



Read by Grade Three Retention Eligibility: 2023 Update

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Read by Grade Three Retention Eligibility: 2023 Update

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BACKGROUND

As the strategic research partner to the Michigan Department of Education (MDE), the Education Policy Innovation Collaborative (EPIC) provides technical research 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 effects 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 districts retain students who do not meet a state standard for reading proficiency by the end of the 3rd grade.

On March 24, 2023, Governor Whitmer signed [Public Act 7](#) into law, which amended the original Read by Grade Three Law by, most notably, removing the third-grade retention mandate¹. This change will go into effect in 2023-24, meaning that students who scored below the state-determined cut-off² on the 3rd-grade ELA M-STEP at the end of 2022-23 may still be retained under the Read by Grade Three Law. Although future cohorts of Michigan 3rd graders will not be subject to the retention policy, the other supports and interventions outlined in the Read by Grade Three Law will remain in place³.

In this report, we examine the rates and characteristics of students who could be required to repeat the 3rd grade in 2023-24 based on their ELA M-STEP scores at the end of 2022-23. As districts may choose to promote retention-eligible students to the 4th grade by granting good cause exemptions, we also provide estimated retention

rates that account for characteristics that are likely to qualify a student for an exemption. Additionally, we compare our estimates to those from previous school years to assess changes over time.

DATA AND METHODS

These analyses use data about Michigan students' performance on the 3rd-grade ELA M-STEP. Students' scores on this assessment can range from 1203 to 1379. This scale is split into four score ranges that describe students' performance level ("not proficient," "partially proficient," "proficient," or "advanced"). Some students who score in the "not proficient" range are eligible for literacy interventions under the Read by Grade Three Law. To assess overall patterns in student performance, we calculate the percentage of students across score ranges that correspond to different proficiency levels and eligibility for Read by Grade Three interventions.

Our remaining analyses focus on students who received scores of 1252 or below and are therefore eligible for retention under the Read by Grade Three Law. We use this cut-off to calculate an overall retention-eligibility rate as well as the rates for specific subgroups of students and districts. To allow for comparability with previous iterations of these analyses, we use the same data sources and definitions as those described in our [2022 Preliminary Read by Grade Three Retention Estimates](#) report and present all our estimates for students who took the M-STEP in 2023 alongside comparable estimates from 2022 and 2019⁴.

In addition to calculating retention eligibility rates, we provide estimated retention rates that account for certain characteristics that may qualify students to be promoted to the 4th grade through good cause exemptions (e.g., special education status, English learner status, length of time enrolled in current district)⁵. However, these are only estimates and it is possible for *all* retention-eligible students to receive exemptions through parent requests, provided that the superintendent agrees that retention is not in the student's best interest. In fact, our report on the [Read by Grade Three Law Initial Retention Decisions for the 2021-22 School Year](#) showed that only 545 of the 5,680 students eligible for retention in 2022 (about 10%) were retained. More than half of the exemptions that districts granted that year were reported as parent requests.

RESULTS

Students in 2023 Were Less Likely to Meet State Standards for 3rd Grade ELA Proficiency

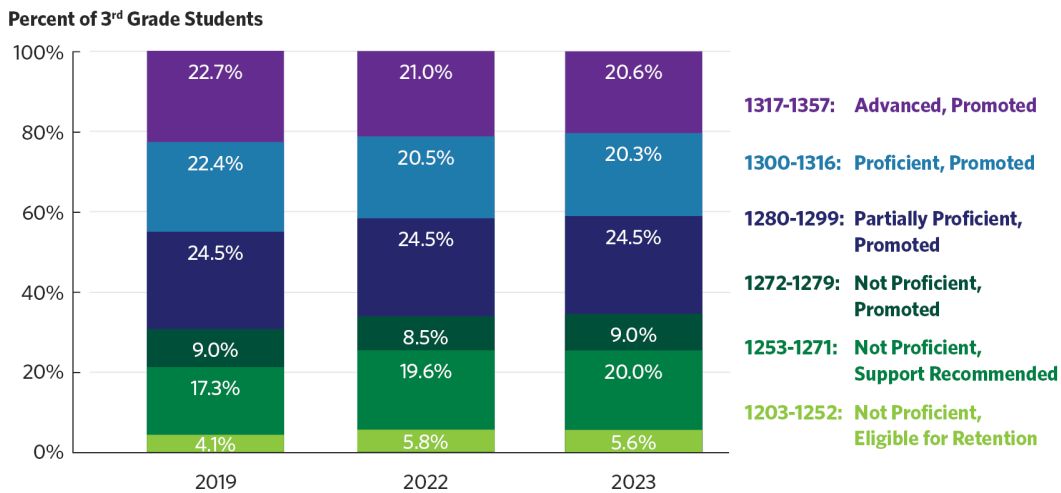
In 2023, 65.4% of 3rd-grade students at least partially met state standards for grade-level proficiency in ELA based on their M-STEP scores. This includes the 24.5% who were "partially proficient" (shown in the dark blue bar in Figure 1), 20.3% who were

“proficient” (shown in light blue), and 20.6% who were “advanced” (shown in purple). The remaining 34.6% of students received scores of 1279 or below and were therefore considered “not proficient.” In comparison, 30.4% and 34.4% of students were “not proficient” in 2019 and 2022, respectively.

More Than One-Quarter of 3rd-Grade Students Qualify for Literacy Support Under the Read by Grade Three Law

Under the state-determined cutoff for the Read by Grade Three Law, students who receive scores of 1271 or below are eligible for certain supports and interventions to help improve their reading skills. In 2023, 25.6% of students scored within this range, representing a slight increase relative to the 25.4% of students who were eligible for literacy supports in 2022 and remains significantly higher than the 21.4% of students who would have been eligible in 2019 if the policy had been in effect at that time. Districts are required to provide these supports to the 5.6% of students who are “reading deficient” or received scores of 1252 or below and it is recommended, but not required, that districts provide these same supports to the 20.0% of students who received scores between 1253 and 1271.

FIGURE 1. Distribution of Students Across 3rd-Grade ELA M-STEP Score Ranges by Year



Note: The height of each bar segment represents the percentage of students who scored within a particular range on the 3rd-grade ELA M-STEP each year. The score ranges are determined by the state⁶. The percentages for each year may not add to exactly 100 due to rounding.

Retention Eligibility Rates Improved Slightly in 2023

The 5.6% of Michigan 3rd graders who received scores of 1252 or below are considered more than one year behind grade level in reading, making them eligible for retention under the Read by Grade Three Law. While this represents a slight improvement from

the 5.8% of students who were eligible for retention in 2022, it is notably higher than the 4.1% of students who would have been eligible in 2019 if the retention policy had been in effect at that time. As the “All Students” bars in Figures 2 through 6 show, after accounting for certain types of good cause exemptions, we estimate that about 2.0% of students could be retained, decreasing from 2.4% in 2022, and still somewhat higher than our estimate of 1.7% in 2019.

These Improvements Primarily Took Place in Traditional Public Schools, in Districts With Lower Prior ELA Achievement, and in Urban Areas

While nearly all student demographic groups experienced at least slight improvements in their retention eligibility rates (shown in Figures 2 through 4), these improvements were concentrated in certain types of districts. As Figure 5 shows, the retention eligibility rate for students in urban school districts decreased by about 0.7 percentage points (from 10.9% to 10.2%) between 2022 and 2023, while the rates for suburban, town, and rural districts remained approximately the same. This suggests that the slight improvement in the statewide retention eligibility rate was driven by the change in the rate for urban districts. Similarly, Figure 6 shows that while traditional public schools and districts with prior ELA achievement scores in the bottom quartile saw improvements in their retention eligibility rates in 2023, charter schools and districts in the highest quartile of prior ELA achievement did not.

Recent Increases in Mobility Could Mean That More Students Will Qualify for Good Cause Exemptions

Although the retention eligibility rate decreased only slightly from 2022 to 2023 (from 5.8% to 5.6%, or about a 3% change), the estimated retention rate decreased more significantly (from 2.4% to 2.0%, about a 17% change). This is because students who are eligible for retention in 2023 are more likely to have been enrolled in their current districts for less than two years, compared to retention-eligible students in past years. If these students were not provided with an appropriate individual reading improvement plan at their previous district, they may qualify for good cause exemptions. This increase is particularly apparent for students in charter schools. As Figure 5 shows, the estimated retention rate for charter schools decreased substantially from 2022 to 2023 even though their retention eligibility rate increased.

FIGURE 2. Retention Eligibility and Estimated Retention Rates by Race/Ethnicity

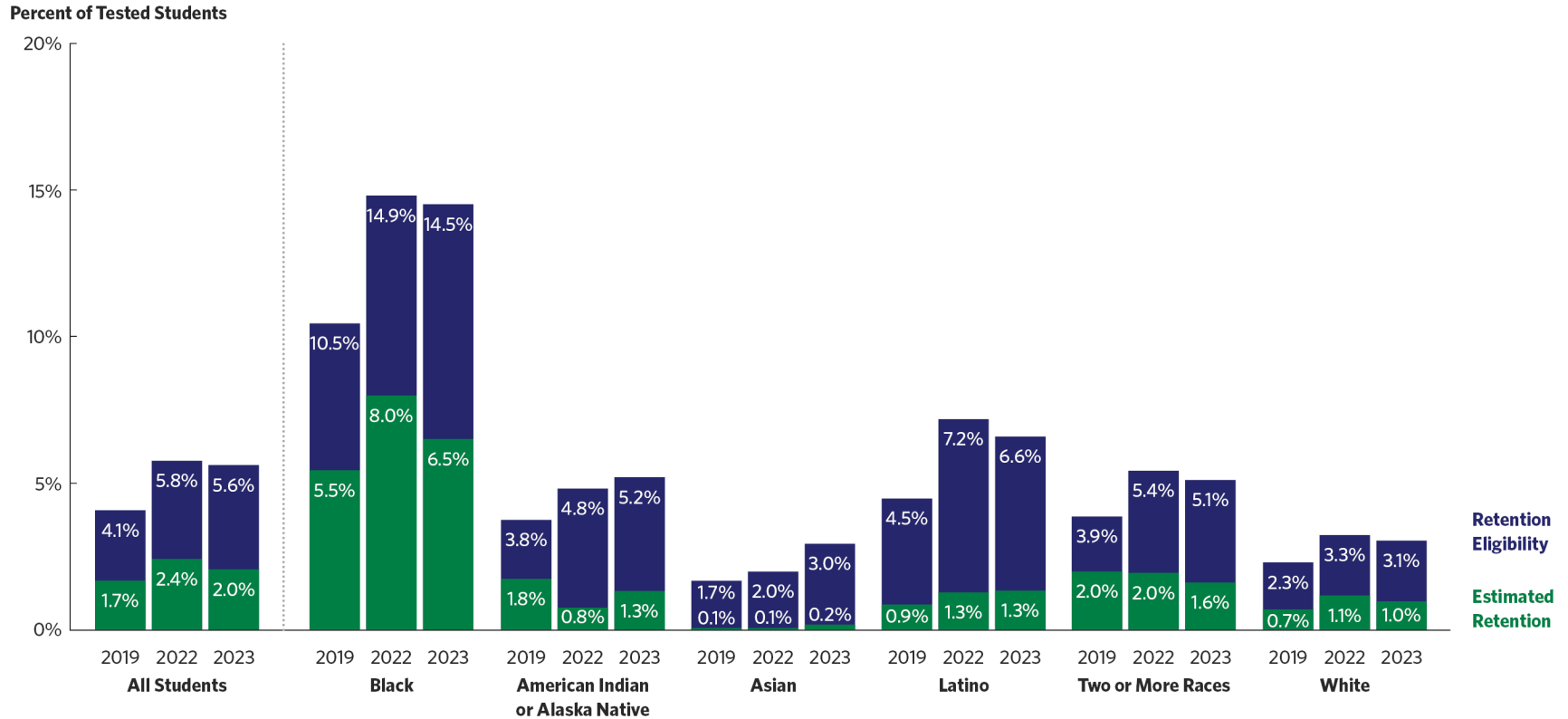


FIGURE 3. Retention Eligibility and Estimated Retention Rates by Student Demographics

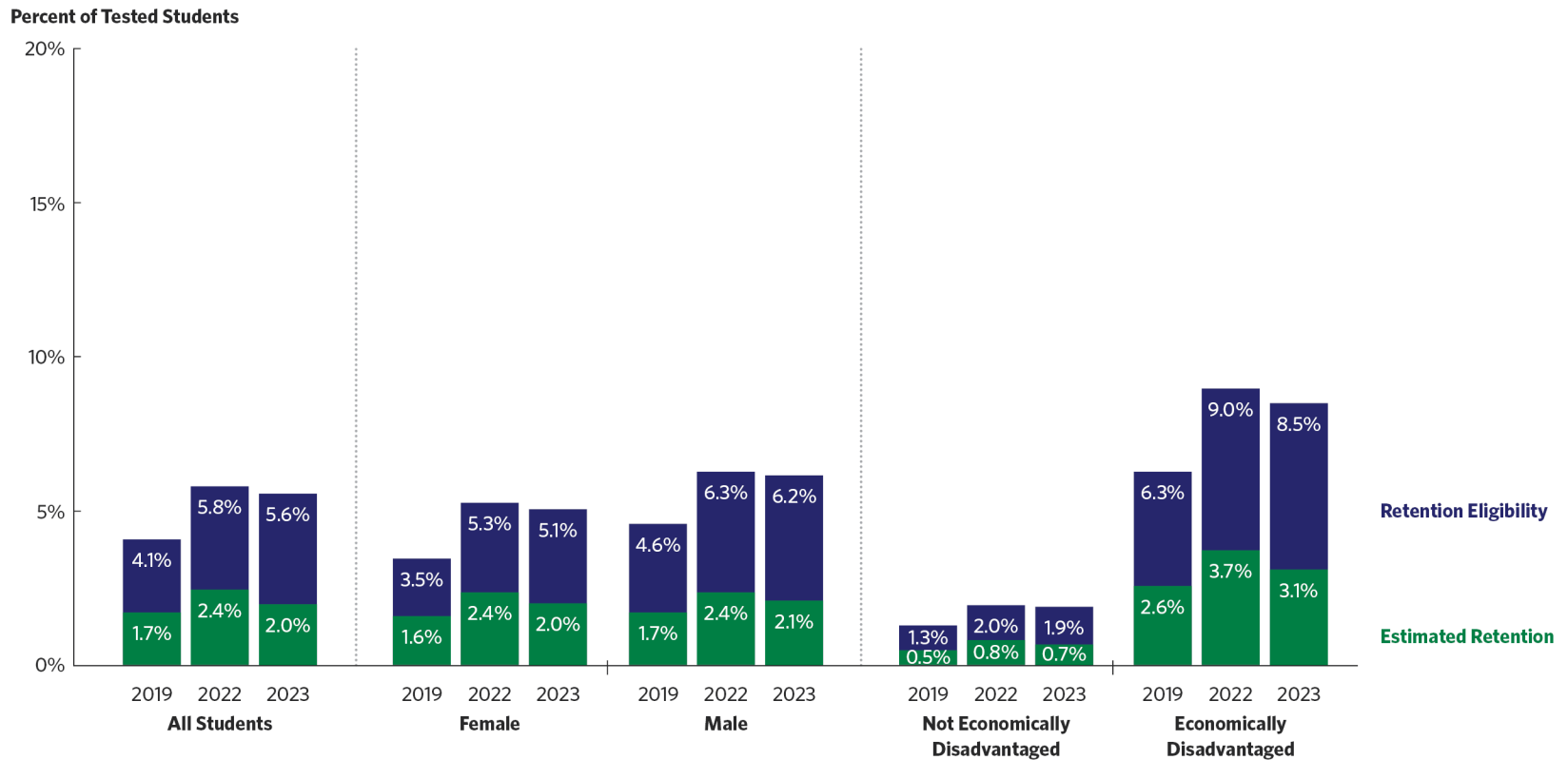


FIGURE 4. Retention Eligibility and Estimated Retention Rates by Student Characteristics

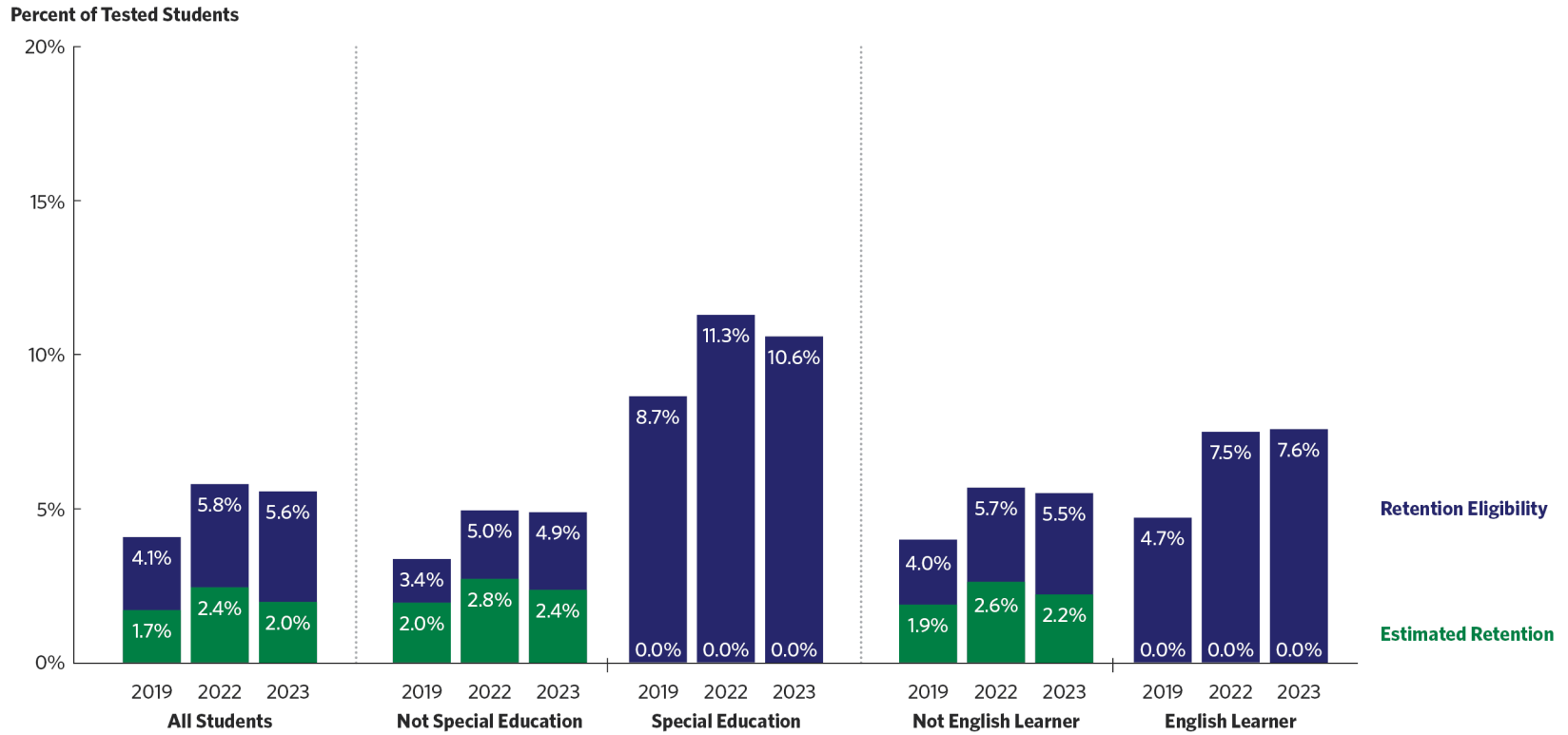


FIGURE 5. Retention Eligibility and Estimated Retention Rates by School Urbanicity

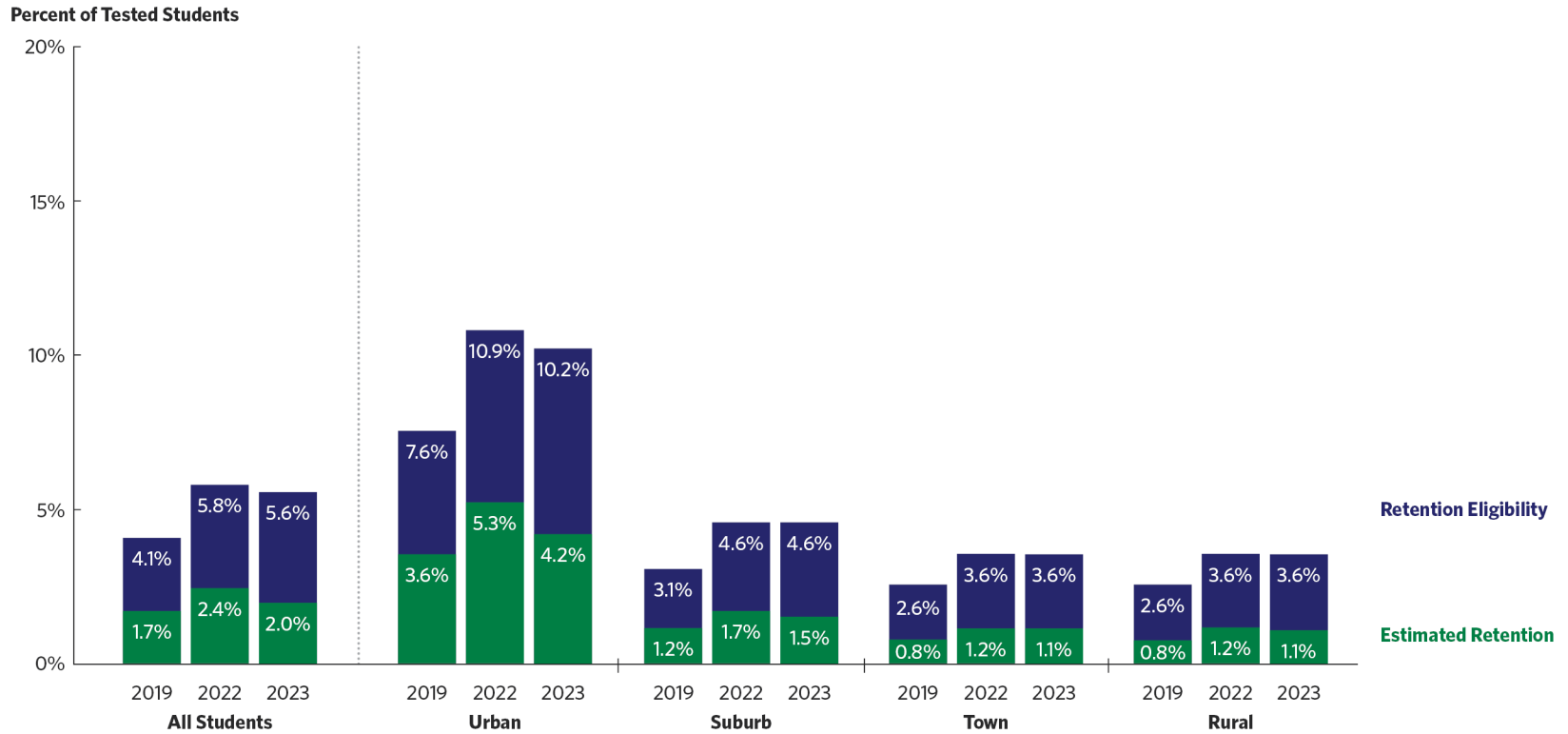
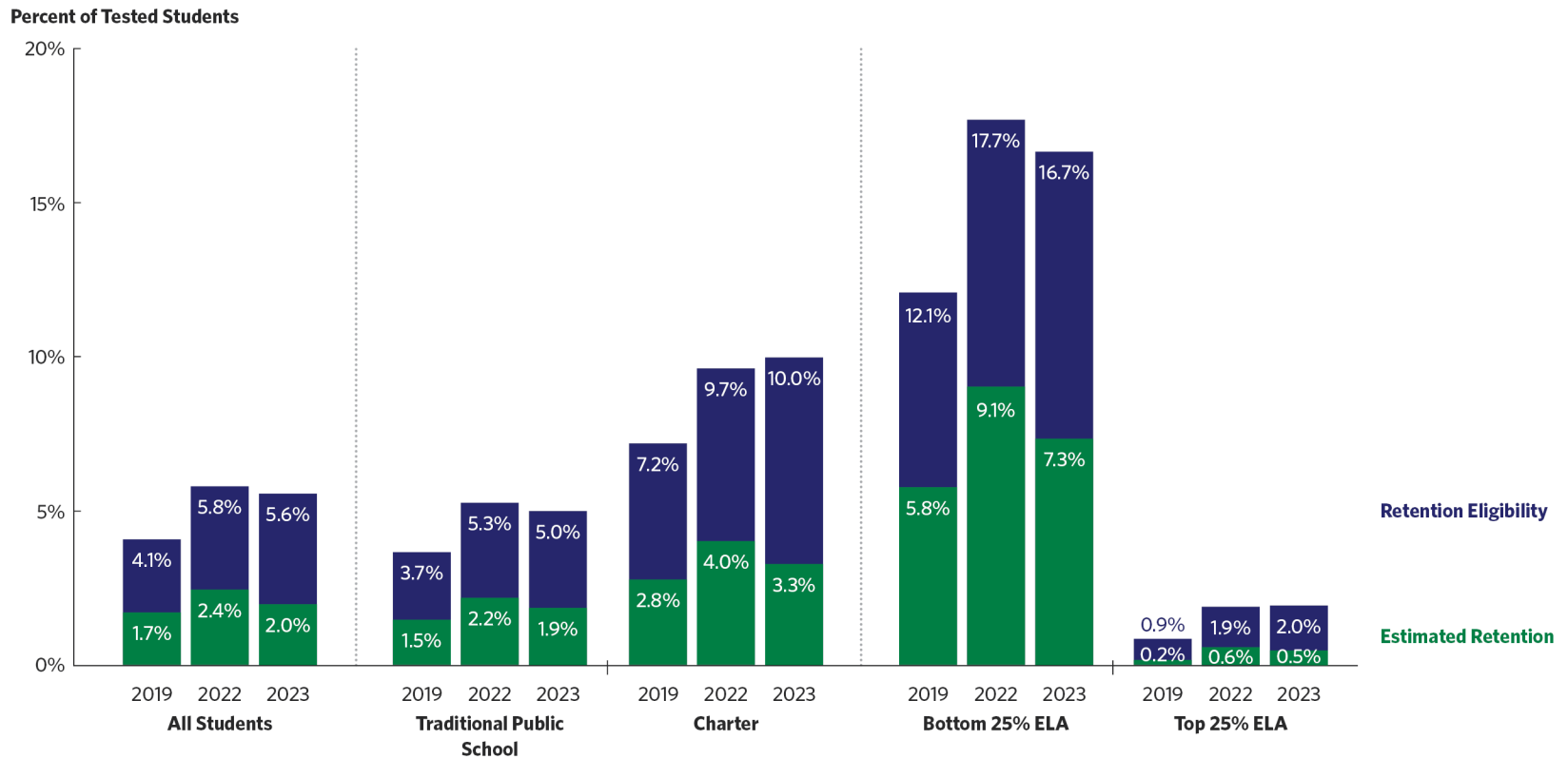


FIGURE 6. Retention Eligibility and Estimated Retention Rates by School District Characteristics



IMPLICATIONS

Overall, our results show concerning trends in Michigan students' 3rd-grade ELA performance, but slight improvements in retention eligibility rates. Although fewer 3rd-grade students were eligible for retention in 2023 than in 2022, more than one-third were still considered "not proficient" in ELA and more than one-quarter were eligible for literacy supports and interventions under the Read by Grade Three Law. While this means that fewer students are considered "more than one year behind grade level in reading," students continue to struggle to meet state standards for 3rd-grade ELA proficiency.

These findings demonstrate a continued need for policymakers, school leaders, and other stakeholders to prioritize and support Michigan students' early literacy outcomes, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. While future cohorts of students will not be subject to the 3rd-grade retention policy, the other supports outlined in the Read by Grade Three Law—which include evidence-based reading programs, targeted small-group or one-on-one reading interventions, ongoing progress monitoring, supplemental reading instruction, and access to highly-effective or specially-trained educators—will be especially important for supporting student success.

ENDNOTES

¹ Michigan Public Act 7, 102nd Legislative Session, MCL § 380.1280f.amended (2023). [https://www.legislature.mi.gov/\(S\(m3lvnwkvf0pjhacfd0s2faw\)\)/documents/2023-2024/publicact/pdf/2023-PA-0007.pdf](https://www.legislature.mi.gov/(S(m3lvnwkvf0pjhacfd0s2faw))/documents/2023-2024/publicact/pdf/2023-PA-0007.pdf)

² Keesler, V.A. (2019, May 16). Read by Grade Three Retention Guidelines. [Memorandum] Michigan Department of Education. https://www.michigan.gov/-/media/Project/Websites/mde/2019/05/15/RBG3_Retention_Guidelines.pdf?rev=52cf d8925cbb43299d19cf48da8881b0

³ Chapman, D. D. (2023, April 20). Read by Grade Three (RBG3) testing, communication, and implementation. [Memorandum] Michigan Department of Education. <https://www.michigan.gov/mde/-/media/Project/Websites/mde/Memos/2023/04/Spring-2023-RBG3-M-STEP.pdf?rev=6cb66f8efbb747c0980e5421a31a5c5b>

⁴ Although the retention component of the Law did not go into effect until the 2020-21 school year due to the COVID-19 pandemic, students who participated in remote learning in 2020-21 were not required to come to school to take the test, making it difficult to interpret the results from that year. Instead, we show comparable analyses about students who would have been eligible for retention based on their 3rd-grade ELA M-STEP scores in 2019 if the retention policy had been in effect at that time.

⁵ Please see our [2022 report](#) for a description of the different types of good cause exemptions offered and how we factor these into our estimated retention rates.

⁶ Keesler, V.A. (2019, May 16). Read by Grade Three Retention Guidelines. [Memorandum] Michigan Department of Education. https://www.michigan.gov/-/media/Project/Websites/mde/2019/05/15/RBG3_Retention_Guidelines.pdf?rev=52cf d8925cbb43299d19cf48da8881b0. Michigan Student Test of Educational Progress (2023, August). Spring 2023 Interpretive Guide to M-STEP Reports [Guide] Michigan Department of Education. https://www.michigan.gov/mde/-/media/Project/Websites/mde/OEAA/M-STEP/Interpretive_Guide_to_M-STEP_Reports.pdf?rev=f2c8bb6a71634749bcc487f1c25bcb66&hash=C508663801B841D003CAB66E869D1127.