

State Notes

TOPICS OF LEGISLATIVE INTEREST

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Learning to Read v. Reading to Learn: A Discussion of Third-Grade Reading Supports **By Olivia Ponte, Legislative Analyst**

Introduction

Third grade marks a pivotal point in a child's development, and literacy must be attained before further knowledge can be acquired.¹ Therefore, it is vital to ensure students are proficient in reading to best prepare them for adult life in the American workforce. When comparing State reading proficiency results with those of a nationally representative sample, Michigan's standard of proficiency appear lower than that used on a national scale.² However, Michigan has taken measures to better intervene when additional support is needed to correct literacy at this stage, such as enact the "Read by Grade Three" Law of 2016, as well as create the Michigan PreK-12 Literacy Commission and the Reading Now Network.

The Revised School Code prescribes the current measures in the State to ensure as many students as possible obtain a score of at least "proficient" in English language arts on the grade three State assessment.¹ These measures include the approval of a variety of reading assessment systems, grade retention, and reading intervention programs. However, third-grade reading proficiency hovers near 32% in the State, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).³ Legislation continues to be considered to attempt to improve early literacy in Michigan students. While there are many different approaches to address reading proficiency in third graders, Michigan recognizes this pivotal point in the education system and is actively trying to ensure high literacy rates across the State.

Importance of Education

A strong education is a key part of success for many American adults. A report by Education Week shows that a student who does not complete high school costs the government about \$260,000 combined between lost earnings, taxes, and productivity.⁴ According to the United States Census Bureau, about 10% of Michigan's population age 25 and older falls into this category, lacking a high school diploma or passage of the general educational development test (GED).⁵ Furthermore, adult education funding has been reduced in recent years, from roughly \$80 million in 2001, to \$26 million presently.⁶ Many Michigan adults lack the necessary skills to acquire high-paying jobs.

In addition to Michigan adults without a high school diploma or GED, Michigan has a high number of adults who lack a postsecondary degree. In 2016, about 28% of Michigan adults age 25 and older had obtained a bachelor's degree or higher. While this number is higher than the 22% in 2000, it is still lower than the national average of 31%.⁷ The lack of higher education restricts the types of jobs Michigan residents can get, and in some cases may negatively affect

¹ A student receives a score of "proficient" if the student can successfully complete the tasks for his or her grade level outlined in the Michigan English Language Arts standards adopted by the State Board of Education in 2010.

the State's economy. For example, the lack of a well-educated workforce in metropolitan Detroit is one of the reasons Amazon cited for choosing not to include Detroit as a finalist for its new headquarters.⁸

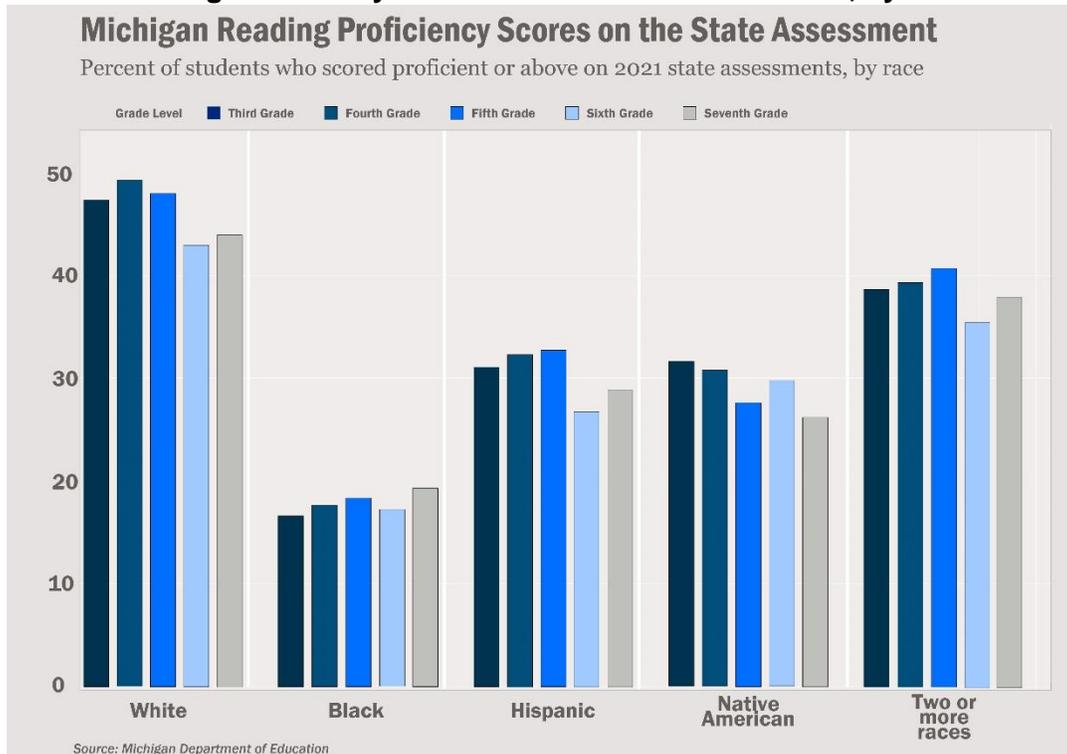
In addition to the workforce, the lack of a well-educated adult population also negatively affects the United States military. According to a 2021 Bloomberg report, about 70% of all Americans between the ages of 17 and 24 are ineligible to enlist.⁹ While there are several factors behind this, one of the three biggest obstacles for these young adults is the Armed Forces Qualification Test, which is used by the military to assess math and reading skills. Of the test takers that have a high school diploma, about 30% fail. The failure rate of those without a high school diploma is even higher.¹⁰

Another issue with the K-12 education system in the United States is that some students entering institutions of higher education are not prepared to learn advanced topics. Instead, community colleges and universities are forced to spend money and resources on basic coursework instead of new and specialized education because some students are not equipped for higher education, even after receiving a high school diploma.¹¹ Michigan has seen this phenomenon for itself. For the past 10 years, more than half of community college students in the State have been required to take (and pay for) remedial education courses that do not count for credit toward their degrees.¹²

Lastly, academic success and failure contribute to both economic and racial inequities across the country, including here in Michigan. According to NAEP reading proficiency results, there is a clear relationship between students' test scores and their socioeconomic status. Because of their low scores and lack of support, low-income students are more likely to drop out of high school and take low-skill jobs, thus perpetuating the cycle of poverty.¹³

In Michigan, these inequities are exacerbated by large racial disparities in educational attainment. For example, 27% of Hispanic, 26% of African American, and 24% of Native American adults aged 25 or older in Michigan have obtained an associate degree or higher.¹⁴ However, when looking at the same level of educational attainment, the numbers increase to 71% of Asian and 41% of White adults in Michigan.¹⁵ Furthermore, these disparities are evident in third-grade reading scores. Figure 1 shows data collected from the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) in which reading proficiency scores from the 2021 State assessment are broken down by race in grades three through seven. The data demonstrate that different racial groups in Michigan, on average, have different reading proficiency levels in third grade. This phenomenon further continues the cycle of racial and economic inequities in the State.

Figure 1
Reading Proficiency Scores on the State Assessment, by Race



Third Grade Benchmark

It is evidently important for young students to have a strong education, but why is third grade an important benchmark? Third grade marks the critical point in the education system when teachers stop teaching children how to read and expect students to read to learn. It is not that reading instruction stops at this point; rather, the focus of reading in the classroom switches from decoding the words to understanding the content of the passage and picking up new vocabulary along the way.¹⁶

It is essential to ensure that students are proficient in reading by the time they have completed third grade so that they can continue to learn in other areas. According to the Children's Reading Foundation, about 85% of schooling in subject areas other than language arts is taught through reading.¹⁷ If a student is not proficient in reading at this level, any lessons and coursework in other subjects will not be fully understood, furthering the knowledge gap for students who are not yet literate.¹⁸ To better understand this point, researchers at Yale University investigated this and found that about three-quarters of students who struggle with reading in third grade continue to struggle with reading in high school.¹⁹ Furthermore, it is not a simple task to help struggling readers who already have passed the third-grade benchmark. Research has shown that reading intervention is not as effective for struggling readers after third grade as it is for pupils who have yet to reach this point in their education.²⁰

The phenomenon outlined here has come to be referred to as the "Matthew effect" of reading, or the idea that there is an accumulated advantage.²¹ Dr. Keith Stanovich became known for his application of this idea to third-grade reading, claiming that the knowledge gap between proficient and struggling readers only grows as they continue in their academic careers.

While it may seem daunting to boil a student's future down to one pivotal point in elementary school, there is a silver lining: the Matthew effect is preventable. The research has shown exactly when this phenomenon can take hold of a young student's future. Therefore, by implementing reading supports and interventions to ensure proficiency by third grade, the Matthew effect should lessen.²²

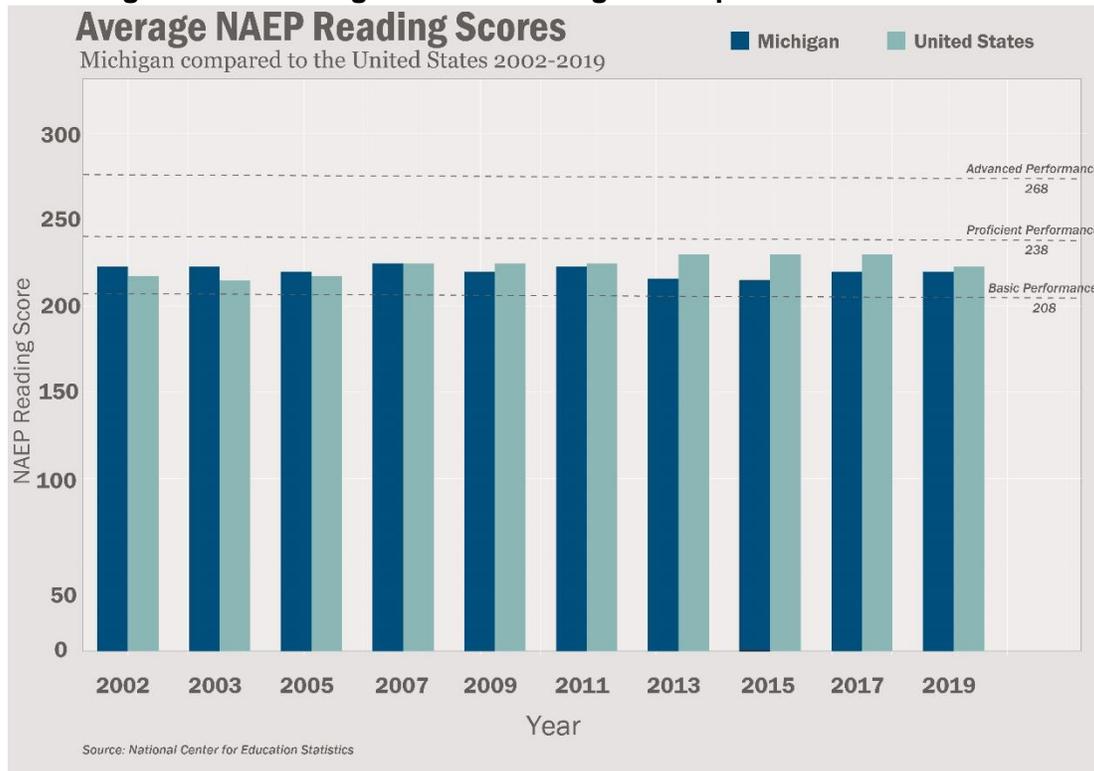
Current Testing

The United States enacted the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act in 2002. The purpose of the Act was to ensure that all students in the country were testing at the proficient level in mathematics and reading by 2014.²³ To do so, the Act required that there be an annual assessment of students' progress in these areas. However, the Act left the specifics of this assessment up to the individual states. The Act did not define what it meant to be proficient, nor did it detail how proficiency was to be measured.²⁴ The updated version of this law, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015, maintains the NCLB requirement that each state must test students' reading proficiency. However, unlike NCLB, there is no Federal accountability requirement. Under ESSA, the State must continue to submit an accountability plan, but can apply for subgrants for local accountability plans as well.²⁵ The fact remains, then, that it is ultimately up to the State to determine what it means to be proficient in reading.

Some claim that the states should use the proficiency standards used in the NAEP. The NAEP, which annually produces "The Nation's Report Card," is a project mandated by Congress and administered through the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) within the US Department of Education. The NAEP is the largest nationally representative assessment of educational proficiency in the United States.²⁶ The results from the NAEP often are used to compare results across states, as the NAEP is the only nationwide measure of proficiency available. [Figure 2](#) compares the average NAEP reading score in Michigan with the average reading score nationwide, from 2002 through 2019. Since 2009, Michigan has received a lower reading proficiency score than the national average. Furthermore, the average reading proficiency score of Michigan students did not reach the NAEP standard of proficiency in any of the past 20 years.



Figure 2
Average NAEP Reading Scores in Michigan Compared to the United States



Michigan annually assesses its students by way of the Michigan Student Test of Educational Progress (M-STEP). This test was designed to assess how well Michigan students meet the expectations of the State's academic standards across subject areas.²⁷ The MDE has qualitative standards in place for reading literature, reading informational texts, and foundational skills in reading. For example, a student in third grade should be able to "read with sufficient accuracy and fluency to support comprehension."²⁸ Therefore, the M-STEP presents grade-level text and tests for understanding.

According to the Michigan NAEP coordinator, the M-STEP and the NAEP tests differ in many ways: the sampling of students, the methods of testing, the assessment frameworks, and the criteria used to evaluate student performance. Therefore, the results of these tests cannot be directly compared.²⁹ However, it is important to recognize the benefits of both tests. While the M-STEP allows Michigan to see how well its students are aligning to its standards, the NAEP allows the State to see how it ranks among other states. According to the 2019 reading results from the M-STEP, 45% of Michigan students earned a score of "proficient" or higher.³⁰ In that same year, NAEP results show that 32% of Michigan students at the third-grade level were proficient in reading.³¹ This illustrates that the standard of what it means to be proficient in reading is different across the M-STEP and NAEP examinations.

How to Improve Reading Proficiency

While many agree that steps need to be taken to ensure a higher percentage of students are testing at a proficient reading level when they complete the third grade, it is unclear what those steps should be. One of the most common debates regarding possible solutions addresses the issue of grade retention versus social promotion. Grade retention, also known as 'being held back', is when a student repeats the same level of schooling for an additional year. This practice, however, can have negative consequences on social development, since students who are held back will be in a different grade level than their peers. Furthermore, this poses a threat to students' educational success, as this negative social change also tends to lead to a higher chance of dropping out later.³² For this reason, others argue in favor of social promotion, or the practice of letting a student advance to the next grade level, even if they are not academically ready to do so. However, this also can lead to a higher chance of dropout, since students who are promoted before they are ready tend to fall behind and lose academic motivation.³³

This debate was had in Michigan when the "Read by Grade Three" Law, Public Act 306 of 2016, was enacted. The Act requires grade retention for students who, after completing the third grade, do not meet the minimum reading proficiency score on the M-STEP exam or cannot demonstrate reading proficiency through a State-approved alternative. A student can receive a "good cause" exemption after a parent or legal-guardian files a petition, but many opponents to the Act cite the negative effects of grade retention explained previously.³⁴

The required retention aspect of the Act was to begin with the 2019-2020 school year; however, because of the schooling interruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, retention requirements did not take effect until after the 2020-2021 M-STEP cycle. According to a report from researchers at Michigan State University, however, only about 7% of students who were flagged for retention actually repeated third grade. According to M-STEP results, 3,477 students scored below the required proficiency level. However, many Michigan schools and parents used the exemptions allowed in the Act, and only 229 students were retained for another year.³⁵ This means that 0.2% of all third graders were retained in accordance with the Act, which is not significantly different from years before the Act was enacted.³⁶ While the required grade retention might not have had the intended effect on early literacy improvement, the Act includes many other State requirements to improve early literacy as the largest piece of Michigan legislation regarding third-grade reading.

The Act mandates school districts to select at least one MDE-approved diagnostic reading assessment system to screen students in grades K to three for reading difficulties. Should a student be flagged for a reading difficulty, the school must provide an individual improvement plan and notify the student's parent or legal guardian. Furthermore, school districts must provide reading intervention programs to help students who are experiencing such reading difficulties. The Act also required MDE to create the Early Literacy Coaching Model, which was



designed to support strong coaching programs and further improve professional learning around literacy coaching throughout the State.³⁷

So, what else has the State done to affect reading proficiency? In compliance with Executive Order 2016-18, MDE houses the Michigan PreK-12 Literacy Commission: a 13-member commission to advise on how to increase literacy proficiency in Michigan students.³⁸ In 2012, school superintendents from 20 western Michigan counties formed the Reading Now Network, which focuses on professional learning and literacy coaching to improve student literacy.³⁹ Most recently, in April 2021, a bill package was introduced in the Michigan Senate (Senate Bills 380 through 383) that would require students be screened for dyslexia and for MDE to create a dyslexia resource guide and advisory committee.⁴⁰

In response to the *Gary B v Snyder* lawsuit—first brought against Governor Snyder in 2016, continued under Governor Whitmer, and settled in 2020—the MDE has published "Equity in Literacy". This seeks to advise school districts in the State as to how to use evidence-based literacy strategies, initiatives, and programs to improve literacy in Michigan students, with special attention to reducing class, racial, and ethnic disparities.⁴¹

Conclusion

At first glance, the notion that third grade is one of the most important points in a child's K-12 education may seem unintuitive. However, the pivotal change of "reading to learn" rather than "learning to read" that occurs in the third grade has repercussions that either can help or hinder students for the rest of their academic career. This phenomenon is not new; however, the number of students that are testing at a level of "proficient" or higher in Michigan continues to be lower than the national average. Therefore, new legislation and supports continue to be created to raise the number of proficient readers.

The most relevant example of such legislation is the "Read by Grade Three" Law that was enacted in 2016. The Act added a section to the Revised School Code that required grade retention, student screenings for reading difficulties, and reading intervention programs to be created. The State has several other reading supports in place, such as the Michigan PreK-12 Literacy Commission and the Reading Now Network. Furthermore, the State is continuing in its mission to improve early literacy. State legislators continue to introduce legislation to create more reading support for Michigan students, such as Senate Bills 380 through 383, which would require dyslexia screening and create a dyslexia commission and resource guide.

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