



DUEY STROEBEL

STATE SENATOR • 20TH DISTRICT

Testimony on SB 329

June 15th, 2023

Thank you Chairman Jagler and members of the Senate Committee on Education for scheduling today's public hearing on SB329, the Right to Read Act, which I have authored alongside Representative Kitchens. This bill is aimed at addressing the ongoing literacy crisis that we are facing here in Wisconsin by joining 31 other states in passing legislation to use a science-based reading approach to teach reading.

For decades, we have seen districts across the country get away from teaching kids foundational reading skills such as phonics in favor of the Lucy Calkins approach to reading known as "balanced literacy." The use of so-called "balanced literacy" has yielded unbalanced results. In Wisconsin, around 67% of Wisconsin's fourth graders cannot read at grade level, which is the lowest our reading scores have been since 1992. Wisconsin also has the largest racial achievement gap when it comes to reading scores, with black fourth graders scoring about 22% lower than their white classmates. The status quo is setting Wisconsin students up for failure.

By third grade, students go from learning to read to reading to learn. If a student is lacking the basic foundational reading skills that are necessary to comprehend higher-level texts by third grade, they are far more likely to fall further behind their peers as they progress through school. Third grade reading readiness scores have proven to be a key predictor of future outcomes. Students who are reading below grade level by third grade are more likely to either drop out or not graduate from high school (88% of students who fail to earn a diploma were struggling readers by third grade). They are also less likely to get a family-sustaining job and have a greater chance of becoming incarcerated at some point in their life (70% of inmates are unable to read beyond a fourth grade reading level).

I want to be clear—we are not placing the blame on teachers with this bill. We have a lot of excellent teachers in Wisconsin. Unfortunately, even the best teacher is limited when they are forced to teach outdated and ineffective curriculum. The Right to Read Act will provide critical supports and resources for both students *and* for educators.

This bill accomplishes several things, chief among them being the creation of a literacy coaching program within the Department of Public Instruction. DPI must contract with up to 64 full-time literacy coaches, who are trained in the Science of Reading approach, to be assigned to high-need school districts as well as to the 12 CESAS. This program will fall under the newly-created Office of Literacy, who will approve recommended curriculum—submitted to them by a nine-person Early Literacy Council--

that is aligned with the Science of Reading approach. The bill also bans the use of three-cueing, which has served as the crux of the ineffective Lucy Calkins model of literacy instruction.

Additionally, the Joint Finance Committee will provide funding for grants that schools will be able to utilize to purchase approved science-based early literacy curriculum. If a school district utilizes a reading coach, or if they receive any of this grant money, they must purchase a curriculum that has been approved by the Office of Literacy. To ensure that our educators feel supported in this process and comfortable with the new curriculum, we will also require school districts to provide professional development opportunities on science-based early literacy instruction with funding being allocated for the trainings.

Finally, this legislation will establish requirements for reading readiness assessments and interventions. By screening students 4K-3 at least three times per school year, schools will have a better chance of identifying struggling readers early on so that they can create an individualized reading plan for that student and provide necessary and rigorous interventions to help get that student caught back up.

31 other states have made the shift towards the Science of Reading approach because they realize that what we've been doing for the past several decades has not worked. Our legislation is largely modeled after the "Mississippi Miracle." In 2019, Mississippi made the shift to the Science of Reading approach and went from dead last in reading scores to middle of the pack (where Wisconsin currently is). They were the only state to make significant gains in fourth grade reading scores.

Every child, regardless of their background, deserves to receive an exceptional education. Unfortunately, that has not been the case for every student in Wisconsin over the last several years. While there are a number of reasons for why that is, one of the most effective ways to remedy this right now is to make the shift to a science-based early literacy approach and provide resources for students and teachers to be successful.

Today's learners are tomorrow's workers. When our students are able to thrive, our communities are stronger and more prosperous. The Right to Read Act will transform the way that we teach reading in Wisconsin, helping better prepare our students for college and career readiness and setting them up on a pathway to lifelong success.

Thank you again for providing me with the opportunity to speak to SB 329. I appreciate the committee's consideration of this bill and would welcome any questions at this time.



JOEL KITCHENS

STATE REPRESENTATIVE • 1ST ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

Testimony for the Senate Committee on Education Senate Bill 329 June 15, 2023

Thank you, Chairman Jagler and members of the committee for holding this public hearing on Senate Bill 329, the Right to Read Act.

Schools are supposed to teach the 3 R's. Reading, 'Riting, and 'Rithmitic. But if they can't get the first "R" right, how can kids learn the other two?

Our state is facing a reading crisis. Sixty-four percent of fourth-graders are not proficient at reading. We are dead last in reading achievement among black students – falling 31 spots since 1992. Hispanic students dropped from 1st in the nation to 28th while white students fell from 6th to 28th.

I don't need to tell you that this is unacceptable. If kids don't learn how to read by the end of third grade, they are far less likely to graduate from high school and lead productive lives. Two-thirds of children who cannot read at grade level in third grade will end up in prison or on welfare.

How did we get here? Partly through good intentions. Beginning in the 1980s, schools across the country shifted toward a balanced literacy approach to reading. The idea was to make reading fun. But it's no fun when you can't do it. Experts in reading believe these curriculumms are failing our students and many schools are still using them.

I have talked to dozens of parents who found out that their fourth-grader, seventh-grader, or high school student couldn't read – including UW's Chancellor who discovered early that her child couldn't read and got him a reading tutor. Not every family is lucky enough to be able to afford a tutor, but he is now a student at the University of Chicago.

Poor and underprivileged families simply can't afford to hire a tutor and many parents are working too many jobs to even notice their child can't

read. We have to do better in Wisconsin and luckily, we have a successful model to follow.

States like Mississippi turned their reading scores around by focusing on teaching the Science of Reading and screening. Which is how most of us in this room learned to read. And it works.

Mississippi's 4th graders improved from last to 29th in the national rankings and tied the national average for the first time. Mississippi wasn't the only state to make significant gains in 4th-grade reading.

Right here in Wisconsin, districts like Elmbrook, New Berlin, and Thorpe have switched to Science of Reading instruction and it is working. I personally toured Elmbrook and witnessed kids who were engaged, learning, and making remarkable progress. The Science of Reading works.

SB 329 is largely modeled after the "Mississippi Miracle" and other states that have seen success. I should point out that a substitute amendment has been introduced that responds to some concerns we have heard. Here are the major components:

DPI will create an Office of Literacy to provide oversight. The state will pay the salary of the director for one year.

The state will pay for professional development to retrain our teachers in the Science of Reading, since most of them were not trained properly while in school. This is a one-time expenditure. In the future, teachers must be trained in the Science of Reading in order to obtain a license.

After consulting with the CESAs, the Office of Literacy will deploy up to 64 reading coaches around the state to help teachers in implementing the Science of Reading. Half of them will go to schools with the lowest reading scores, while the other half will go to schools that apply. Districts will pay for half of that expense.

The bill creates a Council on Early Literacy that will review available curricula and arrive at a list of recommended curricula. The state pays for half of the cost of the curriculum for any district that chooses to purchase a new curriculum from this list. This will be a sum-certain appropriation, so grants will be awarded until the money is exhausted.

After listening to concerns, we have removed the mandate that in the future, districts must purchase curricula from the list. They will be prohibited, however, from purchasing a curriculum which uses the three-cueing system.

Spotting reading problems sooner dramatically increases the chance that a child will succeed in school and life. This bill will screen schoolchildren on their reading abilities earlier and more often, notify parents of concerns, and create a clear plan to get kids back on track to succeed.

The provision that required schools to retain children in third grade that are not reading at grade level has been modified. Districts will now be required to retain children in reading only, beginning in the 2027 school year, if they are performing satisfactorily in other subject areas. DPI will provide guidance for districts to arrive at their own policy.

There will also be a financial component to this. The Legislature and Governor Evers are committed to investing \$50 million in the upcoming budget. Governor Evers' had asked for \$20 million for literacy in his budget proposal.

Taxpayers will also be protected because DPI must return to the Joint Committee on Finance on an annual basis to report progress and the entire program will sunset in five years. This gives elected officials an opportunity to tweak the program if needed.

We are not doing this alone. The Right to Read Act was developed after months of discussion with the Department of Public Instruction. I believe we have arrived at a true bipartisan solution to our reading crisis.

Wisconsin students will succeed again by returning to the way most of us learned to read, catching struggling readers sooner, and getting them the help they need. This is a proven pathway to improving test scores.

Thank you for your time and I hope you consider supporting Senate Bill 329. I am happy to answer any questions you might have.



June 15, 2023

Senate Committee on Education

Department of Public Instruction Testimony
2023 Senate Bill 329

I want to thank Chairman Jagler and members of the committee for the opportunity to give testimony on Senate Bill 329 (SB329). My name is Laura Adams, Policy Initiatives Advisor, testifying for the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) and with me today is Tom McCarthy, Executive Director to the State Superintendent.

DPI is offering testimony on SB 329 for information only. We are attaching some of our referenced research to the written testimony.

First, DPI wishes to acknowledge and thank the legislators who have been working on this bill in order to advance a significant investment in early reading in Wisconsin: Senators Jagler and Stroebel and Representatives Kitchens and Wittke. We all know how critical reading is to academic success and the ability to participate in a democratic society. And we all know that we can and must do better to support Wisconsin children's reading development.

DPI supports the evidence-based strategies to improve reading outcomes that are included in this bill, specifically providing coaches knowledgeable in evidence-based early reading instructional practices to those schools that need the greatest supports; providing evidence-based professional learning opportunities to educators; establishing a common early literacy screener for all districts and schools; requiring individualized reading plans for students who need additional reading supports; maintaining a recommended list of early reading curriculum and diagnostic assessments, and funding local purchase of standards-aligned, high-quality early reading instructional materials. These would provide a network of learning and supports to achieve improved early literacy outcomes for all students and advance our work across the state in early reading development, including systematic and explicit phonics instruction.

Research combined with what other states have done to find success shows us that to gain improvements in reading, students need to continue learning and experiencing grade level reading and other content area instruction while receiving extra targeted reading instruction to advance their learning around the specific areas they need to master in order to get to grade level on reading. That is done through local educators and parents

and caregivers working together to shape instruction for children through reading plans and delivering on them.

Based on this, DPI does not support requiring a third-grade retention policy based on a single assessment as outlined in this proposed legislation. Research conducted on third-grade retention policies show negative to mixed results at best with some students performing better for two years, some students performing better for a single year and then failing to achieve proficiency in subsequent years, and some students not seeing any academic improvement at all. At the same time, research consistently shows that students who have been retained in third grade are more likely to drop out of school before graduating high school, and more likely to experience negative social-emotional impacts.

The amendment recently added to this bill allows students to pass from third grade to fourth grade for all subjects except reading. This is simply modified retention and doesn't make sense for an elementary school. This would result in long-term issues for students, families, and school districts. What happens to those students in districts where there is a separate building for middle school? Will districts be required to bus students back to the elementary school for reading since they will be a year behind? Being retained in reading for third grade means those students will not receive fourth grade level instruction in reading. Without that how will they progress to fifth grade reading instruction? How will they ever get "caught up"? By always receiving instruction that is one year behind, how will students ever get up to grade-level in reading?

And let's not forget that elementary schools don't operate the way that high schools do with subjects always being taught at the exact same time every day. Instead, elementary educators, with principals, create their own schedules based on the needs of students in their classrooms, based on how they responded to instruction the previous day and the schedules for classes often called "specials" - physical education, music, art, and world language. These are classes that don't happen every day which impacts the schedule so that one day reading instruction is provided at 10:00 a.m. but the next day reading instruction is provided at 1:30 p.m. And perhaps most significantly, imagine the social emotional impacts on students who have to stand up at reading time and walk back down to the third grade classrooms.

Here is what happened in Tennessee with a mandated third-grade retention policy and an extremely short implementation period. Tennessee's third-grade retention policy, based on a reading assessment score, was passed in 2021 and went into effect this past school year. In one district alone, Washington County in the rural east, 179 of around 540 third-grade students needed to be held back - that's about one-third of the third-graders in that district. Without sufficient time to implement new curriculum, engage with and apply new professional learning, and hire, train, and place literacy coaches, Wisconsin schools would face a similar situation.

Requiring students to repeat third-grade, or even third-grade reading, based on a single assessment also has a significant impact on the education system. It would result in a need for additional staff to provide instruction to the students who are repeating third grade at a time when increasing numbers of educators are leaving schools because they do not have the supports they need or a salary that has kept pace with inflation or a variety of other reasons, and fewer are entering the profession as educators.

The third grade retention policy, as written in this proposed legislation, takes statutory authority away from local school districts and does not allow for any parent or caregiver voice. There is no voice or role for parents or families in making this decision about retaining their third grade child. Requiring a student to repeat third grade based on the results of a single test is a major decision that families should be able to make with their local educators, as is the case today in Wisconsin schools. Parents and caregivers are decision-makers in so many major aspects of their children's schooling, for instance, whether or not to go to 4K or 5K, whether to homeschool, or which schools to attend, whether to pursue an evaluation of educational needs for identification of disabilities, or gifted and talented programming, whether to access learning interventions, what electives in middle school to pursue, summer school, after-school programming, sports, extracurriculars and clubs, high school course requests, youth apprenticeships, advanced coursework and dual enrollment, and so much more. Legislatures before you have supported that major role. Why through this state law impose mandatory retention without a parental or caregiver role and voice in that decision? A one size-fits all legal mandate, which this law imposes, is wrong.

We know that specific students are more likely to be retained: Non-white students, students experiencing poverty, and students with identified disabilities. In Wisconsin, students in these subgroups are already marginalized. We know they need and deserve the most support. Instead of punishing those students, let's focus on investing in resources targeted to support them, such as other parts of this legislation we support, professional learning for their educators, increased funding for special education and English learner programs, and general aids to all schools to increase local reading intervention services.

While DPI supports the creation of individualized reading plans for students, there is nothing articulated in this bill that allows students to exit from these plans, the additional assessments, and the additional interventions that they would be required to receive. There needs to be both a plan to support the reading development of each student and a plan that allows them to be released from the intensive interventions they receive when necessary. And parent and caregiver voice need to be included. In both the development and ability to end a child's personal reading plan. Having no criteria that allows for a child to exit a personal reading plan is another sign that this bill is being rushed through and that more conversation is needed.

DPI is also concerned about the accountability aspects of this bill and its applications to private schools receiving government-funded vouchers. Under this bill, these private schools have access to the supports and financial benefits included in this legislation without holding them to the same accountability measures, namely including them in the proposed third grade retention requirement and new public reporting requirements on school report cards. By providing supports and financial incentives to some schools without the same accountability measures, we are deepening inequities in our Wisconsin education system. DPI opposes that.

The timelines in the bill are a serious issue. At the informational joint hearing of the Senate and Assembly Education Committees on reading that occurred in March, we heard Dr. Kimyona Burke state that it took several years to hire and place literacy coaches in Mississippi schools. Given our current shortage of reading and elementary teachers across the state, we predict the same will be true in Wisconsin. The timelines as proposed in this bill don't make sense for education preparation programs which will impact the ability for them to grant education degrees and for DPI to grant licenses that meet the new requirements. We need to give our students, parents and educators sufficient time to make sure the required changes and supports are in place. Moreover, we look forward to separate action in the state budget to fund teacher recruitment and retention.

Current report cards include the percentage of students at each performance level for English Language Arts (ELA) at each grade. These ELA results measure students on a combination of reading, writing, listening, and grammar use. Spring 2024 will be the first time that Wisconsin reports assessment results for reading. This is a new data point for schools and this bill is rushing it onto report cards. Additionally, there are very serious concerns about implementation timing for other data systems and reporting aspects of this bill. DPI will need time and staff to make changes to data collection platforms and DPI will need time to ensure that data is valid and reliable. School district staff will need time to be trained on what data to upload and how.

DPI supports the creation of a recommended list of early reading curriculum, as well as, providing funding to cover the local costs for all schools to invest in new curriculum. But we do not support prohibiting specific kinds of instruction again takes statutory authority away from local school boards and eliminates the possibility of parent voice in a child's instruction. Further, evidence shows that simply buying new curriculum is not enough to impact achievement. Educators require on-going professional learning to implement new curriculum so that the new curriculum doesn't just sit on a shelf. The amount offered in this bill will not cover local expenses for these new purchases, currently only covering 50% of the cost while immediately opening the door to proration at a lower amount. We estimate right now that this will be prorated to far less than covering 50% of the costs. And, it has no funding for professional development for classroom teachers on how to effectively use those new materials. All of this points to a real need for additional funding.

While \$50 million is a significant and necessary investment in early reading in Wisconsin, we do not believe this sum is sufficient to pay for the additional assessments at additional grade-levels, purchasing new curriculum in hundreds of schools, professional learning for every early elementary teacher and administrator, and the salary and training for statewide literacy coaches. That means that school districts will be required to make significant investments from local funds to meet the requirements in this bill, which translates to districts having fewer funds for math, science, social studies, the arts, health and physical wellness, world languages, career and technical education- or other important aspects of learning.

DPI is here today asking for your action in amending the proposed legislation to better support our students, schools and our educators in the area of early literacy. Some of these issues we detail out further in our full written testimony.

Specifically, we call on you to:

- Eliminate the third-grade retention requirement. We recommend amending the bill to direct DPI to develop a model policy for third-grade retention and giving DPI authority over the components of that policy while retaining districts' existing statutory authority and allowing them to determine whether they will adopt this or any third-grade retention policy.
- Amend the bill to retain districts' existing statutory authority that allows them to make their own instructional decisions.
- Amend the bill so that all schools - public, independent charter, and private in parental choice programs - be subject to the same requirements and accountability measures.
- And extend the timelines in this bill to account for the time needed to procure assessments that meet the requirements in the bill; the time needed to secure, train, and place literacy coaches; the time educator preparation programs need to implement changes to their programs; the time needed to develop a recommended list of early literacy curriculum, and time for districts to procure and begin implementing that curriculum.

Thank you for your time and we will now take any questions.

If you have further questions or would like additional information, please contact Kevyn Radcliffe, Legislative Liaison, at kevyn.radcliffe@dpi.wi.gov or (608) 264-6716.

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Third Grade Retention - What does the research say about retaining students in third grade for not being able to read at grade level?

Northwest | October 01, 2019

Third Grade Retention

References

Barrett-Tatum, J., Ashworth, K., & Scales, D. (2019). Gateway literacy retention policies: Perspectives and implications from the field. *International Journal of Education Policy and Leadership*, 15(10), 1&e"17. Retrieved from <http://journals.sfu.ca/>

From the Abstract:

"South Carolina's Read to Succeed Law (RTS) is different than the other 15 states' literacy-based third grade retention laws. It mandates literacy intervention training for in-service and pre-service teachers. Research indicates academic gains from retention are short-lived, diminishing over time and increasing drop-out rates. Through a statewide survey, this study identifies educators' perceptions and knowledge of retention and the RTS policy and examines the relationship between knowledge and perceptions. Educators were not familiar with retention research or RTS specifics but favored retention. Implications include the need for more teacher training regarding new state policies and the efficacy of their foundations. This study provides evidence that policymakers should consider the means of implementation and shoulder accountability for a structured and equitable support system."

Froman, T., Brown, S., & Luzon-Canasi, A. (2008). *Third-grade retention: A four-year follow-up*. Miami, FL: Research Services, Miami-Dade County Public Schools. <https://eric.ed.gov>

From the Abstract:

"This study duplicated the procedures used by Greene and Winters (2006) on data from the Miami-Dade school system with the advantage of an additional two years' worth of information. The results indicated that the effects of the retention policy are far from clear and arguably negative. There is considerable evidence to suggest that the apparent gains of the retained students may have been short-lived if not completely illusory. The lack of precise measurement and a precisely appropriate comparison group prevent an indisputable interpretation. The superficially obvious benefit of retention to some students and the equally obvious detriment of retention to others will likely keep large-scale test-based promotion policies a matter of heated debate subject to political fashion for the foreseeable future."

Greene, J. P., & Winters, M. A. (2004). *An evaluation of Florida's program to end social promotion (Education Working Paper No. 7)*. New York, NY: Center for Civic Innovation at the Manhattan Institute for Policy Research. <https://eric.ed.gov>

From the Abstract:

"Nine states and three of the nation's biggest cities have adopted mandates intended to end 'social promotion' promoting students to the next grade level regardless of their academic proficiency. These policies require students in certain grades to reach a minimum benchmark on a standardized test in order to move on to the next grade. Florida, Texas, and seven other states, as well as the cities of New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia, have adopted mandatory promotion tests; these school systems encompass 30% of all U.S. public-school students. Proponents of such policies claim that students must possess basic skills in order to succeed in higher grades, while opponents argue that holding students back discourages them and only pushes them further behind. This study uses individual-level data provided by the Florida Department of Education to evaluate the initial effects of Florida's policy requiring students to reach a minimum threshold on the reading portion of the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) to be promoted to the 4th grade. It examines the gains made in one year on math and reading tests by all Florida 3rd graders in the first cohort subject to the retention policy who scored below the necessary threshold, comparing them to all Florida 3rd graders in the previous year with the same low test scores, for whom the policy was not yet in force. Because some students subject to the policy obtained special exemptions and were promoted, the study also uses an instrumental regression analysis to separately measure the effects of actually being retained. The study measures gains made by students on both the high-stakes FCAT and the Stanford-9, a nationally respected standardized test that is also administered to all Florida students, but with no stakes tied to the results."

Greene, J. P., & Winters, M. A. (2007). Revisiting grade retention: An evaluation of Florida's test-based promotion policy. *Education Finance and Policy*, 2(4), 319&e"340. Retrieved from <https://www.mitpressjournals.org>

From the Abstract:

"In 2002, Florida adopted a test-based promotion policy in the third grade in an attempt to end social promotion. Similar policies are currently operating in Texas, New York City, and Chicago and affect at least 17 percent of public-school students nationwide. Using individual level data on the universe of public-school students in Florida, we analyze the impact of grade retention on student proficiency in reading one and two years after the retention decision. We use an instrumental variable (IV) approach made available by the relatively objective nature of Florida's policy. Our findings suggest that retained students slightly outperformed socially promoted students in reading in the first year after retention, and these gains increased substantially in the second year. Results were robust across two distinct IV comparisons: an across-year approach comparing students who were essentially separated by the year in which they happened to have been born, and a regression discontinuity design."

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 (NBER Working Paper 21509). Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research. Retrieved from: <https://www.nber.org>

From the Abstract:

"Many American states require that students lacking basic reading proficiency after third grade be retained and remediated. We exploit a discontinuity in retention probabilities under Florida's test-based promotion policy to study its effects on student outcomes through high school. We find large positive effects on achievement that fade out entirely when retained students are compared to their same-age peers, but remain substantial through grade 10 when compared to students in the same grade. Being retained in third grade due to missing the promotion standard increases students' grade point averages and leads them to take fewer remedial courses in high school but has no effect on their probability of graduating."

Winters, M. A. (2012). *The benefits of Florida's test-based promotion system (Civic Report No. 68)*. New York, NY: Center for State and Local Leadership at the Manhattan Institute. <https://eric.ed.gov>

From the Abstract:

"State and municipal policymakers are increasingly addressing the practice of social promotion in schools—moving children along to the next grade whether or not they have mastered the curriculum—by mandating test-based grade promotion. This paper draws conclusions about the effects of a policy limiting social promotion. To do so, it employs a methodology known as regression discontinuity, which is capable of producing causal estimates of policy effects to study the impact of Florida's test-based promotion policy on later student achievement. Under this program, students must take an exam to automatically pass from third to fourth grade (some students scoring below the automatic promotion threshold may still advance at teacher discretion). Students who are retained in third grade also receive a rigorous remediation regime aimed at improving their long-term performance. By studying the long-term performance of children who just barely passed the test, as well as those who were just barely left behind, it was possible to compare two essentially identical populations: one set of students who moved forward despite only borderline understanding of the material; and another set who stayed behind a year and received tutoring, mentoring, and other remedial interventions. On average, the students who were remediated did better academically, in both the short and long term, than those who were promoted. Tellingly, the benefits of the remediation were still apparent and substantial through the seventh grade (which is as far as the data can be tracked at this point). These results contrast with previous work cited by supporters of social promotion finding that grade retention has strong negative consequences for the student's later academic outcomes. This paper takes the view that there is considerable reason to question the validity of much of that research because most prior studies on grade retention use methods that are flawed or inadequate. Notably, these studies do not take into account 'unobserved differences' between students studied. Unobserved differences are characteristics, such as maturity level or home environment, that aren't accounted for in the researchers' datasets, but which may have an enormous bearing on student performance. The results of this study demonstrate that a test-based promotion policy structured similar to Florida's policy should be expected to improve student performance relative to a policy of social promotion. Florida's system is an example for policy makers across the country to emulate."

Other Resources

Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2010). Early warning! Why reading by the end of third grade matters. KIDS COUNT special report. Baltimore, MD: Author. <https://eric.ed.gov>

From the Abstract:

"Over the past decade, Americans have become increasingly concerned about the high numbers—and costs—of high school dropouts. The time is now to build a similar consensus around this less-recognized but equally urgent fact: The pool from which employers, colleges, and the military draw is too small, and still shrinking, because millions of American children get to fourth grade without learning to read proficiently. And that puts them on the dropout track. This special report highlights the causes and consequences of low reading proficiency and proposes some essential steps toward closing the gap between those who can and cannot read proficiently, raising the bar for what people expect all American children to know and be able to do, and improving the overall achievement of children from low-income families."

Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2013). Early warning confirmed: A research update on third-grade reading. Baltimore, MD: Author. Retrieved from <http://www.aecf.org>

From the Abstract:

"This report underscores the urgency of ensuring that children develop proficient reading skills by the end of third grade, especially those living in poverty or in impoverished communities. A follow up to 2010's 'Early Warning: Why Reading by the End of Third Grade Matters,' this report supports the link between reading deficiencies and broader social consequences, including how living in poor households and high-poverty neighborhoods contribute to racial disparities in literacy skills in America and how low achievement in reading impacts an individual's future earning potential."

Weyer, M. (2018). A look at third-grade reading retention policies. National Conference of State Legislatures. Retrieved from <http://www.ncsl.org>

From the Abstract:

"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."

Workman, E. (2014). Third grade reading policies. Technical report. Denver, CO: Education Commission of the States. <https://eric.ed.gov>

From the Abstract:

"The third-grade year is considered a pivotal point in a child's educational career, as a critical shift in learning takes place—one where basic reading skills are established and can begin to be utilized for more complex learning. State policymakers are well aware of the importance of ensuring that all students are reading at grade level by the end of third grade. The Education Commission of the States (ECS) has seen a flurry of policies passed recently that are geared toward improving third grade reading through identification of reading deficiencies with state or local assessments, provision of interventions for struggling readers in grade K-3 and retention of outgoing third graders not meeting grade-level expectations. This report provides statutory provisions on the identification of, intervention for and retention of struggling readers in the preK-3 grades."

Methods

Keywords and Search Strings: The following keywords, subject headings, and search strings were used to search reference databases and other sources: 3rd grade retention, 3rd grade repetition grade retention AND third grade AND reading, grade repetition AND reading AND third grade

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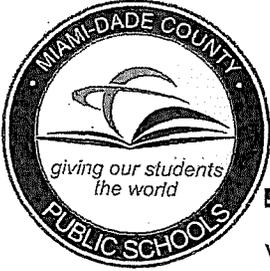
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Institute of Education Sciences
550 12th Street, SW
Washington, DC 20202
(202) 245-6940



INFORMATION CAPSULE

Research Services

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Christie Blazer, Supervisor

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL GRADE RETENTION

At a Glance

This Information Capsule reviews the research conducted on elementary level grade retention. Research findings on the effect of retention on elementary students' outcomes are inconsistent. One widely accepted conclusion is that when retention occurs, it should be accompanied by additional interventions designed to increase students' academic achievement and foster their social-emotional development. Other key research findings include:

- Retained students are more likely to be from minority backgrounds and low-income households.
- Retention has a temporary positive impact on student achievement.
- No definitive conclusions have been reached on how retention affects students' academic achievement in the long-term. Most older studies found that retention had a negative impact on student's long-term achievement, but several recent studies that used more sophisticated methodologies concluded that retention had no effect, and may actually have had a positive effect, on students' future achievement.
- Studies conducted on the impact of elementary school retention on students' high school dropout rates have reported mixed findings.
- Research on the impact of retention on students' social and emotional adjustment has produced conflicting results.
- Studies suggest that elementary students with the lowest levels of academic achievement and the poorest learning-related (self-regulatory) skills may have the most to gain by repeating a grade, both academically and socially.
- Some researchers have concluded that retention is more effective at the earliest grade levels, but others maintain that retention is harmful at all grade levels.
- When retention is being considered for struggling elementary school students, researchers recommend that school staff implement several strategies, such as basing retention decisions on multiple criteria, using new instructional strategies and materials during the retention year, and providing students with supplemental academic and social-emotional interventions.

The goal of retaining students is to provide them with an extra year of instruction so they are better prepared before entering the next grade level. Grade retention is considered a last resort option, after other efforts have failed to adequately prepare a student to advance to the next grade level. Retention of a student usually occurs for one of the following reasons: poor performance on standardized achievement tests; emotional immaturity that results in disruptive behavior; developmental immaturity that results in learning difficulties; or poor attendance

patterns that preclude the acquisition of essential knowledge and skills (Intercultural Development Research Association, 2018; Bayer, 2017; Peixoto et al., 2016; Child Trends, 2015; Duggan, 2014; Hipkins, 2014; Özek, 2014; Warren et al., 2014; Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012; Cannon & Lipscomb, 2011; Wu et al., 2010).

Proponents of grade retention believe that it provides struggling students with extra time to acquire the necessary academic, social, and behavioral skills before starting the next grade level. They argue that it is unreasonable to expect every student to develop at the same pace and that some students need an extra year to catch up with their peers (Mariano et al., 2018; Meador, 2018; Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012; Cannon & Lipscomb, 2011; Hanover Research, 2011a).

Critics, on the other hand, contend that retention leads to lower levels of student self-esteem, more negative attitudes toward school, and difficulties adjusting to new peer groups. They note that some children report feeling embarrassed about being separated from their same-age peers and are often stigmatized by teachers and parents as failing (Intercultural Development Research Association, 2018; Mariano et al. 2018; Lynch, 2017; Özek, 2014; Rose & Schimke, 2012; West, 2012; Cannon & Lipscomb, 2011).

In 2015, approximately 2.2% of U.S. students in kindergarten through grade 12 were retained in the same grade in which they had been enrolled in the prior school year (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). In the past, the retention rate was highest in first grade. However, an increasing number of states have adopted laws that require students to repeat the third grade if they do not score at or above the proficient level on the reading portion of state-mandated achievement tests, so the percentage of retained third graders has increased steadily (Intercultural Development Research Association, 2018; National Conference of State Legislatures, 2018; Álvarez, 2017; Warren et al., 2014; Krier, n.d.). Child Trends' (2015) analysis of data from the 2012 National Household Education Survey found that the percentage of students retained in first grade decreased from 4.5% in 1993 to 2.6% in 2012, while the percentage of students retained in third grade increased from 3.4% to 5.9% over the same time period.

Characteristics of Students Most Likely to be Retained

Researchers have found that retained students are more likely to be from minority backgrounds and low-income households (Kamenetz, 2017; Schwerdt et al., 2017; Hanover Research, 2016; Knoff, 2016; Porter, 2016; Tolen & Quinlen, 2016; Squires, 2015; Hipkins, 2014; Rose & Schimke, 2012; Cannon & Lipscomb, 2011). The National Center for Education Statistics (2017) reported that in 2015, 1.8% of White students were retained in kindergarten through grade 8, compared to 3.2% of Black students and 2.8% of Hispanic students. According to Child Trends' (2015) analysis of data from the 2012 National Household Education Survey, 3.3% of children in grades 1-3 who had a household income above the poverty line were retained, compared to 9.7% of children whose household income was at or below the poverty line.

Some researchers believe that disadvantaged students are retained more often because they are less likely to have access to schools with adequate resources and qualified teachers (Hanover Research, 2016; Squires, 2015; Hipkins, 2014). Rose and Schimke (2012) stated that some experts "view grade retention as punishing disadvantaged students who . . . may not have received the same quality of instruction as their more advantaged peers."

In addition to being from a racial/ethnic minority and a low-income household, other student

factors associated with higher rates of retention include:

- Male;
- Younger than same-grade peers;
- Immigrant/English language learner;
- Parents with low educational attainment;
- Parents not involved with child's school;
- Single-parent household;
- Frequent school changes;
- Chronic school absences;
- Developmental delays or attention problems;
- Behavior problems or aggression;
- Difficulty with peer relationships;
- Reading problems; and
- High-conflict relationships with teachers (Intercultural Development Research Association, 2018; Peixoto et al., 2016; Duggan, 2014; Hipkins, 2014; Warren et al., 2014; Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012; Hanover Research, 2011b; National Association of School Psychologists, 2011; Krier, n.d.).

According to Cannon and Lipscomb (2011), students with several risk factors may face up to a one-in-nine chance of being retained.

Research on the Impact of Elementary School Retention on Students' Academic Achievement

Many researchers agree that retention in the elementary grades has a temporary positive impact on student achievement. A large number of studies have reported that elementary students post gains in academic achievement immediately after completing a retention year, but that performance gains dissipate within approximately two to three years subsequent to retention (Hanover Research, 2016; Jacob, 2016; Knoff, 2016; Tolen & Quinlin, 2016; Depew & Eren, 2015; Squires, 2015; Duggan, 2014; Hipkins, 2014; Stipek & Lombardo, 2014; Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012; West, 2012; Bright, 2011; National Association of School Psychologists, 2011; Krier, n.d.).

However, there is disagreement on the effect of retention on students' long-term academic achievement (Peixoto et al., 2016; Warren et al., 2014; Rose & Schimke, 2012; Wu et al., 2010). Earlier studies consistently found that over a longer period of time, retained elementary students demonstrated lower levels of academic performance than promoted low-achieving elementary students (Intercultural Development Research Association, 2018; Hanover Research, 2016; Duggan, 2014; Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012; Marsico Institute for Early Learning and Literacy, 2012; Bright, 2011; Jacob & Lefgren, 2009; Krier, n.d.). But researchers have begun to question these findings because they believe the earlier studies failed to adequately control for pre-existing differences between students who were retained and those who were promoted (Hughes et al., 2018; Cham et al., 2015; Winters, 2012).

Recent studies have used more sophisticated statistical techniques, such as regression discontinuity, that employ rigorous controls for pre-existing differences between promoted and retained students. These more methodologically robust studies have reported that retention has no effect, and sometimes even a positive effect, on elementary students' future achievement (Winters, 2018; Schwerdt et al., 2017; Im et al., 2013; Rose & Schimke, 2012; West, 2012;

Cannon & Lipscomb, 2011; National Association of School Psychologists, 2011; Allen et al., 2009).

Research on the Impact of Elementary School Retention on Students' High School Dropout Rates

Studies on the impact of elementary school retention on students' high school dropout rates have reported mixed findings. Some studies have found that students retained in the elementary grades have higher dropout rates in high school than those who were not retained. For example, Hughes and colleagues (2018) found that Texas students who were held back in grades 1-5 were almost three times more likely than their peers to drop out of high school. Andrew (cited in Barshay, 2014) concluded that retaining students in early elementary school reduced their odds of completing high school by approximately 60%, compared to their matched peers who stayed on grade level.

In contrast, other studies have found that elementary retention does not affect the likelihood that students will drop out of school (although researchers have linked retention at the middle school level to higher dropout rates in high school). Jacob and Lefgren (2009) reported that retention among sixth grade students had no significant effect on high school dropout rates, although retaining eighth grade students increased the probability that they would drop out of high school. Similarly, Depew and Eren (2015) found that retention in the fourth grade had no impact on students' likelihood of dropping out of high school, but retention in the eighth grade had a strong effect on increasing the probability that students would drop out of high school.

Research on the Impact of Elementary School Retention on Students' Social-Emotional Adjustment

Research on the impact of elementary school retention on students' social and emotional adjustment has produced conflicting results. Most studies have found that retention in the elementary grades is associated with lower academic self-concept, lower levels of self-esteem, lower-quality peer relationships, and more negative attitudes towards school (Meador, 2018; Lynch, 2017; Schwerdt et al., 2017; Knoff, 2016; Peixoto et al., 2016; Child Trends, 2015; Duggan, 2014; Hipkins, 2014; Stipek & Lombardo, 2014; Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012; Hanover Research, 2011b; Krier, n.d.). Andrew (cited in Intercultural Development Research Association, 2018) concluded that elementary students who are retained suffer lower self-esteem and view retention as a punishment and a stigma, not a positive event designed to help them improve their academic performance.

However, a few studies have reported less negative results. Some studies have concluded that retention does not have a lasting negative impact on elementary students' social and emotional outcomes, while others have found that retention may even have a positive impact on self-concept, sense of school belonging, academic self-efficacy, motivation, and classroom engagement. For example:

- Cham and colleagues' (2015) study of Texas students found no evidence that retention in grades 1-5 reduced their general motivation for educational attainment in grade 9. In fact, retained students were somewhat more likely to believe that their teachers expected them to succeed academically and that their peers valued achievement and had high educational expectations.

- Im and associates (2013) reported that when Texas students who had been retained in grades 1-5 reached middle school, they exhibited the same levels of teacher-rated behavioral engagement and self-reported school belonging as their continuously promoted peers.
- Özek (2014) tracked seven cohorts of Florida students who were retained in the third grade. Results indicated that students were significantly more likely to have disciplinary problems and receive a suspension in the two years immediately following retention, but that these effects dissipated entirely after two years.
- Wu and colleagues (2010) investigated the behavioral and social effects of first grade retention on fourth grade Texas students. The researchers reported that retained students benefited from retention in both the short-term (during the retention year) and longer-term (through grade 4) with respect to decreased teacher-rated hyperactivity, higher teacher ratings of behavioral engagement, fewer peer reports of sadness and withdrawal, and improved perceptions of academic self-efficacy. Other benefits were more temporary: retained students had an increase in mean peer-rated liking and self-rated school belonging relative to promoted students during the retention year, but this advantage decreased substantially by grade 4. The researchers concluded, "Retention may bestow social advantages in the short term but have detrimental effects on social acceptance in the longer term, as students become more sensitive to being over-age for grade."
- Ellsworth and Lagacé-Séguin (2009) conducted a study to determine if early grade retention was associated with a diminished sense of self-esteem or academic self-efficacy in post-secondary Canadian students. The researchers compared university students who had been retained between kindergarten and grade 9 with students who had never been retained. Students were matched on age, gender, grade 12 grade point average, and family variables. Results of the study indicated that grade retention did not have a long-term negative impact on university students' self-reported self-esteem or academic self-efficacy – the retained group's responses on measures of self-esteem and self-efficacy did not differ significantly from those of students who had not been retained.

Research on Which Students Are Most Likely to Benefit from Grade Retention

Although most researchers agree that grade retention is not appropriate for certain students, few studies have been conducted to determine which students benefit most from the practice (Intercultural Development Research Association, 2018; Meador, 2018; Tolen & Quinlin, 2016; Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012).

A study conducted by Chen and colleagues (2014) at three Texas school districts concluded that retention in the first grade was most beneficial both academically and socially to students who demonstrated the lowest levels of academic achievement and the poorest learning-related skills (a cluster of self-regulatory skills). The researchers found that retained students with the poorest academic and learning-related skills posted greater gains on reading and math tests over the next five years than students who had also been retained but whose academic and learning-related skill deficits were less severe. Specifically, retained students who progressed the most after retention were those who had been rated as having poorer effortful control, less

task persistence in the face of challenges, less ability to focus their attention, and less ability to delay gratification.

Research on the Grade Level at Which Retention is Most Effective

Researchers disagree about the grade level at which retention is most effective. Many believe that retention can produce positive student outcomes at the earliest grade levels, but some contend that it is harmful at all grade levels.

Those who believe retention is best done at the earliest grade levels maintain that it is most effective when students' academic abilities are still developing, when their emotional and social distress can be minimized, and before they settle into negative academic routines. They argue that students are much more likely to experience the negative academic and social-emotional effects associated with retention once they reach fourth grade (Barnum, 2018; Meador, 2018; Lynch, 2017; Schwerdt et al., 2017; Squires, 2015; Hipkins, 2014; Hanover Research, 2013).

Researchers who advocate for retention only in the early elementary grades point to studies conducted on the impact of retention on high school dropout rates. As mentioned earlier in this paper, several studies have found that retention in the elementary grades has little if any effect on high school dropout, but retention in the middle school grades is linked to a greater likelihood of dropping out in high school (Depew & Eren, 2015; Jacob & Lefgren, 2009).

Other researchers argue that retention is harmful at all grade levels. They have found that even as early as first grade, retention has negative effects on achievement and on students' confidence and social status that last throughout elementary, middle, and high school (Andrew, cited in Barshay, 2014; Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012; Marsico Institute for Early Learning and Literacy, 2012).

Limitations of the Research Conducted on Grade Retention

There are several limitations associated with the research conducted on the effects of grade retention. One issue is that the factors that increase a student's risk of being retained also increase his/her risk of subsequent negative outcomes. In other words, some studies have conflated the negative effects of retention with the negative effects of the underlying issue that led the school to retain the student in the first place (Hughes et al., 2018; Mariano et al., 2018; Child Trends, 2015; West, 2012). For example, Barshay (2014) stated: "Consider a child who has trouble paying attention, can't read by the end of fourth grade and is held back . . . Did the stigma of repeating fourth grade cause the child to . . . perform worse at school? Or was it his ongoing struggle with attention deficit disorder?"

Another difficulty associated with studies analyzing the effects of grade retention is that additional interventions are often introduced along with retention, such as reading camp, peer tutoring, extended learning time, and student support teams. This makes it impossible for researchers to separate the effect of retention on student outcomes from that of other interventions that are implemented simultaneously (Winters, 2012).

Early studies failed to adequately control for pre-existing differences between students who were retained and those who were promoted. In general, retained students tend to differ from promoted students on a number of variables that predict student outcomes, such as previous levels of academic achievement, conduct problems, poor relationships with teachers, less parental involvement in school, and poverty. Failure to remove the effect of these pre-existing

differences between students who were subsequently retained or promoted led to overly large, biased estimates of retention effects. Recent studies have addressed this issue by using more sophisticated statistical techniques, such as regression discontinuity (Hughes et al., 2018; Cham et al., 2015; National Association of School Psychologists, 2011; Wu et al., 2010; Allen et al., 2009).

Strategies that Increase the Effectiveness of Retention

When retention is being considered for struggling elementary school students, researchers recommend that school staff implement several strategies, including:

- Retention decisions should be based on multiple criteria rather than only a single test score or individual teacher's recommendation. Factors should include the amount of progress a student makes during the school year; input from teachers, parents, counselors, and other specialized staff; and results from multiple assessments and observations (Intercultural Development Research Association, 2018; Meador, 2018; Álvarez, 2017; Squires, 2015; Duggan, 2014; Robelen, 2012; Rose & Schimke, 2012; Range, 2011).
- Instruction during the retention year should not be a repeat of the prior year's experience. Experts suggest that the retention year should incorporate new instructional strategies and materials instead of exposing students to the same conditions that did not work for them the first time (Intercultural Development Research Association, 2018; Porter, 2016; Squires, 2015; Hipkins, 2014; Stipek & Lombardo, 2014; West, 2012; Hanover Research, 2011a; National Association of School Psychologists, 2011; Allen et al., 2009).
- Performance data should be used to continuously monitor students' progress and evaluate the effectiveness of instructional strategies during the retention year (Knoff, 2016; Hanover Research, 2011b; National Association of School Psychologists, 2011).
- Retention should be accompanied by supplemental interventions designed to increase students' academic achievement and foster their social-emotional development (Hipkins, 2014; Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012; Marsico Institute for Early Learning and Literacy, 2012; Robelen, 2012; West, 2012; Krier, n.d.). Examples of supplemental interventions include:
 - Personalized learning that targets instruction to students' individual needs, enhances the range of available learning options, and provides students with extra attention, including special assistance and accommodations as needed (Hanover Research, 2016; Rose & Schimke, 2012; Krier, n.d.).
 - Increased instructional time to promote the development of academic skills, including after-school programs, before-school programs, summer school programs, and Saturday classes (Barnum, 2018; Intercultural Development Research Association, 2018; Hanover Research, 2016; Squires, 2015; Hipkins, 2014; Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012; Rose & Schimke, 2012; West, 2012; Cannon & Lipscomb, 2011). Block scheduling (even at the elementary level) can also provide students with large periods of uninterrupted instructional time (Intercultural Development Research Association, 2018; Meador, 2018).

- Tutoring programs with peer, cross-age, or adult tutors to promote academic and social skills (Intercultural Development Research Association, 2018; Porter, 2016; Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012; Cannon & Lipscomb, 2011; Hanover Research, 2011b).
- Student support teams that include school psychologists, social workers, and other school staff to monitor students' progress, provide emotional support to retained students, and address any unique academic needs students may have (Intercultural Development Research Association, 2018; Meador, 2018; Hipkins, 2014; Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012).

Summary

This Information Capsule reviewed the research conducted on elementary level grade retention. Studies have found that retained students are more likely to be from minority backgrounds and low-income households. Some researchers believe that disadvantaged students are retained more often because they are less likely to have access to schools with adequate resources and qualified teachers.

Research findings on the impact of retention on elementary students' outcomes are inconsistent. One widely accepted conclusion is that when retention does occur, it should be accompanied by additional interventions designed to increase students' academic achievement and foster their social-emotional development. Other key research findings include:

- Retention has a temporary positive impact on elementary students' academic achievement. A large number of studies have reported that elementary students post performance gains immediately after completing a retention year, but the gains dissipate within approximately two to three years.
- No definitive conclusions have been reached on how retention affects elementary students' academic achievement in the long-term. Early, less methodologically sound studies reported that retained students demonstrated lower levels of academic performance than low-achieving promoted students. However, more recent studies using increasingly sophisticated statistical techniques have been more likely to report that retention has no effect, and sometimes even a positive effect, on students' future achievement.
- Studies conducted on the impact of elementary school retention on students' dropout rates have reported mixed findings. Some studies have found that students retained in the elementary grades have higher dropout rates than low-achieving students who were not retained. Other studies have found that elementary retention has no effect on the likelihood that students will drop out of high school.
- Research on the impact of retention on elementary students' social and emotional adjustment has produced conflicting results. Most studies have found that retention is associated with lower academic self-concept, lower levels of self-esteem, lower-quality peer relationships, and more negative attitudes towards school. However, a few studies

have concluded that retention does not have a lasting negative impact on elementary students' social and emotional outcomes and may even have a positive impact on students' self-concept, sense of school belonging, academic self-efficacy, motivation, and classroom engagement.

- Studies suggest that elementary students with the lowest levels of academic achievement and the poorest learning-related (self-regulatory) skills may have the most to gain by repeating a grade, both academically and socially.
- Researchers disagree about the grade level at which retention is most effective. Many believe that retention can produce positive student outcomes at the earliest grade levels, but some contend that it is harmful at all grade levels.
- When retention is being considered for struggling elementary school students, researchers recommend that school staff implement several strategies, such as basing retention decisions on multiple criteria, using new instructional strategies and materials during the retention year, and providing students with supplemental interventions, such as intensive reading programs and peer tutoring.

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MEMO

TO: Senate Committee on Education

FROM: Chris Reader, Executive Vice President
Quinton Klabon, IRG Senior Research Director

DATE: June 15, 2023

RE: SB 329, "Right to Read" Literacy Legislation

Senator Jagler and committee members, thank you for the opportunity to testify on Senate Bill (SB) 329, the "Right to Read" legislation. Thank you also to Sen. Stroebel and Rep. Kitchens and your leadership in authoring this bill. We've been overdue for serious legislation that will help kids read, thrive in school, and live productive lives here in Wisconsin.

IRG Action is the advocacy and lobbying partner of the Institute for Reforming Government, a Delafield-based think tank that works to give all Wisconsinites an opportunity to prosper. Central to that is reading in schools, the key to unlock all other learning. Improving literacy outcomes for Wisconsin's kids is one of the most critical reforms policymakers will consider this session. Improving schools is a way to keep families and businesses in small towns, to turn our big cities into economic powerhouses, and to give every child control over their future.

—
This week, we submitted [testimony](#) for the Assembly version of this bill. We won't repeat it here. In short, we're blown away by what's happened in states like Mississippi. By addressing every part of the reading pipeline, Mississippi went from [the bottom to the top](#) in national rankings in every conceivable demographic. They now outperform Wisconsin in every student category, and they closed their COVID learning gap in 1 year while we were still 5 points behind. Last month, IRG Action released [Ranking the Options](#), which summarized what states like Mississippi and Florida did. The nine specific policies we ranked are all present in some form in this bill. You've done your homework. You've built the foundation on phonics. All children deserve what works, phonics, especially lower performers and dyslexic students. We'd retrain educators in the science of reading to implement the curriculum well. Universities would realign around phonics-based instruction to help teachers enter classrooms better prepared. To make sure that those principles stick, coaches with an eye for best classroom practices would break bad habits in struggling schools. Finally, screening for struggling or learning-disabled students,

building a comeback plan for them, and looping their parents in would create a path back to grade level for learners. There are a lot of commonalities between Right to Read and what happens in leading states.

But there are places where it differs from national models, and some school voices have spoken up about how that affects them. IRG Action wants a bill to pass that drives better literacy results, gets schools invested in the process, and respects educational freedom. From extended conversations with charter and choice school leaders and the public statements made by school districts, we believe that a high-quality literacy bill deserves two amendments. Neither will substantially affect the bill's efficacy, as evidenced by America's five leading states in reading: Florida, Mississippi, Massachusetts, South Carolina, and Louisiana.

First, let's discuss independent charter and choice schools. It's an unfortunate thing, but trust has been completely broken between many of them and the Department of Public Instruction. From authorization debates to, in my hometown, parents getting rejected from the choice program because their applications listed their home as "Wisconsin Rapids" while their verification paperwork from the city abbreviated it "Wisc. Rapids" to difficulty verifying students as part of the Special Needs Scholarship Program, the scars exist. So, they ask what they're getting in this exchange since a lot already use phonics. The choice school that I think is the best in the state was featured on the national website of Wit & Wisdom, a leading curriculum, because they had the foresight to do this stuff in 2016. Even with the existing amendment, they're being asked to give up a real measure of religious freedom, academic autonomy, accountability to their parent organizations, or just messing with what's working. So, we could remove independent charter schools and voucher schools from the bill entirely, both from DPI mandates and from access to any of the services and funding.

In other words, let's do what Florida did. Florida has a significant amount of choice students. When Florida invented a lot of these reforms years ago, they did not include choice schools in their reforms. What happened? Florida has enjoyed the best public school reading scores in the nation for years. Miami is, by far, the best big district in the country, with students years ahead of those in Milwaukee. But they also have some of the biggest and best private schools in the country. They are a charter paradise with every high-scoring, diverse option you could imagine. How? They had a common goal, but allowed slightly different paths to get there. The bill would still address 92% of kindergarten-to-third grade students, and you could even raise the reimbursement rate for participating schools.

Now, while districts have craved direction on reading for awhile and have spoken positively of the investment and resources, some of the accountability has made them nervous. We're

talking specifically of 3rd grade retention: assuming that they're not special needs or learning English as a second language, students would repeat 3rd grade with additional, individual help if they score Below Basic on the Forward Exam. To be clear, 3rd grade retention seems to have been effective in states like Florida and Mississippi. It is a policy worth considering. However, it is not the only accountability in this bill. In fact, SB 329 includes significant accountability. No reading reform law can work without some of the pieces here. Proactive interventions are mandated. Parent involvement, the strongest accountability there is, is mandated. The science of reading training and coaching is mandated for professors, college classrooms, and current teachers. Even without 3rd grade retention, the bill still delivers the accountability needed to improve literacy in Wisconsin. Moreover, top states like Massachusetts and Louisiana do not retain students and still rank in the top 5 because of the quality of their classrooms and interventions. In fact, 3rd grade retention might not seem so frightening once other reforms are allowed to work, allowing it to pass later. Louisiana might sign retention into law this session as a finishing touch for their record of success. So, you could remove 3rd grade retention entirely and rely on the excellent inputs and accountability that already exist in the bill.

Both of those amendments allow us to remind schools that Mississippi's reforms are positive in nature. They lifted burdens from students, instilled renewed professional pride to teachers, and granted relief to thousands of parents of the dyslexic. The science of reading is a gift, and we need to get the people implementing it excited about this historic opportunity.

Even our nation's highest-performing states did not include all aspects of Right to Read in their transformations. Removing the choice school complication and holding the line on the vast majority of accountability measures for school districts could allow Wisconsin to chase and surpass those national leaders. Otherwise, we risk going back to the status quo. It's no place that we want to be.

Phonics works. Coaching works. Intervention works. I believe that. You believe that. If it's true, why would we let leaving out some finishing touches stop us from unambiguous improvement in the lives of 5-year-olds around this state? The 90% of this that everyone agrees on would give every child a fighting chance to be great, would make businesses give Wisconsin a second look for investment, and would be one of Wisconsin's landmark bipartisan victories this century. Consider these two possible improvements, and consider what a vetoed or hostilely resisted law will cost us. Thank you so much for the research and thoughtfulness that you've put into your work already. You've made me proud to be a Wisconsinite.

AMY BINSFELD

STATE REPRESENTATIVE • 27TH ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

Chairman Jagler and members of the Education Committee. I want to thank you for allowing me to testify on SB329 Right to Read bill.

SB329 allows the opportunity for us to show unity and help move our young learners to a better reading future. This bill provides help to both our young students, but also our teachers. Currently, Wisconsin is falling quickly when it comes to keeping our youth on track with reading. SB329 helps in more ways than may even be realized.

This bill provides training assistance to our teachers for those who want to learn more science based approach to reading academics. This bill is to try to help our teachers who need an updated process to assist our young learners, but at no point blame them for the fact they didn't have the correct training tools to truly help some of our young readers. SB329 provides the opportunity for districts to request a reading coach to assist the teachers as well as 50% coverage of updated curriculum with the science base of reading.

SB329 provides the opportunity for a dyslexic student to find success without feeling like they are just the "dumb" kid. Dyslexic students will not learn by many traditional methods especially when it comes to reading. A dyslexic student will struggle not only to read but to write. It is a fact that they will write with all phonetic sounds and even when most words are spelled wrong they along with others will be able to read what they write. By using a phonics based learning method proposed in SB329, you will find that not only will the easy learners thrive, but those that normally would struggle will find a lot more traction to keep up with their peers.

The fact that assessments will be done several times starting in Kindergarten is a huge plus. Finding the right plan at an early stage will also help when it comes to mental health. Too often we forget that children who struggle to read will be more likely to suffer from mental frustration which will cause them to become angry, depressed, or just withdraw from their school experience. SB329 provides so many opportunities for children to get help early and stay positive in their learning. This can and should also assist the teacher to have a positive outcome each day and not suffering mentally as they watch a student struggle.

Watching a child struggle to read is a very difficult process and I know firsthand because my daughter is dyslexic and has overcome so much over the years. Now I want to see all children have the same opportunity.

IF we all work together to move SB329 forward we can see great outcomes for our young learners, teachers, families, and all of Wisconsin.

Thank you for your time and I welcome any questions.

TO: Members, Senate Committee on Education

FROM: Daniel Henderson, School Programs Coordinator

SUBJECT: SB 329 -- Reading instruction and private schools participating in parental choice programs and amendments

DATE: June 15, 2023

Thank you Mr. Chairman, and committee members, for the opportunity to testify on SB 329, the reading reform bill.

You are to be applauded for wanting to address this issue and for your willingness to publicly recognize that we have a reading crisis in the state.

It is appalling that billions of dollars are being spent annually on education and our children still cannot read. It needs to be fixed. Thank you for leading the charge.

We studied the Mississippi miracle months ago. And asked ourselves if Wisconsin could replicate that effort. We came to the conclusion that the variables of our states are too different. Wisconsin's diverse education environment with its many options requires unique approaches, which prevent its effective replication.

We wanted desperately to provide our support. **But the Wisconsin Council of Religious & Independent Schools (WCRIS) must oppose SB 329 unless it is amended.**

We stand ready to work with you on repairing this bill and making it something the private schools throughout the state can support. We honestly want to find ways to say "yes."

As you may know, WCRIS represents 800 schools and over 100,000 children across the state. We represent all major private school groups. Our Board of Directors comprise the superintendents of all the Catholic and Lutheran schools, and has members representing the various independent Christian school groups across the state.

Archdiocese of Milwaukee

Association of Christian
Schools International

Christian Schools
International

Diocese of Green Bay

Diocese of LaCrosse

Diocese of Madison

Diocese of Superior

Lutheran Church
Missouri Synod
North Wisconsin District

Lutheran Church
Missouri Synod
South Wisconsin District

Wisconsin Association
of Independent Schools

Wisconsin Conference
of Seventh Day Adventists

Wisconsin Evangelical
Lutheran Synod
Northern Wisconsin District

Wisconsin Evangelical
Lutheran Synod
Western Wisconsin District

Wisconsin Evangelical
Lutheran Synod
Southeastern Wisconsin
District

Associate Members

PHONE
(608) 287-1224

E-MAIL
wcris.staff@wcris.org

WEBSITE
www.wcris.org

ADDRESS
110 East Main Street
Suite 802
Madison, WI 53703

Unlike Wisconsin's other education advocacy groups, we actually run schools. Our superintendents say that if voucher schools are mandated to adopt policies that conflict with their religious beliefs and values, they will withdraw from the voucher program.

Our schools' autonomy is the very thing which makes our schools successful and is a magnet for parents. Our schools won't be around to be chosen if SB 329 is not fixed. Wisconsin's private schools save local and state taxpayers \$1 billion annually, thanks to private philanthropy. The public sector has no way of closing that gap when our schools go away.

You are each to be commended for your concern and hard work to address the reading deficit in Wisconsin. But one size does not fit all. We learned that during the pandemic, when the whole state was treated as sick, while only certain regions were actually ill.

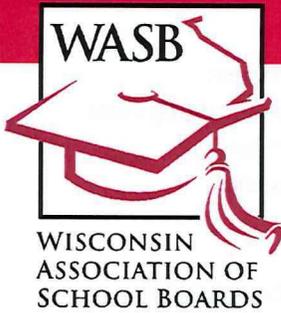
We seek the following changes to SB 329:

1. **Retention policy:** omit the requirement that the private school promotion policy for third to fourth grade *"include all of the components that are required to be in DPI's model policy."* This is not mandated for the required written policies for promoting pupils from grade 4 to grade 5, and from grade 8 to grade 9;
2. **Clarify the effects of the retention policy on voucher students.** For example, because of the voucher cap, you don't want two voucher students when only one seat is available in a particular grade. Direct that the accounting for the voucher is assigned fully to the grade assigned to a retained student despite the number of vouchers allowed in that grade, so that a promoted student will not trigger a lack of sufficient voucher seats;
3. **Exempt costs that are required to comply with the reading program from voucher totals.** Vouchers have just been increased, but the cost of compliance with the reading initiative unwittingly erodes the increase, along with requirements for crime reporting, Narcan and cold baths, to name three other pending legislative proposals;
4. **Curriculum and retention:** Make it clear that voucher schools that choose NOT to adopt a new literacy curriculum are also not obligated to follow this bill's third grade retention requirement;
5. **Delete the prohibition on three-queuing.** While it may not be as effective as phonics, there may be the occasional student who can only learn to read with this method of training. Teachers should be free to use this technique without fear of breaking the law;
6. **Literacy Council.** The Council should include a representative from the Wisconsin Council of Religious & Independent Schools. WCRIS currently has statutory inclusion in the DPI's Title One Committee of Practitioners, and the Professional Standards Council.

7. **Literacy coaches:** Literacy coaches who are assigned to serve private schools must have demonstrated knowledge/experience with private K-12 schools. They must respect the beliefs and values of the private school, and respect the private school's religious identity and culture;
8. **True opt-in trigger:** Clarify that schools can only participate if they "opt-in" to the program. And, unless they are officially a member of the program and receive funding support through the program, they do not have to use a state literacy coach nor follow the state's third grade retention policy;
9. **Opt-out:** Allow private schools to "opt-out" of the state's reading goals and program for the next school year, if they had been previously participating;
10. **Non-voucher private school students:** Not all of the state's 100,000 private school students are eligible to participate in the voucher programs. Non-voucher students are equally in need of improving their reading ability. There is substantial learning loss from the pandemic. A simple block grant program that financially rewards schools for every percentage point increase in students' annual reading scores, will yield positive results. Students are already being tested.

Please fix the reading bill proposal. WCRIS stands ready to serve in that effort.

Thank you. I'd be happy, Mr. Chairman and committee members, to take any questions.



122 W. WASHINGTON AVENUE, MADISON, WI 53703
PHONE: 608-257-2622 • TOLL-FREE: 877-705-4422
FAX: 608-257-8386 • WEBSITE: WWW.WASB.ORG

JOHN H. ASHLEY, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

TO: Members, Senate Committee on Education
FROM: Dan Rossmiller, WASB Government Relations Director
DATE: June 15, 2023
RE: COMMENTS on SENATE BILL 329, relating to: reading instruction in public schools and private schools participating in parental choice programs, an early literacy assessment and intervention program, providing an exemption from rule-making procedures, and granting rule-making authority.

The Wisconsin Association of School Boards (WASB) is a voluntary membership association representing all 421 of Wisconsin's public school boards.

Before commenting on the specific aspects of Senate Bill 329 as we understand the bill and changes that we believe have been proposed to it or may be proposed to it soon, we want to acknowledge several things.

- 1) There is widespread agreement that the reading level of Wisconsin pupils is not where we would like it to be. It could be and should be higher and steps need to be taken to ensure that reading levels improve. A student's early years are critical to academic achievement. A study by the Annie E. Casey Foundation found pupils who are not proficient readers by the end of third grade are four times more likely not to graduate from high school than proficient readers.
- 2) This bill provides resources that were lacking in the bills advanced last session. The WASB opposed those bills in significant part because of the lack of resources provided to schools to cover the costs of the requirements those bills imposed.
- 3) We want to publicly acknowledge the time and effort that Representatives Kitchens and Wittke and Senators Stroebel and Jagler have put into developing the bill that is before you today.

With that being said, the WASB has some significant concerns with the bill in its present form, not the least of which is that this sweeping bill imposes some of the biggest mandates on school districts that I have seen in my career as a lobbyist. This bill makes huge changes in how all schools will have to teach reading and we are concerned about the speed at which this bill is moving. This bill still needs work.

Third-Grade Retention Provisions: A significant set of concerns relates to the third grade retention component of the bill and its impact on pupils, families, teachers, and schools.

As drafted, both the bill and the proposed substitute amendment require school boards, independent charter school operators, and the governing boards of private choice (voucher) schools to adopt retention policies that include at least all the components of a DPI-created model retention policy. These retention policies would, with certain exceptions, call for schools to retain (i.e., hold back) third grade pupils who score in the lowest proficiency category on the third grade reading assessment. Pupils in the lowest proficiency category would either not be allowed to advance to fourth grade or not be allowed to advance in third grade reading unless they fit into "good cause" exceptions outlined in the bill. There are no provisions for allowing students to be retested for involving parents, teachers or reading coaches in this decision. The decision is taken solely on one test result.

Schools would be required to provide each retained pupil with intensive instructional services, progress monitoring, and supports designed to remediate the areas in which the pupil is identified as deficient, adding costs to districts. In addition, schools would be required to provide retained pupils an intensive summer reading program, also with added costs to districts, including the costs of staffing these summer programs and transporting pupils to these summer programs.

We believe it is possible for schools to provide all these services to pupils without holding them back in third grade. Tennessee, which also has third grade retention provisions, allows certain pupils to advance to fourth grade if they receive tutoring with a tutor from a “state accelerating literacy and learning tutoring corps” for the entirety of the following school year in accordance with state-established tutoring requirements. We ask you to consider similar provisions. At a minimum, there should be provisions for retesting students. Here’s why:

One of our concerns with the retention provisions is that, as drafted, the bill and the proposed substitute amendment require the decision to retain a pupil to be based solely on the pupil’s single score on a single test (which under the current statute references in the bill and substitute amendment) is given only once a year. There is no opportunity for a pupil to be retested, which turns this single test taken at one moment in time into a very high-stakes event with lifelong consequences for pupils, parents, teachers, and schools. Both Mississippi, a state held up as a model for its early literacy instruction program, and Tennessee, for example, provide for retesting students. Mississippi allows multiple opportunities for pupils to retest and demonstrate sufficient proficiency to advance to fourth grade. Tennessee allows students to retest following completion of an intensive summer reading camp. Under both the bill and substitute amendment, there are no “off-ramps” for students who achieve third grade reading proficiency, either after the high-stakes testing, after an intensive summer instructional program or during the year in which they are retained. This should be addressed.

There are additional technical and practical problems with the way the bill is drafted. Currently, both the bill and the proposed substitute amendment statutorily specify that schools consider only the pupil’s score on the state’s current statewide assessment known as the Forward Exam. Currently, the Forward Exam is given only once a year during a window that begins in mid-March and runs through mid-April. Schools do not receive the results of that exam until August. This creates a practical problem if schools are going to be required to provide an intensive summer reading program for pupils subject to retention. It also creates a huge public relations problem for schools if they cannot notify parents until August that their child must remain in third grade when school starts on September 1.

Another specific concern with the Forward Exam is that it currently does not include enough reading related questions to be able to generate a specific reading score because it was not designed as a high-stakes reading test. Rather, it was designed to measure pupil’s performance broadly in English Language Arts to meet federal requirements under the Every Student Succeeds Act. The Forward Exam would have to be reworked if it is to measure what this bill contemplates it will measure. If not, a different test is needed.

If a different test or screener other than the Forward Exam must be developed or selected, this should be clearly reflected in this legislation. If so, the timelines in the bill will need to be reworked.

Impact on Teachers: One concern is the impact this legislation is going to have on the supply of early elementary grade teachers. Both the bill and proposed substitute amendment will require much more screening and more focused screening of pupils, as well as additional notifications to parents, and in some cases, the development of individualized reading improvement plans for pupils as well as weekly progress monitoring for pupils identified as “at-risk” under the bill. While this additional workload will be present in all public school classrooms in grades 4K through third, the increased workload burden will be greatest in schools and classrooms with the highest

concentrations of pupils with reading difficulties. In fact, it is not only possible but likely that in some schools and classrooms, 100 percent of pupils could be classified as “at-risk.” This would trigger all the additional measures described above for each pupil in the classroom, and thus dramatically increase the workload of teachers in those schools and classrooms. If this makes it harder to attract and retain teachers in these classrooms, it will make an already challenging supply of teachers even more challenging. The intensive focus on third grade under this legislation could potentially impact resources available for other grades, creating new staffing challenges.

Costs to Schools: Another concern is with the costs this legislation would impose on school districts. Although the bill (or proposed substitute) and the package it represents is purported to provide \$50 million, while \$50 million is significant, it is highly unlikely that amount will cover the costs to districts of implementing all the requirements imposed by the bill. This is a concern for school districts now that it is clear they will not be receiving funding adjustments in the 2023-25 state budget that keep pace with current levels of cost inflation.

Based on reports from several school districts in Southeastern Wisconsin that have adopted science-based early literacy instructional approaches (using new curricular and instructional materials, instructional coaches, and training for teachers), it has often cost between a half a million dollars to a million dollars per district to implement the new approach mandated by this bill. And that does not account for the ongoing costs of maintaining the new instructional approach in future years.

If this bill is to succeed, it is important that it be implemented with fidelity. It is doubtful that \$50 million in one-time money is enough to cover more than a fraction of the costs of the bill to local school districts. We note that Tennessee, which has about 20 percent more pupils than Wisconsin, initially invested \$100 million in its early reading initiative. Indiana, with help from the Lilly Endowment, is investing up to \$111 million to support its early literacy initiative. Mississippi, a state with only about 55 percent as many pupils as Wisconsin, has made an ongoing investment of at least \$15 million each year in its early reading initiative.

Instructional Coaches: The bill would establish an Office of Literacy in the Department of Public Instruction. This office, in consultation with CESAs, would be required to contract for up to sixty-four full-time equivalent literacy coaches. These literacy coaches must demonstrate knowledge and expertise in science-based early literacy instruction and instructional practices and have instructional experience in grades kindergarten to twelve. It is unclear whether these literacy coaches would come from the ranks of existing elementary teachers. If so, this could take at least sixty-four teachers from the classroom at a time when schools are already struggling with a lack of supply of teachers.

Further, as drafted the bill requires the Office of Literacy to assign one-half of the sixty-four literacy coaches to schools based on pupil scores on the third grade reading assessment and one-half of the sixty-four literacy coaches to schools that request early literacy support. The latter half of the literacy coaches must be dispersed evenly among cooperative educational service agency (CESA) regions. However, the bill requires that at least three literacy coaches be assigned to each CESA region. There are 12 CESAs and three times twelve is thirty-six. Half of sixty-four is thirty-two. Something does not add up as it looks like the bill is short four literacy coaches.

The WASB looks forward to working with lawmakers to address the concerns identified above either within this bill or in future trailer legislation. We believe Wisconsin can benefit by learning from the issues and solutions identified in states that have already undertaken a revamping of their early literacy instruction.

It is more important to get this effort right than it is to get it done fast. Thank you considering this testimony.

Testimony

Wisconsin Senate

6-15-23

Jackie Weissenburger, Ph.D

Hello! My name is Jackie Weissenburger. First, I would like to provide you with information about my background to explain why I am coming before you today. I have almost 20 years of experience as a teacher, school psychologist and school counselor in the PK-12 schools, and another 20 years of experience as a professor of education and leader, including as a director of a school of education, in the UW System. I have a Ph.D. in Educational Psychology with special expertise in learning disabilities and achievement testing, and I have closely researched and examined Wisconsin's reading and writing assessment results since the late 1990s. I am also on the executive board of WI Reads.

As was stated in an earlier hearing by Representative Christine Sinicki: First, you learn to read and then you can read to learn. Unfortunately, far too many Wisconsin children fail to learn to read, and most Wisconsin children (two thirds) fail to reach reading proficiency. The data is especially dismal for children of color and for those who are eligible for free and reduced lunches. Sadly, only 10-12 percent of Wisconsin's 4th grade Black children have achieved reading proficiency in recent years, and Wisconsin continues to earn the dubious distinction of having the widest achievement gap of any state in the nation.

You might think this is simply a Milwaukee or a COVID problem. That is NOT the case. As a whole group, Wisconsin's scores have flatlined and students have performed significantly below proficiency standards since at least 2003.

My main point in providing testimony, however, is not to go on and on about the dismal numbers that have spanned our state for the past two decades. My point is to gratefully thank the cosponsors in the Assembly and the Senate who have taken the courageous and must needed steps to ensure that a vast majority of Wisconsin's children will learn to read starting in the year 2024. I also want to thank the entire legislature for passing this bill, because I think you will. I am confident you will pass it because you know that it is in the best interest of the children in our state.

Specifically:

1. **Thank you for requiring science-based reading instruction in our elementary classrooms across the state.** Since the year 2000, research has confirmed that specific instructional approaches and curricula are most effective in teaching reading. These instructional approaches are commonly referred to as the Science of Reading.
2. **Thank you for requiring teacher preparation programs to provide instruction that prepares our teachers to teach reading using science-based reading instruction.** Pardon my use of idioms, but if we truly want to "turn the Titanic around," all "hands need to be on deck," especially our higher education partners.

3. **Thank you for ensuring that all kindergarten to 3rd grade teachers, principals of schools with k-3 classrooms, reading specialists, and university faculty who teach early literacy courses receive quality professional development in science-based early literacy instruction.**

4. **Thank you for requiring reliable and valid universal screening assessments of all students and technically adequate diagnostic and progress monitoring assessments for students who score below the 25th percentile.** These assessments are important as they provide essential feedback to teachers to determine if their instructional approaches are working.

5. **Thank you for specifically defining science-based reading instruction consistent with the 5 primary pillars identified by the National Reading Panel in 2000 and confirmed by scores of research studies since.** These include Phonemic Awareness, Phonics, Fluency, Vocabulary, and Comprehension.

6. **Thank you for ensuring that DPI maintains a publicly available list of approved early literacy curricula/instructional materials and reading assessments.** School districts will thank you for such guidance as they take steps to meet the requirements of the bill, but especially to meet the needs of their students.

7. **Thank you for requiring a personal reading plan that includes weekly progress monitoring for children who perform below the 25th percentile on reading assessments.** Such individualized programming using science-based instructional practices informed by diagnostic assessments can truly make a difference for children who are struggling to read.

8. **Finally, thank you for giving me a chance to thank you today.** I am thrilled to know that so many of our leaders in the state want to take active steps to help the vast majority of our children **learn to read so they can read to learn.**

Please do not forgo the chance to vote in favor of SB 329!



Wisconsin State Reading Association

WSRA... providing leadership, advocacy, and expertise

Testimony on Senate Bill 329

The Wisconsin State Reading Association, a volunteer organization of professional educators, is pleased to hear commitments being made at our state capital to increase investment in K-12 education, specifically in reading. We are pleased that this proposal provides for 64 literacy coaches. But that provision only provides services for approximately 15% of our schools. For years our organization has advocated for increases in licensed reading specialists and reading teachers who have comprehensive knowledge of literacy research, who can act as literacy coaches, and provide instruction to our neediest students. Too many of our schools do not have the resources to hire a district reading specialist or reading teacher to meet the literacy needs of their students, and if they do, often do not act in that capacity. In 2019 WSRA submitted a Legislative Action Plan to this effect, which we have provided to each of the committee members in our individual meetings earlier in the session.

WSRA is concerned that Senate Bill-329 favors one-size-fits-all solutions with little to no scientific studies to understand the root causes of stagnant literacy scores and achievement gaps in Wisconsin. We do have a flagship literacy research institution at the University of Wisconsin that could do scientific research to determine those root causes to maximize the effects of tax dollars. The State Superintendent's Reading Advisory Council is another body to consider consult on this legislation.

The reason for the stagnated literacy scores in Wisconsin is a systemic problem. This includes licensure changes that promote the loss of teacher professional learning, the inequitable distribution of adequate resources, and replacing teachers' professional decision-making with purchasing products as curricula instead of as resources. In addition, this bill holds students accountable for these significant shortcomings through grade retention. Under this bill, local control is significantly eroded, and in some cases, removed. This bill:

Removes Local Control. Removes local control of curricula that addresses unique student needs by school districts to a new state council, three of which are appointed by the State Superintendent and six of the nine member appointments will be by legislative majority party in each house. Beyond just reporting, DPI must submit recommendations on early literacy curricula and instructional materials to and be approved by the Joint Committee on Finance, which according to its website "the Committee's primary responsibility is to serve as the principal legislative committee charged with the review of all state appropriations and revenues," not education policy.

Creates State-Sanctioned Vendors of Curriculum. The danger of a new policy proposed in SB-329 is it prioritizes the criteria for the sale of vendor products statewide instead of prioritizing teacher expertise to tailor curriculum to classroom and individual student needs. Infused into the bill is

language that mandates training by a for-profit vendor, Lexia LETRS, for all teachers regardless of need and regardless of the lack of scientific efficacy of this program. This bill mandates that the Institute for Education Science (IES) be used to verify evidence that a program works, but a report of the research arm of the IES concluded that LETRS training does not improve students' reading achievement. SB-329 ignores Wisconsin school and school district successes, and instead, moves toward state-controlled curricula such as Texas and California. Statewide approved vendor requirements will come with significant new costs to school districts.

Mandates & Restricts What Can Be Taught. Regardless of whether a school or school district is performing well, this legislation dictates and prohibits how and what can be taught. SB-329 prohibits the teaching at the university/college and local school district level of basic research-based skills while advocating that evidence-based practices be used. The confusion over the term, three-cueing in this bill, which is “to read based on meaning, structure and syntax, and visual cues (which includes phonics) or memory”, all of which are necessary to read fluently, is detrimental. The bill erroneously calls three cues a model. The bill also defines the terminology of “science-based early reading instruction,” the concern is the state defining \ redefining generally accepted meanings of what is science-based. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) states that reading is an active and complex dynamic cognitive process that involves using *meaning* as appropriate to type of text, purpose, and situation and includes developing and interpreting *meaning*. The National Reading Panel Report references that readers need meaning, structure or grammar and the visual, to read. But this bill prohibits the very thing that readers use and that the National Reading Report references.

Be Sure to Review the Full-Body of Experience and Study. Similar policies have been shown not to work twenty years ago despite spending billions of taxpayer dollars through the Reading First Grant Study (2008) and the Wyse & Bradbury (2022) study of the ten-year implementation of England's mandated phonics-first approach. This bill is not a new approach; it is a decades-old approach.

Mandates Statewide Third Grade Retention Policies. Long-term, retention has the potential to be incredibly harmful to a great many children and money ill spent. Negative effects of retention of students in the elementary grades are widely documented and are characterized by dropout rates of students as they reach middle and early high school. In states where this policy exists, some students are retained more than once with little to no benefit. As evidenced in Mississippi, racial disparities exist with populations that often over-represented in retention rates. It should be noted that Mississippi's retention rates have increased every year.

In Summary. Quick fix solutions don't exist. Investment in teachers and teacher expertise will have the greatest impact. Manipulating the system in the short-term with a statewide high stakes third grade retention policy that artificially increases NAEP scores has the potential in the long-term to be incredibly harmful to a great many children. We ask that the committee consider removing the third-grade retention policy.

Testimony on SB 329

Good afternoon. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak. I am Deborah Cromer from La Crosse, a retired reading specialist and reading teacher who taught full time for over forty years. Since I retired in 2019, I have been a volunteer reading tutor in various settings working with diverse students ranging from grades two to ten, most recently in a public elementary school where I worked individually with five students in grades two through five from noon until 2:30 daily—effectively serving as a half-time unpaid reading interventionist. That school does not have Title I services, and next year it will not even have a reading intervention teacher on staff.

I am sure that everyone attending this hearing wants All Wisconsin students to become confident and competent readers, writers, and learners just as I do. One of the requirements in the bill has the potential to make that goal a reality, the provision that a personal reading plan be developed for at-risk students that includes interventions to meet the students' needs. I am puzzled, though, that there is no stipulation for funding for districts to hire expert teachers of literacy to provide the interventions. Without funding, how can that requirement be implemented?

Because of the other stipulations, if this bill is passed, more students at school will need comprehensive, responsive individual instruction, the kind of instruction that I have provided which means I may need to be a full time volunteer instead of half time. This bill, if passed, will mean that more students will need intervention because the narrowing of instruction will not meet their needs and may even cause them to regress. This bill, if passed, would divert money that could have been used to hire teachers with expertise in comprehensive responsive literacy to provide individual instruction to students with a personal reading plan instead of product training that restricts what counts for reading to easier-to-measure, easier-teach isolated skills. This bill, if passed, will mean that many students will be retained for reading in third grade, bearing the blame instead of the system which has failed them by not providing expert teachers who can design instruction that builds upon what students know to address their individual needs.

The blame starts here in this building where decisions about children's futures are made for political reasons by people who have never taught anyone to read, who base legislation on cherry-picked data rather than the body of evidence, who prefer the simple view of reading to the complexities of literacy teaching and learning, who do not understand and provide for human variation, who do not support the development of teacher expertise for a comprehensive understanding of literacy, and who pander instead to those who stand to make money on the backs of children by selling one-size-fits-all products.

I am horrified by this bill and dread the impact on the lives of children, if it is passed. I urge you, for the sake of ALL Wisconsin students, to vote no.



PO Box 7486 • Madison WI 53707-7486
608-268-5074 (Madison) • 866-849-2536 (toll-free) • 608-256-3370 (fax)
info@wifamilyaction.org • www.wifamilyaction.org

**TESTIMONY IN OPPOSITION TO SENATE BILL 329
ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON STATE AFFAIRS
THURSDAY, JUNE 15, 2023**

JACK HOOGENDYK, LEGISLATIVE & POLICY DIRECTOR

Thank you, Chairman Jagler and committee members, for the opportunity to testify on Senate Bill 329. Wisconsin Family Action is testifying today in opposition to one significant part of SB 329, and that is the inclusion of private schools participating in the Parental Choice Programs.

A private school that participates in the Parental Choice Program does not surrender its right to function as a private school under the laws of Wisconsin. SB 329 encroaches on the right of a private Parental Choice school to make its own curriculum and instruction choices. We are particularly concerned about religious schools participating in a Choice Program—schools that exist primarily to educate children according to the dictates of their religious faith, which includes choosing curriculum, materials and methods that are in harmony with that mission.

In 1972, the US Supreme Court in the landmark *Wisconsin v. Yoder* case, held that an individual's interests in the free exercise of religion under the First Amendment outweighed the state's interests in compelling school attendance beyond the eighth grade. Surely, this "free exercise" extends to a distinctly religious school not being compelled by the state to adopt a certain curriculum or materials in reading or in any other subject.

This provision on phonics curriculum should be irrelevant to any school using religious curriculum. We are not aware of any religious reading curriculum that teaches three-cueing. In fact, most religious reading curriculum was started in opposition to three-cueing because these schools largely believed anything other than a phonics-based program was inferior and even deleterious to children learning to read.

Under current law, the DPI can only require private schools to adopt academic standards but has no ability to regulate the curriculum. For private schools participating in a Parental Choice Program, that is solely for the regulation of the relevant accreditation agency.

Historically Wisconsin statutes have defended private religious schools' complete autonomy in curriculum. I cite statute *118.165(1)(d)*: *This subsection does not require the program to include in its curriculum any concept, topic or practice in conflict with the program's religious doctrines or to exclude from its curriculum any concept, topic or practice consistent with the program's religious doctrines.*

If this bill becomes law in its current form, it would be the first time DPI would be able to tell private schools what curriculum they can purchase. Based on past experience, it is not a stretch for us to be concerned or even believe, that under the provisions of this bill, DPI would claim "separation of church and state" or some other reason for not recommending a reading program produced by a religious-based publisher. Thus, private schools would be forbidden from purchasing and implementing religious early-literacy curriculum on or after January 1, 2024.

I would point out that according to the Wisconsin Institute for Law and Liberty's January 2023 edition of *Apples to Apples*, statewide, students involved in a Parental Choice Program outperformed their public-school peers in English and Language Arts. Proficiency rates were about 3.2% higher statewide and in Milwaukee, proficiency rates were 8.1% higher than in the relevant traditional public schools.

Many of the religious schools participating in a Parental Choice Program choose to use reading programs that are decidedly religious in their content but are also teaching reading in a way that is producing literate students. These schools should be able to continue to use the reading programs they are currently using or adopt another of their choice without any interference from the state.

In summary, there is no reason to include private schools participating in a Parental Choice Program in this bill. We urge the authors to amend the bill and remove these schools from these requirements.

Thank you for your attention and careful consideration of our concerns.

Section I
Part A: Group Rhyme Awareness

				+ / -
1. fan	door	pan	shoe	-
2. cake	rake	wim	ball	-
3. soap	cat	leaf	rope	+
4. gum	watch	drum	house	-
5. dog	run	pie	log	-
6. bell	well	deer	gas	+
7. hat	nose	mat	cup	+
8. rock	mouse	clock	bee	-
9. kite	night	bus	wall	-
10. wig	seal	tree	pig	+

Benchmark: 5 Score: 4 /10

STOP If student scores below the benchmark:
Administer Individual Rhyme Awareness and include only the individual score in Summed Score.
Record both scores on Class Summary Sheet.

Part C: Individual Rhyme Awareness

				+ / -
1. bell	deer	gas	well	+
2. clock	rock	house	rain	-
3. dog	run	log	pie	-
4. mat	nose	cup	hat	-
5. drum	watch	gum	house	+
6. fan	shoe	door	pan	-
7. night	bus	wall	kite	-
8. cake	wim	rake	ball	-
9. pig	wig	seal	tree	-
10. rope	cat	soap	leaf	+

Benchmark: 5 Score: 3 /10

If student scores below the benchmark:
Administer Individual Rhyme Awareness and include only the individual score in Summed Score.
Record both scores on Class Summary Sheet.

Section I
Part B: Group Beginning Sound Awareness

				+ / -
1. bed	saw	bug	fan	-
2. road	rug	swim	pic	-
3. sail	five	run	sock	-
4. can	fish	cow	doll	+
5. house	girl	hand	bee	+
6. five	car	house	foot	-
7. door	duck	nose	well	-
8. shirt	ball	hay	shark	-
9. wall	mouse	wig	hat	+
10. pig	pot	run	shoe	-

Benchmark: 5 Score: 3 /10

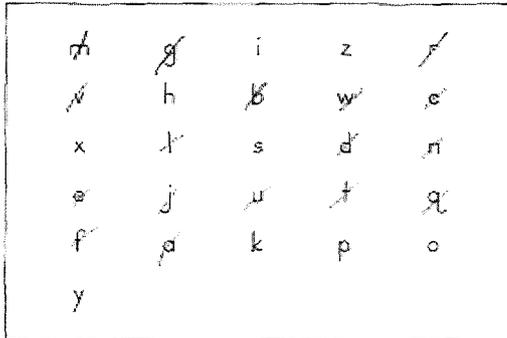
STOP If student scores below the benchmark:
Administer Individual Beginning Sound Awareness and include only the individual score in Summed Score.

Section I
Part D: Individual Beginning Sound Awareness

Benchmark: 5 Score: 2 /10

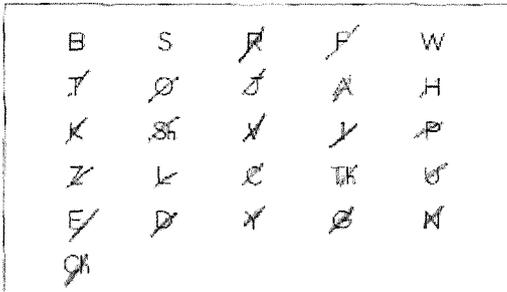
Section II: Alphabet Knowledge
Lower-Case Alphabet Recognition



Benchmark: 12

Score: 9 /26

Section III: Letter-Sound Knowledge
A: Letter Sounds



Benchmark: 4

Score: 3 /26

Section III: Letter-Sound Knowledge
B: Spelling

1. sad	<table border="1"><tr><td>s</td><td>a</td><td>d</td></tr><tr><td>c</td><td>e</td><td>t</td></tr></table>	s	a	d	c	e	t	<input type="radio"/>	# Checked	Bonus Point						
s	a	d														
c	e	t														
2. bug	<table border="1"><tr><td>h</td><td>u</td><td>g</td></tr><tr><td></td><td>o</td><td>k</td></tr></table>	h	u	g		o	k	<input type="radio"/>	# Checked	Bonus Point						
h	u	g														
	o	k														
3. lip	<table border="1"><tr><td>l</td><td>j</td><td>p</td></tr><tr><td></td><td>e</td><td>b</td></tr></table>	l	j	p		e	b	<input type="radio"/>	# Checked	Bonus Point						
l	j	p														
	e	b														
4. net	<table border="1"><tr><td>n</td><td>e</td><td>t</td></tr><tr><td></td><td>a</td><td>d</td></tr></table>	n	e	t		a	d	<input type="radio"/>	# Checked	Bonus Point						
n	e	t														
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5. job	<table border="1"><tr><td>j</td><td>o</td><td>b</td></tr><tr><td>h</td><td>i</td><td>p</td></tr><tr><td>g</td><td>u</td><td></td></tr><tr><td>ch</td><td></td><td></td></tr></table>	j	o	b	h	i	p	g	u		ch			<input type="radio"/>	# Checked	Bonus Point
j	o	b														
h	i	p														
g	u															
ch																

Benchmark: 2

Score: 0 /20

Section IV: Concept of Word

	Pointing	Word ID	COW Word List
There was a little turtle.	<input type="radio"/> (1)	<input type="radio"/> (2)	in
He lived in a box.	<input type="radio"/> (1)	<input type="radio"/> (2)	turtle
He swam in a puddle.	<input type="radio"/> (1)	<input type="radio"/> (2)	box
He climbed on the rocks.	<input type="radio"/> (1)	<input type="radio"/> (2)	puddle
Score:	<input checked="" type="radio"/> /4	<input type="radio"/> /8	he
Pointing	<u>0</u> +		little
Word ID	<u>0</u> +		was
COW Word List	<u>0</u> =		climbed
COW Total Score	<u>0</u> /22		swam
Pointing Benchmark: 2			rocks
Word ID Benchmark: 2			<u>0</u> /10
COW Word List Benchmark: 0			

Section V: Word Recognition in Isolation (optional)

Preprimer	Primer	First Grade
and	away	happy
see	blue	share
to	mother	began
like	stop	hot
the	jump	then
for	little	cheeks
my	play	pony
go	find	came
is	take	running
red	very	smile
not	around	black
did	may	hand
me	ride	birthday
get	work	feeding
with	fish	ball
in	after	steps
big	help	baby
do	bird	dark
he	new	girl
can	duck	heat
Score: ___ /20	Score: ___ /20	Score: ___ /20

Summed Score

Phonics Awareness + Beginning Sound Awareness + Alphabet Recognition + Letter Sounds + Spelling + COW Word List

JANUARY DICTATED WRITING SAMPLE

tiAs

TASI SPTO OPR to
to ME 221

TESTIMONY – Senate Bill 329
Senate Committee on Education – June 15, 2023

Chair Jagler and Committee Members;

Thank you for holding this public hearing on Senate Bill 329 relating to how we teach children to read, how our teachers are trained to help students learn to read, and what teaching materials our schools use to teach reading. Countless reports on poor reading proficiency of nearly 600,000 young people across the state have been issued. We have the lowest racial achievement gap in the nation! We've lost our way in properly educating our children and they are suffering.

I'm passionate about literacy. I'm passionate about finding a way to properly teach our children how to read so they can be successful. Senate Bill 329 (SB 329) addresses three very important components to move students reading ability in the right direction.

- We need better screening of students
- We need quality reading materials using the science of reading
- We need teacher training

Along with this policy change will be resources to help train teachers and help schools purchase quality materials for reading education.

Senate Bill 329 focuses on students and their success rather than on systems. I believe the standards set forth in SB 329 will help students be successful.

Once again, thank you for holding a public hearing on SB 329.



Testimony to the Senate Committee on Education

Senate Bill 329

Peggy Wirtz-Olsen, President

Wisconsin Education Association Council

June 15, 2023

I am Peggy Wirtz-Olsen, an English and art teacher serving as president of the Wisconsin Education Association Council. I am here in opposition to Senate Bill 329.

Every reading teacher I know understands that “one size fits all” approaches are flawed because not all students learn in the same ways. For instance, some learners benefit from more phonics. Some learners benefit from other methods. The good news is that Wisconsin’s highly qualified reading teachers are experts at finding, accommodating, and nurturing these differences. Families and teachers work together to make sure the curriculum works for their students. It concerns moms, dads, teachers and paraprofessionals when lawmakers – who are not licensed teachers – ban teaching practices and insert themselves in classrooms.

Research shows that 30 to 40 percent of students benefit from reading lessons that rely heavily on phonics. That’s a lot, but it also means 60 to 70 percent do not necessarily benefit from lessons heavy on phonics. Again, not all students learn in the same way. (Source:

<https://apnews.com/article/phonics-science-reading-c715dea43f338f163715b01b83bb1066>)

Research supports instruction that purposely develops a child’s ability to analyze speech sounds, and to relate those sounds to patterns of print—phonics—in combination with instruction to develop reading comprehension, vocabulary, and what is called a “strong positive and agentive relationship with literacy.” (Source: <https://plthomasedd.medium.com/dismantling-the-science-of-reading-and-the-harmful-reading-policies-in-its-wake-d15d9fe6d8e0>)

Peggy Wirtz-Olsen, President
Bob Baxter, Executive Director

No evidence justifies the use of a heavy and near-exclusive focus on phonics instruction either in general education classrooms or for students with reading difficulty, including those classified as dyslexic. (Source: <https://plthomasedd.medium.com/dismantling-the-science-of-reading-and-the-harmful-reading-policies-in-its-wake-d15d9fe6d8e0>)

Educators call on legislators to employ the best science on reading rather than defy it. As the National Education Policy Center says, “The truth is that there is no settled science of reading. The research on reading and teaching reading is abundant, but it is diverse and always in a state of change. Accordingly, the importance of professionally prepared teachers with expertise in supporting all students with the most beneficial reading instruction, balancing systematic skills instruction with authentic texts and activities. This key idea of a ‘balanced literacy’ approach stresses the importance of phonics, authentic reading, and teachers who can teach reading using a full toolbox of instructional approaches and understandings. It is strongly supported in the scholarly community and is grounded in a large research base.”

(<https://dianeravitch.net/2020/03/19/nepc-there-is-no-science-of-reading/>)

WEAC believes that funding literacy and interventions is a good idea. Public schools have been starved for a long time under revenue limits and often unable to fund staffing and programs that can make a positive difference. We support changes so the score on a standardized test taken on one day does not force a student to undergo the harmful practice of grade retention.

Creating a panel appointed exclusively by three elected officials, however, is a particularly bad idea. The bill would require the creation of a Council on Early Literacy Curricula to recommend curricula and instructional materials for grades K-3. The state superintendent, the Assembly speaker and the Senate majority leader would each appoint three members to the nine-person council. The bill would also create a new Office of Literacy Coaches, which is another partisan political body. Parents, teachers, administrators, and locally elected school boards are best-suited to ensure high quality curriculum and programs.

Wisconsin early education teachers are especially concerned that this bill would triple the amount of testing for K-3 students. Over-testing early learners is not the answer – it’s the problem. Under this bill, desperately needed funding for classroom instruction and interventions will be spent on the multi-billion-dollar companies that produce bubble tests. Those tests will be

used to decide the fates of students along with their teachers, schools, districts, and entire state public education system—even though these tests have little validity when applied this way. The requirement to include standardized assessment results on the state report cards, included in the bill, is one example of this. Teachers will have to spend more time on paperwork and reporting, instead of providing one-on-one attention to students.

Additionally, the bill would require teachers to take on lengthy coursework for additional certifications with no additional pay and include provisions to make it easier to sue dedicated teachers in circuit court. Wisconsin is struggling to keep and attract educators into the profession, but these measures coupled with a lack of acknowledgement for teachers' expertise, will certainly push more caring educators out of the profession.

WEAC wants nothing more than for every child to be an inspired, excited, and proficient reader. This bill, however, is not the way to achieve our shared goal. Instead, it will further politicize schools, demoralize educators and – most tragically – harm students.

We urge you to join Wisconsin Public School teachers in opposing Senate Bill 329.



ROBERT WITTKÉ

STATE REPRESENTATIVE • 62nd ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

TESTIMONY – Senate Bill 329
Senate Committee on Education – June 15, 2023

Chair Jagler and Committee Members;

Thank you for holding this public hearing on Senate Bill 329 relating to how we teach children to read, how our teachers are trained to help students learn to read, and what teaching materials our schools use to teach reading. Countless reports on poor reading proficiency of nearly 600,000 young people across the state have been issued. We have the lowest racial achievement gap in the nation! We've lost our way in properly educating our children and they are suffering.

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Once again, thank you for holding a public hearing on SB 329.



WISCONSIN
INDEPENDENT
CHARTER SCHOOL
ADVOCATES

Info@wicsa.org

June 15, 2023

Wisconsin State Senate
Education Committee Testimony

Senate Bill 329 - Literacy

Chairman Jagler and Committee members,

Thank you for taking the time to hear testimony on this legislation geared at improving literacy in Wisconsin. We are registering for Information Only as we have portions of the bill we support and portions of the bill that we are still working through.

We understand an amendment to the substitute amendment to be forthcoming and we will provide feedback to this committee at a later date. SB 329 has a wide array of provisions and we want to make sure our members have had a chance to review the legislation before making specific recommendations.

To be clear, we support the focus on phonics instruction, removing of the three-cueing curriculum in Wisconsin's schools and improving literacy overall. We support a comprehensive strategy around curriculum, assessments, screening and professional development that best serve our students. In partnership with our authorizers, we strive to achieve the highest academic performance of all our scholars.

However, there are a number of new processes proposed by this legislation (and substitute amendment and possible simple amendment) that could impact the autonomy of Independent Charters school's operations. We will create a complete list of responses and get them to this committee as soon as practicable.

Respectfully,

Howard Fuller, WICSA Board Chair
Jim Bender, WICSA Lobbyist



DAVE MAXEY

STATE REPRESENTATIVE • 15TH ASSEMBLY DISTRICT

To: Senate Committee on Education

From: Rep Maxey

Re: 2023 Senate Bill 329

Date: June 15, 2023

Chairman Jagler and members of the committee, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to testify on Senate Bill 329 which thanks to phonics I am able to read. Currently, Wisconsin is falling behind in reading comprehension across the state. However there are a few shining examples of excellent literacy programs, in my district the School District of New Berlin we invested in this very literacy program, and it is working.

The overall goal of this legislation is to ensure that no child is left behind when it comes to literacy. Starting in fourth grade the guardrails of literacy begin to fall away and if the foundations of reading have not been established, learning all subject matter only gets harder as kids progress through the education system. Literacy comprehension is critical to ensuring our students are successful in every subject matter. If students can't read, then students can't succeed.

As we speak 70% of incarcerated individuals cannot read above a fourth-grade level and 85% of juveniles who interact with the juvenile court system are functionally low literate. Two-thirds of kids who aren't reading by third-grade end up in poverty or jail. There is a direct link between education and corrections.

This legislation ensures that students will be at grade level by third grade, by providing students who struggle with reading, the tools necessary to read at grade level. This legislation works, and we've seen the positive effects of similar programs in other states like Mississippi where in nine years Mississippi went from the 49th-ranked state in literacy scores to 21st.

We are currently in budget season and as we all put forth our budget motions and look for ways to invest in our state, I say it's time we invest in our students and our future. As stated early there is a correlation between incarceration, poverty, and low literacy rates. Senate Bill 329 is an investment that can solve a multitude of problems in Wisconsin.

June 15, 2023

School Choice Wisconsin and our affiliate School Choice Wisconsin Action, a membership organization that serves 373 schools in parental choice programs, appreciates the opportunity to offer written testimony.

We have worked with the authors of SB 329 and its companion bill in the Assembly and are grateful for their decision to remove the mandate that required private schools to choose literacy curricula from a list approved by DPI. That concerned our member schools so deeply that some indicated they might leave the choice program were the state to intrude so directly in their curricular decisions.

We also understand that additional changes to the bill will ensure that participation in the sections of the bill that permit schools to seek grants is permissive – in other words, private schools may opt into these sections. In that event, the language in 115.39(3)(b) is at odds with the freedom to opt-in.

We have indicated to the bills' authors that the schools we serve will have fundamental concerns about any provision that strikes at the heart of the autonomy that allows private schools to provide parents with varying options. The retention provisions do just that.

We feel confident that members will hear concerns from schools in all sectors regarding the practicality of a "one-size-fits-all" approach to retention policy, and we are prepared now or in the future to work with members to address these issues.

The following list addresses just some of those challenges:

- The bill mandates a single policy whose specific terms all private schools must adopt when considering whether to promote a student from third to fourth grade. Schools currently have widely varying policies on how to address reading issues and many already have established effective methods that do not align with this top-down approach.
- The bill requires schools to offer an intensive summer reading program to students who scored in the lowest proficiency category for reading on state standardized tests. Most private schools do not offer summer school and have neither the staff nor the funding to meet this requirement.

- The bill requires, with few exceptions, that schools that promote a low proficiency reading student from third to fourth grade then require the student to repeat the third grade reading program. For many schools – especially small schools – this requirement would be difficult to staff and to schedule.
- The administrative requirements of this approach are prescriptive and onerous. Private schools already have incentives to teach children to read and the most powerful is that parents who are not satisfied can leave.
- Finally, a major issue is the question of who will monitor compliance. Must DPI now determine whether private schools are in compliance? If so, this is likely to add a new wave of administrative rules and guidance that will only increase a regulatory burden that already deters schools from joining the program.

We thank the committee for considering our concerns and stand ready to work with members to address them.



Susan Mitchell, Founding Director



Nicholas Kelly, President



TO: Members, Senate Committee on Education

FROM: Rachel Ver Velde, Senior Director of Workforce, Education and Employment Policy

DATE: June 15, 2023

RE: Senate Bill 329, reading instruction in schools and early literacy assessment and intervention program

Wisconsin Manufacturers & Commerce (WMC) values the opportunity to submit testimony on Senate Bill 329, a bill to make reforms to reading instruction in schools.

WMC is the largest general business association in Wisconsin, representing approximately 3,800 member companies of all sizes, and from every sector of the economy. Since 1911, our mission has been to make Wisconsin the most competitive state in the nation to do business. That mission includes making sure Wisconsin's youth are prepared and ready to participate in the workforce.

Employers are concerned about declining test scores in Wisconsin and students that leave the K-12 system unprepared for the workforce. Only one-third of Wisconsin students read at grade level. Even worse, Wisconsin has the worst racial achievement gap of any state. Only 10% on black 4th graders and 9% of black 8th graders are at grade level for reading.¹ These poor outcomes are a huge concern for Wisconsin employers. It is vitally important for employers to have students graduating from the K-12 system that are proficient in reading. In WMC's most recent *Wisconsin Employer Survey*, conducted in January 2023, 85% of employers indicated that they are struggling to hire workers. As employers throughout Wisconsin have severe worker shortages it becomes even more important that their future employees have basic competencies and skills for the workplace.

WMC appreciates that the authors have included in this legislation key reforms to improve Wisconsin's reading scores. We are particularly happy to see the inclusion of additional screening tests in kindergarten through 3rd grade to identify at-risk students and require schools to create a plan for these students to get back on track, along with parental notification through the entire process. WMC was supportive of this reform last session, and we are glad to see it incorporated in this bill. We also are happy to see this issue being addressed at the teacher preparatory level. WMC believes that it is vitally important that future teachers are taught to teach reading and language arts using science-based reading instruction and not three-cueing. Additionally, providing literacy coaches both to low proficiency schools and on a regional basis will hopefully help improve literacy outcomes throughout the state.

¹ The Nation's Report Card (NAEP):

https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/profiles/stateprofile/overview/WI?cti=PgTab_OT&chort=1&sub=MAT&sj=WI&fs=Grade&st=MN&year=2022R3&sg=Gender%3A%20Male%20vs.%20Female&sgv=Difference&ts=Single%20Year&tss=2022R3&sfj=NP



WISCONSIN INSTITUTE FOR LAW & LIBERTY, INC.
330 E. Kilbourn Avenue, Suite 725, Milwaukee, WI 53202-3141
414-727-WILL (9455)
Fax 414-727-6385
www.will-law.org

June 15, 2023

Chairman Jagler and members of the Senate Committee on Education,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony today on Senate Bill 329.

This bill comes at a critical time for literacy in Wisconsin. According to the most recent data from the Forward Exam, only about 37% of Wisconsin students are proficient in reading.ⁱ And this is not just a problem in the largest cities. Districts that “Exceed Expectations” on the state report card often have proficiency levels below 70%—meaning 30% of students aren’t achieving adequately.ⁱⁱ

Sadly, many school districts around the state have not taken the necessary steps to address the problem. Antiquated curricula not based in the “Science of Reading” is pervasive. A recent WILL studyⁱⁱⁱ found that 44% of districts around the state are using curricula that do not align with the best practices identified in educational research. Those districts had lower reading outcomes on average than districts that used other methods.

Fortunately, there is a better way forward. States that have implemented legislation substantially similar to what’s under consideration today have made significant jumps in reading. One success story is Mississippi, long a bottom-dweller in reading proficiency. In 2013, they ranked 49th in fourth-grade reading as measured by the National Assessment of Educational Progress. After requiring more phonics, today they are ranked 21st. Wisconsin desperately needs a similar revolution.

The success of Mississippi shows the effectiveness of phonics. That state-wide evidence is backed by a scientific understanding of how connecting written letters to the sounds kids hear is the best way to teach reading; this is opposed to the method of “three-cueing,” which is popular in schools but partly to blame for poor reading proficiency. The strength of the science behind this is affirmed, to quote one example, by Mark Seidenberg, a University of Wisconsin-Madison psychology professor and reading expert, who has been quoted in the *New York Times* explaining that the evidence for phonics, “is about as close to conclusive as research on complex human behavior can get.”^{iv}

This bill creates a “Council on Early Literacy Curricula” to recommend the curricula and instructional materials for use in kindergarten through 3rd grade. This system will ensure that reform-minded voices will play a key role in choosing appropriate curricula, and that the power of DPI to undermine that reform is hemmed in. While some might view the ban on teaching “three-cueing” methods as too prescriptive on local school districts, the reality is that many districts around the state have thus far refused to base their decisions on faddish theories rather than evidence, necessitating a state-level solution.

The standards for a teacher preparatory program would also change, to include a demonstrated ability to prepare teachers to teach reading and language arts using the science-based approach, and explicitly not the “three-cueing” method. This component is necessary because far too often, teachers do leave

the university system unprepared to teach reading in the best possible way.^v According to a 2020 analysis,^{vi} more than 30% of would-be teachers failed to pass the Foundations of Reading Test on the first try. The overall passage rate, including teachers who failed and later re-took it, was less than 55%.

There are many potential reasons why universities remain tied to disproven methods. Many legacy professors are reluctant to change the way they've personally always done things, and there is always strong bureaucratic inertia behind the institution's status quo. But regardless of the reason, colleges of education must prepare teachers to be effective at teaching kids to read. That is necessary for these improvements to materialize in the elementary classroom. But it is not only future teachers who need to learn in a new way; we must retrain our current educators as well. Under the bill, all K-3 teachers, principals of schools that offer grades K-3, and reading specialists will receive training in the science of reading no later than 2025.

In addition to phonics instruction, another hallmark of Mississippi's progress has been early identification of struggling students—and the provision of extra help to get them moving in the right direction. Under the bill, districts would be required to assess the literacy skills of students in K4-3rd grade and create a personal reading plan for each student who is identified as “at-risk” to fall behind. By far the best way to avoid later reading issues is early intervention, and the bill provides for that.

Finally, a core concern of WILL's education agenda has long been the central role that parental empowerment deserves in our education policy. Almost anyone involved in education will tell you that parental involvement is key to success. Under this bill, schools will be required to disclose the student's literacy assessment score within 15 days. The provisions here ensure that parents are aware of their child's literacy progress so that they can provide more help at home if needed.

In addition, parents and guardians of a student enrolled in 4K-3rd grade have the ability to file a complaint with DPI if the parent/guardian believes the school board did not live up to their duties under this bill. This provision ensures that parents are empowered if they feel that the school district is not meeting its obligations to do everything it can to make sure every student can read.

There are few issues more critical to the future of Wisconsin than improving literacy. When a child can't read, their future options in life become extremely limited. Students who can't read by third grade are less likely to graduate from high school, which leads to lower lifelong income and even poorer overall health. While no single piece of legislation is a silver bullet, this bill would put Wisconsin on the right path to improved reading and a brighter future for the state's kids.

Kyle Koenen

Policy Director

Wisconsin Institute for Law & Liberty

ⁱ <https://wisedash.dpi.wi.gov/Dashboard/dashboard/19948>

ⁱⁱ For example, Cedarburg. https://apps2.dpi.wi.gov/reportcards/get-file?level=district&distKey=000937&fileName=DRCDetail_Public_Cedarburg_2021-22_000937.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://will-law.org/report-outdated-reading-curricula-impedes-wisconsin-students/>

^{iv} <https://0-www-nytimes-com.countycat.mcfls.org/2020/02/15/us/reading-phonics.html>

^v <https://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2018/02/12/582465905/the-gap-between-the-science-on-kids-and-reading-and-how-it-is-taught>

^{vi} <https://uwm.edu/sreed/wp-content/uploads/sites/502/2020/03/Research-Brief-The-Utility-and-Cost-of-Requiring-Wisconsin-Teachers-Pass-the-ForT-and-edTPA-assessments.pdf>

Wisconsin Grade Retention Policy Brief

April 2021

ELPA 870: Politics of Education

Molly Gallagher, Taehyun Kong, Mark Moralez, & Paris Wicker

Intended audience

- Education policy makers and those interested in the short- and long-term effects and alternatives to grade retention policy.

Key messages

- Grade retention often causes more harm than good, especially for those in early education (K-3rd grade)
- Grade retention is often based on teacher recommendations and/or test scores/assessments.
- In Wisconsin, migrant-status, English language learners, Black, Hispanic, and “unknown” students have higher representation in those retained than other student populations.

Policy options

- No one test score or teaching experience should decide retention decisions.
- Identify struggling students earlier and increase development for teachers.
- Apply an equity-minded lens to written policy to address and acknowledge inequity in retention numbers

Introduction

Grade retention is the practice of holding a student back from advancing to the next grade. This practice usually occurs when a student is identified as not meeting the academic requirements needed to advance. Requirements often entail reaching proficient levels in varying academic skills, such as reading, writing, and math. Grade retention is often justified as a preventative measure used to mitigate the advancement of students to a grade in which they are doomed to fail. *Social promotion* is the practice of advancing a student to the next grade when they do not meet the requirements for that grade. Social promotion is generally viewed as a harmful practice, resulting in increasing national trends of school districts and states using grade retention as a tool to avoid it. Nonetheless, there exists widespread criticism about the implications of grade retention. Regardless of why a student is held back, there are consequences (many unintended) in doing so. Therefore, there exists a need to examine grade retention, the policies around the practice, and the implications of the practice.

The purpose of this policy brief is to examine grade retention policies, how they have changed over time, and their impact on students, schools, and communities. This brief will

include a literature review summarizing the criteria for grade retention, how retention differs from social promotion, and the short- and long-term impacts of retention. This is followed by an analysis of Wisconsin state statutes and school board written policies. In the early 2000's, Wisconsin adopted a policy against the practice of social promotion. Since then, widespread efforts have been taken at the school district level to create and implement grade retention policies. This brief will analyze these various policies using Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) data to determine who is retained and when, summarize the research and implications of retention, and ultimately offer recommendations for policy makers and school districts regarding grade retention in Wisconsin.

Problems of Grade Retention

Grade retention has received various forms of criticism due to the consequences it imposes on retained students, as well as disproportionalities in who is retained. Despite being well intentioned, grade retention has been criticized for exacerbating a student's challenges rather than alleviating them. Critics argue that retained students are more likely to achieve at lower levels, drop out of school, and experience negative social and economic impacts than their non-retained peers (Jimerson, 1999; Alexander, Entwisle, & Dauber, 2003). Despite being a countermeasure to social promotion, critics claim that both practices have negative consequences, and that grade retention is a symptom of the problems faced by students, rather than a solution to them. Many of the achievement and opportunity gaps experienced by students with varying identities are argued to be exacerbated by grade retention (Reardon, 2008). Some of the ways in which this plays out include:

- Racially minoritized students are more likely to be retained than their white peers (Shores, 2020).
- Boys are more likely than girls to be retained (Bassock, 2013).
- Students with disabilities are more likely to be retained (Anderson, 2002).
- Low-income/Free & Reduced lunch qualifying students are more likely to be retained (Leckrone, 2006).

Despite the short-term benefits that grade retention can present, critics argue that grade retention has no long-term positive impacts (Jimerson, 1999). All these criticisms should be concerning to any policy maker/school board official that drafts policy resulting in the implementation of grade retention. These criticisms will be explored further throughout the following literature review. This brief aims to measure the extent of which these criticisms are true, both nationally, and as it relates to Wisconsin students. DPI collects and publishes data regarding grade retention in Wisconsin schools, which we will use alongside the following literature review to determine whether the criticisms listed above play out in practice in Wisconsin and nationally.

Literature Review

This section reviews the literature on grade retention policy and processes, identifying key research schemes and practices. The scope of this study is an analysis of literature between the years of 1909-2021, mostly concentrating on the last three decades. The major findings of this review includes extensive literature highlighting the relationship between grade retention and social promotion, changes in the criteria used in retention decisions, and



the consequences of grade retention on teachers, schools, and vulnerable student populations. We categorize the literature review analysis into three themes: grade retention vs. social promotion, teacher-based vs. test-based retention, and short- and long-term effects. Overall, the literature indicates a seismic policy shift from social promotion to grade retention and from teacher-based to test-based criteria, as well as examines how negative long-term effects outweigh most short-term benefits of grade retention, especially for the youngest students (pre-third grade).

Teacher-based vs Test-based Retention

Research examining the criteria for retention largely falls into two distinct categories: teacher-based and test-based retention (Huddleston, 2014). Test-based retention uses high-stakes tests based on norms established by the professional testing community (Penfield, 2010). On the other hand, teacher-based retention relies on teachers' assessment of their students' academic proficiency (Penfield, 2010).

Research shows that teachers largely have a positive orientation towards retention, despite having limited knowledge on the long-term effects (M. Witmer, 2004). Research also highlights that teachers often feel pressure to meet testing expectations and as a result may teach to the test rather than focus on improving gains in academic achievement (Renaud, 2013). This could also compel teachers to recommend retention based on their own judgement and other subjective factors rather than academic data (Silberglitt et al., 2006; Cardigan et al, 1986). The attitudes and perceptions of teachers can disproportionately impact students who are racially minoritized, students whose parents are less involved in the school, and students with more frequent disciplinary incidents (Range et al., 2011) There are some noted positives effects of teacher-based retention, mainly effects on improved teacher motivation and better alignment of teaching practices with curriculum (Huddleston, 2014; Renaud, 2013).

Test-based retention criteria have been increasingly common with the rise of high-stakes testing/assessment which ties important consequences to test results. There are some short-term gains with test-based retention, such as improved grades and curriculum and instruction alignment, yet similar to the teacher-based criteria, these benefits fade over time with students falling behind again with increased risks of dropping out of school (Huddleston, 2014). The current iteration of test-based retention is connecting retention with literacy and reading assessment. First initiated in Florida, now seventeen states plus DC require retention for third graders whose assessments indicate that they are behind on reading (Cumming & Turner, 2020.) For some states, this has resulted in thousands of students being held back, sometimes more than once (APM Reports, 2018). Overall, more scholars are acknowledging that no one single measure of achievement (teacher, test, or intervention) should be solely used in determining a potentially life-altering decision such as grade retention (Huddleston, 2014; Xia & Kirby, 2009).

Grade Retention vs Social Promotion

Social promotion is the practice of passing a student to the next grade even if they have not satisfied academic requirements (Hernandez-Tutop, 2012). Over the past century, research has shown both advantages and disadvantages to social promotion. The practice is called "social" promotion because it is done in the perceived interest of a student's social and psychological well-being (Doherty, 2004). Proponents of social promotion claim it is better than the alternative – holding back students who do not meet academic targets. Today,



research largely shows that promoting students who are unprepared does not provide short- or long-term benefits (Doherty, 2004). Overall, neither social promotion nor retention are effective for improving academic achievement (Berlin, 2008), yet both continue to be used in schools throughout the country (McMahon, 2018).

Literature in support of social promotion can be traced back as early as 1909 – soon after the formation of formal grade levels – when concerns grew around the number of misfitting overaged students (Shepard, 1990; Ayers, 1909; Keyes, 1911). In the following decades, scholars argued that students who were promoted did better academically, socially, and emotionally than students who were retained. Research around academic benefits showed that promoted students did better in language arts, reading, mathematics, social studies, and overall grade-point averages than students who were retained (Goodlad, 1954; Cunningham & Owens, 1976; Holmes and Matthews, 1984). A study from 1984 found that students who were retained had more negative attitudes toward school than students who were promoted (Holmes and Matthews, 1984). Additionally, retained students were shown to struggle with social adjustment, emotional adjustment, and behavior (Holmes and Matthews, 1984). A study in 1997 comparing students who were retained with similarly performing students who were promoted, found higher absenteeism and lower social-emotional rankings among students retained (Jimerson et al., 1997).

Arguments against the use of high-stakes testing have highlighted the benefit of social promotion to alleviate the dependency on test scores by passing students to the next grade even if they have not satisfied testing requirements (Huddleson, 2014). Further, grade retention results in stigmatization and embarrassment; promotion aims to mitigate the social and emotional detriment by allowing students to stay with children their own age (Alexander, Entwisle, & Dauber, 2003). Studies find racial and class disproportionality in students who are retained as opposed to promoted. Students who are retained are more likely to be poor, Black and Latinx, male, and have mothers with low IQs, than their equally low achieving peers who were promoted (Jimerson et al., 1997; Jimerson et al., 2006).

Promotion policies pushed onward until the 1970s and 1980s, when education took a hard reversal. *A Nation at Risk*, a notable reform report from 1983, announced that American schools were failing and were not internationally competitive (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). This fear called for education reform based on rigorous standards and testing, causing reformers to advocate for the end of social promotion. Opponents of social promotion have argued it creates a pattern of entitlements for students who do not meet expectations (McMahon, 2018). A report from 2003, revealed that about three-quarters of parents and more than 80 percent of teachers think that it is worse for a child who is struggling to be promoted than it is for them to be held back (Johnson et al., 2003). President Clinton urged states to end social promotion practices and asserted that students should not pass fourth grade until they can independently read (Hauser, 2000).

Now, over twenty years after President Clinton called for the end of social promotion, schools still use this practice, though it is difficult to know how prevalent it is because teachers are unlikely to admit when they promote students (Doherty, 2004). In a 2003 report from Public Agenda, most teachers reported that their colleagues promoted unprepared students, and many teachers reported having done this themselves (Johnson et al., 2003). Research suggests that social promotion does little to advance a child's education, and it hides the failures of the school to properly educate students (Huddleston, 2014; Johnson et al., 2003). Cities and states have implemented test-based grade retention policies to prevent the use of social promotion practices (Huddleston, 2014). In many states and school districts, promotion and retention decisions are made on a case-by-case basis (Doherty, 2004).



Looking ahead to the next school year, districts are considering how to address “learning loss” that has resulted from a year of remote schooling during the Covid-19 pandemic. Many states have policies requiring students to be reading proficiently by the end of third grade and several states will retain students who do not meet these criteria (Cummings & Turner, 2020). However, this year 19 states and D.C. have addressed promotion and retention policy in their reopening plans (Cummings & Turner, 2020). Michigan decided to waive third-grade retention, while Ohio passed legislation prohibiting retention (Michigan Department of Education, 2020; Ohio Department of Education, 2020). Mississippi allows students to be promoted if they have met other district requirements (Mississippi Department of Education, 2020). Michigan, Ohio, and Mississippi are all among the states which typically require third-grade retention for students who cannot read proficiently (Cummings & Turner, 2020). This year and the following year will see more students promoted based on age rather than competency than in typical years, having an impact on students in the years to come.

Short and Long-Term Retention Effects

Grade retention has immediate effects on students’ social, emotional, and academic well-being, as well as lasting, life-long impacts. The short, intermediate, and long-term effects of retention are explored in research and how the effects compare with students who are socially promoted and students who meet academic targets.

In the short-term, students who are retained may show improvement in the subject areas in which they struggled. Reading and mathematics scores generally improve in the repeated year (Silberglitt et al., 2006); however, numerous studies reveal that students experience negative effects in the short-term such as stigmatization from peers, low self-esteem, separation from friends, and decreased motivation (Alexander, Entwisle, & Dauber, 2003). The academic benefits experienced from retention diminish over time and disappear completely in as little as three years (Johnson & Rudolph, 2001; Holmes, 1989). Jimerson (2001) revealed that two thirds of retained students show improvements in the second year of the repeated grade, but these initial gains were not maintained over time (Jimerson, 2001).

Some educators have claimed that retaining students at an early age does less harm. However, retaining students in elementary school increases their risk of dropping out by 20 to 50 percent (Jimerson, 2006). In fact, early grade retention is one of the most powerful predictors of future drop out (Silberglitt et al., 2006). Silberglitt, Jimerson, and Appleton (2006) conducted a longitudinal study that compared students retained early (kindergarten through second grade) with students retained slightly later (third through fifth grade). The study revealed that students retained early had better reading scores than students retained later; however, the general trajectories of both groups showed similarly decelerated growth. In other words, regardless of whether students are retained earlier or later, long-term outcomes remain largely the same (Silberglitt et al., 2006).

A study by Jimerson (1999) on grade retention followed students for 21 years, comparing students who were retained, students who were socially promoted, and a control group of students who advanced at the typical rate. By 11th grade, students who were retained had lower levels of academic achievement, more behavioral challenges, and lower attendance (Jimerson, 1999). Longitudinal studies consistently demonstrate that retained students are more likely to drop out than their equally low achieving peers (Jimerson, 1999; Alexander, Entwisle, & Dauber, 2003). In the 21-year study, retained students were more likely to drop out of school and less likely to receive a diploma by age 20 (Jimerson, 1999). The link



between retention and dropping out is stronger for Black and Latinx students, and strongest for Black and Latinx girls (Hughes et al., 2018).

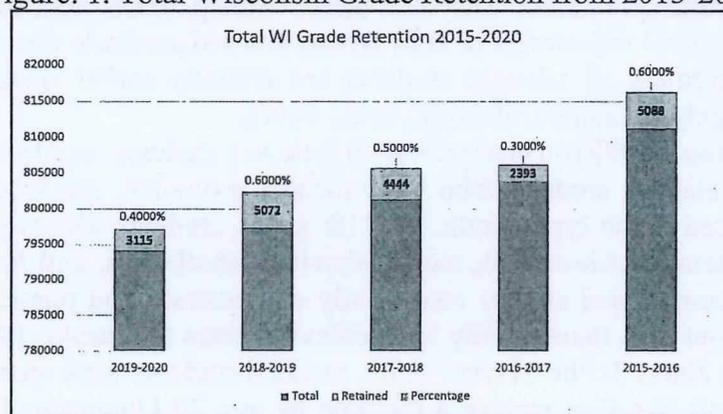
The negative impacts of grade retention span beyond the duration of school. Dropping out has detrimental impacts for students' future well-being. High school dropouts are far more likely to be periodically unemployed, on government assistance, or in prison than high school graduates (Jimerson, 1999; Hughes et al., 2018). Eide and Showalter (2001) found significant correlation between grade retention and post-high school labor market earnings. The effect was greater for Black students than for White students (Eide & Showalter, 2001). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) found that dropouts report more health issues after age 25 (Pleis, Ward & Lucas, 2010). Lastly, Jimerson (1999) found that students who were retained were less likely to be enrolled in a postsecondary education program.

Some scholars have argued that studies showing an association between grade retention and long-term impacts have methodological limitations. The factors that increase a students' risk of being retained, such as low achievement, poor learning-related skills, and low cognitive competence, also increase their risk of dropping out of school and having inconsistent employment. Confounding factors challenge the evidence that suggests a causal relationship between retainment and negative long-term outcomes. To address the limitation of previous studies, recent longitudinal studies incorporate strong controls for potential baseline differences (Hughes et al., 2018; Peguero et al., 2021). These studies reinforced a causal relationship between retention and long-term impacts.

Wisconsin Context

From 2015-2020, data from the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) shows that retention rates for Wisconsin hovered on average around 0.5%. This is below the national average rate of 1.9% (Warren et al., 2014), and amongst the states with the lowest retention rates in the country. In the 2017-2018 as well as the 2018-2019 academic years, there was a steady increase in the percentage of students retained followed by another decrease during the 2019-2020 academic year (and start of the Covid-19 global health pandemic). At the moment, it is unclear how and if the global pandemic and subsequent school disruption and abrupt shift to online learning shaped the decrease of retention numbers. Continued vigilance around retention numbers will be crucial in the era of post-pandemic schooling.

Figure 1. Total Wisconsin Grade Retention from 2015-2020

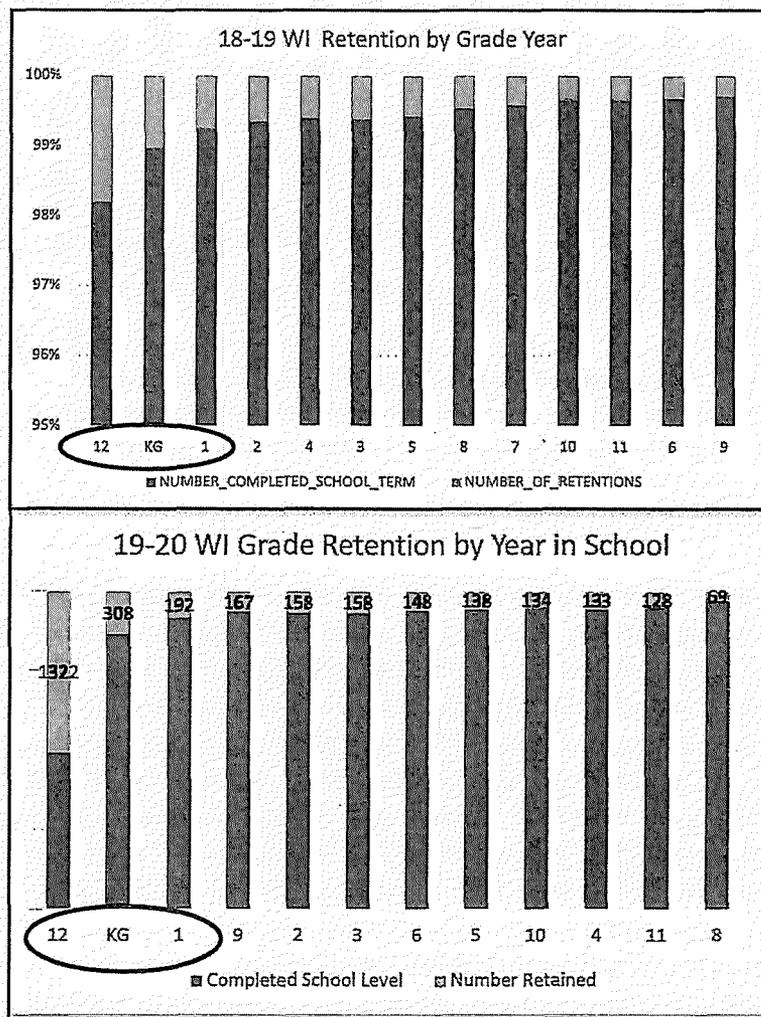


Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (2021)

When does Retention Occur?

Disaggregating retention numbers by when retention occurs reveals disproportionate levels of retention by grade level. Twelfth, kindergarten, and first grades (respectively) are the most common grade levels for retention in Wisconsin between the years 2018-2020 (see Figure 2). In comparison, first and ninth grades are the most common nationally (Warren et al., 2014). Given the research regarding the ill effects of retention, especially in early education (Huddleston, 2014; Silbergitt et al., 2006), the prevalence of retention in the early grade levels warrants cause for concern and further inquiry.

Figure 2: Wisconsin Grade Retention by Year, 2018-2020



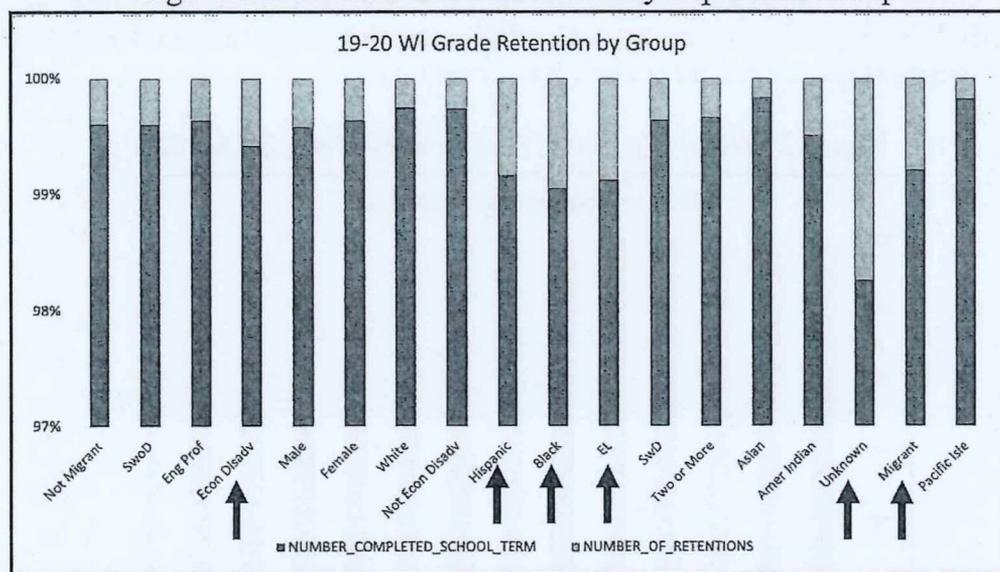
Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (2021)

Who is Being Retained?

National studies often see large disparities by race/ethnicity, sex, location, and socioeconomic circumstances (Warren et al., 2014), and Wisconsin also follows this trajectory. Though inconsistent from year to year, Wisconsin data from 2018-2020 show that

students identified as having migrant-status, Black, Hispanic, English language learners (ELL), or economically disadvantaged share a larger percentage of those retained and are often higher than the state average (see figure 3). Furthermore, the largest population percentage retained is within an “unknown” category in the data, suggesting that for a large majority of student retained, DPI does not have accurate or available demographic data.

Figure 3: Wisconsin Grade Retention by Population Group



Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (2021)

Wisconsin Grade Retention Policy

Wisconsin, like many other states were early adopters of eliminating social promotion as a means to increase accountability and to be seen as a stronger vocational and economic powerhouse (Brown, 2007). Wisconsin state statutes provide minimal guidance for retention policies and give each school district control with setting the parameters of retention. Each school district is strongly encouraged to adopt written policy detailing promotion criteria from kindergarten to first grade, fourth to fifth grade, eighth to ninth grade, and high school graduation. These milestone transition years largely align with pivotal moments in the Wisconsin Student Assessment System (WSAS). As a result, written guidelines vary drastically by school district (especially regarding parent involvement and required intervention) but includes a combination of test, academic performance, teacher, and other intervention-based criteria (Wis. Stat. § 118.33). While the policy seeks to include multiple criteria for decision-making, it does not provide guidance on addressing inequities in who and when students are being retained.

Recommendations & Promising Practices

Research indicates that neither grade retention nor social promotion is successful for improving academic achievement in the long-term (Jimerson et al., 2006). Therefore, a

number of educators and researchers suggest alterations to grade retention, which include a combination of evidence-based interventions and teaching strategies (Linda Darling-Hammond, n.d.; Jimerson et al., 2006; Rafoth & Carey, 1995).

Figure 4: Evidence-Based Recommendations for Grade Retention

- Parent/ family Involvement (Jimerson et al., 2006)
- Age appropriate & culturally sensitive instruction (Jimerson et al., 2006)
- Multi-age classrooms/learning (Jimerson et al., 2006)
- Early identification of struggling students (Lynch, 2014)
- Designing (and assessing) evidence-based interventions
- Increasing instructional time (Lynch, 2014)
- Tutoring programs (Lynch, 2014)
- Wrap around services (e.g. mental health) (Huang, 2014)
- Looping (Jimerson et al., 2006)

Furthermore, new alternatives to replace grade retention are also being developed in response to current educational challenges during the Covid-19 pandemic. Emerging research is showing that nearly every student in the United States has fallen behind in the 2020-2021 school year due to the pandemic (Dorn et al., 2020). In response, several school districts are more intentionally including parent and families in the decision-making process (Caprariello, 2021). Likewise, Jimerson and colleagues (2006) encourage schools to ask the students themselves what are their perspectives regarding grade retention.

Other alternative focus on changes to the existing school and learning structure (Jimerson et al., 2006). For example, looping and multi-age classrooms can also be excellent alternatives to grade retention. Looping classes allow students to spend two or more years with the same teacher which aides in informing teachers to meet each student's needs and accept their strengths. The multi-age classroom includes students of various ages and abilities, so each student can move forward at their own pace and learn from each other (May, Kundert, & Brent, 1995). Both looping and multi-age classrooms provide opportunities for teachers to better understand and adapt to students' individual learning styles (e.g., Nicholas & Nicholas, 2002; Yang, 1997). Other countries with significantly lower retention rates compared to the United States (e.g., Japan, Germany) often use looping (Reynolds, Bahart, & Martin, 1999).

From an international perspective, South Korea, Japan, and Sweden ban grade retention (Dineen, 2015). In South Korea, age perception has significant cultural value, coupled with a prejudice that students who repeat the grade are more likely to be delinquent teenagers. As schools consider the social perception that students will experience with grade retention, they enact the policy of “level learning”, which assesses both horizontal and vertical movement by grade. Level-specific curriculum means that the curriculum by which students learn in classes is developed by student ability level, and includes all factors such as education content, purpose, method, materials, evaluation, and teaching. The purpose of each level-specific curriculum is to maximize the growth potential and educational efficiency of each student by considering individual differences in students' abilities, aptitude, needs, and interests. Important variables to consider when organizing moving classes by level are usually represented through learning skills, learning interests, and learning styles, and the shape of classes by level may also vary depending on how students develop them in real-world classroom situations. The type of curriculum by level is



determined by how the learning group is organized, first by learners with similar abilities by grade, then by learners with similar abilities without distinguishing grades due to the opening of the no-year system, and third is based on the grade system. Pre-existing studies on the curriculum by level have been consistently suggested that this has a positive impact on academic achievement (Mani et al., 2018).

Conclusion

This brief examined grade retention, the literature surrounding it, as well as its implementation in Wisconsin school districts. Many of the criticisms made about grade retention have been backed by research and data. This brief shows that not only are there disproportionalities in who is retained, but also that there are clear long-term negative consequences experienced by retained students, despite potential short-term benefits. The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction has collected and published grade retention data that concerningly shows disproportionalities in retention, often impacting students who are most vulnerable. Research shows that those retained often have their academic and social challenges exacerbated through the practice of retention, leading to the widening opportunity and achievement gaps. This begs the question: how should Wisconsin policymakers address retention?

It should be no surprise that this is not a simple task. Grade retention is often used as a method to mitigate social promotion, a practice that also has negative consequences. Solving the issue of retention is not as simple as barring the retention of students. This brief has shown that grade retention is a *symptom* of deep-seeded issues in educational institutions. An examination into best practices, both domestically and internationally, was conducted in this brief. These best practices often involve wide sweeping, some would say radical, changes in educational practices and the narratives that surround them. These kinds of changes are often hard to achieve due to dwindling budgets, restrictive bureaucracies, and political battles at the state and school district levels. Nonetheless, there exists a clear need to advocate for grade-retention policy reform. Whether it be creating uniformity in grade-retention policy, the restructuring of classroom practices and curriculums, or investing in effective assessment/intervention strategies, there exists a need for change.

Additional Resources

1. **Louisiana's Individual Academic Plan:** for students at risk at being retained which includes an option for summer retesting as well as evidence-based interventions to address the student's specific academic weaknesses
 - o <https://hechingerreport.org/held-back-not-helped/>
 - o <https://go.boarddocs.com/la/bese/Board.nsf/goto?open&id=ARUN7H5DCA3D>
2. **Alternatives to grade retention** by Linda Darling-Hammond. Published on the School Superintendents Association. <https://www.aasa.org/schooladministratorarticle.aspx?id=15030>
3. **Politico:** 'Parents are powerless'. Students face being held back after a year of remote learning <https://www.politico.com/news/2021/04/22/repeat-school-year-482336>

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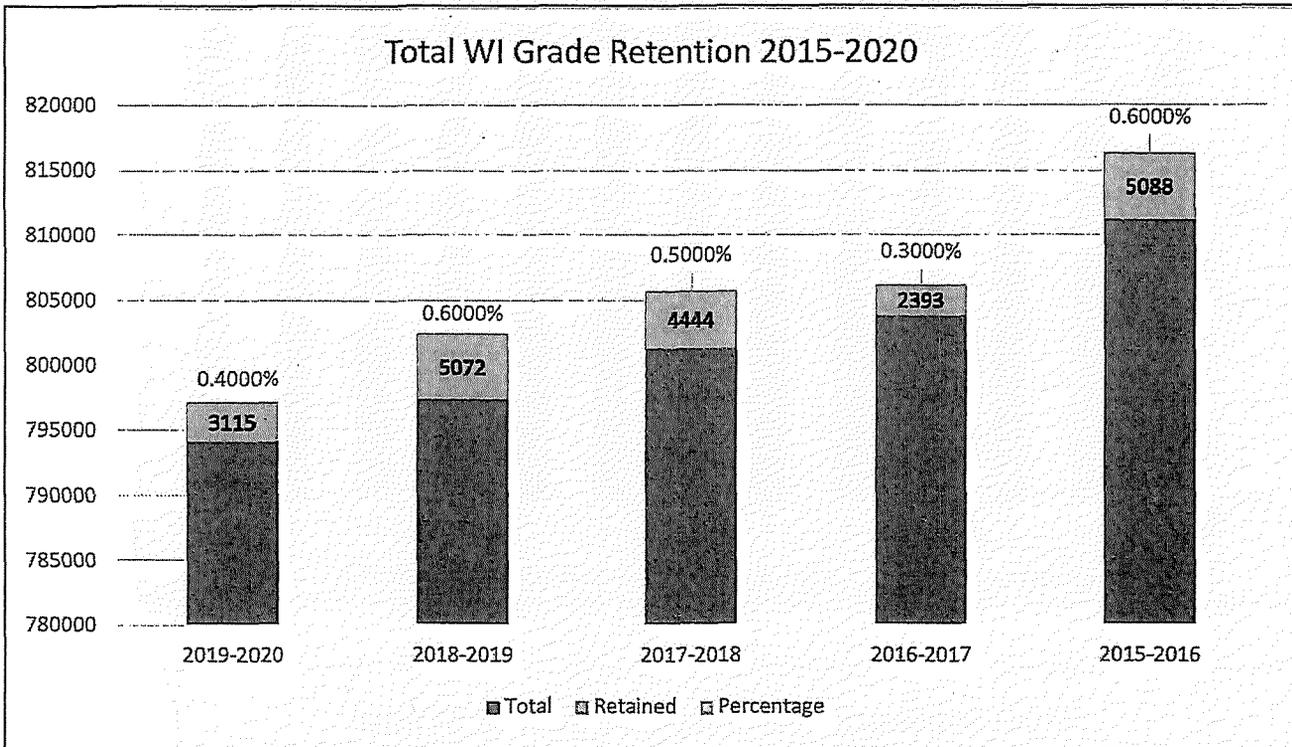
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Appendix

Figure 1. Total Wisconsin Grade Retention from 2015-2020



Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (2021)



Figure 2: Wisconsin Grade Retention by Year, 2018-2020

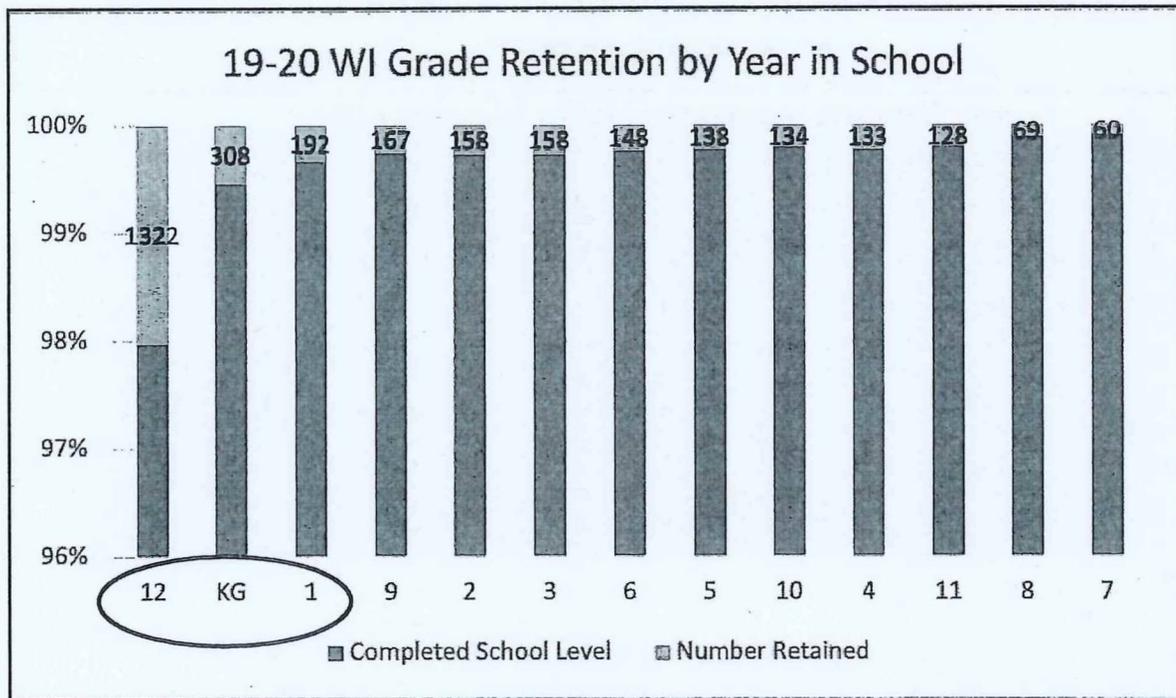
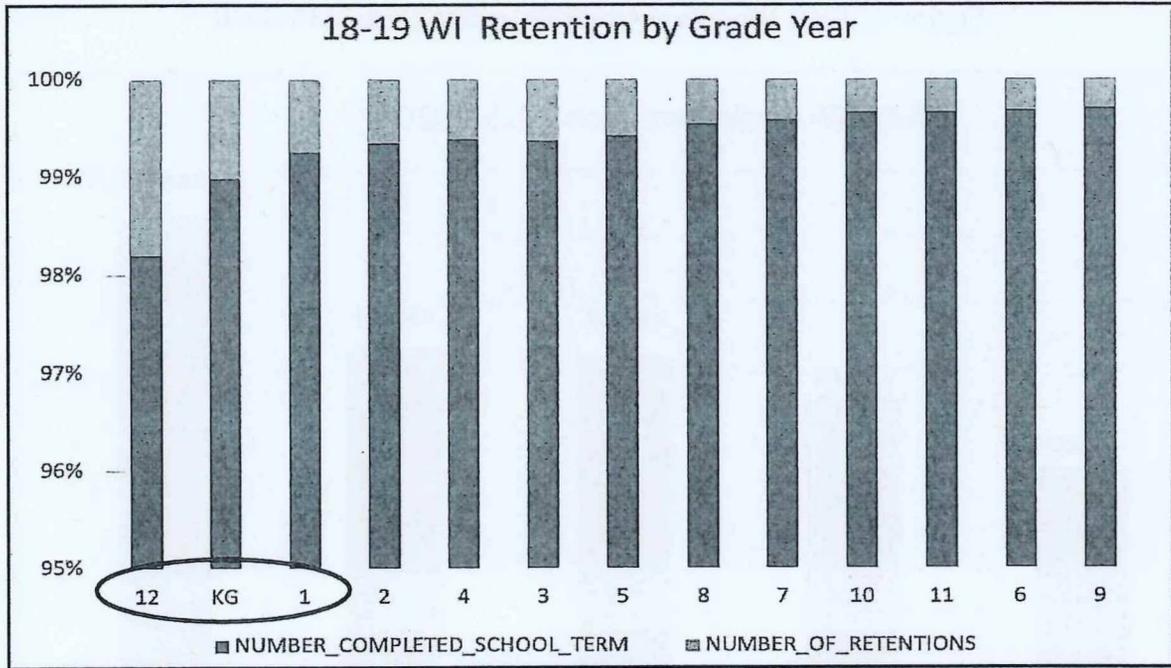
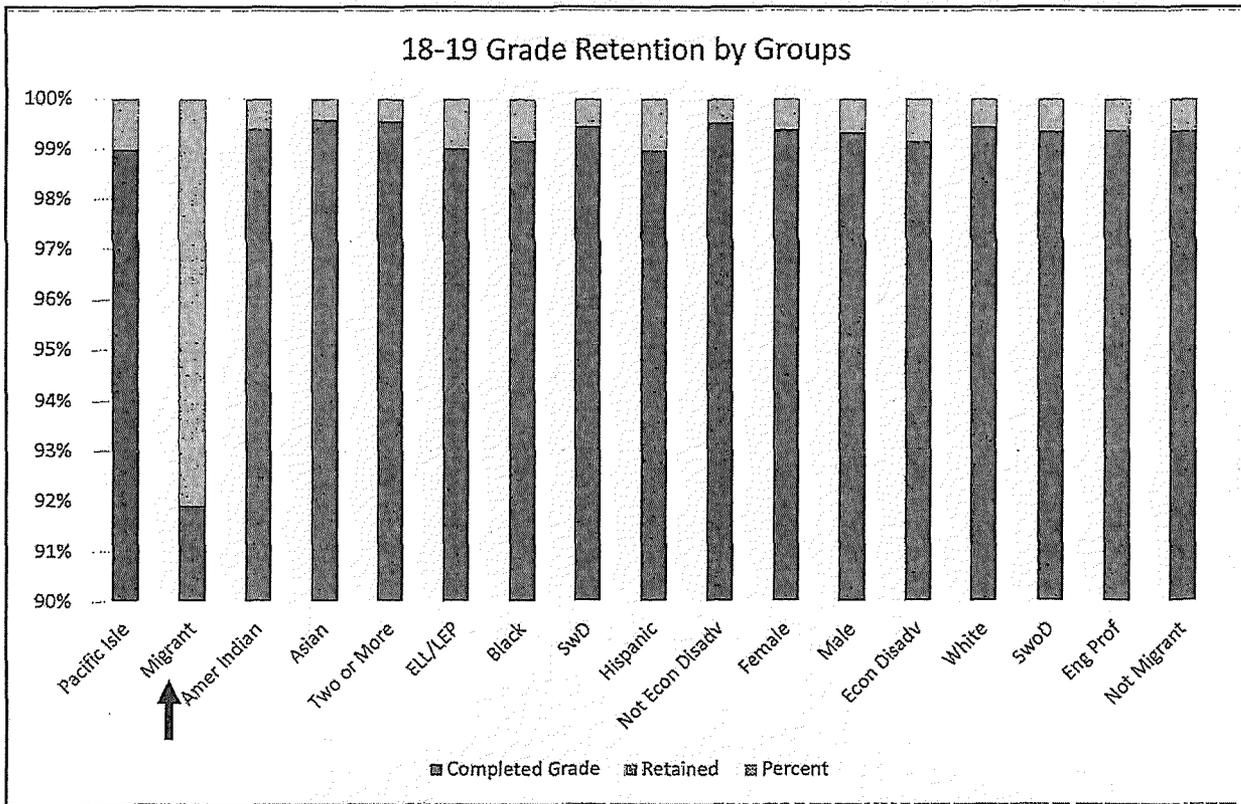
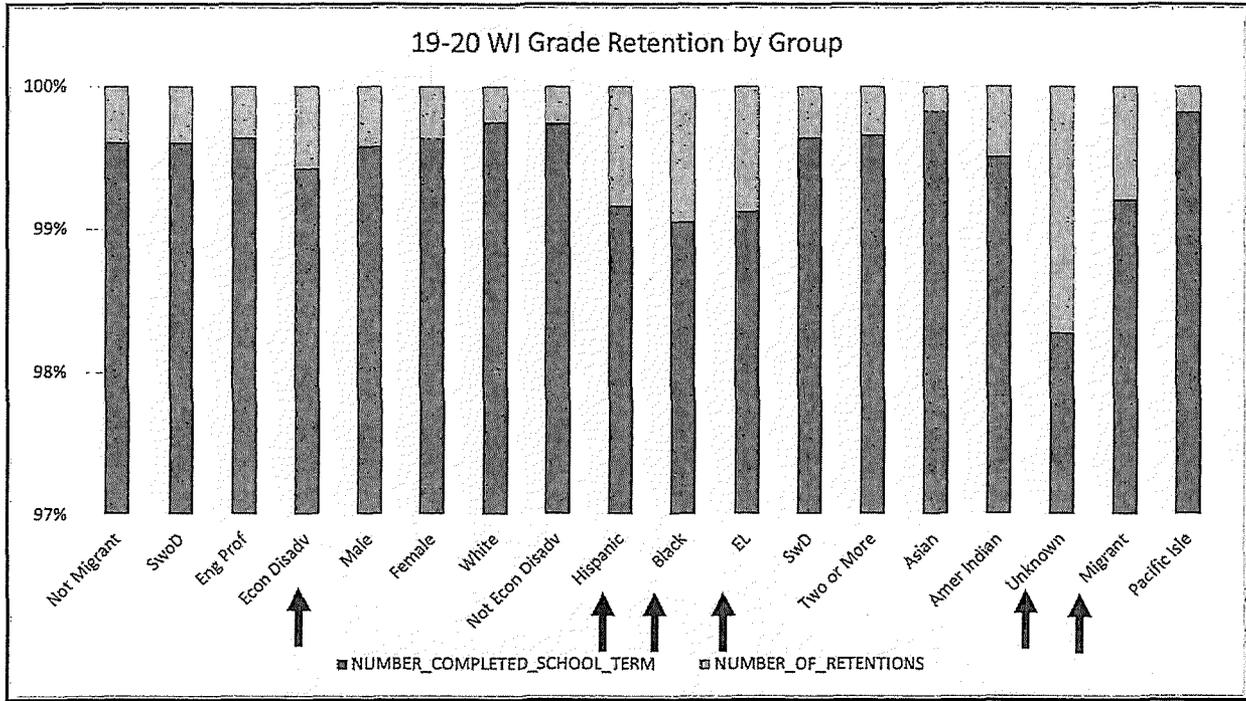




Figure 3: Wisconsin Grade Retention by Population Group



Wisconsin Professors of Literacy Response to SB 329/AB 321

How exciting to see Wisconsin looking to make a major investment in the literacy education of Wisconsin students! As a group of over 30 professors of Literacy in both public and private institutions, we very much support the concept of "Right to Read" within SB 329. In addition, we agree with the researched-based notion that children must be explicitly taught letter-sound correspondence through phonics instruction. All UW-System teacher preparation programs and the private colleges represented in our group include instruction in how young readers gain phonemic awareness, alphabetic principle, phonics knowledge and evidence-based instruction related to those important concepts as evidenced by high passing rates (average first-time pass rate of 76.5%) on the Wisconsin Foundations of Reading Test (FORT) 190.

We understand there is currently a misconception about the systems of oral language and sources of information in text that all readers use to effectively understand what they read. The "Three Cueing System" is not a prescriptive approach to reading instruction that can be mandated, legislated, or banned. All readers have semantic, syntactic, and phonological language systems that they use to understand oral and written language. Moreover, all books contain these three sources of information. Also noteworthy, most published screeners are limited to assessing children's ability to read isolated words and the speed in which they can read a passage. Many teachers have reported a mismatch between these isolated skills tests their children's ability to authentically read and write. Therefore, it is crucial for the teacher to analyze a young child's reading of authentic text. For example, if a student solely focuses on the meaning of the text during the reading sample, the teacher is informed that explicit instruction may be needed in skills, such as phonemic awareness, phonics, or sentence structure. The teacher can use the patterns observed during the oral reading to pinpoint the specific phonics instruction that may be needed. In summary, recognizing and addressing the diverse nature of reading cues and strategies allows teachers to differentiate each child's needs and ultimately advance literacy learning.

The plan laid out by this bill will do little to move the needle to increase literacy outcomes and we believe will only mimic the failures of the 2000's Reading First federal policy that seemed to improve first grade isolated word decoding, but did not increase comprehension in grades 1, 2, or 3. The Wisconsin Forward Exam as well as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) requires readers to decode fluently and accurately while deeply comprehending what they are reading. A shift to over-emphasize isolated phonics instructions will have tradeoffs. Reading is meaning; the consequences being that instruction in comprehension and practice in connected texts may be sacrificed.

The SB 329/AB 321 bill outlines narrowed curriculum and assessment choices that benefit publishers and companies in their effort to gain education dollars that could be better spent on the children of Wisconsin and the professional development of their teachers. Wisconsin needs a systematic approach to literacy improvement that includes

evidence-based early literacy instruction, but also attention to culturally responsive and comprehensive literacy engagement in older children and adolescents.

Teachers do not gain any long-term benefits from outside consultants who train them in a boxed program but need a literacy expert in every district for a sustained time giving them time and space to grow professionally. Wisconsin Professors of Literacy are yet to have a seat at the table to shape research-grounded, evidence-based legislation. Furthermore, we are untapped literacy experts in our state trained in synthesizing research and bridging research to practice. Instead of outsourcing the research for literacy legislation to Mississippi (which is yet to know if its efforts will bring sustained, longitudinal gains), we would like an opportunity to be at the table to shape legislation that creates systems of highly expert teachers with the content knowledge, pedagogical skill, and assessment competency to guide Wisconsin literacy forward.

Sincerely,
Wisconsin Professors of Literacy Working Group

Point of Contact: Amber Garbe
Phone: 715.341.1175
Email: agarbe@uwsp.edu