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Educators Standard Board

Phillip M. Robinson Jr.
State Representative
Ohio House District 6

House Bill 497 Sponsor Testimony
House Primary & Secondary Education Committee
March 8, 2022

Vice-Chair Bird and members of the Ohio House Primary & Secondary Education Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of House Bill (HB) 497, legislation to reform the Ohio's Third Grade Reading Guarantee (TGRG). My joint sponsor, Chairwoman Gayle Manning, and I look forward to productive conversations with the committee and all related 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 abilities.

HB 497 has three goals to accomplish this: 1) End the retention provision of the TGRG; 2) Limit 3rd Grade testing to the English Language Arts (ELA) standardized test to only once a year; and 3) And to start a conversation and force the legislature to look to other ways to improve K-3rd grade reading education and proficiency levels through future legislation and policy; other than punishment and over testing.

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 stagnate 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.

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When comparing 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 policy and lets local school districts decide their retention rules; and 3) Wyoming, which has no specific laws about 3rd grade reading all together.

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 dropping out of school; 3) financial burden for schools; 4) hurts learning and proficiency in other disciplines; and 5) the potential social and emotional harm to students. On an individual basis, retention may be needed for some students when local educators see the need, but not when state mandated based on standardized testing, ignoring the child's performance in other studies, and the community's socioeconomic factors.

The current TGRG rules are another example of too much standardized testing pulling both teachers and students away from actual learning and real remediation to 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.

Ohio needs to move to investing in proven ways to improve reading proficiency, things like 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; an issue my office is working on right now.

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.

Vice-Chair Bird 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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