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Chair Bird, Vice Chair Fowler Arthur, Ranking Member Robinson, and members of the House Primary and Secondary Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify as a proponent of House Bill 117, the legislation to reform Ohio's Third Grade Reading Guarantee. It is my pleasure to see so many of you again. For those new to this committee, my name is Jennifer Bindus, and I am honored to stand before you, once again, in my greatest roles: wife, mom, classroom teacher, and a champion for all children.

If you happened to hear my testimony from last March's House hearing on the former HB 497, you will notice that much of it will be the same. This is purposeful and for good reason. This past August, I started a new school year with forty-nine of the best third graders around. They come to school each day ready to learn. But, with the start of this new year, came the same test with the same threat of retention. I believe in my testimony so wholeheartedly that I want to deliver my message again. Mandatory retention based on a single measure is wrong.

I've spent most of my twenty-seven years in the classroom with third graders; twenty-four of those years to be exact. I've had the privilege of calling over 1,400 students, "my kids". During the months of August to May, and even during our Summer Academy, there is no place I'd rather be than in Room 5 at Leighton Elementary School in Aurora, Ohio. You might say that it's my home away from home and those who know me well, know I'd not have it any other way.

In my school, teachers are content area specialists. We team up and share responsibilities for two classes of students. For my team, I teach reading and writing while my team teacher is the math, science and social studies expert. This allows me to focus solely on literacy instruction. We provide authentic, engaging experiences for our learners at Leighton Elementary and I get the opportunity to refine my craft all day, every day.

A little over ten years ago, my grade level team heard about a new piece of legislation centered around a reading guarantee. We couldn't move past one word: retention. From its inception, we knew this part of the legislation would never be good for kids. Especially kids who had never taken a high-stakes, state-level test.

Under the last ten years of the Guarantee, many positive outcomes have developed. Reading practices have strengthened in school districts. We now have early screenings for our youngest learners, multi-tiered and multi-layered interventions, extended support for students deemed not on track and substantial requirements for teachers of reading. My district's K-3 teachers have already completed Ohio's eighteen hours of dyslexia law requirements, ahead of the state timeline, and are already delivering systematic, explicit instruction in phonics blended with authentic literacy instruction.

Under the last ten years of the Guarantee, I've also seen what are most likely unintended consequences that lawmakers did not see coming when they put this legislation in place. Let me detail these from a practitioner's point of view.

Test prep: In the great push to get students to pass the test, an abundance of test prep occurs across school districts. This takes away from authentic, literacy-rich instruction and creates a disconnect from meaningful work such as having students read real books.

The Great Scramble: This is what I've personally named that time when fall test results arrive, usually in late December. After reflecting on student scores, teachers start identifying students whose learning paths abruptly need to change. These are the students who, as of that moment, will not pass 3rd grade. Last December, I visited the Senate Education Committee to testify in support of the former HB 497 and at that point, I was eight days short of finishing the first semester of school and I had no idea which of my students were "officially" passing or failing third grade.

Test, retest and then test some more: When students don't meet the cut score, they have multiple attempts to pass the test. They can even take an alternate test as permitted by the Ohio Department of Education. This leads to lost instructional time while preparing for and taking these tests.

Developmentally inappropriate instruction and practice: Much of our instruction and practice is now computer-based because of the online state test. Our youngest children are learning to read on digital devices. We have seven- and eight-year-old children trying to type multi-paragraph essays in response to two or more reading passages. I can't help but wonder if the digital push takes away from those all-important early literacy skills in grades K-3. Our literacy instructional minutes could be better spent on developmentally appropriate activities that effectively teach kids to read and write.

These seemingly unintended consequences were likely caused by the retention clause of the Third Grade Reading Guarantee. I thank House Representatives Manning and Robinson for recognizing that change is needed. I am also here to assure you that Ohio's teachers can provide differentiated, systematic and explicit reading instruction; deliver early, targeted and multi-layered interventions, and stay accountable to all stakeholders without the threat of student retention.

Let me speak briefly about student retention. Retention is stressful, traumatic, punitive, shameful and embarrassing. Retention, based on a single measure, is bad practice. Retention, without a team consensus, is bad practice. Retention gaps exist along racial and social lines. Retained students often receive more of the same instruction when really, they might just need something different. I have to ask, “Why are lawmakers imposing a practice that does demonstrable harm to Ohio’s children?”

If the retention clause is removed from the Guarantee, lawmakers and educators can still see to it that our third graders move to fourth grade as proficient readers.

Lawmakers can help school districts obtain resources. Time, teacher training, professional development, literacy coaching, early literacy development, intervention supports and extended school year opportunities are all examples of resources that would be welcomed by teachers such as myself. Lawmakers can trust teachers to regularly assess and progress monitor in house. This way, teachers receive immediate, timely results that allow for same-day intervention. Lawmakers can encourage districts to use yearly standardized assessments as overall tools for improvement, not punishment for teachers or students.

Let me close by reaffirming that Ohio’s teachers can provide differentiated reading instruction, deliver targeted interventions, and stay accountable to all stakeholders without the threat of student retention. Instead of making teachers do “The Great Scramble,” let us focus on what matters: authentic literacy instruction and frequent in-house monitoring of student progress coupled with early, targeted and multi-layered interventions.

Thank you, Chair Bird, Vice Chair Fowler Arthur, Ranking Member Robinson, and members of the House Primary and Secondary Education Committee, for allowing me to pour my “teacher heart” out to you today in support of House Bill 117. My door to Room 5 is always open if you’d like to join some of my favorite kids in doing your reading for the day. I’d be happy to answer any questions you may have.

