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House Primary & Secondary Education Committee

Testimony on House Bill 117

Lisa A. Gray, Ohio Excels
May 9, 2023

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 provide testimony on House Bill 117 (HB 117). My name is Lisa Gray, and I am the President of Ohio Excels. We are a non-partisan, non-profit organization created by leaders of Ohio's business community who are committed to helping improve educational outcomes for Ohio's students and ensuring that all K-12 schools prepare students for success in the next step of their lives, whether it is higher education, the military, or the workforce.

I am here today on behalf of Ohio Excels and our partners in the business community to express our concern about the bill's proposed changes to the Third Grade Reading Guarantee and to highlight the urgent need to support Ohio's struggling readers.

As many of you know, I have testified on this issue before, the last time being almost one year to the day. I am here again to share the results of research that was conducted for us by the Ohio Education Research Center on the impact of third-grade retention. While I know where most of you stand on this issue, I want to share this research with all of you since we will be presenting it later this week in the Senate Education Committee.

This study is the first of its kind in Ohio to focus on the effects of literacy-based retention on students. Unlike other analyses which just summarize scores, don't focus on literacy-based retention specifically, or lack appropriate comparison groups, this study uses the gold standard in social science methodology to identify what happens to students after they are retained.

The study looked at how students who were in the third grade in the 2013-14 school year performed on state ELA and math tests in each following grade up to seventh grade. Using a special statistical method, the researchers were able to compare students scoring just above the cut score and who were not retained – the control group – to students scoring just below the cut score and who were retained.

The results surprised even us: **Third grade students who were retained performed better** than similar students who originally scored just above the cut score in ELA and math in every grade we could examine, fourth grade through seventh grade. While the gap between retained students and non-retained students decreased each year, the immediate benefits were compelling. In fourth and fifth grade, for instance, the average retained student scores at least one performance level better than a similar non-retained student.

To illustrate the size of this difference, imagine two students who had similar scores on the third grade ELA test, both in the Limited range. This research shows that the gap between those similar students on their fourth grade ELA test would be large enough to raise the retained student nearly to proficiency while the non-retained student would remain in Limited.

In retained students' second time through third grade, 90% increased their score, 53% increased an entire performance level on the ELA test and 21% achieved proficiency. It's worth noting that 90% of retained students scored at the very bottom test level, Limited, making this improvement all the more impressive. Overall, the students furthest from the cut score benefitted the most from the retention.

This analysis provides yet more evidence of the value of the Third Grade Reading Guarantee and its impact on students' future learning outcomes. Ohio Excels and our partners in the business community believe there is no more significant benchmark in education than ensuring that our students are proficient readers before they leave elementary school and if they are not, much more needs to be done to ensure they become strong readers.

Removing the retention component without ensuring that adequate resources, supports, interventions, transparency, and accountability are in place to support Ohio's struggling readers will only lead to worse academic outcomes, something our children, families and state do not deserve and cannot afford.

Already, Ohio's youngest schoolchildren appear to be some of the worst affected by learning declines exacerbated by the pandemic according to state and national assessments. Third graders in Ohio experienced a 22-percentage point reduction in reading proficiency during the pandemic, from 67% in the 2018-19 school year to 51.9% in the 2020-21 school year.

Findings from the [Annie E. Casey Foundation](#) show that students who do not read proficiently by the third grade are four times more likely to leave high school without a diploma compared to proficient readers. If the student is economically disadvantaged this risk is multiplied, and they are actually six times more likely to not graduate. Research by the [Ohio Department of Education](#) found that students who are proficient in reading by third grade were five times more likely to be college and career ready.

As a state, we must be urgent in addressing this challenge and ensure that our strategy is much more robust and comprehensive and based on research and data specific to Ohio's students' performance. Our children and our families are counting on us. We cannot continue to promote our students – 40% at each grade level – who are not proficient readers. Doing so is likely to lead to a life of educational and financial hardship.

Thank you again for the opportunity to share our testimony, and I am happy to answer any questions you might have.