

Guest commentary

Vulnerable kids can't improve reading if their parents can't help

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by [Michele Corey](#)



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Michigan has a new third-grade reading policy, intended to ensure that everyone entering the fourth grade is successfully reading at the time when the focus of instruction veers from learning to read to learning content material.

After months of debate surrounding the controversial component over retaining students who can't read before entering fourth grade, bills have been signed by the governor and implementation of the plan is underway. Michigan's ongoing challenge with this important benchmark includes 37 percent of kids unable to read at a basic level and 71 percent not reading proficiently by the end of third grade – statistics that are far worse for students of color and students facing other learning and life challenges.

Being one of the lowest performing states in the nation, it is critical that Michigan puts the right plan into action and adequately funds the steps necessary to do so.

Fortunately, there is much to be learned from Florida's decades-long experience with mandatory retention.

A new study released in September unearthed a critical finding in Florida's early grade retention policy which, similar to Michigan's legislation, requires all students with reading skills below grade level to be retained in the third grade.

Researchers found the strongest predictor of retention was the educational attainment of students' mothers. Children whose mothers had less than a high school diploma were 14 percent more likely to be retained compared with children whose mothers had a bachelor's degree. In addition, children with well-educated mothers were more likely to be promoted based on subjective exemptions.

What can we learn from more experienced states on this issue?

That what we intuitively know is also borne out by experience and evidence — there is a link between the educational success of parents and that of their children. Research has consistently shown that the success of children is tied to that of their parents, with multiple studies showing that children with more educated parents have more literacy readiness.

Parent education, of course, has its ties to economic status, but it is also specifically tied to parental availability for, understanding of, and ability to advocate for their kids in educational (and other) settings.

Because of this, [Michigan's Children](#) has argued that third grade reading scores won't rise appreciatively unless parents are able to engage effectively in their children's learning. They are after all a package deal. Parents are a child's first and best teacher and the home is the first and continues to be the most influential "classroom" for a child's learning, view of the world, and ability to grasp success in life.

There are ways to make progress on this issue. Michigan's Children was successful in maintaining in our final legislation a requirement to collect information about barriers parents face to successfully completing the required "read at home" plans.

If Michigan is anything like Florida, which of course it is, those barriers will likely include low adult skill levels. Addressing those barriers will have to include a family literacy component. Considering that there are 42,000 adults in Michigan between the ages of 18-34 who have less than a ninth grade education, and that each year more than 15,000 babies are born in Michigan to mothers without a high school credential, one can predict that some parents of the poorer performing kids are themselves poorly educated, likely poorly employed and struggling to ably assist in their children's education.

A two-generation approach to literacy is what is required. Investment in family literacy must be part of the strategy to improving third grade reading scores. Adult education programs have suffered for decades over inadequate funding and as a result many good programs have closed their doors. Without opportunities for parents to get the educational help they need, how can they be expected to support their children's

educational journey? Educational programs must become more accessible to adults who need them.

Another necessary strategy Michigan's Children successfully worked to include in the third grade reading legislation was an expansion of the participants in the read-at-home component to include caregivers beyond parents, like after-school providers.

Knowing the many challenges of working parents, particularly those struggling with their own literacy, and allowing other caregivers to contribute to the read-at-home plans is a sensible way to assist children's learning. Of course, this requires that children are spending time in quality child care settings outside of school where their education can be supported.

To improve on the numbers of schoolchildren who can read by the end of third grade, we need to invest inside the school building, but also outside – in family literacy, high-quality child care to prepare kids before they reach kindergarten, and high-quality afterschool and summer programs that can reduce the literacy gap through the early grades and beyond.

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