

Preparing all children to become strong readers

Ten ways to strengthen Ohio's grades K-3 early literacy initiatives

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Summary

Children who start strong in reading are more likely to succeed academically as they progress through middle school, high school, and beyond. Conversely, those who struggle to read in the early grades often falter as they encounter more challenging material; many become frustrated with school and drop out. Ohio lawmakers have long recognized the importance of foundational reading skills to students' long-term success. Passed in 2012, the Third Grade Reading Guarantee laid a strong policy foundation for early literacy in Ohio. But much more needs to be done to truly “guarantee” that all Buckeye children acquire the reading capabilities needed for a successful future. This brief recommends several ways that legislators can build on the state’s early literacy initiative to ensure that every child reads well.



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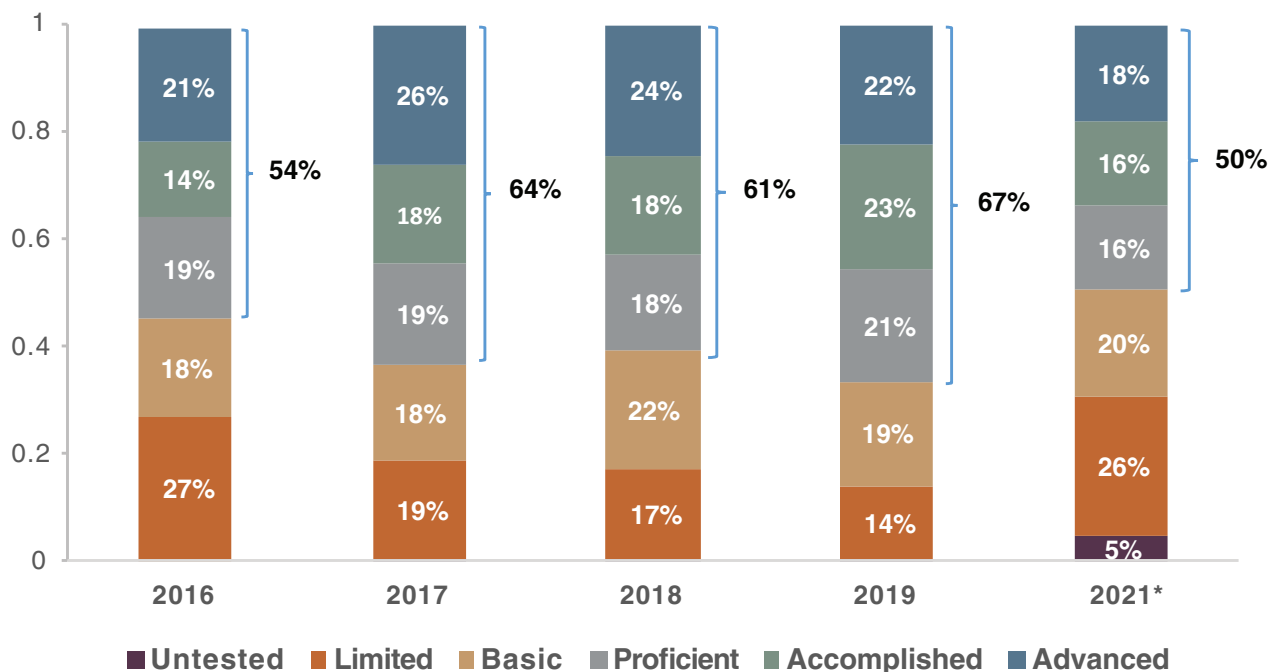
Introduction

There’s no denying it: Reading is essential to functioning in today’s society. Job applications, financial documents, ballot measures, and email all require basic literacy skills. So does success in school and college. Our lives are also enriched when we can effortlessly read novels, works of history, and the daily news. Yet even today, some 43 million American adults—about one in five—have poor reading skills. Of those, an estimated 16 million are functionally illiterate.

Giving children a strong start in reading is job number one for elementary schools. Nothing else that happens in the early grades matters nearly as much, for children who struggle to read at that stage almost never catch up. Published in 2012, an influential Annie E. Casey Foundation report found that nonproficient readers in third grade were four times more likely to drop out of high school. Longitudinal analyses from Ohio and other states have revealed similar negative consequences.

Mindful of the long-term importance of reading, Ohio lawmakers enacted the state’s Third Grade Reading Guarantee in 2012. The initiative requires fall diagnostic testing in grades K–3 to screen students for reading deficiencies, mandatory improvement plans and parental notification when children are identified as off-track, and grade retention and intensive interventions if third graders do not meet state standards. Before the pandemic hit, this package of reforms was moving the achievement needle. As figure 1 shows, Ohio’s third-grade reading proficiency rate rose from 55 to 67 percent between 2015–16 and 2018–19. There was also a substantial decline in the percentage of students scoring “limited” on state reading tests.

Figure 1: Ohio’s third-grade ELA test results, 2015–16 to 2020–21



Source: Ohio Department of Education. **Note:** Ohio first implemented its revamped state assessments in 2015–16. Spring 2020 state assessments were cancelled due to Covid.* The 2020–21 test results reflect learning losses caused by pandemic-related disruptions. Some numbers do not add because of rounding.

Then disaster struck, and student achievement across the nation slumped during the pandemic. In 2020–21, Ohio’s third-grade reading proficiency rates fell to 50 percent, with about a quarter of students scoring at the lowest level. Achievement gaps, which were already wide prepandemic, have also worsened. In 2018–19, for example, just 53 percent of Ohio’s economically disadvantaged students achieved reading proficiency by third grade compared to 83 percent of their nondisadvantaged peers—a thirty-percentage-point gap. In 2020–21, that gap increased to 34 points.

To ensure that all Ohio students truly read well by the end of third grade, policymakers need to redouble their early literacy efforts. As they weigh options to increase reading proficiency, they should build on three key principles:

1. **Empowerment:** Parents should be empowered to support their child’s literacy growth.
2. **Excellence:** Schools should implement highly effective early literacy programs.
3. **Responsibility:** The K–12 system—including the state, local districts, and individual schools—has a duty to ensure that all children have foundational reading skills.

With these precepts in mind, we offer recommendations to strengthen parental engagement, promote instruction grounded in the science of reading, and uphold a clear and consistent reading standard.

Strengthen parental engagement

Parents play a crucial role in a child’s literacy development. As far back as 1985, the National Commission on Reading [declared](#), “Parents play roles of inestimable importance in laying the foundation for learning to read.” [Volumes of research](#) show that greater parental involvement is linked to higher pupil achievement. Children especially benefit when parents have high expectations and create home environments conducive to learning (including at-home reading activities).

State and local leaders need to encourage vigorous parent engagement. The Third Grade Reading Guarantee includes worthy provisions that require schools to notify parents when their child is off-track and to involve them in creating the child’s improvement plan. Yet beyond those obligations, current law does not require anything in the realm of parental engagement or school responsibility after a plan is developed. The Ohio Department of Education (ODE) helps by posting family resources about early literacy on its website, but the focus is largely on helping parents navigate administrative processes as opposed to offering advice and tips about how to help their children become better readers.

Another potential vehicle to empower parents is through Ohio’s recently launched Afterschool Childhood Enrichment (ACE) accounts. This program offers low-income families \$500 per child to use for educational purposes, including afterschool and summer programs, tutoring, and field trips. The initiative is an important step forward in helping needy families access enrichment and extracurricular activities. But it’s still too limited: only homeschooling parents may use ACE dollars to purchase educational curricula and materials, while public or private school parents who want to use their funds to support at-home reading in this way are unable to do so.

Policy recommendations

To strengthen parental engagement in their children’s early literacy, Ohio lawmakers should do the following:

- 1. Require parent notifications about their children’s reading difficulties to include an information packet suggesting ways that they can directly support reading progress.** State law requires schools to notify parents in writing when their children in grades K–3 are identified as being off-track in reading. It spells out a few items that schools must include in that notification, such as the current services being provided to the student and proposed “supplemental instructional services” to improve his or her reading abilities. But there is no requirement for schools to provide parents with advice about how they can help their own child. To fill this gap, legislators should direct ODE (with input from educators and parents) to craft a clear, reader-friendly information packet showing ways that parents can support their child’s reading. Such a packet should be included with all parental notifications. To develop it, Ohio could look for exemplary resources developed by other states as well as reputable parent-centered nonprofits (e.g., [Reading Rockets](#)).
- 2. Require at least two annual check-ins with parents after a student’s reading improvement plan is finalized.** Current law does not insist that schools communicate

with parents as they implement a child’s improvement plan. That should change; parents deserve to receive updates on their child’s progress. Schools will also benefit from input from moms and dads who are also observing their child’s development. At a minimum, Ohio law should require schools to have at least two annual follow-ups with a struggling reader’s parents—perhaps within 60 and 120 days after the finalization of the improvement plan.

- 3. Allow parents of a child with an improvement plan to purchase reading materials via ACE accounts.** Children from prosperous, [language-rich](#) households have an inside track in school, but low-income parents are often at a disadvantage in creating such environments. One barrier is lack of books and other reading materials in their homes—surely reflecting their smaller budgets—and less access to [libraries](#). To help families purchase the essentials of at-home reading support, legislators should leverage the ACE program. Current law doesn’t let public and private school parents purchase books or learning materials with ACE dollars; only homeschooling families may do that. Legislators should permit parents of every child with a reading improvement plan to use ACE funds to purchase books and reading materials, both the instructional kind and the “fun reading” kind.

Promote instruction grounded in the science of reading

For decades, debates have raged about how best to teach young children to read. On one side are those who advocate for phonics—explicit and systematic instruction in the way letters and combinations of letters correspond to sounds. In the other camp are “whole-language” advocates, who assert that children best learn to read by looking at visual clues or memorizing thousands of words, one by one. In that model—often implemented via popular “three cueing” or “balanced literacy” programs—phonics is neglected or pushed to the side.¹

A large body of research on reading acquisition strongly backs phonics as the more effective approach. Reviewing dozens of studies, the influential National Reading Panel [report](#) concluded that systematic phonics instruction is a superior method. In a recent [scholarly review](#), a team of researchers stress the critical importance of phonics to help children crack the “alphabetic code.” The U.S. Department of Education’s [practice guide](#) advises teachers in grades K–3 to “teach students to decode words, analyze word parts, and write and recognize words” (i.e., teach phonics). Because of its strong evidence base, phonics plays a key role—alongside four other “pillars” of reading identified by the National Reading Panel²—in what many now term the “science of reading.”

Decoding—foundational as it is—isn’t all that children need in their toolkits. Reading comprehension, as [E.D. Hirsch](#) and others have argued, requires strong background knowledge, an understanding of grammar and syntax, and rich vocabulary. Unfortunately, the role of background knowledge, in particular, has too often been neglected, as suggested by the [limited time](#) elementary schools spend on social studies and science. Depriving children of cultural, historical, and scientific knowledge often makes comprehending a wide range of texts all the more difficult. The good news, as found in a [Fordham Institute study](#), is that when elementary schools spend more time on subjects like social studies, students make more rapid gains in reading comprehension.

Ohio needs to take this science seriously—as a number of [other states](#) are doing—if its students are to become strong readers. To its credit, ODE’s recent [statewide literacy plan](#) embraces reading science. But ineffectual practices are still widespread. A recent media [account](#) notes that three in five U.S. teachers report using the “three cueing” approach. And an *Education Week* [survey](#) from 2019 found that the Fountas & Pinnell *Leveled Literacy*, which relies on whole-language methods, was the most popular program in America’s elementary schools. Closer to home, the National Council on Teacher Quality found that a quarter of Ohio’s [teacher preparation programs](#) (including a few of its largest) do a lackluster job training candidates in the pillars of reading.

¹ For a concise comparison of the instructional approaches, see Louisa Moats’s [Whole-Language High Jinks](#) (p. 18). Emily Hanford’s 2019 article [“At a Loss for Words”](#) also offers an accessible explanation of the two methods.

² The four other pillars are phonemic awareness, fluency, vocabulary, and reading comprehension.

Policy recommendations

While it's encouraging to see ODE promoting the science of reading, state legislators also need to press the issue. We recommend the following:

- 1. Create a state reimbursement program for schools purchasing high-quality instructional materials.** Following a model developed by [Louisiana](#), Ohio lawmakers should incentivize schools to adopt high-quality ELA textbooks and materials. To implement the program, Ohio should rely on its recently developed Materials Matter catalog, which includes ratings of textbooks and curricula based on expert reviews. Schools that purchase materials earning the highest rating—a mark that indicates close alignment to the science of reading—would qualify for full reimbursement from the state.
- 2. Require districts and charter schools subject to a “reading achievement plan” to implement curricula aligned with the science of reading.** State law requires districts and charter schools to create [reading achievement plans](#) if they receive low early literacy ratings (one or two stars) or have third-grade reading proficiency rates less than 51 percent. The statute outlines several topics that must be addressed in such plans—e.g., performance goals and strategies for reading improvement—but it does not require schools to adopt literacy programs aligned to the science of reading. Lawmakers should strengthen this statute and require any district or charter subject to an achievement plan to adopt curricula that align with the science of reading and provide professional development that supports rigorous implementation.
- 3. Create a literacy coach program to support low-performing elementary schools.** Legislators should authorize ODE to hire and deploy trained reading coaches who provide hands-on support in elementary schools that receive two consecutive years of one-star early literacy ratings. Unlike typical, short-lasting professional development workshops that do little to improve practice, intensive coaching can assist educators in significantly raising [student achievement](#). As evidence, Mississippi has implemented a robust [reading-coach system](#), and that state is now widely admired for its strong progress on national assessments. To launch such a program in Ohio, lawmakers would need to dedicate sufficient funding, perhaps somewhere between \$30 to \$40 million per year.³
- 4 Require independent evaluations of Ohio’s literacy intervention efforts.** Current law requires ODE annually to report data on the number of students in grades K–3 identified as being off-track in reading and the types of interventions they receive. It also calls for an evaluation—“if available”—about the effectiveness of interventions. Unfortunately, no such evaluation has yet been conducted. While data collection is a good start, legislators need to insist that rigorous evaluations of schools’ reading interventions occur. Lawmakers should remove the “if available” clause in current statute and simply direct ODE to commission, every two years, an independent evaluation of schools’ early literacy interventions. This would allow Ohio’s policymakers and educators to zero in on the specific interventions that are proving to be the most beneficial for struggling readers (and which are not).

³ With about one-fourth as many K–12 students as Ohio, Mississippi spends approximately \$10 million per year on its coaching program. For a broad overview of its early reading initiatives, including the organizational structure of its literacy-coach program, see Carey M. Wright’s 2021 presentation “[Improving Early Literacy in Mississippi](#).”

Uphold a clear and consistent reading promotional standard

Prior to the Third Grade Reading Guarantee, practically all Ohio third graders moved on to fourth grade without regard to their reading capability. But as [data](#) indicate, students who are passed along via “social promotion” suffer consequences later in life, with many dropping out of high school. When he signed the Guarantee into law, former Governor John Kasich summed it up, [saying](#), “Kids who make their way through social promotion beyond the third grade, when they get up to the eighth, ninth, tenth grade . . . they get lapped, the material becomes too difficult.”

The Guarantee’s retention provision establishes a checkpoint at which students need to demonstrate basic reading skills before schools promote them: third graders must achieve a certain “promotional” score on their state ELA exam (or an approved alternative test). Students who do not meet that standard must be retained in third grade and receive intensive interventions. Students have multiple opportunities to clear that bar—once in the fall, again in the spring, and (if administered by their school) during the summer. The law also exempts certain students with disabilities and English learners. In 2018–19, the most recent year in which the retention provision was in effect, schools held back 5 percent of third graders under this law (the requirement was waived due to Covid in the 2019–20, 2020–21, and 2021–22 school years).

The retention provision regularly comes under fire, as nobody likes to make students repeat a grade, and some have questioned the efficacy of the initiative. The concerns, however, aren’t backed by the best-available research. A line of [rigorous studies](#) on Florida’s pioneering third-grade reading law—the model for Ohio’s law—indicates that its retention provision has been effective. The most [recent evaluation](#) found that retention, coupled with interventions, boosted the achievement of retained third graders and reduced their likelihood of needing remediation later. Although no rigorous evaluation of retention has been conducted in Ohio, state exam data show that third-grade reading achievement was on the rise prior to the pandemic (see figure 1 on page 2 above). This positive trend suggests that under the Guarantee, including its retention requirement, schools have been focusing more strongly on early literacy and students are reaping the benefits.

Policy recommendations

The Guarantee’s retention provision remains a necessary safeguard against “social promotion” and ensures that students with severe reading deficiencies receive the extra help they need. Legislators should, however, consider several policy updates. We recommend the following:

- 1. Establish a fair, permanent promotional standard.** In June 2022, the Ohio House passed [legislation](#) that, if approved by the Senate and governor, would eliminate the Guarantee’s retention requirement. The bill is misguided, as it would remove a necessary checkpoint and allow children to fall through the cracks. That said, legislators should revisit where exactly the promotional standard is set. Under current law, it’s scheduled to reach proficiency in 2024–25, a high enough level that it could overidentify the number of students who truly need extra help with the reading basics. One possibility is to permanently set the standard at or near the current promotional score, which is somewhat below proficient. That bar would avoid holding back students who are likely ready for more challenging material yet still ensure that children with severe reading deficiencies get the assistance they need.
- 2. Demonstrate equivalency between alternative and state assessments.** State law allows promotion if third graders demonstrate an “acceptable level of performance” on alternative assessments that districts are allowed to administer in addition to the state ELA test. ODE currently approves [five alternatives](#), and 3.3 percent of third graders were promoted through this route in 2018–19. Whether such students read at the same level as their counterparts is uncertain, as Ohio doesn’t publish analyses that verify equivalency between exams (akin to an [ACT-SAT crosswalk](#)). Here, lawmakers should (a) revise statute to require students to achieve an “equivalent” (as opposed to the vague “acceptable”) level of performance on alternatives and (b) require ODE to demonstrate equivalency to the state ELA exam before allowing an alternative to be used for grade-promotion purposes.
- 3. Ensure midyear promotion occurs by virtue of achieving state promotional standards.** State law permits—though does not require—districts to promote retained students midway through their second year as a third grader. Midyear promotions, however, are not necessarily based on meeting the state’s promotional standard. Instead, districts may promote a retained student midyear if they believe he or she reads “at or above grade level,” without any specific reference to the promotional bar. Lawmakers should make clear that retained students must achieve the conventional promotional score to be eligible for midyear promotion, based on the fall administration of a third-grade state or alternative test.

Conclusion

All children can learn to read when properly instructed and given the right supports. Ohio's Third Grade Reading Guarantee lays a solid foundation for ensuring that elementary schools are making early literacy a priority and that struggling readers are receiving extra help. State lawmakers should be commended for their attention to early literacy, but more work needs to be done. With some thoughtful policy updates, state leaders will take further steps toward fulfilling their "guarantee" to all Ohio students that they'll have the reading skills needed for lifelong success.

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