

To Improve Proficiency, 3rd Grade Reading Bill Must Have Appropriate Funding to Do the Job

April 5, 2016 – With bi-partisan support, the Senate last week approved (31-6) a third grade reading bill that gives parents a bigger voice in determining whether their children could advance to the fourth grade despite being behind in reading proficiency. The Senate plan differs from the earlier House bill that cleared in October because it offers more and broader exemptions for advancing children to fourth grade if they aren't able to read at grade level. Under the House plan, schools would be prohibited from moving students ahead if they demonstrated they were more than a grade level behind in reading. While both plans call for early interventions to assist students and literacy coaches to better train teachers, conflicts over the retention issue – how many students should be held back and in what circumstances – has sent the matter to a conference committee to be sorted out. If a resolution doesn't emerge, a long-awaited bill to provide help to struggling third-graders could be stalled.

Reading proficiency by the end of third grade is a significant benchmark in a child's educational development because after third grade instruction focuses on content knowledge and not learning to read. In June, the Governor's Third Grade Reading Workgroup, concerned with Michigan's 40th place ranking among states in 3rd grade reading proficiency, made a series of recommendations for improvement. The report noted that up to two-thirds of 4th graders were unable to read proficiently based on a national standardized test.

At Michigan's Children we urge a swift resolution to the retention question in order to move remedies for the reading struggles experienced by many children, especially the most vulnerable. To do so, the state needs to dedicate the funding necessary to implement an improvement plan in the early years when remedies will do the most good. There is too much at stake if we're to achieve the lofty goal of becoming a top 10 education state in 10 years, the expressed goal of the Superintendent of Schools and the State Board of Education.

Though not addressed in the legislative plans, there are other measures we believe should be considered to improve reading overall in Michigan and to bridge the damaging disparities in reading proficiency among children of color and their peers. We must provide additional state resources for *Early On* interventions for more children who are eligible for help with developmental delays and other health considerations that hinder learning. Another recommendation: Begin piloting Great Start Readiness Programs (the state's preschool for 4 year olds) to the most at-risk 3 year olds who are not yet able to access it. In addition, supporting family literacy programs which are proven to improve children's grade-level learning would help, as well.

Lastly, in order for a final plan to do the most good, we need all legislative and administrative stakeholders, including the State Board of Education and Gov. Snyder's reading workgroup, to be pointed in the same direction with the appropriate funding to ensure success for our schoolchildren and the state's future.

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