

### Question:

You requested information regarding third grade retention to assist you while preparing an analysis for legislation on the topic.

### Response:

Whether a child is reading proficiently by the third grade is an important indicator of their future success. We know that children who are not reading proficiently by third grade are four times less likely to graduate high school on time and are at much greater risk of dropping out. Policymakers have enacted legislation geared toward improving third grade reading proficiency as a result of this knowledge. One of the strategies used is retention of students who do not meet grade-level expectations. We have outlined current policies as well as some research on the topic, both in favor of, and in opposition to, retention.

### **State Policies—Third Grade Retention**

A December 2014 publication by ECS provides an overview of [third-grade reading policies](#) throughout the country, including, but not limited to, retention policies. Some of the key findings regarding retention include:

- 16 states plus D.C. require the retention of third grade students who do not meet grade level expectations in reading. (While Delaware law states that students not reading at grade level should be retained, there is a caveat to that policy outlined in the epilogue of a budget bill. It states that until the Statewide Assessment System is fully implemented, all consequences related to that Statewide Assessment System are eliminated for individual students—including retention).
- Of those that require retention, 12 will promote students if they participate in an intervention.
- Three states allow students to be retained based on a recommendation from a teacher, parent, or superintendent.
- 16 states plus D.C. provide good cause exemptions for at least one of the following reasons: students receiving special education services, students previously retained on the basis of a reading deficiency, English language learners, principal or teacher recommendation, or parental appeal.

Since the publication of this ECS report, a few states have modified their policies regarding retention and promotion. To our knowledge, most of these changes only impact the details of the state’s retention or promotion policies. For additional information, ECS maintains a [state policy database](#) on promotion and retention. The following changes have occurred:

- Oklahoma expanded the use of a ‘probationary period’ for students in [House Bill 1823](#). Language was added to include the use of a ‘probationary period’ for qualifying students, instead of mandatory retention in the 2016-2017 school year.
- Georgia [House Bill 502](#) provided that certain criteria for promotion and placement of students in third grade (and grades 5 and 8) will not apply if the state board of education is unable to provide timely assessment results during the first year of using a new assessment instrument.

- Utah [Senate Bill 204](#) requires Local Education Agencies to reasonably accommodate a parent’s or guardian’s written request to retain a student in kindergarten through grade 8 based on the student’s academic ability or the student’s social, emotional, or physical maturity.

## Research and Additional Resources

- The [Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes “Fast Fact” sheet](#) provides information on whether retention in the early years is an effective, research-based strategy for improving student outcomes. This document reviews literature about the effects of early retention, and highlights the nuances in the retention/social promotion debate. This document concludes that research on the topic is not conclusive.
- This [2015 working paper](#), entitled “The Effects of Test-based Retention on Student Outcomes over Time: Regression Discontinuity Evidence from Florida” (attached) found that early grade retention has no effect on the probability that students graduate from high school.
  - This [2015 article](#) by the National Education Policy Center, entitled “Validity Problems Undermine Study of Florida’s Third Grade Retention Policies” reviews the Florida study, finding that the report’s utility is limited by methods of analysis.
- This [2014 study](#) entitled “Third-grade retention and reading achievement in Texas: A nine year panel study” found that retained third-graders consistently outperformed socially-promoted students.
- This [2012 report](#) released by Brookings, entitled “Is Retaining Students in the Early Grades Self-Defeating?” provides an overview of the background and policy implications of retention.