

Katie Baker
HB 33 Proponent Testimony
Senate Finance Committee
May 31, 2023

Chairman Dolan, Vice Chair Cirino, Ranking Member Sykes, and fellow Members of the Ohio Senate Finance Committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak today as a proponent of literacy amendments that were added to the House's version of the State Budget Bill.

I would like to draw your attention to amendments that would positively change Ohio's Third Grade Reading Guarantee Law by removing the consequence of mandatory retention based upon a standardized test score, as well as eliminating the fall administration of the Ohio State Test in English Language Arts. The amendment also implements mandatory reading interventions as well as phonics instruction in 4th and 5th grades. Additionally, there is also a safe harbor from the consequence of mandatory retention for the group of third graders who recently finished their school year. My name is Katie Baker, and I come before you today as a parent of two young boys, but also as a professional in the area of mathematics intervention.

The State Legislature has been discussing this law for a few years, and during previous hearings in both the House and Senate Education Committees, ample proponent testimony has been provided by many Ohio citizens from across the state. If you've not had the privilege of hearing past testimony, I will attempt to summarize the compelling points that have been presented.

Previous testimony brought awareness of the overabundance of testing related to this law. I have shared that my oldest son has had to take 15 tests related to this law and it would have been 16 if schools did not shut down in the spring of 2020 due to the pandemic.

You should be aware that teachers do not receive the results of the tests in a timely manner and therefore are not able to use the information to immediately address learning needs.

You should have knowledge about other diagnostic tests that all schools give at least 3 times a year which measures reading growth and provides immediate results.

Many across the state have questioned why we make such serious educational decisions based upon an online test, in which kids have to type a multi-paragraph essay, within a set time frame, when they have never experienced formal typing instruction. Like many educators and parents, you too should be wondering if this online test is a true and valid measure of a student's reading ability?

Prior testimony has painted the picture of the stress and anxiety Ohio's 8 and 9 year olds face with the threat of mandatory retention if they do not reach the promotion score.

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As a parent of a recent fourth grader, I can speak first hand to the negative impact the Third Grade Reading Guarantee Law has had on my child. This law did not positively impact my child's reading achievement and created significant stress in his life. While well intended, it is time we analyze the impact and effectiveness of a law that was put into place in 2012.

Our system of retention will never allow a student to catch up. By withholding access to grade level standards, and only teaching below grade level, it is no surprise that by the end of the year, they will remain below grade level.

To put it bluntly, kids in Ohio are held back with the goal of catching up.

If we stop and think about that idea for a moment, we might realize the shortcomings of that plan. Our system holds back kids who were already behind, thus denying them access to 4th grade content, while their peers continue on to the next grade. Ultimately, while well intended, we created a structure in Ohio's schools that perpetuates the achievement gap.

There has been significant conversation and research regarding the effectiveness of a remediation approach such as this, versus an approach aimed at accelerating the learning growth of students. Remediation and Learning Acceleration are not the same, as the approaches used in each model are vastly opposite. Many states across the country have published research and guidance on learning acceleration, yet unfortunately Ohio hasn't made this shift. Moving forward, we must realize that in order to catch kids up, we can't withhold access to grade level standards. We must instead be able to diagnose and address any unfinished learning that directly relates to the current academic content standard of that particular grade level and subject area.

When providing interventions in an acceleration model, we need to focus on a "just in time" diagnosis of a students' understanding and determine how that relates to a learning progression. We then understand where a child's current understanding relates to the grade level standard. Explicit and targeted interventions are designed to provide the student with additional opportunity to build skills and understanding so that they have greater access to the grade level work. These interventions are systematic and cumulative as they follow a specifically designed learning progression aimed at ensuring the student will continue to make progress toward grade level mastery.

In short, Remediation is a mistaken belief that a student must master all previous learning before they are able to learn grade level material. Our interventions should always keep the grade level learning expectation in mind as the goal. Learning Acceleration allows the student to build immediate foundational skills that directly relate to the current grade level learning.

Our Ohio Learning Standards are designed for such work and intervention related to acceleration of growth. The standards connect and build upon each other to ensure that prior knowledge can be utilized to support new learning.

We can utilize an acceleration approach in both literacy and mathematics that will support all students, regardless of race, color, ethnicity or economic status.

There has also been significant brain research that has impacted what we know to be true about learning. Specifically, we know that students who are learning new information must make connections to previous knowledge. The more connections they can make, the stronger and more likely they will be able to retain and recall the information at a later time when needed. Thus, as an education system, we also have to shift our lens to diagnosing strengths in kids, or what they do know as compared to what they are lacking. Students are not able to connect new learning to something they do not already know.

Ohio's legislators have debated and discussed ways in which we can support Ohio's students post Covid. Like many parents of recent third graders, it is our hope that you too are advocating for a safe harbor for these kids because they were in kindergarten and first grade during the height of the pandemic.

The amendments in HB33 do not remove the practice of retaining a student. The amendments instead allow for parents, educators and administrators to look at all student growth and achievement data, as well as other factors that can determine if the student would benefit from retention.

My husband and I are our sons' most important advocates. However, the Third Grade Reading Guarantee Law does not provide parents any rights to object or disagree with the consequence of retention. My children do not meet any of the exemptions under the law, and Ohio does not have a testing "opt-out" choice. Therefore, according to page 15 of the Third Grade Reading Guarantee Guidance Manual, if my children do not take the state tests, they will not have a score and thus be automatically retained until a promotion score is reached. Parents deserve a seat at the table, and should have the right to voice their refusal of retention. In all other retention situations, parents have the ultimate decision as to whether their child will be retained. I'm asking the committee today to provide me with this right as it relates to the Third Grade Reading Guarantee.

As you consider these amendments, it is my hope that you remember my son and the countless other 8 and 9 year old students in Ohio's schools. Let's humanize the data because all of the test scores were earned by young children in Ohio. Let's focus on increased support and interventions rather than consequences placed on children who come to school each day to learn and grow to the best of their abilities.

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Thank you for listening to my testimony and for favorably considering the literacy amendments in HB33. At this time, I'm happy to answer any questions from members of the committee.

Sincerely,
Katie Baker

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