



**POLICY BRIEF**

# Are Retention-Eligible Students Assigned to Highly Effective Teachers Under Michigan's Read by Grade Three Law?

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# Are Retention-Eligible Students Assigned to Highly Effective Teachers Under Michigan's Read by Grade Three Law?

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## INTRODUCTION

Due to the important role that teachers play in shaping both educational and long-term life outcomes of students,<sup>1</sup> policymakers often include mandates in education policies that require specific types of teachers to work with particular groups of students. However, the quality of teachers varies substantially, both between individual teachers and across different schools.<sup>2</sup> This variability, especially across schools, can pose challenges to the implementation of teacher assignment mandates due to potential constraints on the availability of highly qualified teachers in certain schools. These constraints can be heightened in schools serving high percentages of historically marginalized populations.

An example of such a policy is Michigan's Read by Grade Three Law, which aims to improve students' literacy skills by the end of third grade in part by retaining students who score at least a year behind grade level (1252 or below) on the ELA portion of the M-STEP. Under the Law, whether they are retained in third grade or promoted to the fourth grade using one of the Law's "good cause exemptions," schools and districts must provide retention-eligible students with additional literacy interventions and assign them to a highly effective teacher,<sup>3</sup> the teacher with the highest effectiveness rating available, or a reading specialist and provide them with additional literacy interventions.<sup>4</sup> While state legislators repealed the Law's retention component in March 2023 (effective April 2024; 2023 PA 07), the teacher assignment component remains in effect and was in effect during the 2021-22 school year, on which this policy brief and accompanying [working paper](#) focuses.

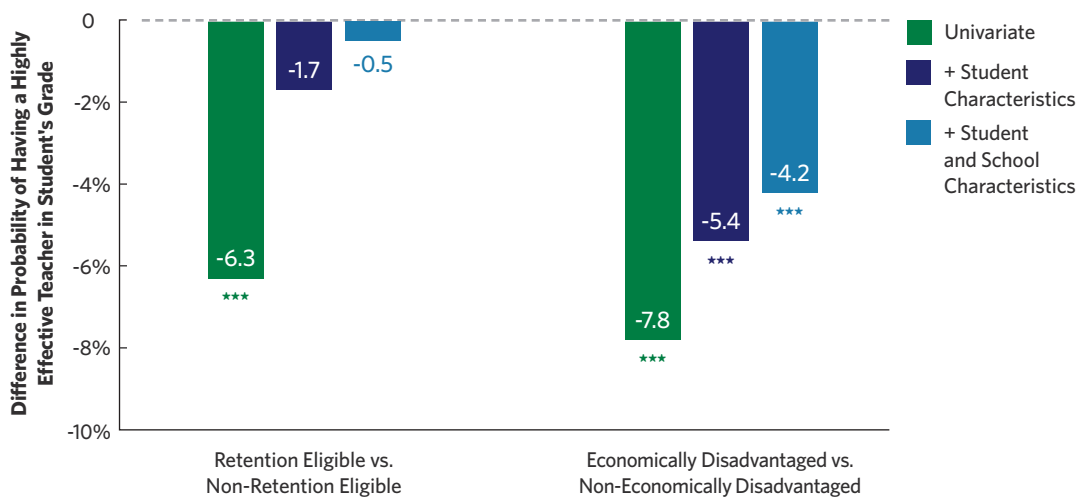
To better understand the implementation of Read by Grade Three’s teacher assignment component, we analyze the capacity of Michigan schools to satisfy the policy as well as the actual teacher assignments for students near the cutoff for retention eligibility. To this end, our study uses detailed administrative data at the student and teacher levels from Michigan and employs two main empirical methods. First, we examine which factors, such as student demographics and district characteristics, influence the likelihood of students attending schools with highly effective teachers, providing insights into the capacity constraints faced by schools. Second, we compare students just above and below the M-STEP cutoff score to answer whether 2020-21 retention eligibility affects the probability of students being assigned to a highly effective teacher in the following year. The combination of these two methods, explained in detail in the accompanying [working paper](#), provides insights into the implementation of Michigan’s Read by Grade Three Law.

## FINDINGS

### Many Michigan Students Do Not Have Access to a Highly Effective Teacher

In 2021-22, 11% of Michigan students attended a school without a highly effective teacher, and 24% attended a school without one in their grade.<sup>5</sup> Figure 1 examines whether certain student groups are more likely to attend schools without highly effective teachers in their grade. We find that retention-eligible and economically disadvantaged students were between 6 and 8 percentage points less likely to attend a school with a highly effective teacher in their grade than their non-retention-eligible and non-economically disadvantaged peers (green bars).<sup>6</sup>

**FIGURE 1. Differences in Probability of Presence of Highly Effective Teacher in Student’s Grade Across Student Subgroups**



Note: The green bars represent estimates from separate univariate regression. The dark blue bars are from a single regression, including controls for gender, race, economic disadvantage status, English learner status, and disability status. The light blue bars are from a single regression with the same covariates as the dark blue bars plus controls for school characteristics. Standard errors are heteroskedasticity-robust and clustered at the district level. +  $p < 0.1$  \*  $p < 0.05$  \*\*  $p < 0.01$  \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$

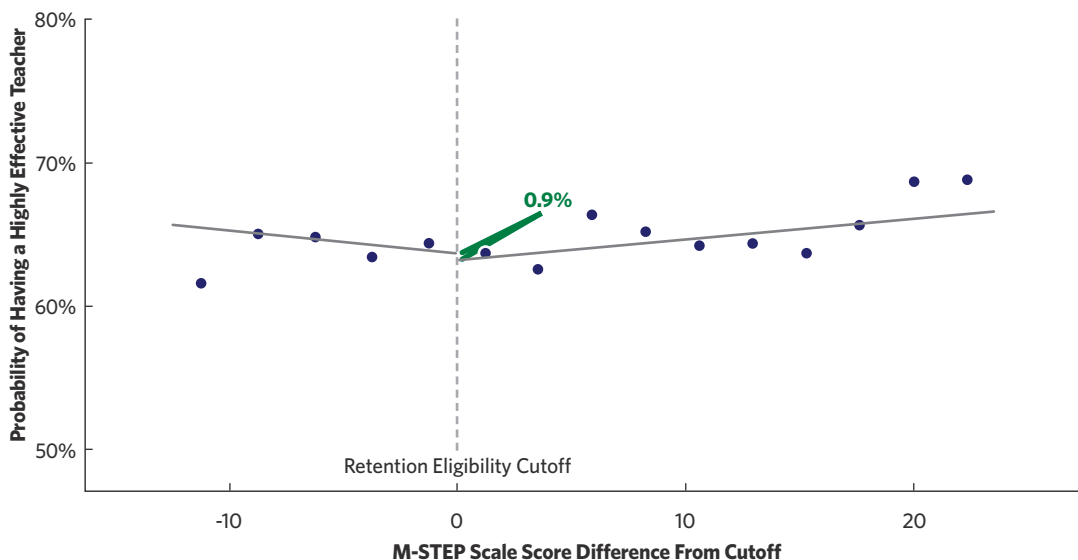
To better understand what factors are driving these differences, we controlled for student characteristics, including English learners and students with disabilities (dark blue bars). Once we include these controls, we no longer see a significant difference between retention-eligible and non-retention-eligible students, suggesting that these other student characteristics, like economic disadvantage status, explain the difference in access to highly effective teachers between eligible and ineligible students. Economically disadvantaged students are still more likely to attend schools without a highly effective teacher available in their grade than their wealthier peers with the same demographics. This disparity persists even when we control for both student and district characteristics to compare students in similar districts (light blue bars).<sup>7</sup>

## Retention-Eligible Students Are no More Likely Than Their Ineligible Peers to Have Highly Effective Teachers

### Retention-Eligibility Does Not Affect Assignments to Highly Effective Teachers

There is no evidence that retention-eligibility has an effect on students' assignments to a highly effective teacher. While we would expect retention eligibility to increase the likelihood of assignment to a highly effective teacher, when we compare the teacher assignments of students who scored just above and below the retention eligibility cutoff in Figure 2, we find no clear indication that this is the case. This finding implies that schools may not be effectively implementing the teacher assignment requirement, although other explanations are possible. For example, our descriptive analysis suggests retention-eligible students are less likely to attend a school with a highly effective teacher in their grade. Therefore, there may be no effect because there are no highly effective teachers available to these students.

**FIGURE 2. Retention Eligibility and Assignments to Highly Effective Teachers**



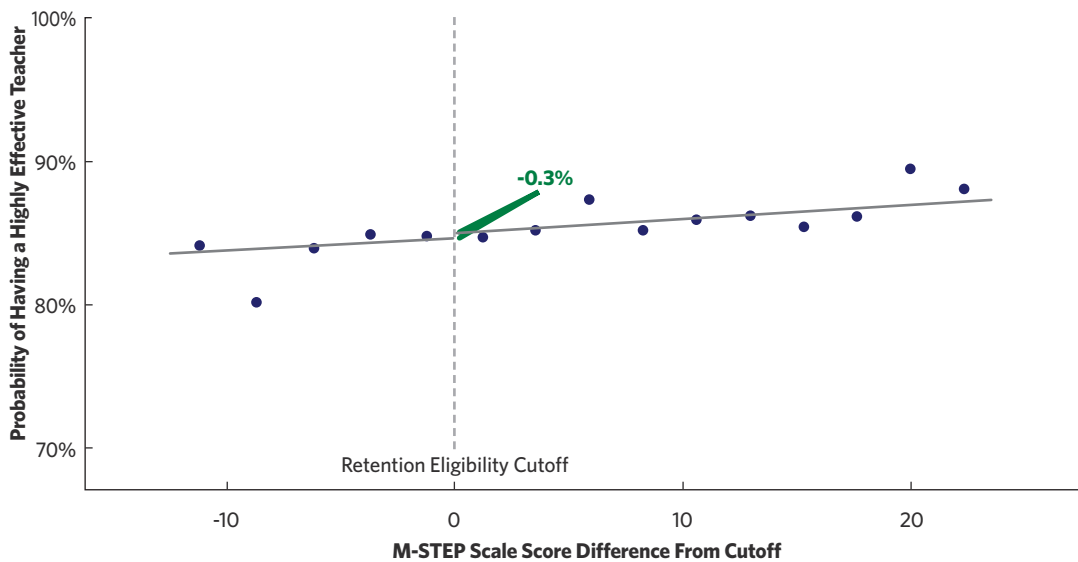
*Note: The y-axis represents the probability of assignment to a highly effective teacher. The vertical line indicates the retention-eligibility threshold of 1252 scale score on the third-grade 2020-21 ELA M-STEP. There is one dot for each scale score. The fit lines are from local linear regressions with triangular weights. Each panel represents a different predicted outcome.*

### The Presence of Highly Effective Teachers Does Not Influence Assignments for Retention-Eligible Students

However, even when we only look at students who attend schools with a highly effective teacher available in their grade, we find similar results. In Figure 3, when we limit our analysis to those students with an available highly effective teacher in their school and grade, we find no change in the probability of assignment to a highly effective teacher across the retention eligibility cutoff. This suggests that the presence of a highly effective teacher does not significantly affect the assignment of students across the retention eligibility threshold.

Furthermore, about 15% of retention-eligible students in schools with a highly effective teacher in their grade are not assigned to one of these teachers even when one is ostensibly available to them (shown in Figure 3). Additional results available in our working paper reveal that the highly effective teachers in the schools serving these students already have an average of two retention-eligible students in their classrooms. Moreover, retention-eligible students are no more likely than their non-eligible peers to be assigned to a teacher with an ELA-specific endorsement, indicating that schools and districts are not more likely to assign these students to literacy specialists in lieu of a highly effective teacher.

**FIGURE 3. Retention Eligibility and Assignments to Highly Effective Teachers for Students With an Available Highly Effective Teacher**



*Note: The y-axis represents the probability of assignment to a highly effective teacher. The sample is restricted to students who have a highly effective teacher in their school and grade. The vertical line indicates the retention-eligibility threshold of 1252 scale score on the third-grade 2020-21 ELA M-STEP. There is one dot for each scale score. The fit lines are from local linear regressions with triangular weights.*

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Together, these results lead to three recommendations for policymakers to consider as they work to ensure compliance with teacher-student assignment component in Michigan's Read by Grade Three Law and other education policies:

## Enhance Communication and Training for Administrators

It may be that administrators were not aware of the requirement to assign retention-eligible students to specific kinds of teachers. In particular, much of the conversation about the Law has been around the retention component itself, and there has been less public discussion of other elements of the Law, including instructional interventions associated with students struggling with literacy. To bridge the gap between policymakers and administrators, there is a crucial need for clearer communication and training. District- and school-level administrators should receive explicit training on the specific components of the Read by Grade Three Law — and any policy — to ensure effective implementation.

## Mandate Transparent Reporting for Accountability

To ensure accountability and monitor compliance with the teacher assignment component, state policymakers should mandate transparent reporting of districts' and schools' adherence to the Law. This might include public-facing dashboards that highlight the proportion of students assigned to highly effective teachers. By making this information readily available, policymakers, educators, and the public can evaluate the extent to which schools' and districts' actions align with the Law's intentions.

## Structure Incentives for Districts to Prioritize Implementation of Teacher Assignment Component

To further ensure the implementation of the teacher assignment component, policymakers may wish to introduce well-defined incentives that address non-compliance or inaction. By establishing clear incentives for districts and schools to prioritize the assignment of highly effective teachers to retention-eligible students, policymakers can encourage proactive efforts towards meeting the requirements of the Read by Grade Three Law.

## NOTES

1. Chetty, R., Friedman, J. N., & Rockoff, J. E. (2011). *The long-term impacts of teachers: Teacher value-added and student outcomes in adulthood* (Working Paper No. w17699). National Bureau of Economic Research. <https://doi.org/10.3386/w17699>, Jackson, C. K. (2018). What do test scores miss? The importance of teacher effects on non-test score outcomes. *Journal of Political Economy*, 126(5), 2072-2107. <https://doi.org/10.1086/699018>, Rivkin, S. G., Hanushek, E. A., & Kain, J. F. (2005). Teachers, schools, and academic achievement. *Econometrica*, 73(2), 417-458. <http://hanushek.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/publications/Rivkin%2BHanushek%2BKain%202005%20Ecta%2073%282%29.pdf>, Rockoff, J. E. (2004). The impact of individual teachers on student achievement: Evidence from panel data. *American Economic Review*, 94(2), 247-252. <https://doi.org/10.1257/0002828041302244>
2. Bonesrønning, H., Falch, T., & Strøm, B. (2005). Teacher sorting, teacher quality, and student composition. *European Economic Review*, 49(2), 457-483. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0014-2921\(03\)00052-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0014-2921(03)00052-7), Lankford, H., Loeb, S., & Wyckoff, J. (2002). Teacher sorting and the plight of urban schools: A descriptive analysis. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 24(1), 37-62. <https://doi.org/10.3102/01623737024001037>, Rice, S. M. (2010). Getting our best teachers into disadvantaged schools: Differences in the professional and personal factors attracting more effective and less effective teachers to a school. *Educational Research for Policy and Practice*, 9(3), 177-192. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10671-010-9085-2>
3. The Read by Grade Three Law defines a highly effective teacher as "determined by the teacher evaluation system under 1249" (PA 306 or 2023 PA 07). 1249 refers to a section of the Revised School Code in which a "rigorous, transparent, and fair performance evaluation system" is required to be adopted. This must include an evaluation of the teacher's job performance "using multiple rating categories that take into account student growth and assessment data" that is then used to rate educators as highly effective, effective, minimally effective, and ineffective (1976 PA 451, section 380.1249). <http://legislature.mi.gov/doc.aspx?mcl-380-1249>
4. Good cause exemptions enable districts to promote retention-eligible students to the fourth grade if they fall within one or more of the following categories: 1) English learners with fewer than three years of English language instruction; 2) students with disabilities (i.e., those with an Individualized Education Program [IEP] or Section 504 Plan); 3) students who were previously retained and received intensive reading interventions for two or more years; 4) 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 (IRIP); 5) students who demonstrated proficiency in other subject areas and/or through an alternative assessment or portfolio of work; and 6) students whose parents or guardians requested an exemption, provided that their superintendent agrees that retention is not in the best interest of the student.
5. Our sample includes all third-grade students who took the ELA M-STEP in 2020-21. Most of these students are in fourth grade in the observation year of 2021-22, but students who were retained are in third grade in the observation year.
6. Economically disadvantaged status is defined in Michigan as students who are eligible for free- or reduced-price lunch, are in households receiving food (SNAP) or cash (TANF) assistance, are homeless, are migrant, or are in foster care.
7. District characteristics include charter school status, urbanicity, prior (2018-19) ELA performance, and enrollment.





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