



Dear Reader:

Much has happened in the three years since *Early Warning: Why Reading by the End of Third Grade Matters* kicked off the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading — not only in the research world, as this update by Leila Fiester shows, but in homes, schools, neighborhoods and statehouses across the nation.

- In 2012, 124 communities in 34 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, representing 350 school districts with 8 million students — 16 percent of all children in the United States who attend public schools — committed to actions recommended by the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading (GLR Campaign) to help more children from low-income families read at grade level by the end of third grade. Fifty more communities are now poised to join them. These local plans involve thousands of community organizations, educators and care providers, local funders, elected officials, parents and neighborhood volunteers who have stepped up to offer their time, talent, resources, political reputation and sweat equity.
- The U.S. Conference of Mayors passed a resolution calling on mayors across the country to launch campaigns against chronic school absence, one of the action areas highlighted in *Early Warning*. Dozens of mayors responded, with many broadening their efforts to include other factors that affect children's ability to read. The GLR Campaign and Attendance Works issued a similar call to action for superintendents, and by early 2013, 66 had signed on.
- Dozens of national sector-leading organizations mobilized their partners, members and affiliates to boost children's reading and to tackle dimensions of grade-level reading proficiency, from school readiness and summer learning to good health and parent involvement.
- More than two dozen governors put a stake in the ground on third-grade reading proficiency. To mention only a few: Massachusetts, Georgia and Oregon are among several states working to increase investment in early childhood programs that will improve children's readiness for school. Connecticut included grade-level reading proficiency in its education reforms. California launched a summer learning campaign and made chronic absence a priority. Wisconsin and Virginia have focused on early literacy screening and intervention for struggling students.

A growing number of state leaders have pinned their hopes for children's literacy on policies that require third-graders to pass a reading test before being promoted to the next grade, with students who do not pass being kept in third grade until they can read at grade level. More than 30 states plus the District of Columbia have policies for reading proficiency that target third-grade reading and more than a dozen can retain students who do not read proficiently. This practice goes by many names but is often described in terms of "retention" versus "social promotion," the practice of promoting students along with their social peers regardless of whether they have met the academic requirements.

Proponents of social promotion say that the social disruption of holding students back while their peers move on does more damage to students' academic success and social/emotional development than promoting a student who hasn't mastered the requisite skills. Advocates of retention say that promoting a student who can't perform at grade level causes the student to fall further behind and can deny him or her the chance to acquire important skills.

The push for retention has brought energy and urgency to the effort to improve third-grade reading proficiency, which is good. But the evidence is not strong enough to support a claim that grade retention is the answer. And the evidence is certainly not strong enough to support *mandatory* retention for every child who fails a standardized test, as some proposals and statutes have required.

Decades of research have produced findings that raise serious concerns about the benefits of retention. These studies have found that socially promoted students had higher academic achievement, better personal adjustment and more positive attitudes toward school and that retained students displayed poorer social adjustment, less frequent attendance, more problem behaviors and a greater risk of dropping out of school. Some recent studies suggest that retention may have academic benefits, but these benefits appear to be short-lived and to fade over time, while other studies found no significant differences between promoted and retained students on measures of achievement or personal and social adjustment.

At the same time, educators, policymakers, parents and researchers all agree that the common practice of simply promoting students who have not acquired basic skills for social reasons is neither effective nor equitable. Many of these same students will fail later grades, when the social and academic consequences may be even more severe. Others may continue to move through the grades, while falling further and further behind their peers, ultimately dropping out of school or obtaining a meaningless diploma.

Thus, the best available evidence suggests that retention alone is ineffective at improving student achievement, yet we know that social promotion alone is an unacceptable alternative. Most important, we know that intervention programs for third-graders who are at risk of being retained can substantially increase their academic achievement. This suggests that neither passive social promotion nor mandatory retention is a good policy strategy.

Fortunately, widespread attention to the issue of retention has produced some statutes and proposals for reforms that go beyond holding kids back for more of the same. These “smart promotion” policies customize education to meet the needs and circumstances of individual students, an approach we believe should be the standard. They also include strategies to identify struggling students in the early grades and work to close their learning gaps, to minimize the need for retention; they position retention only as a last resort; and they ensure that retention is accompanied by additional interventions.

Colorado’s policy is a case in point: For grades K–3, it *requires* that struggling students be assigned to an academic improvement program, receive supplemental instruction during school hours that is tailored specifically to the students’ needs or deficiencies and participate in a home reading program. It *suggests* participation in summer school or a summer reading program. Colorado does not require automatic retention for struggling third-graders; rather, it recommends retention only after an individual assessment and discussion among the students’ parents, teachers and other school personnel.

The jury is still out on whether policies like these add value to students’ academic achievement. An evaluation of Florida’s approach to retention is attempting to produce evidence, but it is still too early to reach reliable conclusions. What we do know, from research summarized in *Early Warning* and in *Early Warning Confirmed: A Research Update on Third-Grade Reading*, is that the price of failing to close the reading gap for children from low-income families is too steep in economic, social and human terms for this country to continue to pay.

In that spirit, we offer this update of the considerable evidence base for why reading by the end of third grade matters so very much.



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