subject-specific vocabulary and disciplinary-specific conventions become *more* important as students move into middle and high school (Snow, Lawrence, & White, 2009).

Also, while we rightly focus on students as the beneficiaries of our educational systems, we cannot forget the role of the teacher. Effective preparation and ongoing professional development are essential to prepare well-informed teachers who have a variety of instructional and intervention strategies at their command (Darling-Hammond, 2010). The law in Michigan requires the use of an early literacy coach model. If not already in place, teachers and families should advocate for the hiring of coaches who meet all of the requirements spelled out in the legislation.

What Can We Do This Year?

At this point, some of you may be saying, "Those suggestions sound well and good, but seeing improvement might take years. Others involve administrative decisions or significant financial investments that are outside of my circle of control. What can be done *this year* to counteract the retention provision of the law?" In Michigan, like most states with reading laws, families, teachers, and administrators have two avenues to avoid automatic retention: alternative assessments and good cause exemptions.

Advocating for Alternative Assessments

According to subsection (5)(a)(ii) of the reading law, local districts have the discretion to choose an "alternative standardized reading assessment approved by the superintendent of public instruction" (MCL 380.1280f). While the developers of M-STEP vouch for its validity and reliability (Michigan Department of Education, 2017), the fact of the matter is that it is too new for any relationship to be established between

M-STEP scores and future reading achievement, let alone overall academic achievement. Rather than relying on the M-STEP, a district could choose from a number of free or very low-cost instruments to demonstrate student proficiency (for a selected list, please visit https://tinyurl.com/alternateassessments). While an alternative assessment may still reveal a reading difficulty, it is logical to make a consequential decision like retention based on an instrument that has been used and studied extensively.

Districts may also elect to avoid traditional standardized tests entirely, including associated concerns about unintended consequences of test interpretation (Messick, 1995), and instead have students demonstrate proficiency using a portfolio containing multiple work samples. A portfolio assessment combining snapshots over time would provide a more complete picture of student ability, particularly for students who suffer from test anxiety.

For families and teachers concerned about the gatekeeping function of a single assessment, they could work together to urge local administrators to choose either a more established standardized test or portfolio reviews for their district.

Using Good Cause Exemptions

Even if a district elects to use an alternative assessment, the switch may not happen soon enough for third graders facing retention at the end of the 2019–20 school year. More immediately, a student may be granted a “good cause” exemption and promoted to fourth grade, regardless of reading score, for any one of the following reasons:

1. the child already has an existing Individualized Education Plan or Section 504 intervention in place,
2. the child is an English language learner who has received less than three years of English language instruction,
3. the child has previously been retained in Grades K–2, or
4. the child has been enrolled in his/her current school district for less than two years and the previous district did not provide a reading improvement plan.

A parent or guardian, any third-grade teacher, the Section 504 coordinator, or any member of the student’s Individualized Education Plan (IEP) team can request the good cause exemption. However, it is essential for families to know that good cause exemptions are neither automatic nor guaranteed. They have to be requested and then approved by the district superintendent or a designated representative.

Problematically, this two-step process will likely have disproportionate impacts on minoritized students. Families with limited English proficiency, and/or who cannot take time from work, may not know, or have the time, to request a good cause exemption for their child. Even after it is requested, the law stipulates that good cause exemptions are granted by the school superintendent. This is another area where the retention provision is likely to have a disproportionate impact on minoritized students. Families in smaller school districts will have an easier time contacting their superintendent than families in large cities like Detroit or Flint. Unless superintendents in large districts assign a designee, or otherwise create a streamlined process for requesting good cause exemptions, the number of cases to review could be overwhelming.

Where Do We Go from Here?

No one is arguing that literacy intervention is unnecessary. In fact, much can be done to strengthen literacy instruction in the United States. However, these rapidly spreading laws advocating for retention are not effective.

Ten states, including Colorado and Minnesota, have third-grade reading laws nearly identical to Michigan’s. The crucial difference in those states is that retention is mentioned as a *possibility*, to be discussed between the family and the teacher, and is not mandated. For states with existing reading laws specifying mandatory retention, amendments could be introduced to alter that single word. That simple change, from *mandatory* to *possible* retention, could make a tremendous difference.

It would leave retention on the table as an option, but it would shift the decision from one predetermined by the state to one elected by the family in consultation with the teacher.

In the meantime, I take comfort from a tiny moment in my teaching career. Near the end of my second year, I received a phone call from a researcher from the Assessment, Research, and Evaluation Department for my district. My heart sank. I figured I had done something terrible.

It was quite the opposite. Despite my initial anxiety, I had exceeded the district average in "graduating" students from their READ Plans. They wanted to know the secret to my success!

I told them it was nothing fancy. I fostered good relationships with my families and I sent my students home with sacks of books to read every week. I spent time one-on-one after school with my most struggling students. I used flexible grouping strategies and a mix of texts, both grade-level and instructional-level. I taught content through interdisciplinary units with meaningful, authentic final products. Most of all, I was lucky to work in the context of a schoolwide intervention plan, where regular, remedial, and special education instruction was coordinated.

We know what works best for our students. Now, we just need to convince the policymakers to listen to us.

Practical Steps:

1. *Contact your state legislators.* Although mandatory retention is currently the law in Michigan, all is not lost.
    - Send a hand-written letter: They are so rare these days that it will likely be read.
    - Organize like-minded teachers and parents to call. Whereas single calls can be ignored, a few hundred calls will send a message!
    - Talk about this issue in person with your local legislators. Try to schedule a one-on-one meeting or attend a town hall or a coffee hour.
2. *Speak to your school administrators.* Discuss effective instruction, interventions, and the possibility of utilizing alternative assessments. Reading laws, like Michigan's (https://www.tinyurl.com/ReadbyGrade3), often include research-based interventions. Are there items in the legislation or in this article you have not yet tried?
3. *Make use of the good cause exemptions.* Until the law is amended, the good cause exemptions provide a means of preventing retention for a significant number of children. In particular, families and teachers may want to consider subsection (8)(e), which allows for broad interpretation: requesting a good cause exemption "in the best interests of the pupil."

References

Allington, R. L. (2014). How reading volume affects both reading fluency and reading achievement. *International Electronic Journal of Elementary Education, 7*(1), 13-26.

Allington, R. L., & McGill-Franzen, A. (Eds.). (2013). *Summer reading: Closing the rich/poor reading achievement gap*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Anderson, G. E., Jimerson, S. R., & Whipple, A. D. (2002). *Students' ratings of stressful experiences at home and school: Loss of a parent and grade retention as superlative stressors*. Unpublished manuscript, University of California, Santa Barbara.

Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2011). *Double jeopardy: How third-grade reading skills and poverty influence high school graduation*. Baltimore, MD: Donald J. Hernandez. Retrieved from http://aecf.org/resources/double-jeopardy/

Applegate, J. (2018, May 25). Countdown: School districts that spend the most per pupil and states ranked by school funding. *Columbus Business First*. Retrieved from https://www.bizjournals.com/columbus/news/2018/05/24/countdown-school-districts-that-spend-the-most-per.html

Barnett, S. W. (2001). Preschool education for economically disadvantaged children: Effects on reading achievement and related outcomes. In S.B. Neuman & D.K. Dickinson (Eds.), *Handbook of early literacy research* (pp. 421-443). New York, NY: Guilford.

Beaver, J. M., & Carter, M. A. (2006). *The developmental reading assessment-Second Edition*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.

Cooper, H., Charlton, K., Valentine, J. C., & Muhlenbruck, L. (2000). Making the most of summer school: A meta-analytic and narrative review. *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development, 65*(1), v-118.

Crosby, S. A., Rasinski, T., Padak, N., & Yildirim, K. (2015). A 3-year study of a school-based parental involvement program in early literacy. *The Journal of Educational Research, 108*(2), 165-172.

Darling-Hammond, L. (2010). *The flat world and education: How America's commitment to equity will determine our future*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Dennis, D. V., Kroeger, D. C., O'Byrne, W. I., Meyer, C. K., Kletzein, S. B., Huddleston, A., & Gilrane, C. (2013). Test-based grade retention (Literacy Research Association policy brief). Retrieved from http://literacyresearchassociation.org/policy-advocacy-statements-resources

Education Commission of the States. (2018, June). [Table summary of state third-grade retention policies]. *50-State Comparison*. Retrieved from http://ecs.force.com/mbdata/MBQuest2RTanw?rep=KK3Q1818

Gambrell, L. B. (2011). Seven rules of engagement: What's most important to know about motivation to read. *The Reading Teacher, 65*(3), 172-178.

Greenleaf, C., Schoenbach, R., Cziko, C., & Mueller, F. L. (2001) Apprenticing adolescent readers to academic literacy. *Harvard Educational Review, 71*(1), 79-129.

Guthrie, J. T., Wigfield, A., Barbosa, P., Perencevich, K. C., Taboada, A., Davis, M. H., … Tonks, S. (2004). Increasing reading comprehension and engagement through concept-oriented reading instruction, *Journal of Educational Psychology, 96*(3), 403-423.

Hughes, J. N., West, S.G., Kim, H., & Bauer, S. S. (2018). Effect of early grade retention on school completion: A prospective study. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 110*(7), 974-991.

Jimerson, S. R., Anderson, G. E., & Whipple, A. D. (2002). Winning the battle and losing the war: Examining the relation between grade retention and dropping out of high school. *Psychology in the Schools, 39*(4), 441-457.

Jimerson, S. R., & Kaufman, A. M. (2003). Reading, writing, and retention: A primer on grade retention research. *The Reading Teacher, 56*(7), 622-635.

Jordan, G. E., Snow, C. E., & Porche, M. V. (2000). Project EASE: The effect of a family literacy project on kinder¬garten students' early literacy skills. *Reading Research Quarterly, 35*, 524-546.

Kamil, M. L. (2008). How to get recreational reading to increase reading achievement. In *57th Yearbook of the National Reading Conference* (pp. 31-40). Oak Creek, WI: National Reading Conference.

Keesler, V. A. (2019, May 16). Read by grade three retention guidelines [Memorandum]. Retrieved from https://www.michigan.gov/documents/mde/RBG3_Retention_Guidelines_655260_7.pdf

Kim, J. S., & White, T. G. (2008). Scaffolding summer reading for children in grades 3 to 5: An experimental study. *Scientific Studies of Reading, 12*(1), 1-23.

Levin, K. (2018, August 29). Test scores spell trouble for the most struggling schools in Detroit and across the state. See how your school stacks up. *Chalkbeat*. Retrieved from https://chalkbeat.org/posts/detroit/2018/08/29/m-step-results-spell-trouble-for-michigans-most-struggling-schools-see-how-your-school-stacks-up/

Marinak, B. A., & Gambrell, L. B. (2008) Intrinsic motivation and rewards: What sustains young children's engagement with text? *Literacy Research and Instruction, 47*, 9-26.

Messick, S. (1995). Validity of psychological assessment: Validation of inferences from persons' responses and performances as scientific inquiry into score meaning. *American Psychologist, 50*(9), 741-749.

Michigan Association of Intermediate School Administrators General Education Leadership Network (MAISA GELN), Early Literacy Task Force. (2016). *Essential instructional practices in early literacy: Grades K to 3*. Lansing, MI: Author.

Michigan Compiled Laws § 380.1280f. Retrieved from http://legislature.mi.gov/doc.aspx?mcl-380-1280f

Michigan Department of Education. (2017). *Spring 2017 M-STEP technical report*. Retrieved from https://www.michigan.gov/documents/mde/EMI977_TECH_REPT_MI_2017_Main_Body_653887_7.pdf

Michigan Department of Education. (2018a). [2018 Statewide Michigan Student Test of Education Progress (M-STEP) Results spreadsheet]. Retrieved from https://www.michigan.gov/documents/mde/StatewideResultsPercentStudentPerfCat_Spring_2018_631094_7.pdf

Michigan Department of Education. (2018b). [2017-2018 Racial Census by School Districts spreadsheet]. Retrieved from https://www.michigan.gov/documents/mde/RacialCensus0506_204440_7.pdf

National Center for Education Statistics. (2017). [National Achievement-Level Results for Grade 4]. Retrieved from https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/reading_2017/nation/achievement?grade=4

National Conference of State Legislatures. (2019). Third-grade reading legislation [map]. Retrieved December 1, 2019, from http://www.ncsl.org/research/education/third-grade-reading-legislation.aspx

National Early Literacy Panel. (2008). *Developing early literacy report of the National Early Literacy Panel: A scientific synthesis of early literacy development and implications for intervention*. Jessup, MD: National Institute for Literacy.

Neuman, S. B. (1999). Books make a difference: A study of access to literacy. *Reading Research Quarterly, 34*(3), 286-311.

Ohio Department of Education. (2018). Third Grade Reading Guarantee. Retrieved from http://education.ohio.gov/Topics/Learning-in-Ohio/Literacy/Third-Grade-Reading-Guarantee

Schwerdt, G., West, M. R., & Winters, M. A. (2017). The effects of test-based retention on student outcomes over time: Regression discontinuity evidence from Florida. *Journal of Public Economics, 152*, 154-169. Retrieved from https://open.bu.edu/handle/2144/27018

Sénéchal, M. (2006). *The effect of family literacy interventions on children's acquisition of reading from Kindergarten to Grade 3*. Portsmouth, NH: RMC Research Corporation.

Sénéchal, M., & Young, L. (2008). The effect of family literacy interven¬tions on children's acquisition of reading from kindergarten to grade 3: A meta-analytic review. *Review of Educational Research, 78*, 880-907.

Silberglitt, B., Appleton, J.J., Burns, M. K., & Jimerson, S. R. (2006). Examining the effects of grade retention on student reading performance: A longitudinal study. *Journal of School Psychology, 44*(4), 255-270.

Slavin, R. E., Karweit, N. L., & Madden, N. A. (1989). *Effective programs for students at risk*. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Snow, C. E., Lawrence, J., & White, C. (2009). Generating knowledge of academic language among urban middle school students. *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness, 2*, 325-344.

Taylor, B. M., Pearson, P. D., Clark, K., & Walpole, S. (2000). Effective schools and accomplished teachers: Lessons about primary-grade reading instruction in low-income schools. *The Elementary School Journal 101*, 121-165.

United States Census Bureau. (2010). *State and county quickfacts*. Retrieved from https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PST045218

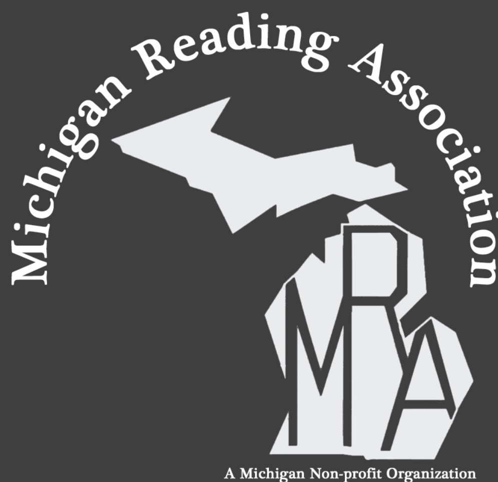
Weyer, M. (2018, June). A look at third-grade reading retention policies. *National Conference of State Legislatures LegisBrief, 26*(21), 1-2.

Yamamoto, K., & Byrnes, D. A. (1987). Primary children's ratings of stressfulness of experiences. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education, 2*(2), 117-121.

Author Biography

Among other adventures, **Gabriel DellaVecchia** has been a reading tutor in Baltimore, a teacher-trainer for the Peace Corps in South Africa, an English teacher in Japan and Cambodia, a student teacher for Grades 2 and 4 in Portland, and a Grade 3 teacher at an International Baccalaureate school in Denver. He is currently a doctoral candidate in Educational Studies with a concentration in Literacy, Language, and Culture at the University of Michigan. He can be reached at dellaveg@umich.edu.

Michigan Reading Association



The Michigan Reading Association (MRA) is an organization of people who believe that literacy is the key to transforming people's lives. Chartered in 1956 by the International Reading Association, MRA has grown to be a leader in providing literacy resources to teachers, parents, and universities.

The mission of MRA is to promote literacy across the state of Michigan. Our association works toward this goal in several ways:

- We offer high quality professional development conferences for teachers, adult educators, administrators, and all those involved in literacy education. We also invite homeschoolers and parents to access the best in literacy profesional development.

- MRA's Michigan Reading Journal is one of the top research journals in the country and is available in both print and electronic formats.

- MRA works with local reading councils around the state to provide support and professional development to members in every region of the state.

- The organization supports international literacy efforts, such as TEACH: Teachers Educating and Creating Hope. This group is comprised of many Chaldean and some non-Chaldean teachers in the Detroit area interested in helping those displaced families with necessities and schooling needs.

- MRA puts on two conferences a year. Our Annual Conference in March brings in 1600 conferees, 150 speakers, and 100 exhibitors from across the state and country. With over 30 breakout sessions every session slot, there is always something for everyone. Our Summer Literature Conference in July offers a chance to interact with authors and illustrators more closely in a beautiful summer venue.

As a Michigan non-profit 501(c)3, we are governed by a board of volunteers who work tirelessly to promote the cause of literacy throughout the state of Michigan.

Membership Information

Regular Membership - $35

Retired Membership - $20

Full-time Undergraduate Student Membership - $15

As part of your membership, receive discounts to both MRA conferences.

To sign up, go to www.michiganreading.org