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

Executive Summary



**Education Policy
Innovation Collaborative**
RESEARCH WITH CONSEQUENCE

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Year Two Report: Executive Summary

Katharine O. Strunk, Tanya S. Wright, John Westall, Qiong Zhu, Tara Kilbride,
Amy Cummings, Andrew Utter, and Madeline Mavrogodato

PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

The Michigan state legislature passed the Read by Grade Three Law in 2016 in response to concerns about the early literacy rates of Michigan's students. Legislators intended for the Law to improve students' early literacy skills through targeted, high-quality instructional supports combined with the threat of grade retention for students who do not meet the state's reading proficiency standard by the end of 3rd grade.

The Education Policy Innovation Collaborative (EPIC) at Michigan State University (MSU) and researchers at the University of Michigan began a four-year evaluation of the Read by Grade Three Law in 2019. While EPIC is the strategic research partner to the Michigan Department of Education (MDE), this evaluation and its results (and all EPIC research) are independent of MDE and represent the conclusions and recommendations of EPIC alone.

This is the second in a series of reports that the research team will release throughout the course of the study. The purpose of this interim report is to provide an update on the implementation of the Read by Grade Three Law and its effect on the early literacy outcomes of Michigan's students. We also examine how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the Law's implementation.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND STUDY OVERVIEW

This report explores two key research questions about the Read by Grade Three Law's early implementation and effects:

1. How is the Read by Grade Three Law being implemented in Michigan? Does implementation vary across populations and places, and if so, why?
2. 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?

We use a mixed-methods design that includes analyses of stakeholder interviews, educator surveys, and state administrative records (as we detail in Table 1). This approach allows us to address each question from multiple perspectives and in multiple contexts. Interviews with state-level stakeholders provide insight about the ongoing implementation of the Read by Grade Three Law and how COVID-19 has affected implementation. Surveys capture information about educators' experiences implementing the Law's literacy supports, their perceptions of the COVID-19 pandemic's effect on the Law's implementation, and the costs of implementing the Law. Administrative records from 2012-13 through 2020-21 allow us to track student and educator outcomes to assess the effects of the Law and potential disruptions due to COVID-19 pandemic using an interrupted time series (ITS) approach. In addition, Michigan collected novel student-level administrative data that we use in descriptive analyses to assess elements of the Law's implementation.

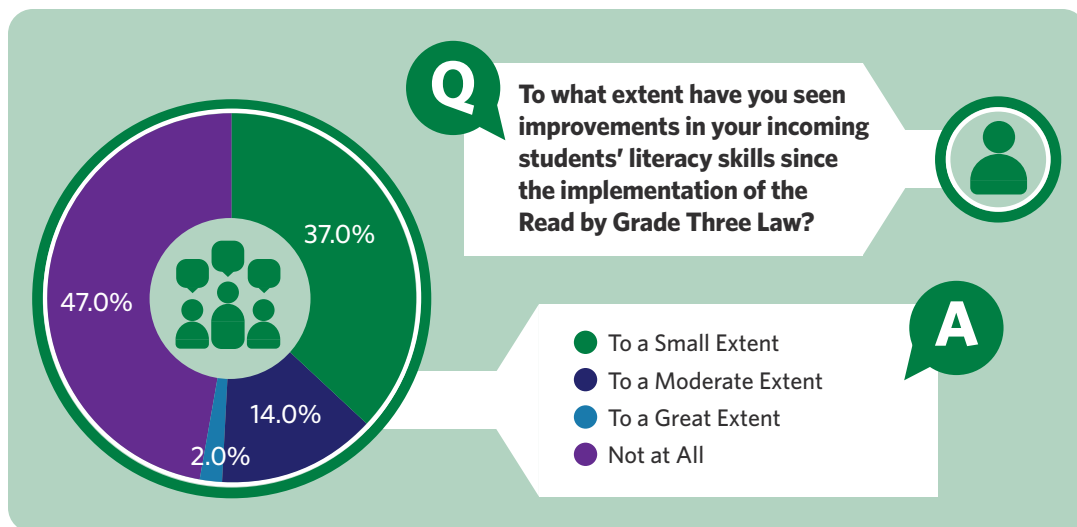
TABLE 1. Data Sources		
Data	Sample	Outcomes/Area of Interest
State-level stakeholder interviews	6 state-level stakeholders	Michigan's educational landscape during the COVID-19 pandemic Perceptions of the current and future implementation of the Law
Educator surveys	7,788 K-5 teachers, 417 K-5 principals, 162 district superintendents, 582 literacy coaches	Literacy instructional practice, professional learning, coaching, curricula, and interventions Understanding, perceptions, early implementation, and costs of the Law. Perceptions of COVID-19's impact on the Law's implementation
State administrative records	5.3 million student-year observations, 225,000 teacher-year observations from 2012-13 through 2020-21	Student achievement, grade retention, special education placement, English learner program participation, student and educator mobility

KEY FINDINGS

ELA M-STEP Scores and Subscores From Before the Pandemic Suggest Moderate Improvements in Students’ ELA Achievement Relative to the Period Before the Law’s Passage. However, Most Teachers Do Not Believe the Law Has Effectively Improved Students’ Literacy Skills

While COVID-19-related disruptions in M-STEP administration resulted in the cancellation of summative year-end tests (M-STEPS) in spring 2020 and made the spring 2021 M-STEPS difficult to use because of low participation rates and wide differences in participation across student groups and districts, ELA M-STEP scores through 2018-19 suggest that 3rd-5th grade ELA performance improved after the Law’s implementation. This was true for overall M-STEP scores and the four subscores (reading, listening, writing, and research). On the other hand, Figure 1 shows that the majority of teachers believed there had been little to no improvement in their incoming students’ literacy skills since the Law’s implementation.

FIGURE 1. K-3 Teacher Perceptions of Incoming Students’ Literacy Skills



Source: EPIC survey of educators about the Read by Grade Three Law.

While Fiscal and Human Capital Constraints Continued to Encumber the Read by Grade Three Law’s Implementation, Educators Continued to Have Positive Perceptions About Many of the Law’s Supports

A large majority of K-3 teachers held positive beliefs about the literacy supports mandated by the Law. A notable exception was Individual Reading Improvement Plans (IRIPs), though principals and superintendents were more optimistic than teachers about their efficacy.

While educators find the Law's interventions useful, the vast majority of educators and state-level stakeholders believe that more resources are needed to implement them. Educators expressed a need for not only financial resources but also more literacy-focused personnel. This need was particularly prominent for teachers in traditionally underserved districts, furthering concerns about inequitable access to literacy resources across Michigan.

Although K-3 Teachers Thought Professional Development Helped Improve Their Practice, Teachers Received Less—and Desired More—Literacy Professional Development During the 2020-21 School Year

Teachers continued to report that professional development improved their instructional practice. Indeed, most teachers said they wanted more one-on-one coaching regardless of whether they had already received it. Despite these positive sentiments about efficacy, teachers reported receiving significantly less one-on-one literacy coaching and other literacy professional development in 2020-21 than in the prior year. Literacy coaches also reported significant challenges in providing professional development to teachers, generally due to pandemic-related disruptions.

More Than One-Half of 3rd-Grade Students in the 2020-21 School Year Were Identified As Having a “Reading Deficiency” at Some Point Between 1st and 3rd Grade

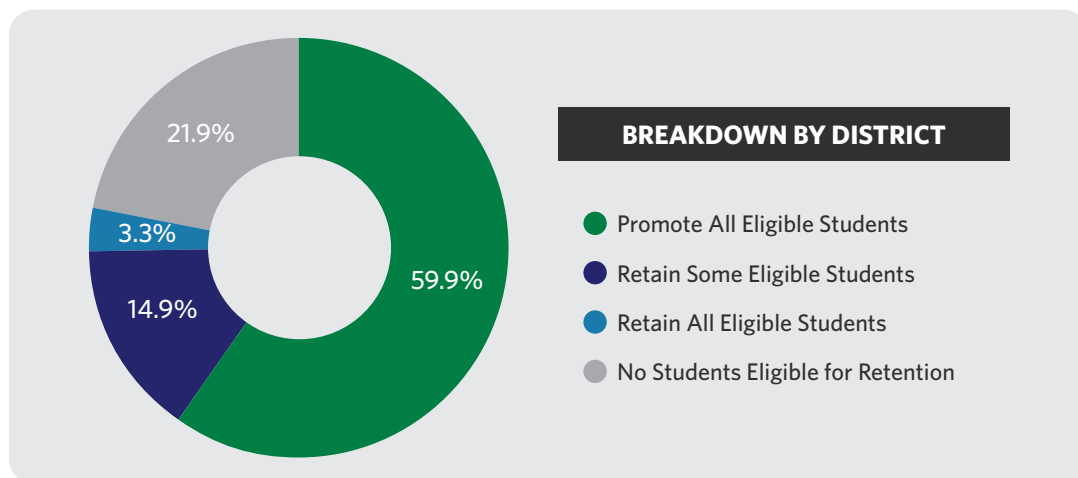
Districts use the “reading deficiency” designation to identify K-3 students who need substantial support and intervention to improve their literacy skills. A striking 52% of Michigan students who were in the 3rd grade in 2020-21 were identified as having a “reading deficiency” at some point in grades 1st-3rd, with approximately one-third identified in each year and 17% identified in all three grades 1st-3rd. “Reading deficiency” rates were significantly higher among historically marginalized student groups and the districts who tend to serve them.

Even with the large number/percentage of students identified with a “reading deficiency” during 1st-3rd grade, there is still some evidence of under-identification of students who need literacy intervention. In general, students who were identified as having a “reading deficiency” more recently or for longer periods of time were more likely to score lower on the 3rd-grade ELA M-STEP. However, in some districts there were systematically more students eligible for retention based on their 3rd-grade ELA M-STEP scores than predicted by students' “reading deficiency” rates and other relevant characteristics. This disparity was particularly evident in districts with higher proportions of economically disadvantaged students and lower prior ELA performance. This kind of systematic under-identification of students who need intervention indicates that too few students received necessary literacy supports, especially in historically low-performing districts.

While Relatively Few Students Were Eligible for Retention at the End of 2020-21, and Districts Planned to Retain Even Fewer, There Were Significant Disparities in Retention Outcomes Across Groups of Students

Fewer than 5% of tested students were eligible for retention based on their 3rd-grade ELA M-STEP score, and districts intended to retain just 0.3% of tested students, providing good cause exemptions to the others. As Figure 2 shows, nearly 80% of districts had students who were eligible for retention under the Read by Grade Three Law, but about 60% of districts (or 77% of districts with any retention-eligible students) indicated that they would promote all of their retention-eligible students to 4th grade through good cause exemptions. Economically disadvantaged, Black, and Hispanic or Latino/a/x students were significantly more likely to be retention-eligible than their White and wealthier peers. Similarly, districts intended to retain students from these groups at higher rates.

FIGURE 2. Breakdown of Districts by Intent to Promote All, Retain All, Promote / Retain Some Eligible Students, Overall



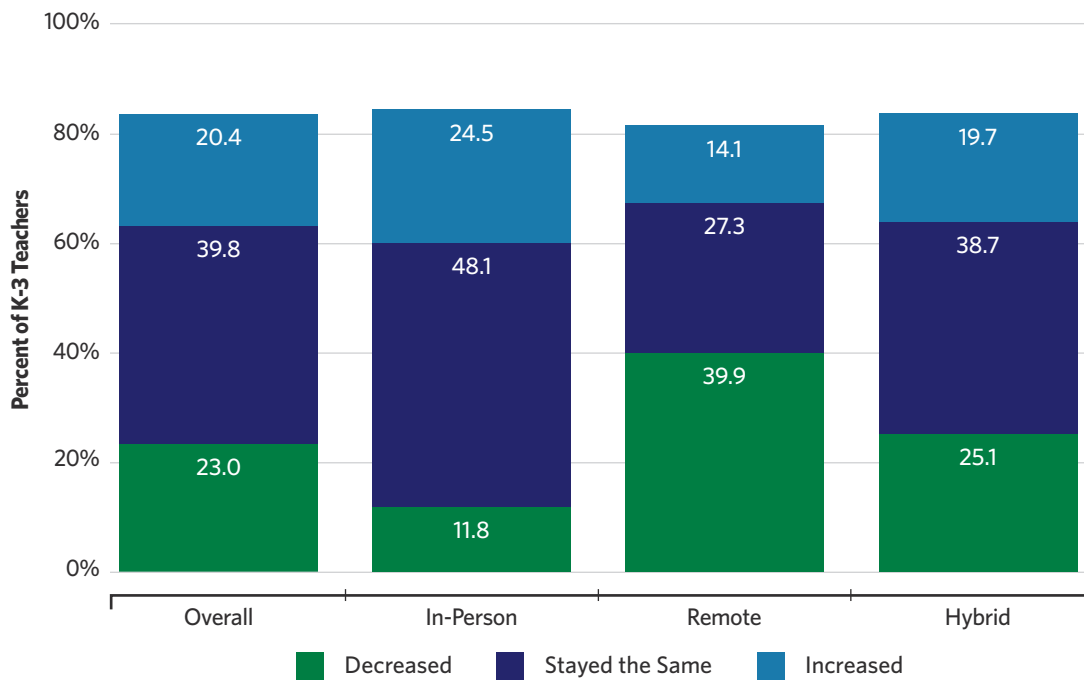
Note: These are percentages of all 766 school districts with 3rd-grade students enrolled during the spring of 2021. The percentages shown may not sum to exactly 100% due to rounding.

K-3 Teachers Reported Spending Less Time on Literacy Instruction During the 2020-21 School Year and Felt That the Pandemic Negatively Affected Their Ability to Provide Literacy Instruction and Interventions

On average, K-3 teachers reported spending two fewer hours per week on literacy instruction in 2020-21 than the previous year. Assuming 40 weeks of instruction per year, this implies 80 fewer hours of literacy instruction over the academic year. Given the importance of instructional time for student learning, this reduction in literacy instruction could severely negatively affect Michigan students' literacy skills.

Educators reported that the COVID-19 pandemic had a detrimental effect on their ability to provide the literacy instruction and interventions necessary to improve students' literacy skills. While all K-3 teachers reported pandemic-related challenges, they were particularly salient for teachers instructing remotely. As Figure 3 shows, teachers providing remote instruction were also far more likely than in-person teachers to report a decrease in the amount of time they spent on literacy instruction. These disparities raise concerns that students learning remotely due to the pandemic likely faced inequitable learning opportunities and outcomes during the 2020-21 school year.

FIGURE 3. Changes in Literacy Instruction Time by Modality



Note: Teachers were asked, "How has the amount of time you spend on instruction in this area changed since last year?" Source: EPIC survey of educators about the Read by Grade Three Law.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Continue to Improve Tier I Literacy Instruction So That Fewer Students Require Intervention

Given that over half of Michigan's 3rd-grade students were identified with a "reading deficiency" at some point in K-3, there is likely room for improvement in core Tier 1—general classroom—literacy instruction. The fact that historically marginalized groups are significantly more likely to be identified with a "reading deficiency" raises additional equity concerns, suggesting that the state should provide more resources to the classrooms, schools, and districts that serve these groups. Schools, districts, and the state should continue its focus on improving classroom educators' literacy instruction practice, particularly for educators serving these specific student populations.

Evaluate District Assessments and Procedures for Identifying Students in Need of Extra Literacy Supports and Help Districts Align Local and State Assessments and Achievement Expectations

We find evidence that some districts under-identify students with “reading deficiencies,” suggesting that students who were struggling with literacy and were eventually eligible for retention did not receive the intervention and supports necessary to succeed in K-3 literacy. The state and districts should work together to better align local literacy diagnostic assessments with the 3rd-grade ELA M-STEP and provide procedures to help students at risk of retention receive the interventions and support they require.

Provide Additional Funding for Literacy Professional Development and Other Literacy Resources

State policymakers should increase funding to strengthen current efforts to improve literacy across Michigan during the 2020-21 school year. Additional funding can support literacy coaches and other non-coaching literacy professional development in evidence-based literacy practices. Since it is challenging to find a sufficient number of qualified literacy coaches, the state should target additional funds to bolster pipelines for recruiting and training new literacy coaches. Additionally, since more than half of students are identified with a “reading deficiency” at some point by the end of 3rd grade, the state should allocate money to provide all students with improved literacy instruction and (if necessary) interventions. This need goes beyond professional development and includes funding for curricula, assessments, staff, and additional time during the school day and year. Policymakers should target these resources at districts serving historically marginalized populations.

Focus On Meeting Students’ Literacy Needs to Address Students’ Missed Learning Opportunities

Much of the policy debate surrounding the Read by Grade Three Law has been dedicated to the retention component’s efficacy, and while 5% of tested students were eligible for retention based on their scores, districts intended to retain just 0.3% of tested students. While some of this disparity is likely because educators do not agree that retention is an effective intervention (see Year One Report, Strunk et al., 2021), it is also likely explained by pandemic-related disruptions to education in Michigan. Instead of focusing on the efficacy of retention to improve students’ literacy, policymakers should focus on meeting each student’s literacy needs and providing opportunities to accelerate student learning to address missed learning opportunities during the pandemic.