

Michigan's Read by Grade Three Law: Year One Report

MARCH 2021

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The research reported here was supported by the Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, through Grant R305H190004 to Michigan State University. The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not represent views of the Institute or the U.S. Department of Education.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors wish to acknowledge the many people who graciously gave of their time in support of this effort. We are grateful to the nearly 19,000 educators who participated in our surveys of teachers, principals, superintendents, and ISD Early Literacy Coaches during the spring of 2020 and to the many education stakeholders who spoke with us.

We are also indebted to a number of individuals who provided technical and research support for this study. From the Michigan Department of Education, we would like to thank Dr. Michael Rice, Sheila Alles, Dr. Venessa Keesler, Brandy Bugni, and Kellie Flaminio for their support and thoughtful feedback. We would also like to thank the many staff from the Center for Educational Performance and Information who assisted us with obtaining and understanding the administrative data, and in particular Tom Howell, Trina Anderson, Mike McGroarty, and Rod Bernosky. In addition, we learned a great deal from feedback and conversation with members of the Early Literacy Task Force, especially Naomi Norman, Susan Townsend, and Erin Brown, and with Dr. Nell Duke from the University of Michigan. As always, we appreciate our partners at the University of Michigan, and in particular Dr. Brian Jacob, for his thoughtful feedback on parts of our analyses. At Michigan State University, we thank Emily Hatch, Lori Bruner and Yujin Oh for their research assistance as well as Emily Mohr for her coordination and thoughtful suggestions and Michelle Huhn for formatting the text and graphics for the report. Finally, we thank Bridgette Redman for her work copy editing the report.

Lastly, the authors are grateful to U.S. Department of Education Institute for Education Sciences (R305H190004) and to the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and Michigan State University's College of Education for their generous financial support of the Education Policy Innovation Collaborative and this study.





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Michigan's Read by Grade Three Law:
Year One Report

Executive Summary



**Education Policy
Innovation Collaborative**
RESEARCH WITH CONSEQUENCE

March 2021

Year One Report: Executive Summary

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Purpose of The Report

In 2016, the Michigan legislature passed the Read by Grade Three Law in response to growing concerns about literacy rates among Michigan students. The Read by Grade Three Law aims to improve early literacy outcomes for students across the state of Michigan through improved instruction, implementation of early monitoring and identification systems, required interventions for students identified as having a “reading deficiency” under the Law, and a requirement that students who do not meet a state standard for reading proficiency by the end of the third grade will be retained.

This is the first of five reports that will be released by the Education Policy Innovation Collaborative (EPIC) at Michigan State University (MSU), in collaboration with researchers from the University of Michigan, as part of a four-year evaluation of the implementation and efficacy of the Read by Grade Three Law. EPIC is the strategic partner to the **Michigan Department of Education (MDE)**, however as with all EPIC research, this evaluation and its results are independent of MDE and the conclusions and recommendations are EPIC’s own.

The purpose of this first interim report is to provide an overview of how the Law was formed and intended to work, its early implementation through spring 2020, and its early effects on relevant outcomes for Michigan students and educators.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND STUDY OVERVIEW

This report focuses on four main research questions about the early implementation and effects of the Read by Grade Three Law:

1. How was the Read by Grade Three Law formed and intended to work?
2. How is the Read by Grade Three Law being implemented in Michigan? Does implementation vary across populations and places, and if so, why?
3. Is the Read by Grade Three Law meeting its goal to improve literacy achievement and attainment for Michigan students? For which students, if any, is the policy particularly successful?
4. Is the policy an efficient use of resources?

To gain insight into these questions from different perspectives and contexts, we employ a mixed-methods design that combines multiple sources of data (outlined in Table 1) and multiple methods of analysis. Interviews of state-level stakeholders provide context about the development of the Law. We join these data with surveys of teachers, principals, district superintendents, and Early Literacy Coaches to examine perceptions about the Law's implementation and early efficacy. To assess the early effects of the Law on a variety of student and teacher outcomes, we analyze longitudinal administrative records using an interrupted time series approach.

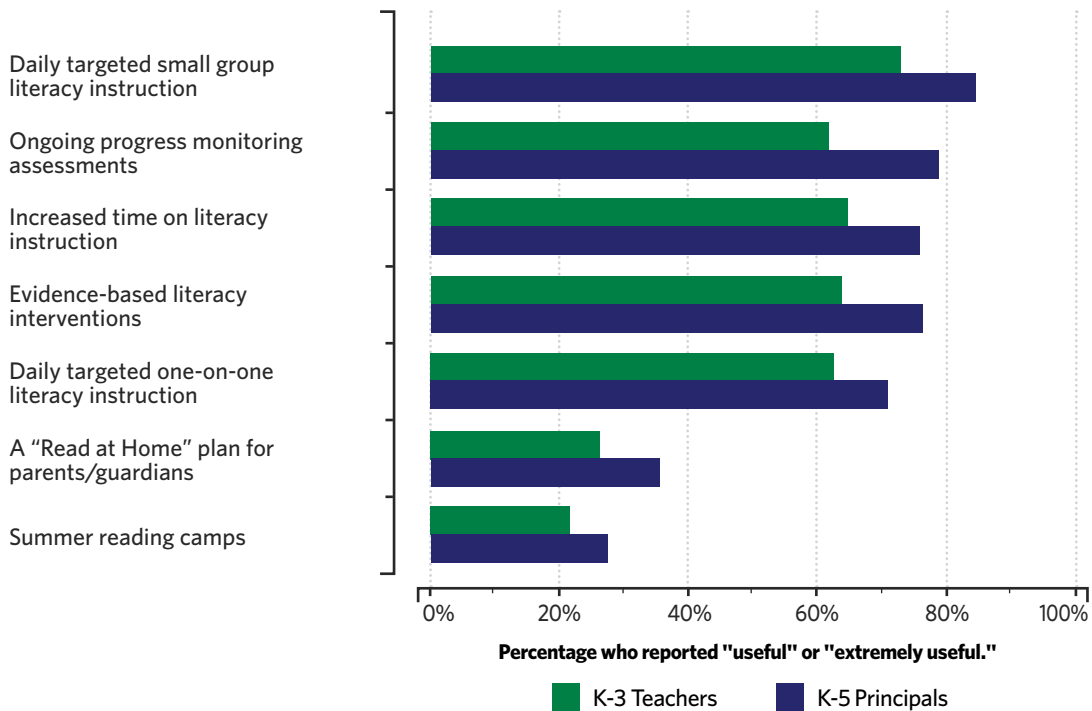
TABLE 1. Data Sources		
Data	Sample	Outcomes / Areas of Interest
Stakeholder interviews	11 state-level policymakers, 5 MDE personnel, and 8 external stakeholders	Formation, perceptions, and early implementation of the Law
Educator surveys	17,532 K-8 teachers, 928 K-8 principals, 192 district superintendents, and 33 ISD Early Literacy Coaches	Literacy instructional practice, professional learning, coaching, curricula, and interventions Understanding, perceptions, early implementation, and costs of the Law
State administrative records	4.7 million K-5 student-year observations and 209,000 K-5 teacher-year observations from 2012-13 through 2018-19	Student achievement, grade retention, special education placement, English learner program participation, student and educator mobility

KEY FINDINGS

Third-grade student achievement has improved and educators attribute gains to the literacy supports identified in the Law. ELA scores have increased each year since the Law was implemented, with students in traditionally underserved districts experiencing the greatest gains. Although we cannot definitively attribute these gains to the Law, educators report finding many of the Law's required interventions to be useful and effective in improving student literacy and achievement. As Figure 1 shows, most teachers and principals indicated that they (or the teachers

in their school) use daily targeted small group or one-on-one reading instruction, evidence-based literacy interventions, increased time spent on reading instruction, and ongoing progress monitoring assessments in their classrooms and find them to be useful.

FIGURE 1. Reported Usefulness of Literacy Interventions



Note: This figure combines results from multiple survey questions. Teachers and principals were asked, "To what extent are you (or the teachers in your school) using the following interventions when you work with students who are identified as having a 'reading deficiency'? If you use it, how useful is it in improving students' literacy?" Respondents who answered "Not at all" for using an intervention were instructed to leave the "usefulness" question blank. Source: EPIC survey of educators about the Read by Grade Three Law.

Fiscal and human capital constraints created barriers to hiring sufficient quantities of literacy coaches. State-level stakeholders cite the matching requirement for ISD Early Literacy Coach funding and a lack of available, qualified educators outside the extant supply of classroom teachers as factors contributing to this shortage. Administrators in districts with high predicted retention rates—those that could benefit the most from literacy coaching—were least likely to report an increase in the number of ISD Early Literacy Coaches working in their school or district since the Law passed.

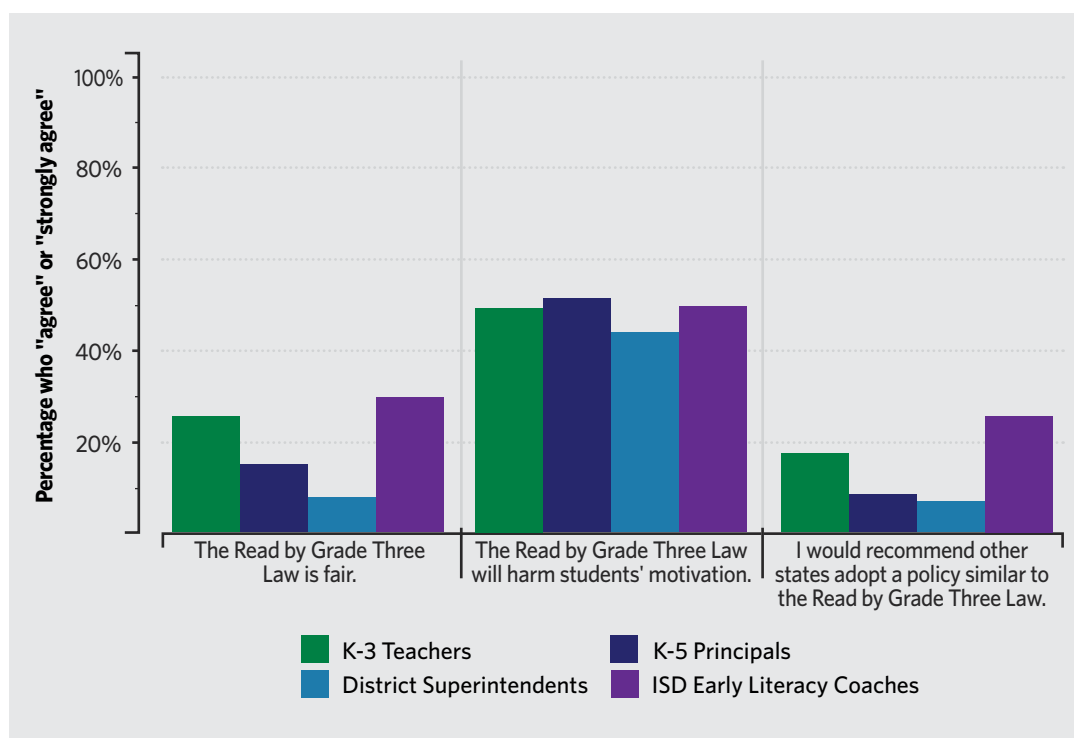
There were disparities in the availability and quality of literacy resources. Educators in districts with high predicted retention rates, low ELA performance, or higher proportions of economically disadvantaged students had less favorable perceptions of their schools' ability to recruit and retain high-quality teachers, availability of library resources, access to a variety of reading materials, and quality of literacy instruction for students with IEPs or Section 504 Plans.

The retention component of the Law remains particularly controversial. While the majority of state-level stakeholders we interviewed disliked retention, many perceived its inclusion to be a tool intended to ensure that schools took early literacy seriously. Others worried that retention

would inequitably and adversely affect students who already have been underserved by the public education system and could have long-term and adverse effects on retained students. The far majority of educators reported that the retention component of the Law caused stress in the school community, and few believe that retaining third grade students will improve student literacy. Accordingly, most district superintendents indicated that they planned to retain third-grade students only on a case-by-case basis, if at all.

Educators held negative perceptions of the Read by Grade Three Law. As Figure 2 shows, very few educators believed that the Law was fair or would recommend that other states adopt similar policies. Moreover, nearly half believed that the Law would harm students' motivation. Given the generally positive impressions educators held about the Law's required interventions other than retention, it seems likely that negative perceptions of the Law are driven by educators' dislike of the retention component.

FIGURE 2. Educators' Perceptions of the Read by Grade Three Law



Note: Teachers, principals, district superintendents, and ISD Early Literacy Coaches were asked, "To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the Read by Grade Three Law?" Source: EPIC survey of educators about the Read by Grade Three Law.

COVID-19 led to concerns about literacy instruction and disrupted the implementation of the Law. In light of the pandemic, the retention requirement of the Law was suspended for the 2019-20 school year, but all other components of the Law remained in place. Most educators expressed concern that their students would return to school behind in literacy, and that barriers would prevent them from accessing materials for literacy learning.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Continue to focus on evidence-based literacy interventions. In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, it will be more important than ever to provide resources to help K-3 teachers continue to implement evidence-based literacy supports. Moreover, given the disruption to K-12 schooling caused by the pandemic, policymakers may wish to consider again pausing on retention in the 2020-21 school year to help provide educators and students with the space to focus on literacy without fear of high-stakes consequences. In addition, given the controversy over retention that existed before the pandemic and that has only increased since March 2020, policymakers may want to re-evaluate the likely efficacy of retention as a central component of the state’s early literacy policy.

Schools and districts need additional funding to help recruit and retain literacy coaches. Educators perceived literacy coaches to be effective, but data suggest that there are not enough of them to adequately serve all the teachers, schools, and districts who need them. State policymakers and ISD and district leaders should consider how to increase the number of literacy coaches and allocate these personnel to schools and teachers who need them the most. In doing so, it will be important to reflect upon how best to continue recruiting and training literacy coaches to increase the number without exacerbating the state’s teacher shortage.

Funding and resources should be allocated in ways that attend to existing inequities in literacy supports and outcomes. Literacy resources—coaches and otherwise—have been inequitably distributed across districts and ISDs. Policymakers should consider ways to target resources and funding to traditionally underserved districts in which teachers and students can benefit the most from additional instructional supports and higher quality literacy resources.