



## Written Testimony on Substitute House Bill 33

### House Finance Committee

Thank you, Chair Edwards, Vice Chair LaRe, Ranking Member Sweeney, and House Finance Committee members for the opportunity to provide written testimony on Substitute House Bill 33, the state's budget bill for fiscal years 2024 and 2025.

My name is Aaron Churchill, and I am the Ohio Research Director at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute. The Fordham Institute is an education-focused nonprofit that conducts research, analysis, and policy advocacy with offices in Columbus, Dayton, and Washington, D.C. Our Dayton office, through the affiliated Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, is also a community (charter) school sponsor.

As a longtime supporter of educational choice, we're pleased to see the steps that the budget bill takes to strengthen Ohio's school choice programs. The additional expansion of EdChoice scholarship eligibility to 450 percent of the federal poverty level will allow more middle-class families to access private schools that fit their child's needs. We are also pleased that the budget bill maintains the governor's enhanced funding for high-quality charter schools. While there is still work to ensure that *all* charters are funded equitably, these supplemental dollars will help narrow funding gaps for quality charters and give them the capacity to serve more Ohio students.

Beyond choice, strong classroom instruction can also open doors for lifelong student success. We commend House lawmakers for preserving the governor's key literacy priorities, including the required adoption of high-quality reading curricula and the proscription on the disproven, ineffective instructional method known as "three-cueing." No school in Ohio should encourage its students to guess at words.

Yet we are also deeply concerned about Substitute HB 33's proposed elimination of Ohio's third-grade reading requirements. The data are clear: Children who cannot read proficiently at the end of third grade are far more likely to struggle in middle and high school, and are at serious risk of dropping out.<sup>1</sup> As we all know, high school dropout is associated with myriad negative adult outcomes, such as increased unemployment, depressed wages, worse mental and physical health, and increased rates of criminal behavior.<sup>2</sup>

Enacted by Ohio lawmakers in 2012, the retention provision in the Third Grade Reading Guarantee aims to ensure that students with severe reading deficiencies aren't falling through the cracks. The policy requires schools to give struggling students the extra time and intensive interventions needed to become strong readers before they are promoted to the fourth grade.

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.aecf.org/resources/double-jeopardy>.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4655594/>.

Make no mistake: Without this policy, schools will quickly relapse into “social promotion,” a harmful practice that pushes children along regardless of their knowledge and skills. Without intervention, such students are likely to become frustrated and discouraged with school, and too many will eventually drop out in high school.

Rigorous studies indicate that this downward spiral can be dramatically altered when states require early intervention. Consider the following studies, all of which rely on a rigorous statistical method that compares the academic trajectories of retained students to extremely similar students who narrowly pass the state’s third grade reading requirement.

- **Florida:** Retained students made significant academic gains on fourth through eighth grade state exams, posted higher high school GPAs, and were less likely to need remedial high school coursework than their closely matched peers.<sup>3</sup>
- **Indiana:** Retained students made substantial gains on state exams through seventh grade; results were positive across-the-board for all student groups examined.<sup>4</sup>
- **Mississippi:** Retained students in this study made particularly impressive progress, scoring approximately 40 percentile points higher than their barely-promoted peers by sixth grade.<sup>5</sup>

These analyses give us confidence that retention benefits struggling readers and puts them on surer pathways. While no study of similar rigor has been conducted in Ohio, it’s worth noting that prior to the pandemic Ohio cut its percentage of students scoring at the “limited” level on third grade reading exams from 27 to 14 percent between 2016 and 2019. This suggests that progress was being made in Ohio with the retention provision in place.

We urge you to reconsider the proposed elimination of the state’s reading requirement. With the governor’s emphasis on the science of reading—including a focus on phonics—fewer third graders will likely need to be held back. That’s great news. But Ohio has promised that *all students* will leave third grade with the reading skills needed to succeed academically in fourth, fifth, sixth grade—and beyond. Maintaining the retention provision will ensure that each and every child is well-positioned for lifelong success. Removing this provision, on the other hand, may placate adults in the system, but will lead to academic struggles and social and emotional stress down the road for students. Please put the needs of kids first.

Thank you again for the opportunity to submit written testimony.

---

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nber.org/papers/w21509>.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.edworkingpapers.com/ai22-688>.

<sup>5</sup> <https://wheelockpolicycenter.org/high-quality-education/ms-read-by-grade-three/>.