



**Education Policy
Innovation Collaborative**
RESEARCH WITH CONSEQUENCE

AUGUST 2021

Education Policy Innovation Collaborative

Preliminary Read by Grade Three Retention Estimates

Overview and Purpose

As the strategic research partner to the Michigan Department of Education (MDE), the Education Policy Innovation Collaborative (EPIC) provides technical support to improve education outcomes for Michigan students. Since 2019, EPIC has been working closely with MDE and the Center for Educational Performance and Information (CEPI) to study the impact of the Read by Grade Three Law in real-time as the policy takes effect. The Read by Grade Three Law aims to improve early literacy outcomes for students across the state 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 3rd grade will be retained.

The retention component of the Law was set to take effect in the 2019-20 school year. However, the requirement was waived as state testing was suspended due to COVID-19 school building closures. Now that state testing has resumed for the 2020-21 school year, 3rd grade students who scored below a state-determined cut-off on the ELA M-STEP assessment are for the first time eligible for retention under the Read by Grade Three Law.

MDE has asked EPIC to estimate retention outcomes for Michigan public school students in 2021 based on their scores on the 3rd grade ELA M-STEP assessment. In response, we have computed statewide retention eligibility rates, retention eligibility rates for subgroup classifications of tested students, and for subgroups of tested students in different school

types and geographic locales. We have also calculated “lower bound estimates” of Read by Grade Three retention rates based on likely good cause exemptions to show a range of potential outcomes under the Law. To provide context for these rates, we also analyzed the proportion of 3rd grade students who took the 3rd grade ELA M-STEP assessment this year.

Data and Methods

Third-grade students with ELA M-STEP scores of 1252 or below are eligible for retention under the Read by Grade Three Law. We therefore use this cut-off to calculate an overall retention eligibility rate and also provide subgroup estimates for students by gender and race/ethnicity, as well as for students who are classified as economically disadvantaged, English learners, and students with disabilities. We also provide separate estimates by geographic locale, as well as for Partnership and non-Partnership schools, traditional public schools (TPSs) and public school academies (PSAs, or charter schools), districts in the top and bottom quartiles of ELA achievement based on 2019 M-STEP assessments, and districts providing different instructional modalities (e.g., fully in-person, fully remote, hybrid) in May of 2021.

Students whose test scores fall below the cut-off for retention but are in one of several categories may be promoted to 4th grade with the approval of the district superintendent through a good cause exemption. These categories include: English learners with fewer than three years of English language instruction, students with an Individualized Education Program or Section 504 Plan, students who were previously retained and received intensive reading interventions for two or more years, and students who have been enrolled in their current district for less than two years and were not provided with an appropriate individual reading improvement plan. Students may also receive exemptions by demonstrating proficiency in other subject areas or upon parent request if the superintendent agrees that retention is not in the best interest of the student.

To understand the proportion of students who are eligible for retention net of students who qualify for a good cause exemption, we estimate “lower bounds” by assuming all retention-eligible students who are classified as students with disabilities or English learners, who were previously retained, who participated in a planned two-year kindergarten program, or who have been enrolled in their current district for less than two years are promoted under a good cause exemption. These estimates do not account for students receiving a good cause exemption through a parent request or by demonstrating proficiency in other subject areas, nor do they account for whether students previously received English language instruction, intensive reading interventions, or an Individual Reading Improvement Plan (IRIP). Of course, all of the results presented here are entirely descriptive and based on students’ scores on their ELA M-STEP assessment.

While students attending school in person all or some of the time were expected to sit for the M-STEP, students receiving fully remote instruction were allowed to choose whether they

participated in assessments.ⁱ However, some districts did not require students—even if they were enrolled in-person—to take the M-STEP assessments. As a result, test participation rates varied across districts and by student subgroups, which may have implications for the representativeness of the tested population. We therefore calculate participation rates by race, gender, economic disadvantage status, student with disability status, English learner status, district 2019 ELA performance, and instructional modality in May of 2021 to highlight differences between the populations of students who did and did not participate in the third-grade ELA M-STEP.

Results

PROPORTION OF STUDENTS TAKING THE 3RD GRADE ELA M-STEP

In 2020-21, 71.2% of 3rd grade students took the 3rd grade ELA M-STEP. As can be seen in Table 1, 3rd grade ELA M-STEP assessment participation rates varied substantially across districts and student subgroups.

As expected, students enrolled in districts that only offered remote instruction in May of 2021 were much less likely to sit for the state assessment. In districts that reported providing only fully remote instruction in May 2021, 22.1% of 3rd grade students took the 3rd grade ELA M-STEP. In districts that were not fully remote (i.e., offered in-person or hybrid instruction) in May 2021, 73.6% of 3rd grade students took the 3rd grade ELA M-STEP. Table 1 also shows that African American or Black students were the least likely to take the ELA M-STEP while White students were more likely than their peers to do so. Economically disadvantaged students were also less likely to participate in testing than were their non-economically disadvantaged peers. Students with disabilities and English learners were less likely to participate in the 3rd grade ELA M-STEP than were students without disabilities and not classified as English learners. In addition, only 35.9% of students in districts that had scored in the bottom quartile of ELA achievement in 2018-19 participated in this year's assessment, relative to 80.6% of students in districts that had scored in the top quartile.

By comparison, in the previous M-STEP administration in 2018-19, 96.5% of 3rd grade students took the 3rd grade ELA M-STEP. This significant decrease in M-STEP participation likely has important implications for the representativeness of retention eligibility estimates. If students who are struggling with literacy and might therefore score below the retention cut-off are also less likely to participate in the 3rd grade ELA M-STEP, we are likely underestimating the proportion of students who are more than one grade level behind in reading. The discrepancies in test participation rates among students in districts that had the highest and lowest ELA achievement in 2018-19 suggest that this is likely the case.

TABLE 1. TEST-TAKING RATES BY STUDENT, SCHOOL, AND DISTRICT CHARACTERISTICS

	Percent Taking the 3rd grade ELA M-STEP
All Students	71.2
By Student Characteristics	
African American or Black	43.3
American Indian or Alaska Native	78.5
Asian	65.0
Hispanic or Latino/a/x	62.3
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	70.1
Two or more races	68.3
White	81.3
Female	71.8
Male	70.6
Not Economically Disadvantaged	79.5
Economically Disadvantaged	64.5
Not Student with a Disability	72.2
Student with a Disability	64.5
Not English Learner	72.0
English Learner	63.8
By District Characteristics	
Bottom 25% ELA in 2018-19	35.9
Top 25% ELA in 2018-19	80.6
Fully in-person only	87.2
Fully in-person option	76.6
Hybrid only	79.3
Hybrid option	58.0
Fully remote only	22.1
No Modality Data	41.4

CHARACTERISTICS OF STUDENTS WHO ARE ELIGIBLE FOR 3RD GRADE RETENTION

Figures 1 through 5 show the retention eligibility rates for 3rd grade students overall and by subgroup based on the spring 2021 3rd grade ELA M-STEP assessment. As noted above, these proportions are based on the sample of students who participated in testing (see Table 1).

Overall, 4.8% of the tested population of 3rd grade students are eligible for retention based on their 3rd grade ELA M-STEP scores. There are wide disparities in retention eligibility rates by race and ethnicity, with African American or Black 3rd grade students the most likely to be eligible for retention based on their spring 2021 ELA M-STEP scores and Asian and White 3rd grade students the least likely. Similarly, far more 3rd grade students who are economically disadvantaged are eligible for retention compared to their higher-income peers. Third graders with disabilities and English learners are also more likely to be flagged for retention than their peers.

There are also differences in retention eligibility rates by school and district type. Third-grade students in Michigan's public school academies (PSAs) are more likely to be flagged for retention than their peers in traditional public schools. Third-graders in the state's persistently lowest-performing schools (Partnership schools) are over four times as likely to be eligible for retention than students who do not attend Partnership schools. Similarly, 3rd grade students who attend districts that were in the bottom quartile of ELA achievement in 2018-19 are nearly eight times as likely to be eligible for retention than their peers in districts that were in the top quartile.

Differences persist across district locales, as well, with 3rd grade students in urban areas over twice as likely to be eligible for retention than students in suburban, town, or rural areas. Figure 5 makes clear that 3rd grade students who were enrolled in districts that remained fully remote in May of 2021 were over three times as likely to be eligible for retention than students who were enrolled in districts that offered in-person instruction, and over twice as likely to be retention-eligible than students enrolled in districts offering hybrid instruction.

FIGURE 1. RETENTION ELIGIBILITY RATES BY RACE/ETHNICITY

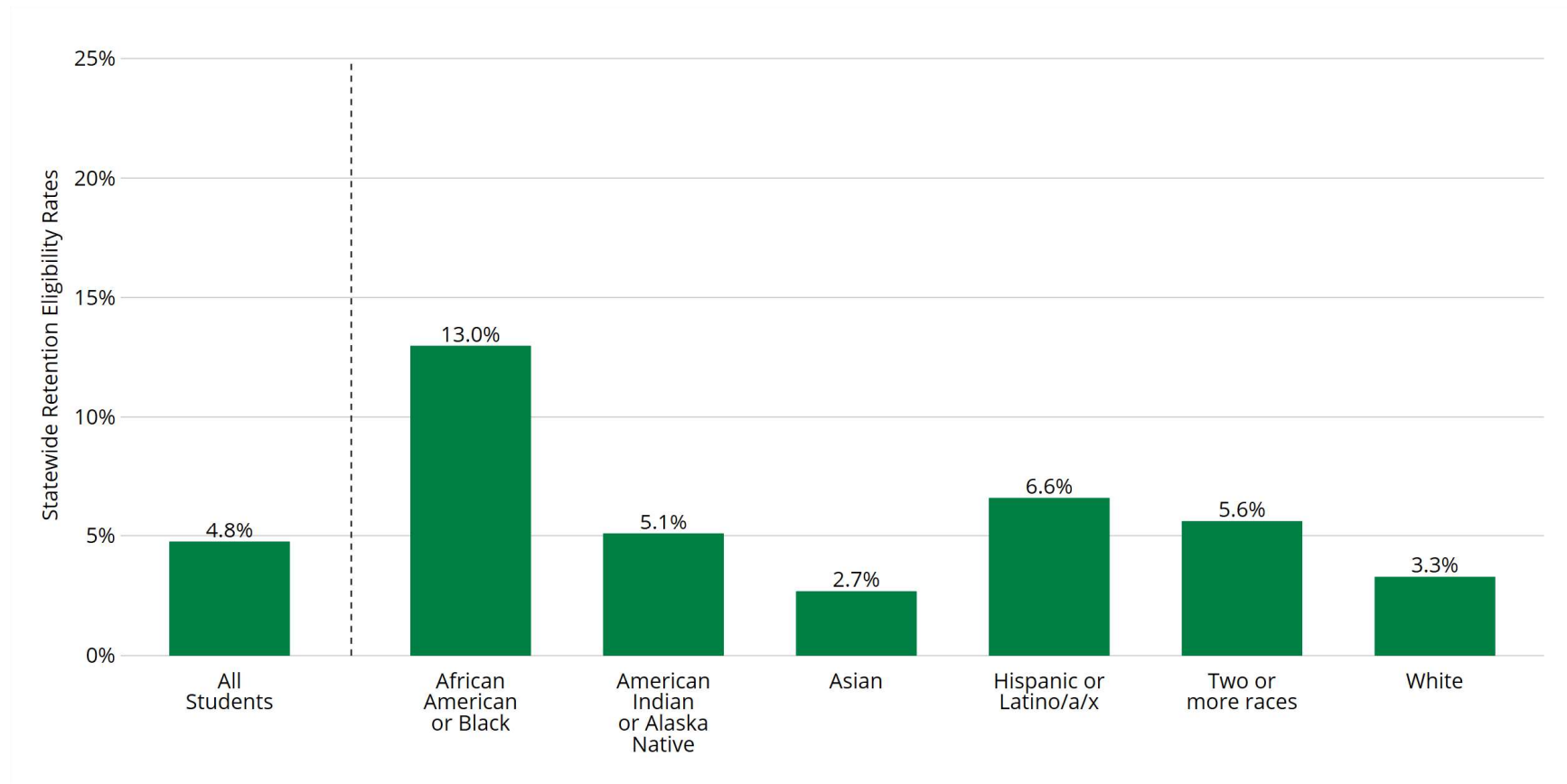
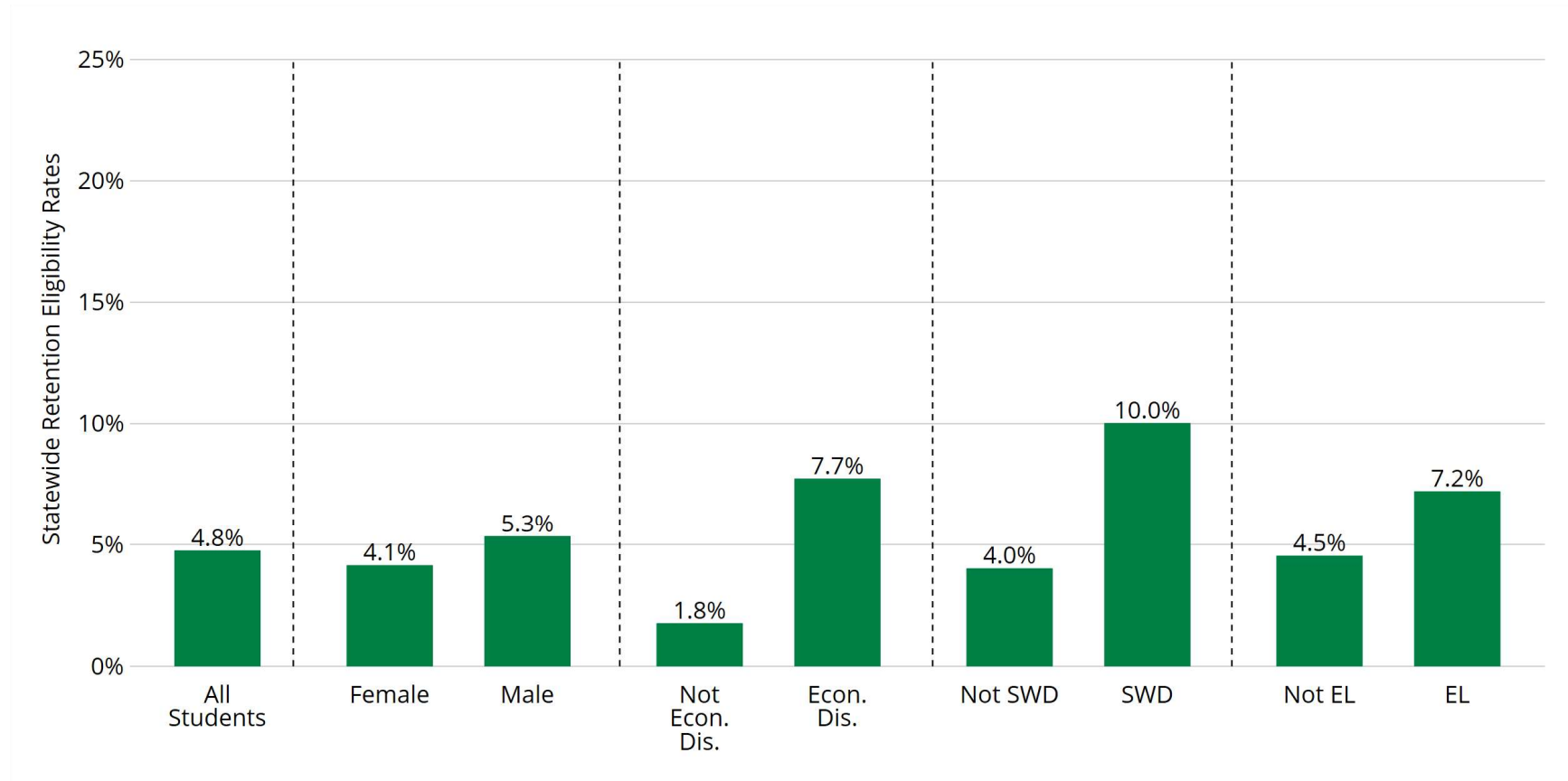
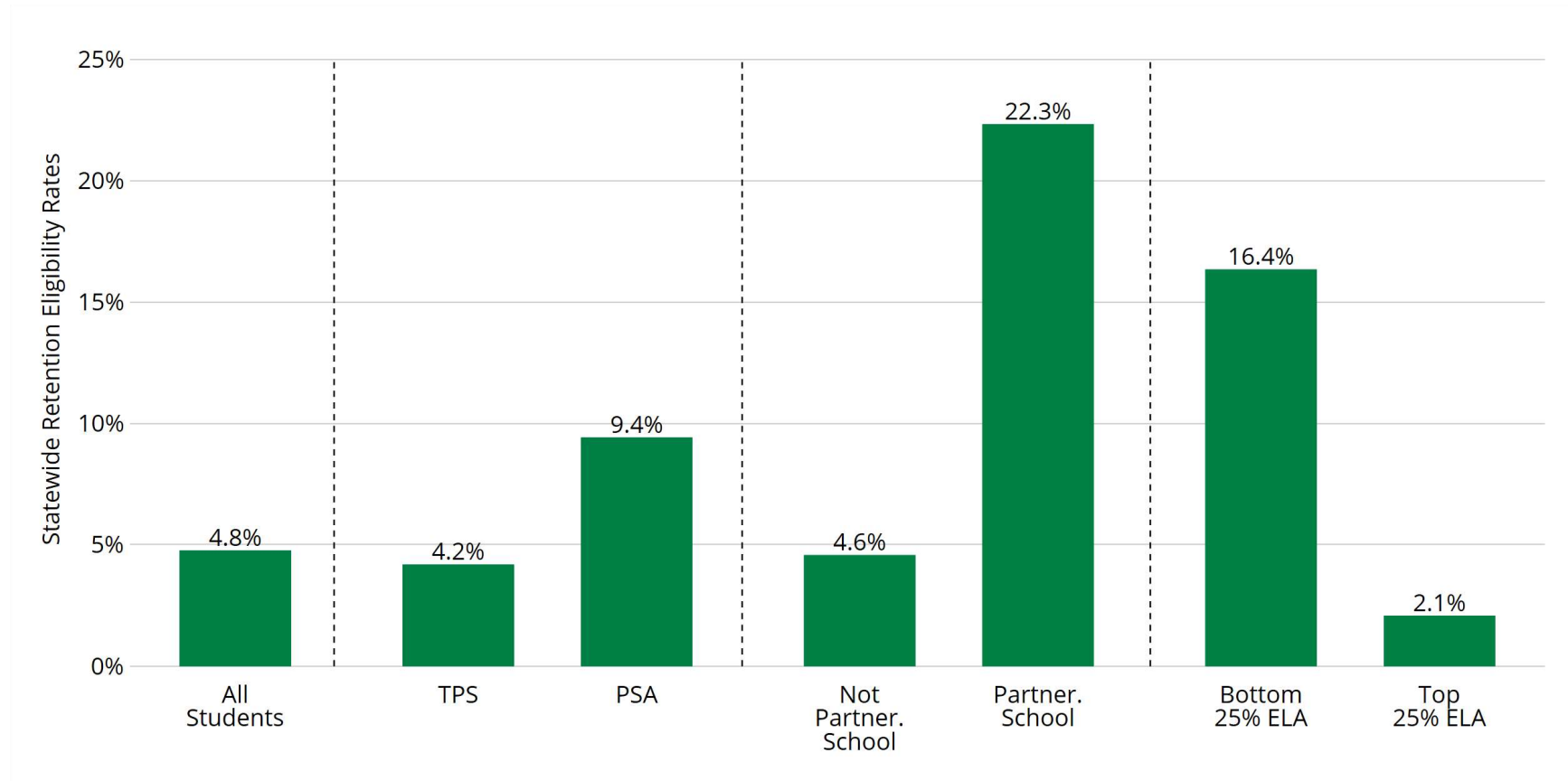


FIGURE 2. RETENTION ELIGIBILITY RATES BY STUDENT CHARACTERISTICS



Note: Econ. Dis. stands for economically disadvantaged. SWD stands for student with disabilities. EL stands for English learner.

FIGURE 3. RETENTION ELIGIBILITY RATES BY SCHOOL CHARACTERISTICS



Note: TPS stands for traditional public school, PSA stands for public school academy, Partner. school stands for Partnership school. Bottom (Top) 25% ELA indicates a student's district was in the bottom (top) 25% of ELA achievement in 2018-19.

FIGURE 4. RETENTION ELIGIBILITY RATES BY SCHOOL URBANICITY

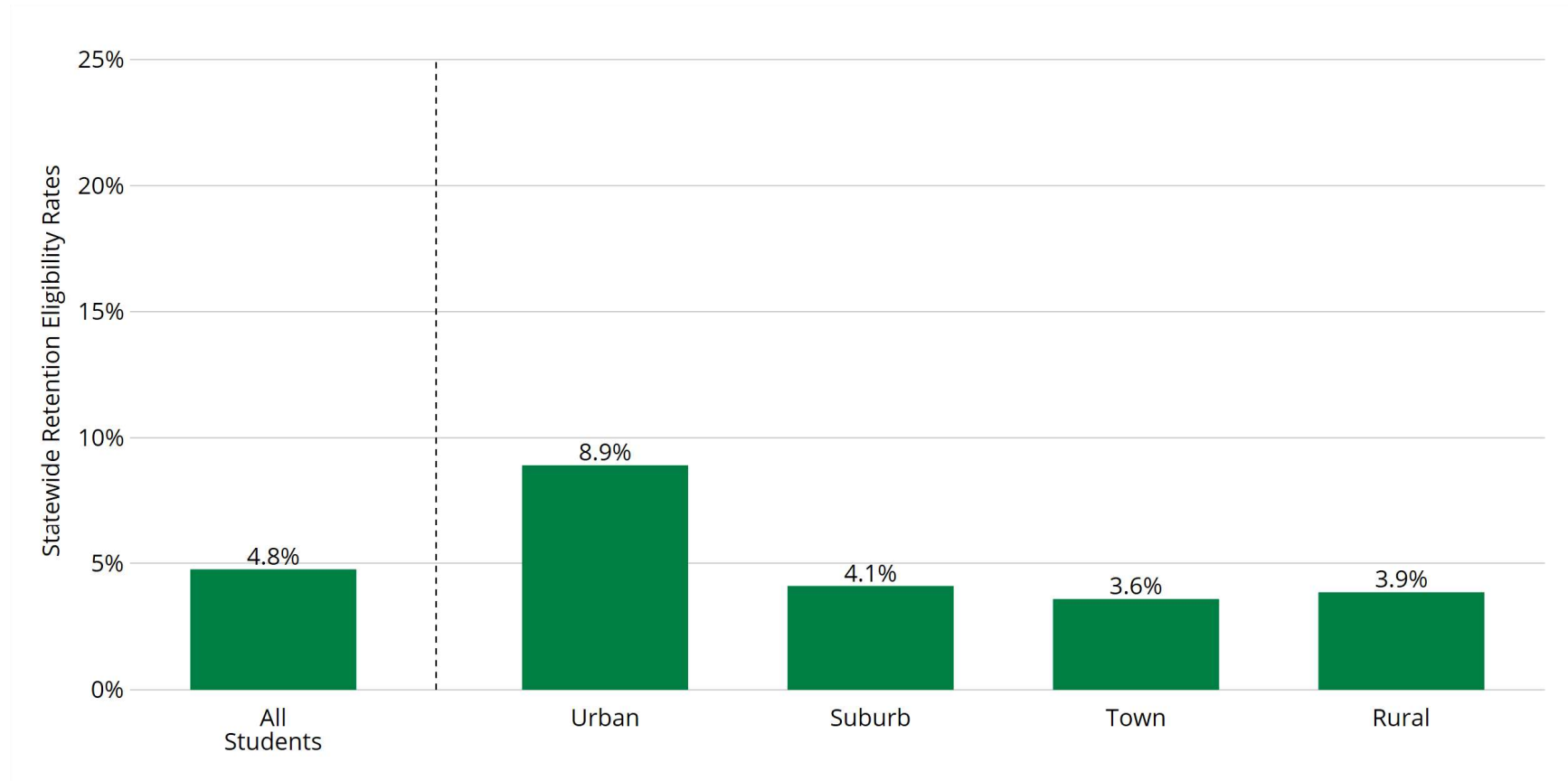
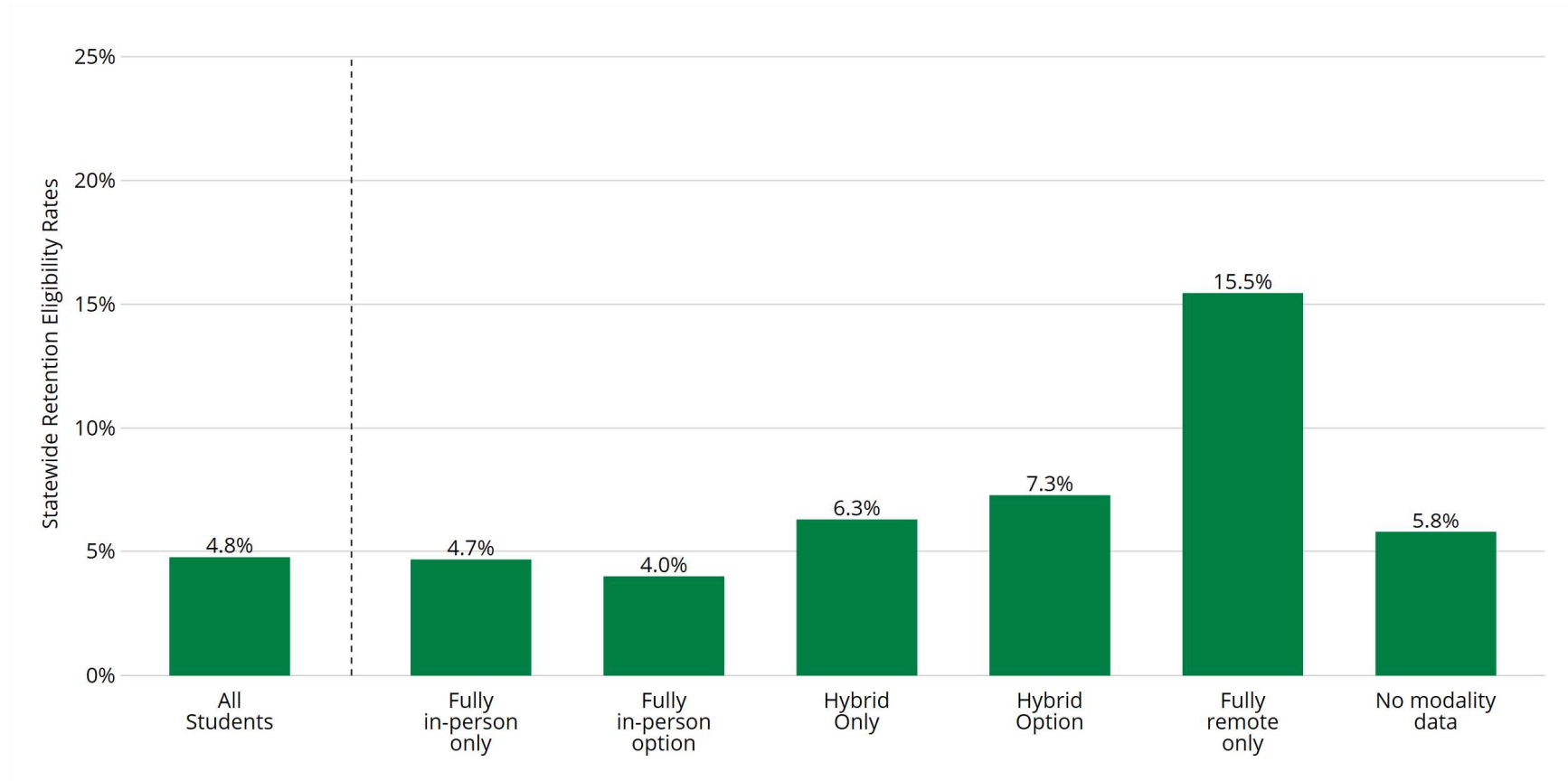


FIGURE 5. RETENTION ELIGIBILITY RATES BY DISTRICT INSTRUCTION MODALITY

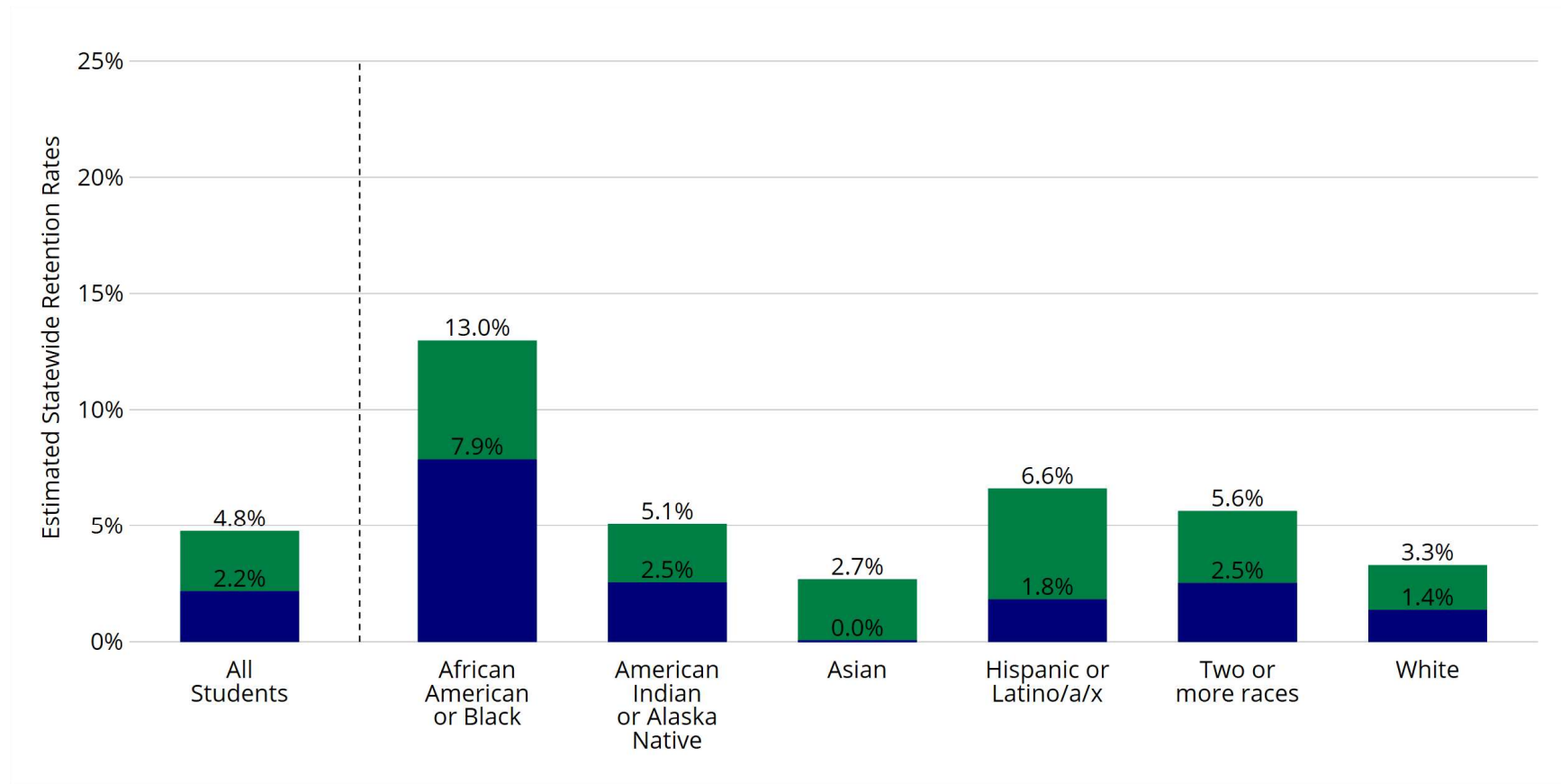


LOWER BOUND 3RD GRADE RETENTION ESTIMATES (NET STUDENTS WHO MIGHT QUALIFY FOR GOOD CAUSE EXEMPTIONS)

Students whose test scores fall below the cut-off for retention but are in one of the following categories may be promoted to 4th grade with the approval of the district superintendent through a good cause exemption: English learners (12.5% of retention eligible students), students with disabilities (25.8%), students who were previously retained (17.0%), students who participated in a planned two-year kindergarten program (4.3%), and students who have been enrolled in their current district for less than two years (10.0%). We estimate lower bounds by assuming all retention-eligible students in these groups are promoted under a good cause exemption. These estimates do not account for students receiving a good cause exemption through a parent request or by demonstrating proficiency in other subject areas as evidenced by scores on other 3rd grade state assessments or a pupil portfolio. We present these lower bound estimates in blue relative to our overall “upper bound” retention eligibility rate estimates in green in Figures 6 through 10.

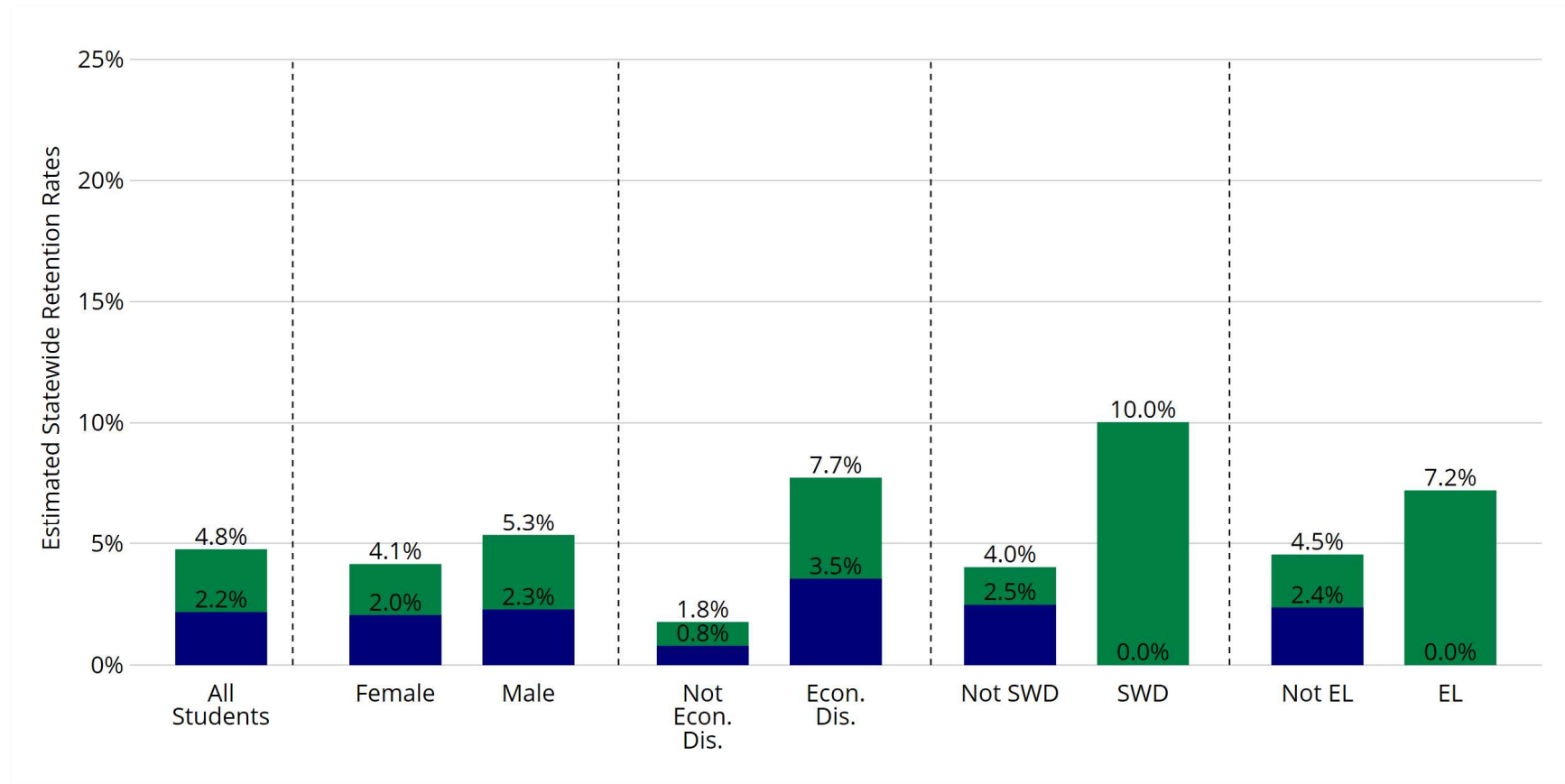
After accounting for factors that qualify students for good cause exemptions, the estimated lower bound overall retention rate drops by more than half (from 4.8% to 2.2%). Subgroup retention eligibility rates decrease as well, although not by consistent amounts across different groups of students. For instance, lower bound estimates suggest that the proportion of African American or Black 3rd grade students who might qualify for retention decreases from 13.0% to 7.9%, while the proportion of Hispanic or Latino/a/x students drops from 6.6% to 1.8%. Almost no Asian or White 3rd grade students would qualify for retention once good cause exemptions are considered. Similarly, less than one percent of 3rd grade students who are not economically disadvantaged qualify for retention after accounting for good cause exemptions relative to 3.5% of economically disadvantaged students. By definition no 3rd grade students with disabilities or English Learners would be retention-eligible under our assumptions of the lower bound estimates. Even after accounting for likely good cause exemptions, 15.5% of 3rd grade students in Partnership Schools and 9.1% of 3rd grade students in districts in the bottom quartile of 2019 ELA test performance would be eligible for retention. Retention eligibility estimates shrink by approximately half for 3rd grade students across all types of instructional modalities.

FIGURE 6. ESTIMATED UPPER AND LOWER BOUNDS OF READ BY GRADE THREE RETENTION RATES BY RACE/ETHNICITY



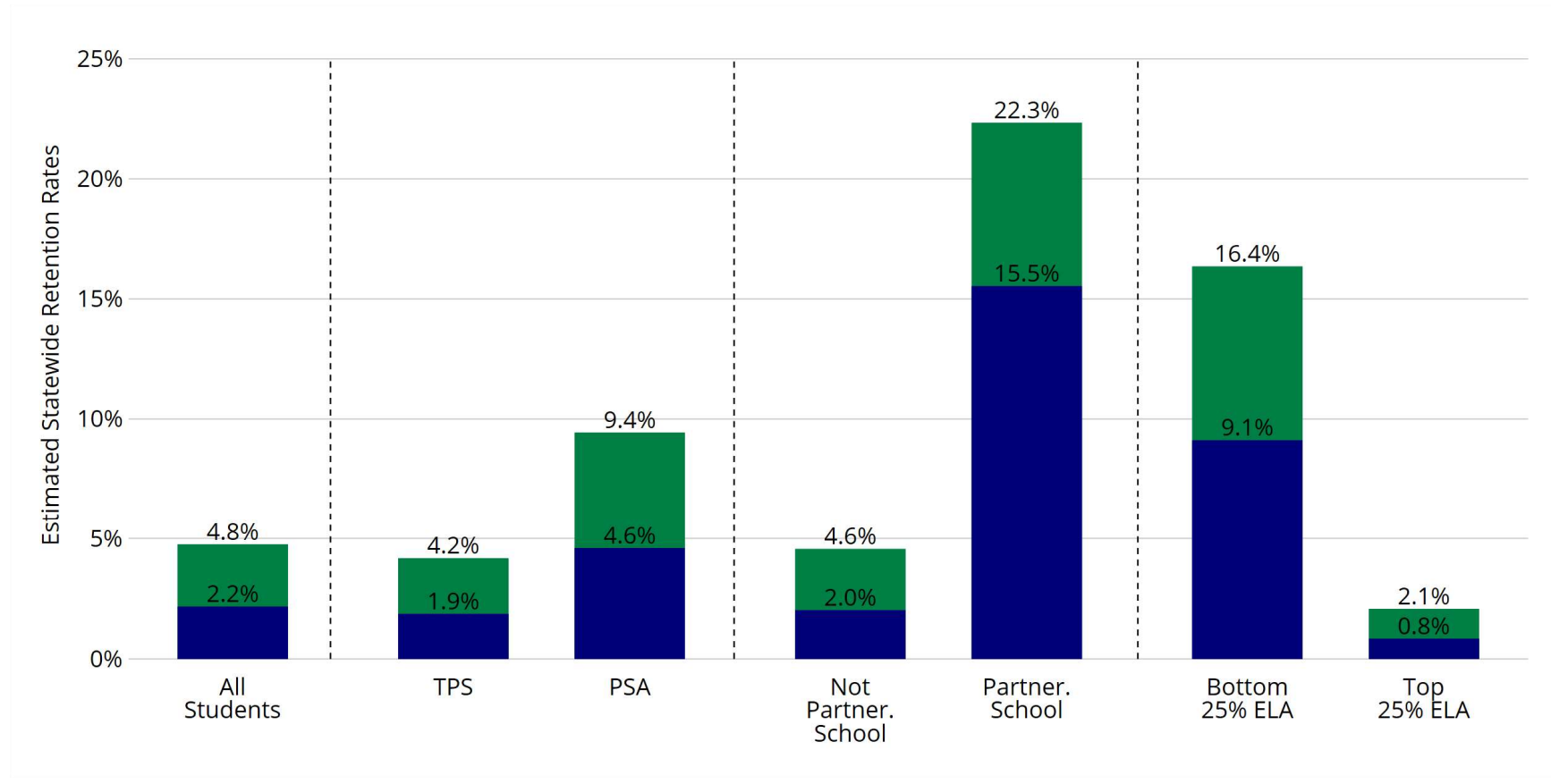
Note: Lower bounds are created by assuming all English learners, students with disabilities, previously retained students, planned two-year kindergarten program students, and students who have been enrolled in their current district for less than two years who are retention eligible are promoted under a good cause exemption outlined in statute.

FIGURE 7. ESTIMATED UPPER AND LOWER BOUNDS OF READ BY GRADE THREE RETENTION RATES BY STUDENT CHARACTERISTICS



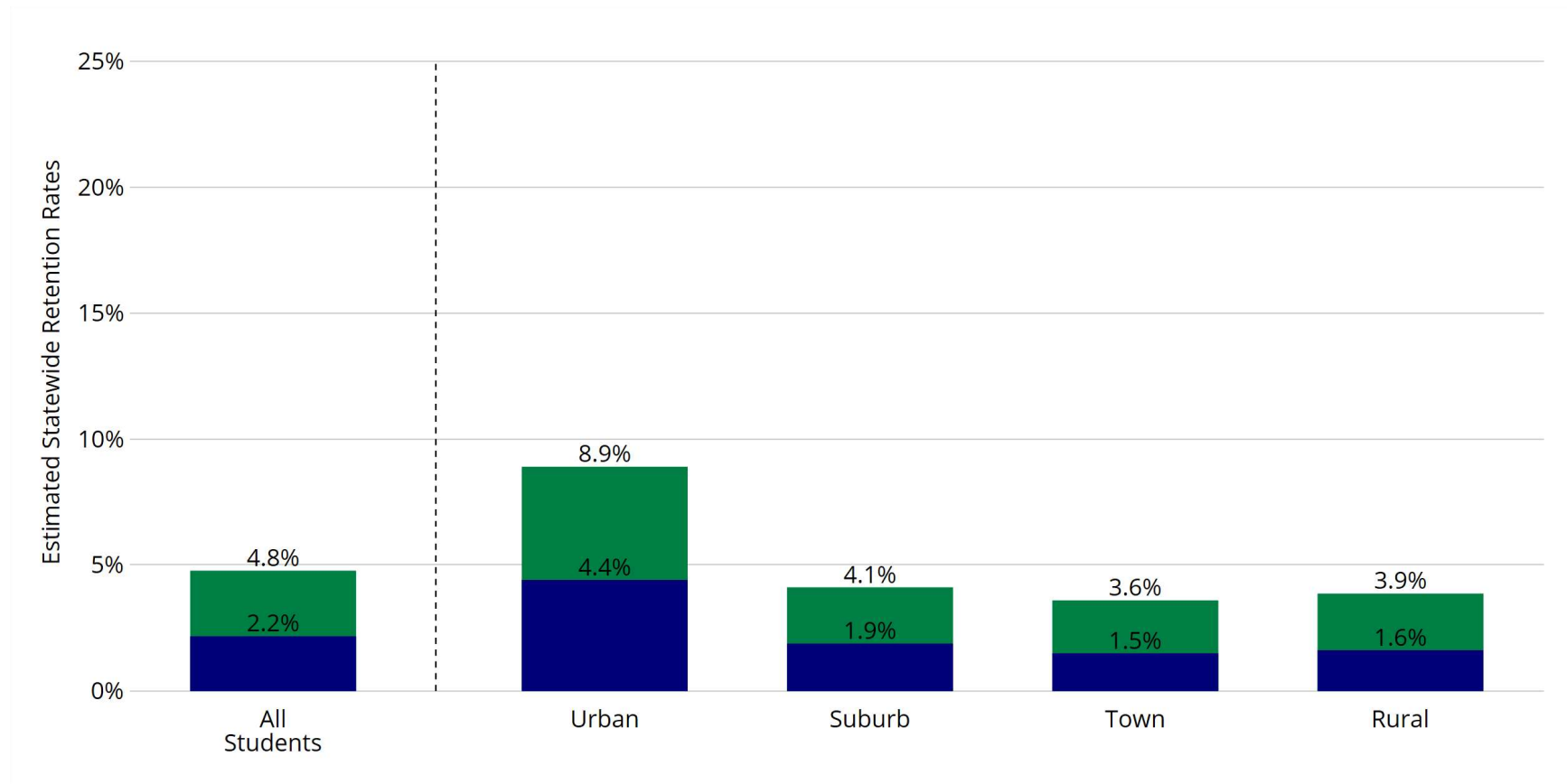
Note: Lower bounds are created by assuming all English learners, students with disabilities, previously retained students, planned two-year kindergarten program students, and students who have been enrolled in their current district for less than two years who are retention eligible are promoted under a good cause exemption outlined in statute. Econ. Dis. stands for economically disadvantaged. SWD stands for student with disabilities. EL stands for English learner.

FIGURE 8. ESTIMATED UPPER AND LOWER BOUNDS OF READ BY GRADE THREE RETENTION RATES BY SCHOOL CHARACTERISTICS



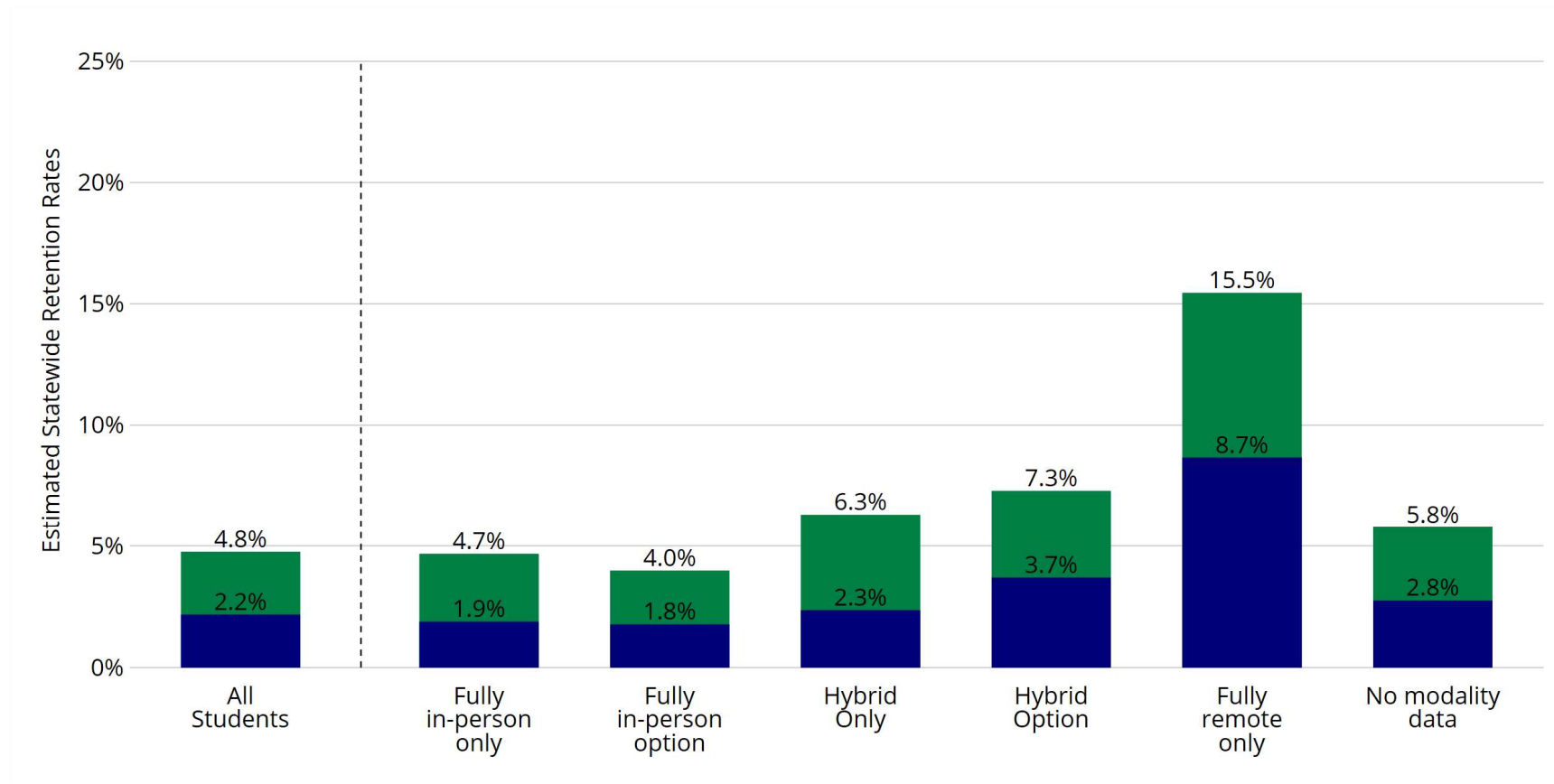
Note: Lower bounds are created by assuming all English learners, students with disabilities, previously retained students, planned two-year kindergarten program students, and students who have been enrolled in their current district for less than two years who are retention eligible are promoted under a good cause exemption outlined in statute. TPS stands for traditional public school, PSA stands for public school academy, Partner. school stands for Partnership school. Bottom (Top) 25% ELA indicates a student's district was in the bottom (top) 25% of ELA achievement in 2018-19.

FIGURE 9. ESTIMATED UPPER AND LOWER BOUNDS OF READ BY GRADE THREE RETENTION RATES BY SCHOOL URBANICITY



Note: Lower bounds are created by assuming all English learners, students with disabilities, previously retained students, planned two-year kindergarten program students, and students who have been enrolled in their current district for less than two years who are retention eligible are promoted under a good cause exemption outlined in statute.

FIGURE 10. ESTIMATED UPPER AND LOWER BOUNDS OF READ BY GRADE THREE RETENTION RATES BY INSTRUCTIONAL MODALITY



Note: Lower bounds are created by assuming all English learners, students with disabilities, previously retained students, planned two-year kindergarten program students, and students who have been enrolled in their current district for less than two years who are retention eligible are promoted under a good cause exemption outlined in statute.

Key Takeaways

There are several key takeaways from this report that shine a light on the types of 3rd grade students who are most likely to be identified for retention under the state's Read by Grade Three Law:

- 4.8% of tested 3rd grade students scored below the pre-determined cut-point on the 2021 ELA M-STEP, making them eligible for retention. This is slightly higher than the 4.1% percent of 3rd grade students who would have been eligible for retention in 2019 based on their spring 2019 ELA M-STEP scores, had the policy been in effect at the time.ⁱⁱ
- Notably, 3rd grade ELA M-STEP participation rates fell by 26.2% in 2020-21 relative to the prior administration in 2018-19 (from 96.5% to 71.2%). Given disparities in test-taking rates, it is likely that the decrease in participation means that this is an underestimate of the true proportion of students who are at least one grade level behind in reading as measured by state assessments.
- When we account for several factors that qualify students for good cause exemptions, our lower bound estimate is that 2.2% of all tested 3rd grade students could be retained under the Read by Grade Three Law.
- There are substantial disparities in the retention-eligibility rates of different groups of 3rd grade students and across different kinds of schools and districts. Far greater proportions of Black or African American, Latino/a/x, and economically disadvantaged students than White and non-economically disadvantaged students are retention eligible. Similarly, tested students whose districts were in the bottom quartile of ELA achievement in 2019 are far more likely to qualify for retention than students in higher-achieving districts.
- Districts that provided only fully remote instruction had higher rates of 3rd grade retention-eligible students than did districts that provided some or only in-person instruction as of May of the 2020-21 school year.

ENDNOTES

ⁱ See the MDE's "Spring 2021 Spring Summative Assessments: Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)" memo here: https://www.michigan.gov/documents/mde/Spring_2021_Summative_Assessments_FAQ_721789_7.pdf [accessed August 12, 2021]

ⁱⁱ See EPIC's "2019 Estimated Read by Grade Three Retention Rates" report here: https://epicedpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/RBG3_cutpoint_analysis_updated_1-30-20.pdf [accessed August 12, 2021]