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Phillip M. Robinson Jr.
State Representative
Ohio House District 19

House Bill 117 Sponsor Testimony
House Primary & Secondary Education Committee
April 18, 2023

Chair Bird, Vice-Chair Fowler-Arthur, and members of the Ohio House Primary & Secondary Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of House Bill (HB) 117, legislation to reform the Ohio's Third Grade Reading Guarantee (TGRG). My joint sponsor, Representative Gayle Manning and I look forward to productive conversations with the committee and all stakeholders.

I had a transformational experience after tutoring a young student while working in the private sector. This led to my subsequent career change and work in education non-profit management. In my new work, it became apparent to me that our schools need more support to help our children with many aspects of education, including reading. I have seen firsthand the challenges and unintended consequences of Statehouse policy changes in education, such as the TGRG. Testing anxieties and fear of retention is having a negative impact on students, parents, and teachers. Regardless of students' race, gender, and socioeconomic status; policies of retention and over testing are never the answer to improving learning in any discipline of study.

Our state needs to shift gears in how we support our schools' efforts to teach our young children how to read. For that reason, it is time to change our TGRG and redirect our efforts in reading.

HB 117 is very straight forward in what it does: 1) End the retention provision of the TGRG; 2) Limits 3rd Grade testing of the English Language Arts (ELA) standardized test to only once a year, and 3) Increases reading intervention services' standards and accelerates phonics introduction. The bill does **NOT** end or get rid of any of the remediation, intervention, or support programs of the current TGRG, or change any other part of the law.

HB 117 has three goals to improve reading education: 1) End the trend of punishing students that struggle with reading; 2) Reduce over testing and over emphasis on standardized state exams; and 3) Start a conversation and redirect legislature to look to productive ways to improve and invest in K-3rd grade reading education and proficiency levels through future legislation and policy.

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Since implementing the TGRG in the '13-'14 school year, we have seen no meaningful or significant improvements to 4th Grade reading proficiency levels. Ohio's National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading scores, prior to the pandemic, shows a decline from 2017 to 2019, with Ohio's reading score remaining virtually stagnant since 2002. Studies have confirmed this, like a recent 2020 analysis by Ohio State University's Crane Center for Early Childhood Research and Policy. Retention and extra testing is clearly not the answer.

When comparing pre-pandemic 2019 NAEP average reading scores among states, the top three states in the U.S. are: 1) Massachusetts, which has a comprehensive 3rd grade reading policy that focuses on prevention, supporting early literacy, and child development; 2) New Jersey, which has no statewide retention mandate and lets local school districts decide their retention rules; and 3) Wyoming, which has no specific laws about 3rd grade reading all together.

Under the current retention policy, Ohio averages more than 3,600 third graders held back for failing the test each year. Only 15% of those third graders who repeated the grade were deemed proficient in reading after a year, and only 8% were deemed proficient by the time they were in fourth grade. Now those students must face the negative harm caused by retention.

The policy of retention has more long term negative consequences to students compared to possible and infrequent short term gains to reading skills. Most studies from over the last 30 years have found that holding students back creates little or no long-term academic benefits and can actually be harmful to students. Some of the negative effects can include: 1) reduced chance of high school graduation; 2) higher risk of dropout and behavioral problems; 3) financial burden for schools; 4) hurts learning and proficiency in other disciplines; and 5) the potential social and emotional harm to students.

Socioeconomic barriers have contributed to black, latin-x, and low-income household students having lower reading scores at higher percentages and are being held back at a higher rate. Disadvantaged students face the downsides of repeating a grade at a higher rate than white and more affluent students. On an individual basis, retention may be needed for some students when local educators see the need and are in consultation with parents. It should not be state mandated, based on standardized testing, ignoring the child's performance in other studies and the community's socioeconomic factors.

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The current TGRG rules are also another example of too much standardized testing, pulling both teachers and students away from actual learning and real remediation for students who are struggling in reading. We have heard time and time again from educators and families the problems caused by over testing and over emphasis on “one size fits all” standardized exams. Eliminating the additional fall third grade ELA assessments also has the benefit of an estimated \$2.7 million in savings for Ohio tax payers at the start of the next fiscal year of passage.

Ohio needs to move to investing in proven ways to improve reading proficiency, solutions include teacher professional development in reading education; funding for more instructional coaches at schools; and earlier intervention starting in kindergarten. Another great way to improve K-3 reading and learning in general is universal pre-school and all-day kindergarten; issues my office are working on right now.

I think the winds of change are here on this issue. HB 117 has the support of parents, students, teachers, superintendents, school boards, school psychologists, and many Ohioans. The National Council of Teachers of English also recommend an end to state mandated retention. Last General Assembly, the bill passed out of House Primary & Secondary Education committee unanimously, and it passed out of the House in bipartisan support with 82 votes. And last year, the Ohio State Board of Education passed a resolution recommending the state legislature repeal the TGRG’s retention provision. We listened to the feedback from the Senate Education committee hearing of the bill last General Assembly and added provisions to expand reading intervention standards and phonics education from 3rd grade to 5th grade.

I have been working to advocate for these solutions as the Chief Impact Officer (CIO) at Reading Partners, a national nonprofit that works with communities to provide students with individual reading support. The more I learn about this issue, the more I know Ohio needs to turn the corner and move toward working solutions to the issue of reading proficiency. A student’s zip code should not determine their destiny.

Chair Bird, Vice-Chair Fowler-Arthur, and members of the committee, I thank you for your time and I am happy to answer any questions you have.

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