
Lessons from Florida's Third Grade Reading Retention Policy and Implications for Arizona







OVERVIEW

It is generally accepted that third grade is a critical pivot point for reading proficiency. More than a decade ago, Florida led the nation in implementing a policy that required that struggling readers be retained in the third grade. Evidence of Florida's success has spurred replication across the country, despite vocal opposition at times, from parents and child advocates.

In 2010, Arizona adopted a retention policy, called Move On When Reading (MOWR), modeled after Florida's policy, impacting retention decisions for Arizona's third graders starting in 2014. And yet, success in Arizona is not guaranteed due to important differences between the two states, continuing debate about what truly accounts for Florida's success and key implementation choices that Arizona still has to make. Forthcoming studies supported by Helios Education Foundation seek to expand the emerging research base by examining Arizona's implementation of MOWR and by conducting follow-up analysis on Florida's policy.

BACKGROUND

Practitioners, policymakers, researchers and philanthropists agree that third grade is a critical pivot point in which children go from "learning to read" to "reading to learn." Children who do not read proficiently at this point tend to fall behind and are four times more likely to drop out of high school than their reading-proficient peers (Hernandez, p.4). The long-term, negative consequences reverberate through families, communities and the nation in terms of lower individual earning power, lost economic productivity and reduced global competitiveness (Fiester, p.9). The importance of third grade reading proficiency

has provided a rallying point for many in the field of early childhood education and the rationale for Helios Education Foundation's investment approach in its Early Grade Success portfolio.

Controversy has erupted as policymakers in a growing number of states responded by passing legislation that require the early identification, remediation and retention of struggling readers in early elementary years (Education Commission of the States, pp. 4–5). The lightning rod in the debate is the mandated retention of students who struggle in reading by the end of third grade. Proponents of the laws argue that the past practice of social promotion—based on age and not academic achievement—sets students up for failure, and the additional year(s) in third grade can give retained students extra time to build the foundational skills necessary for future success.

Supporters thus claim that the retention policies have ended social promotion, replacing it with “literacy-based promotion” (Foundation for Excellence in Education, p.5). Critics decry this solution, citing evidence that retention also has long-term consequences, including higher dropout and lower graduation rates (Jimerson, p. 433; Powell, p.2).

SUCCESS IN FLORIDA

The Policy

The 2002 Florida legislature mandated that third grade students scoring below Level 2 (of five performance levels) on the FCAT (Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test) in reading be retained and provided intensive remediation (Florida S.B. 20E). The policy also included provisions obligating school districts to provide retained students:

- summer reading camp;
- academic improvement plan;
- 90 minutes daily of research-based reading instruction; and
- assignment to a “high-performing teacher” in the retention year.

In addition, the legislature required districts to inform the parents of any students who exhibited a deficiency in reading in grades K–3 about the deficiencies and the third grade retention policy. For children retained, districts had to provide the parent(s) an annual report of the child’s progress.

The legislation allowed for six exemptions (also called good cause promotions) to the policy. Exemptions applied to students who had limited English proficiency or severe disability, scored above 51st percentile nationally on another standardized reading test, been retained twice previously, or demonstrated proficiency through a portfolio of work.

The Implementation

Beginning in the 2002–2003 school year, the new policy went into effect in Florida. The retention of third graders increased substantially. According to the Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability (OPPAGA), the percentage of retained third graders jumped from 3.3 percent in 2001–2002 to 14.4 percent in 2002–2003, with nearly 28,000 students retained across the state (OPPAGA 2008, p.3).



WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO DEMONSTRATE READING PROFICIENTLY BY THIRD GRADE?

The rather unsatisfying answer is—it depends on the reading test. In the groundbreaking work on the relationship between third grade reading and high school completion, Hernandez examined over time children who fell into three groups that correspond roughly to the skill level used in the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), the national benchmark assessment administered to a sample of students every two years. NAEP sets three achievement levels: proficient, basic and below basic.

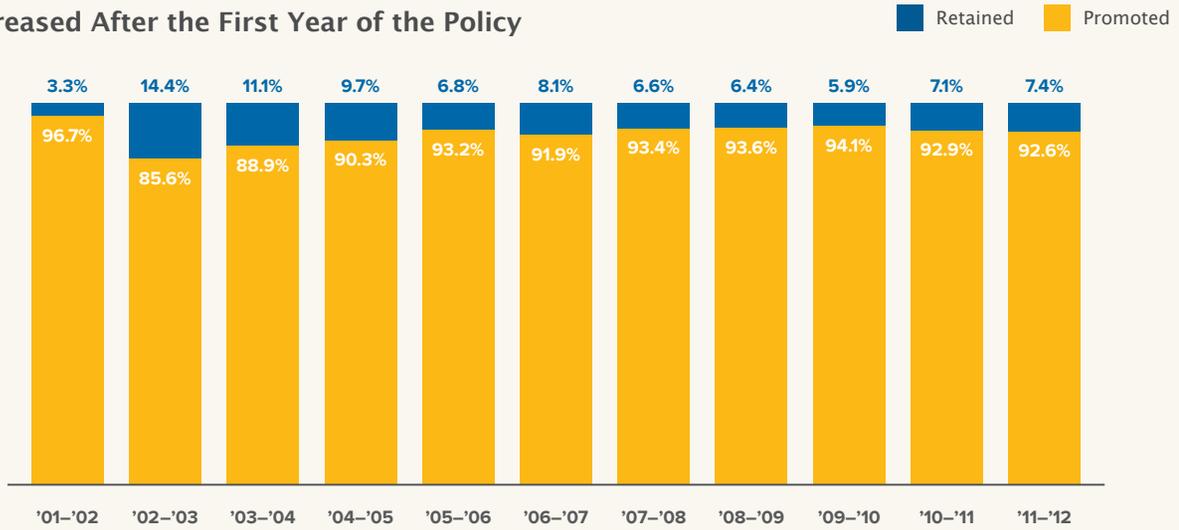
In contrast, states, including Arizona and Florida, currently use their state assessments, based on state standards for each grade, to determine who gets retained in the third grade and who gets promoted to the fourth grade. In Florida, the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) divides students’ results into five categories, from 1 (lowest) to 5 (highest), where a score of 3 is generally considered passing or proficient. In Arizona, the Arizona’s Instrument to Measure Standards (AIMS) divides students’ results into four categories, from Falls Far Below the Standards (lowest) to Exceeds the Standards (highest), where Meets the Standards is generally considered passing or proficient. In both states, only students who score into the lowest level—Score of 1 or Falls Far Below—are targeted for potential retention. By the states’ own standards, these students are far from reading proficiency.¹

To compound the issue, reports by the U.S. Department of Education have shown that states’ proficiencies standards fall in NAEP’s Basic or Below Basic range (Bandeira de Mello, pp. 10–14). Proficiency as determined by the states fails to equal proficiency as determined by NAEP. The bottom line is states are targeting the lowest performing readers with these policies, while continuing to promote students who are also not proficient readers.

¹In academic year 2014–2015, both Florida and Arizona plan to introduce new assessments based on updated standards. When the new examinations are introduced, new achievement levels will also have to be set, potentially impacting which and how many students are targeted for retention in the future.

FIGURE 1

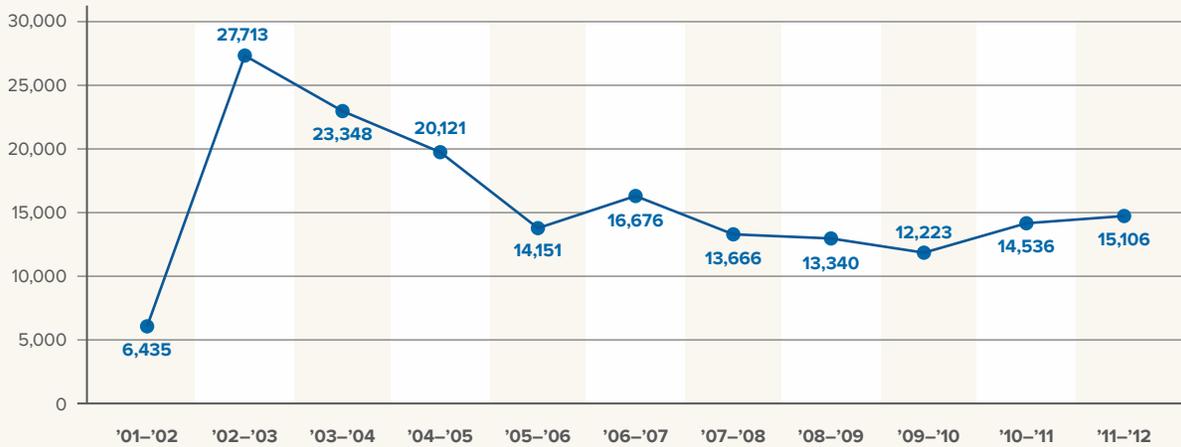
**Percent of Students Retained in Third Grade
Decreased After the First Year of the Policy**



Sources: OPPAGA 2008, Education Information & Accountability Service 2009, Education Information & Accountability Services 2013, and other data on non-promotion obtained from Florida's Department of Education.

FIGURE 2

**Number of Students Retained in Third Grade
Decreased After the First Year of the Policy**



Sources: OPPAGA 2008, Education Information & Accountability Service 2009, Education Information & Accountability Services 2013.

After the first year, as displayed in Figure 1 and Figure 2, the number and percentage of retained students swiftly declined. Within three years, the numbers of retained students had fallen by roughly half and, thereafter, has stabilized at between 6 percent–8 percent of third graders. In 2011–2012, the most recent year that data are available, 15,106 students were retained under the policy.

The decline in retentions stems in part to students receiving more good cause promotions in the early years of the policy and to fewer students receiving a level 1 on the FCAT (OPPAGA 2008, pp. 2–3). Figure 3 shows the number of exemptions continued to climb in the second and third years of the policy before decreasing and leveling off in the latter years. Figure 4 shows that level 1 scores decreased from 27 percent to 17 percent over the nine years from 2002 to 2010.

Little other systemic data on the implementation exists. According to OPPAGA, Florida did not systematically monitor implementation of the policy beyond requiring reports of retentions and exemptions (OPPAGA 2006, pp. 2–3). In response, OPPAGA in 2004–2005

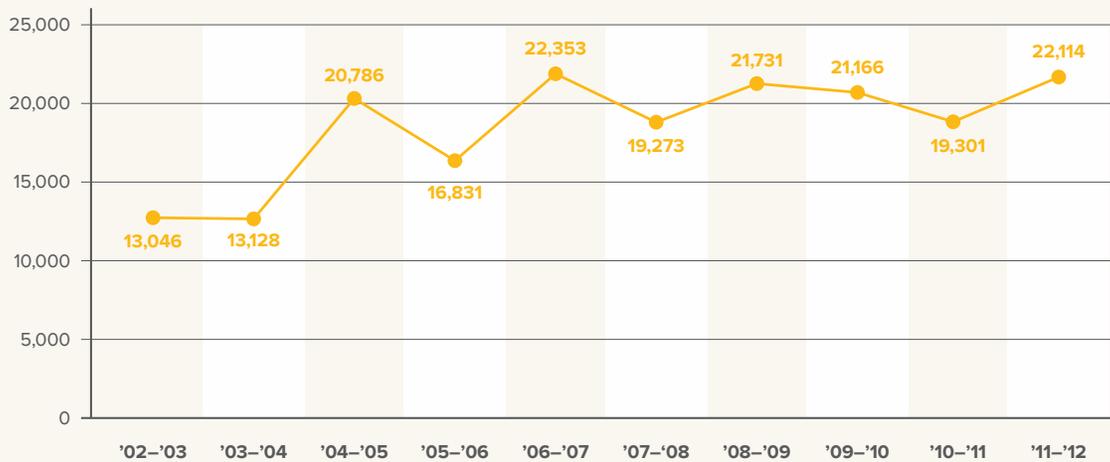
conducted a small study of 10 elementary schools in seven districts to understand the schools’ responses to the policy. The study found that the schools implemented the statutorily required measures, as well as other instructional and organizational strategies to improve students reading proficiencies before third grade and once students were retained (OPPAGA 2006, pp. 8–9). However, this sample of 10 schools, which researchers intentionally selected for their high proportion of students scoring level 1, may not represent the responses of all elementary schools or the experience of all retained students. Therefore, it is still largely unknown to what extent and in what ways the schools and districts implemented all components of the policy, foremost the remediation services.

Evidence of Success

The steady improvements on FCAT, shown in Figure 4, and on NAEP demonstrate that the Florida system has improved its ability to teach more of its youngest learners to read.

FIGURE 3

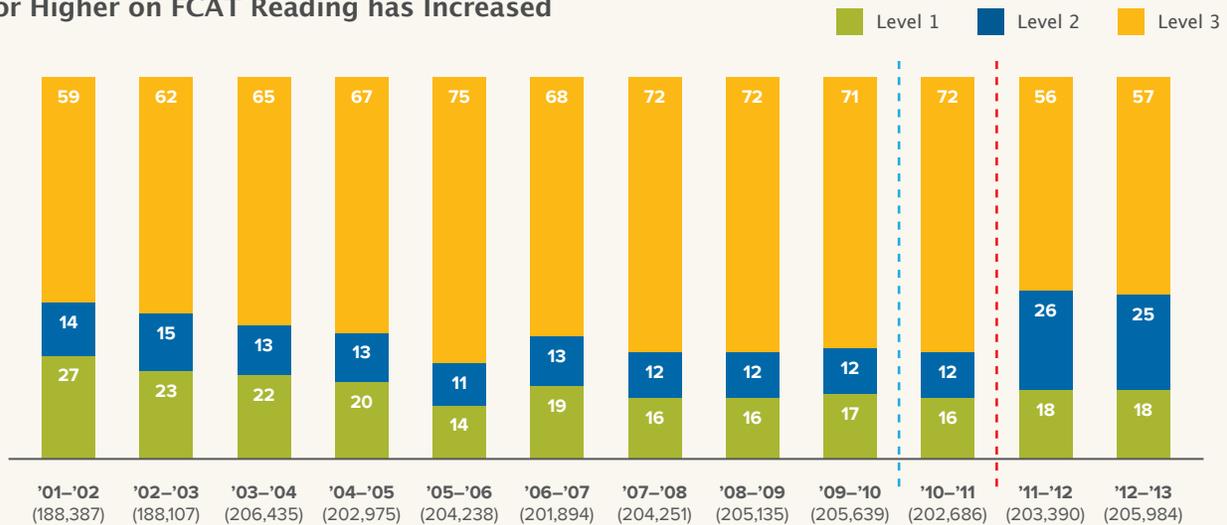
Number of Third Grade Good Cause Promotions



Source: Author with data from Florida’s Department of Education.

FIGURE 4

The Percentage of Third Graders Scoring Level 3 or Higher on FCAT Reading has Increased



Source: OPPAGA 2008 updated by author with data from Florida’s Department of Education Third Grade FCAT Reading Results.

Notes: Scores to the right of the blue, dashed line are those from FCAT 2.0. In 2011, Florida introduced FCAT 2.0 for Reading to measure student achievement of the Next Generation Sunshine State Standards (NGSSS) in reading, replacing the Sunshine State Standards. Scores to the right of the red, dashed line are those from FCAT 2.0 with new Achievement Level Standards. On December 19, 2011, the

State Board of Education established new Achievement Level standards for FCAT 2.0 Reading. Spring 2012 is the first time results are being reported according to these new standards. Because the FCAT 2.0 is based on more demanding content standards and the achievement standards are more rigorous, scores may appear lower on the new scale than on the previous scale for certain grades and subjects.

Like the FCAT scores discussed above, Florida’s performance on the fourth grade and eighth grade NAEP reading assessments has improved markedly over the last decade. From 1992 to 2011, Florida’s fourth grade scores increased by 16 points (approximately one and a half grades, given that a gain of 10 points on NAEP is roughly a grade level), and in 2011, the percentage of fourth graders at or above proficient was higher than their peers in the nation. For eighth grade readers, the average score increased from lower than the national average in 1998 to not significantly different from the nation in 2011 (National Center for Education Statistics 2013, p.10).

However, on closer inspection, these results do not provide definitive evidence of this specific policy’s success. Foremost, correlation does not equate to causation. For example, the sale of holiday cards increases substantially following the start of colder weather; however, the colder weather does not cause

people to purchase more holiday cards. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Florida instituted a number of efforts focused on improving broadly the education system and specifically on reading for young students: Governor Jeb Bush’s A+ Plan from 1999–2007; Just Read, Florida! in 2001; a class-size reduction effort in 2002; Federal Reading First in 2002; Florida Center for Reading Research in 2002 and others. Any of these efforts individually or collectively—rather than the third grade retention policy—may account for the improvements.

Plus, assuming positively that the retention policy triggered a systematic response, causing more children to master reading and fewer children to be retained, the important questions remain—what is the policy’s impact on the students retained?

Even after the improvements in scores on FCAT and NAEP, how do the tens of thousands of students still being retained every year fare? Here the proponents have compelling evidence of success.

In 2012, new research on Florida's retention policy—with more methodological rigor—emerged to somewhat bolster the proponents' position, without providing them a definitive victory. Due to the objectivity of the Florida policy, researchers used regression discontinuity to create two groups of students: one group that barely passed the exam and was promoted and a second group that barely failed it and was retained (Winters, pp. 4–6; Schwerdt and West, pp. 11–14). For these students, randomness (or the difference of one or two questions on the FCAT) played a large role in determining in which group they ended up. Therefore, similar students received dissimilar treatments, and any differences on academic outcomes between them in the future can be attributed to the policy. The design also allows the researchers to isolate the impact of the retention policy, as any other policy or practices change (e.g., smaller classroom sizes would have affected both groups).

By tracking the two groups of students over time, researchers have studied whether or not the academic gains of students who were retained remained statistically significant five years after being held back. One researcher (Winters, p. 7) found that Florida's retention policy improved retained students' performance in math and reading through the seventh grade at a statistically significant level over their socially promoted peers, while another (Schwerdt and West, p. 24) found that the dramatic short-term improvements in achievement of retained students diminished over time and became statistically insignificant within five years. The later researcher also found that the policy implemented in Florida:

- decreased retained students' likelihood of future retention in a subsequent grade;
- did not impact student absences; and
- did not increase special education classifications (Schwerdt and West, p.24).

Impacts on important longer-term outcomes, such as high school graduation and dropout rates, will be available in the near future, as the first cohort of students under the 2002–2003 policy graduated in 2013.

While the new research provides initial evidence of the policy's success, it still fails to explain what aspects of the policy (the retention of students, or the remediation they received, or both together) are causing the academic improvements. Notwithstanding the lacuna in the systematic implementation data, the dominant narrative is that Florida did more than just retain kids: Florida ensured those students got the necessary instruction and support in the repeated year to make real progress and supported its teachers to deliver quality instruction. Critics of the policy highlight that the remediation without retention may be enough to explain positive impacts. The controversy clearly continues.

Unknown Impact in Arizona

Citing Florida as an exemplar, Arizona adopted a third grade reading policy in 2010, called Move On When Reading (MOWR, A.R.S. 15–701), and identified the first third graders in spring 2014 for retention in the 2014–2015 academic year. Despite the references to Florida, Arizona's policy differs substantially from Florida's. Equally important, the numbers of third graders projected to be impacted and the overall state context differ, while the response of districts and schools to the policy and to their struggling readers is only now emerging. Given these differences and implementation choices to come, the positive results achieved in Florida are not guaranteed for Arizona. Whether Arizona's new policy will help or hurt its struggling readers is unknown.

A Different Policy

The following table compares important aspects of the two policies as written. In addition to the fewer good cause promotions, Arizona's most notable difference from its Floridian model is the fewer and less intensive remediation services to be offered to retained students.

Florida sought to provide retained third graders a package of supports, while Arizona has opted to allow school district governing boards to select one service from a menu of options. In addition, whereas

Florida’s policy called for students to be assigned to a “high-performing” teacher, Arizona specifies only a “different” teacher.

Two States, Two Policies

Florida	Arizona
Retains students in the lowest of 5 categories on state assessment (Level 1)	Retains students in the lowest of 4 categories on state assessment (Falls Far Below)
Allows for 6 good cause promotions	Allows for 2 good cause promotions
<p>Requires 4 remediation strategies for retained students:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • summer reading camp, AND • academic improvement plan, AND • 90 minutes daily of research-based reading instruction, AND • assignment to a “high-performing” teacher in the retention year. 	<p>Requires 1 of 4 remediation strategies for retained students:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • summer school reading remediation, OR • intensive reading instruction before, during or after regular school day, OR • online reading instructions for interventions, OR • assignment to a different teacher in the retention year.
Requires early identification of struggling readers in grades K–3, early (unspecified) intervention for struggling readers in K–3 and communication with parent.	Requires early identification of struggling readers in grades K–3, early (unspecified) intervention for struggling readers in K–3 and communication with parents.

A Different Context

Policies are not implemented in a vacuum; context has important effects on policy implementation and outcomes. While Arizona and Florida share some similarities beyond plenty of sun and retirees, the two states also differ on factors that impact implementation. For example, in the Florida education system, each of the 67 counties comprises a school district responsible for elementary and secondary education; whereas, Arizona has more than 200 elementary and unified (K–12) school districts.

A Different Scale

In addition to the design differences, the number of students affected by the policy will differ substantially between the two states. In the first year of implementation in Florida, 14.4 percent of third graders were retained or nearly 28,000 children. In contrast, the Arizona Department of Education (ADE) has reported that while scores of 2,200 (or less than 3 percent) third graders this year will place them at risk of retention, as many as 70 percent of these students may be eligible for promotion based on one of the two legal exemptions². While the scale of the impact is clearly smaller in Arizona than Florida, it is unclear what this scale means in terms of the sea change desired by proponents. Will the substantially smaller scale in Arizona generate pressure on the education system to rally to the needs of its most vulnerable readers?

CONCLUSION...FOR NOW

While Florida's third grade reading policy enjoys less definitive evidence of success than its most vocal proponents claim, it has improved retained students' performance in math and reading up to seventh grade and decreased their likelihood of future retention. It remains unknown what (retention or remediation or the two together) drove the impacts in Florida and whether Arizona's variation in the unique context of Arizona will achieve similar results. Right now, Arizona is in a critical period, as it decides how to implement the policy, especially the retention and support services.

Responding to this situation, Helios Education Foundation brought together the authors of the 2012 Florida studies, Dr. Marcus Winters and Dr. Martin West, and researchers from WestEd, a nonprofit, public research and development agency, to generate rigorous evidence to inform this policy issue. WestEd will investigate how districts and schools interpret and implement the policy's core components and required interventions, while Dr. Winters and Dr. West will seek to determine the impacts of the Arizona policy on student achievement, future retention, special education placements, and attendance. In addition, Dr. Winters and Dr. West will conduct longer-term follow-up to assess the impact of the Florida policy on high school course taking, graduation, and college matriculation. Over the course of the next three years, the researchers will release a series of reports on their findings.

The resulting evidence from these forthcoming studies will enable policymakers and others to engage in a well-informed policy debate in Florida and Arizona and across the country to improve policy and implementation efforts, and, hopefully, to lead more eight- and nine-year-olds to reading success.

²The smaller number of students to be retained in Arizona than Florida should not be interpreted as an indicator that Arizona does a better job in teaching reading. The smaller number is caused by both Arizona's smaller student population and by differences between Arizona and Florida's state reading assessments. Compared with Florida, Arizona has far fewer students reading at or above proficient level on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the nation's standard report card.

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