

## House Bill 117: Proponent Testimony

### House Primary and Secondary Education Committee

May 2, 2023

Chair Bird, Vice Chair Fowler Arthur, Ranking Member Robinson, and members of the Committee:

My name is Melissa Kmetz, and I'm a twenty year veteran teacher. I've spent seventeen of my twenty years teaching third grade, the last three of which I've taught language arts exclusively. I have a Master's in Education with a Reading Specialization. I currently teach third grade in the Lakeview Local School District in Cortland, Ohio, and I am the 2023 Ohio Teacher of the Year.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of House Bill 117. This bill will eliminate mandatory student retention under the Third Grade Reading Guarantee (TGRG). I firmly believe high-stakes decisions about students should not be made based on a single data point.

Illiteracy is an incredibly serious issue in the United States. According to the National Literacy Institute, 130 million adults are unable to read a simple story. Forty five million adults are "functionally illiterate" and are reading below a fifth grade level. Approximately 50% of Americans are unable to read a prescription drug label, and between 46-51% of adults have an income below the poverty level because of their inability to read. Without a doubt, illiteracy is a momentous problem in the United States. While I understand the intent of the Third Grade Reading Guarantee is to address this issue and ensure non-proficient readers do not slip through the cracks, retention is not the answer.

The retention component of the Third Grade Reading Guarantee is incredibly detrimental to students for many reasons. It disproportionately affects students of color, those struggling to overcome the effects of poverty, and those affected by a knowledge gap due to their familial circumstances. Oftentimes, marginalized students don't possess the knowledge and skills necessary to be successful because they have not had the same experiences, enrichment and support other students have had.

In addition to the retention component of the Third Grade Reading Guarantee disproportionately affecting select populations, I've witnessed the extreme stress it causes for students and families. Some students simply do not test well due to test anxiety. Under the guarantee, a student can theoretically be a straight A student yet be retained in third grade if he/she can't achieve a passing score on a standardized assessment. I have had many students whose standardized test scores do not align with their classroom performance due to test anxiety. This year, one sobbed throughout the fall test because he was so afraid he wouldn't do well and would be retained. The night before the spring assessment just a few weeks ago, I received an email from a parent

stating, "Sorry to bother you. \_\_\_\_\_ is freaking out tonight about this AIR Test. Like hyperventilating and crying. I've never seen her like this before. Should she be this worried?" Stories like these are heartbreaking.

Another issue with retention is that, due to confusing formatting, the test questions do not always accurately measure reading comprehension. Frequently, graphs and charts that students are inexperienced with deciphering are used to supplement text. The test may also ask students to record an answer in a way they never have or it may present content in a manner that's confusing. Other times, where to mark answers is confusing to students. When students raise their hand for assistance, teachers are unable to provide assistance. In these cases, students know the content and often the answer, they just don't understand what is being asked or how to show it.

Such lengthy and frequent testing is developmentally inappropriate for many eight and nine year old students. In addition to the fall and spring administrations of the Ohio State Tests in English Language Arts, twice throughout the academic year, schools also administer an alternative reading assessment for students who have not met TGRG promotion requirements. I have seen firsthand the lack of focus, disinterest in school, and test burnout that ensues from such ongoing testing.

Ryan Stowell is one of my administrators at Lakeview Local Schools. He also holds a Master's in Education with a Reading Specialization and shares:

The retention requirement is very much at odds with a significant amount of research that shows that retention has either no positive effects on students' long-term success and decreases the likelihood that they will graduate from high school. A 2018 Texas A&M University study found that students that are retained in elementary school are 2.67 times more likely than their non-retained peers to drop out of high school. There are rare cases when retention is the right decision, but this should be a careful decision made by a team that includes the students' parents, teachers, guidance counselors, and administrators. Standardized testing results should be one of many factors that inform this critical decision; the child's age, academic growth patterns, development, health and wellness, and others should be taken into account. There are circumstances when retention is the right decision, but the benefits of that decision need to be compared to the potential negative consequences. A student should only be retained in cases where the group of stakeholders determines that the benefits of retention outweigh the known adverse consequences of retention. Retention is a decision with life-long consequences. If we get it wrong, it should be based on a more robust set of information than a child's scores on a handful of assessments.

I think it's important that while this bill eliminates the retention of students based on test scores, it keeps in place the important policies of identifying struggling readers as soon as possible and developing appropriate interventions. Providing universal access to high-quality early childhood education is essential for student success. Too many students come into kindergarten behind and play catchup throughout the early grades. The deficit needs to be addressed while students are learning to read and not reading to learn.

Retention decisions should be made utilizing multiple data points by school personnel who know the students best.

I also appreciate the bill eliminating the fall administration of Ohio's State Test in English Language Arts. Without the high-stakes decision tied to this test score, giving the students the test once rather than twice will help to return more time for teaching and learning in the classroom. It will also ensure schools will be less likely to administer alternate assessments multiple times throughout the course of the year.

Once again, thank you for the chance to provide my thoughts. I urge your support of this important bill.