

## Grade Retention

### ISSUE

This **Issue Review** examines research regarding the effects of grade retention on students. The **Issue Review** presents an overview of studies from other states, particularly Florida, on the effects of retaining students and considers what other factors might positively influence student achievement. The **Issue Review** specifically includes information on other states' experiences in retaining students and how Iowa law requires retention of third graders who are not reading proficient, beginning with the 2017-2018 class.

### RELEVANT CODE

Iowa Code section [279.68](#)  
[281](#) Iowa Administrative Code chapter [61.3](#)

### BACKGROUND

Grade retention is the practice of keeping students at the same grade level for an extra year. Traditionally, students have been retained for reasons such as poor overall academic performance or emotional immaturity.<sup>1</sup> Research has shown that the transition between grades three and four is pivotal, as children are expected to go from learning to read to reading to learn. This research, and the fact in 2015 that 32.0% of fourth graders in the U.S. scored below basic reading proficiency, have spurred efforts to create policies that allow or require retention for students that are not reading proficient by the end of the third grade.<sup>2</sup> As part of an effort to ensure children are ready to read to learn, beginning in the summer of 2018, Iowa school districts will be making decisions about third-grade retention based on student performance on reading assessments.

### IOWA'S TEST-BASED GRADE RETENTION LAW

During the 2012 Legislative Session, the General Assembly enacted the [Early Literacy Initiative](#) in [SF 2284](#) (Education Reform Act). The Initiative permits the retention of students that are not reading proficient at the end of the third grade, as determined by student performance on locally determined and statewide assessments. As amended in 2016 by [HF 2413](#) (School Student Reading Assessments and Summer School Act), students that are not reading proficient are categorized as "persistently at-risk." Students in this category are defined as those that have "not met the grade-level benchmark on two consecutive screening assessments." Two other

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<sup>1</sup> Nailing Xia and Sheila Nataraj Kirby, "Retaining Students in Grade: A Literature Review of the Effects of Retention on Students' Academic and Nonacademic Outcomes," (2009), Rand Education, [http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/technical\\_reports/2009/RAND\\_TR678.pdf](http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/technical_reports/2009/RAND_TR678.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> "The Nation's Report Card: State Achievement Level Results," National Assessment of Educational Progress, [http://www.nationsreportcard.gov/reading\\_math\\_2015/#reading/state/acl?grade=4](http://www.nationsreportcard.gov/reading_math_2015/#reading/state/acl?grade=4).

categories of reading proficiency exist: “at-risk,” for students nearly persistently at-risk, and “reading proficient” for students with the optimal level of reading proficiency. Students in these two categories are not subject to grade retention. While grade retention provisions apply only to the third grade, schools are required to provide regular written notification to the parent or guardian of any student in kindergarten through the third grade that is persistently at-risk.

“Persistently at-risk in reading,” as defined in Iowa Code section [279.68](#) for third grade retention purposes, is determined based on multiple sources, not a single assessment. The following data should be considered by the school district:

- Student performance on universal screeners. Universal screeners are brief assessments that focus on a variety of target skills – one universal screener is provided to school districts as a part of Iowa’s [Early Warning System](#). Through the Early Warning System, the Iowa Department of Education currently provides reading screeners for pre-kindergarten through grade six to support schools in detecting students persistently at-risk in reading.
- Student performance on progress monitoring assessments, which are administered to students who receive additional instruction or intervention, to evaluate reading improvement. The assessments are also part of the Early Warning System.
- Student performance on large-scale assessments, such as the statewide assessment of student progress required in Iowa Code section [256.7\(21\)\(b\)](#).
- Student performance on classroom assessments.

School districts are required to provide an intensive summer reading program for students considered persistently at-risk at the end of the third grade, unless the districts are granted a waiver by the Department of Education (the Department). Students that are persistently at-risk must enroll in the intensive summer reading program unless they qualify for a good-cause exemption. Good-cause exemptions include:

- Limited English proficient students with less than two years of instruction in an ESL (English as a Second Language) program;
- Students with an Individualized Education Program (IEP) indicating that participation in locally determined or statewide assessments is not appropriate;
- Students that have demonstrated an acceptable level of performance on an alternative assessment, based on performance measures approved by the State Board of Education;
- Students that have demonstrated mastery through a portfolio review under guidelines adopted by [rule](#) by the State Board of Education;<sup>3</sup> and
- Previously retained students that have received intensive remediation for at least two years.

Third-grade students that are persistently at-risk in reading and do not qualify for a good-cause exemption may be retained, unless they successfully complete their school district’s intensive summer reading program. Successful completion of an intensive summer reading program is defined as meeting one of the following two standards:<sup>4</sup>

- Consistent attainment of an end-of-third-grade proficiency standard based on a department-approved literacy assessment; or
- Attendance at no less than 85.0% of the program’s sessions.

<sup>3</sup> [281](#) Iowa Administrative Code Chapter [62](#), Department of Education Guidance of Early Literacy.

<sup>4</sup> [281](#) Iowa Administrative Code Chapter [61.3](#).

Through these mechanisms, students do not need to be reading proficient to be promoted to the fourth grade, even if they do not qualify for a good-cause exemption. Satisfactory attendance in an intensive summer reading program permits promotion. Further a decision to retain a student in the third grade may be made only after direct consultation with the student's parent or guardian and after formulation of a plan of action to increase the student's reading proficiency. Students that are promoted to the fourth grade, but are still persistently at-risk in reading, must continue to receive reading interventions until they become reading proficient. See **Appendix A** for a flowchart regarding how retention decisions will be made.

[Senate File 2284](#) required the intensive summer reading program and retention provisions to begin on May 1, 2017. [Senate File 2323](#) (FY 2017 Education Appropriations Act) delayed the implementation of these provisions until May 1, 2018. The first students that will be considered for retention by school districts are students that will be in the third grade during the 2017-2018 school year. It is estimated that the intensive summer reading program will cost between \$6.4 million and \$9.6 million annually,<sup>5</sup> and may cost as much as \$13.9 million annually.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to the intensive summer reading program, [Senate File 2284](#) established the Successful Progression for Early Readers Program to provide reading interventions for students persistently at-risk in reading. The program requires school districts to provide, if funding is appropriated by the General Assembly, at least 90 minutes daily of scientific, research-based reading instruction and learning strategies as well as the intensive summer reading programs. School districts may also include the following strategies:

- Small group instruction.
- Reduced teacher-student ratios.
- More frequent progress monitoring, which are assessments to measure students' reading proficiency.
- Tutoring or mentoring.
- Extended school day, week, or year.

Since its inception in FY 2014, the Successful Progression for Early Readers Program has received an appropriation of \$8.0 million to support local education agencies and the Department of Education in providing these reading remediation services.

In addition to these optional strategies, Successful Progression for Early Readers requires school districts to do all of the following:

- Provide parents of students who are persistently at-risk in reading with a plan outlined in a parental contract, including participation in regular parent-guided home reading.
- Establish a reading enhancement and acceleration development initiative designed to offer intensive accelerated reading instruction to each kindergarten through third-grade student who is persistently at-risk in reading.

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<sup>5</sup> February 2016 Administrative Rules — Fiscal Impact Summaries, page 16, <https://www.legis.iowa.gov/perma/09142016341>.

<sup>6</sup> November 2016 [Report of the 2016 Intensive Summer Reading Program \(ISRP\) Study](#).

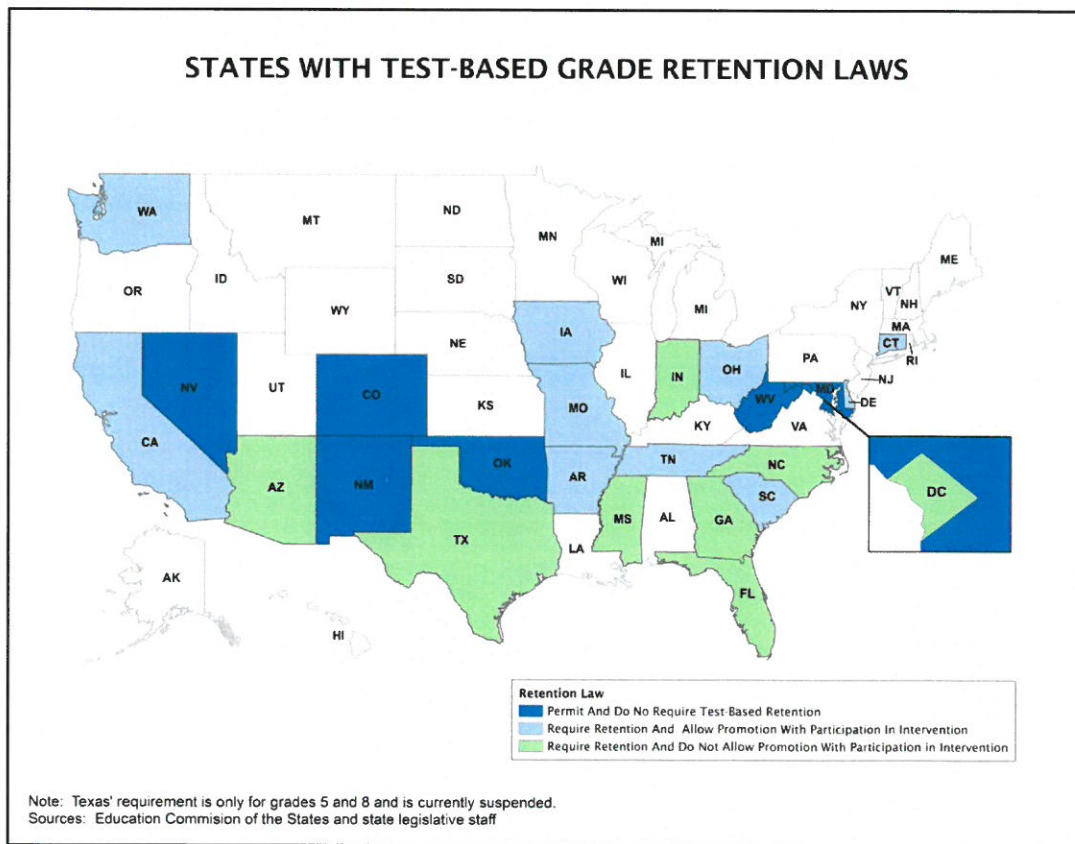
- Report to the Department the specific intensive reading interventions and supports implemented by the school district. The Department will annually prescribe the components of requested or required reports.
- At regular intervals, apprise the parent or guardian of academic and other progress being made by the student and give the parent or guardian other useful information.

**OTHER STATES’ TEST-BASED RETENTION LAWS**

According to the Education Commission of the States,<sup>7</sup> 16 other states and the District of Columbia mandate the retention of third-grade students who are not reading proficient. Of these 17, nine states, like Iowa, allow promotion if the student successfully participates in reading intervention. The other eight do not allow promotion based on participation in reading intervention. Six additional states permit retention based on a recommendation from a teacher, parent, or superintendent.

**Figure 1** places states’ test-based retention policies into three categories. Blue states permit retention as an option but do not require it. Light blue states require retention but allow promotion if the student successfully participates in reading intervention. Green states require retention and require demonstration of reading proficiency for promotion.

**Figure 1**



<sup>7</sup> "K-3 Quality: Is there a third grade retention policy?" (July 2016), Education Commission of the States, <http://ecs.force.com/mbdata/mbquestRT?rep=KQ313>.

Most states and D.C. have good-cause exemptions similar to the exemptions in Iowa. Examples include students that receive special education services, students that were previously retained, and English language learners.

Most states and D.C. require reading interventions. The states that do not require them recommend reading interventions. See **Appendix B** for a list of reading interventions in states with test-based grade retention.

### **RESEARCH ON GRADE RETENTION**

Grade retention is intended to provide poorer-performing students an additional year to achieve the grade-level standard needed for promotion to the next grade. A noncomprehensive list of reasons for retention includes the following:

- Promoting students that are not prepared creates further failure in the future.
- Promoting students without demonstrating the requisite skills gives the inappropriate message that they do not need to work as hard as possible.
- Promoting lower-performing students alongside the better prepared puts a further burden on teachers because they must spend additional time with lower-performing students.
- Promoting lower-performing students gives parents the impression that their children are doing better than they are in reality.
- Retaining students in early grades prevents retention in later years.

Opponents of grade retention advocate for social promotion. Social promotion is the practice of promoting students regardless of whether or not they learned the requisite skills for the next grade. The reasoning behind social promotion is that a student, if retained, may suffer psychological and emotional harm. A noncomprehensive list of arguments for social promotion includes the following:

- Retaining students lowers their self-esteem and self-worth, creating more poor academic performance.
- Retention damages peer relationships by separating the student from friends.
- Retained students are more likely to drop out of school.
- Retaining students is expensive.
- Retained students have a higher rate of drug abuse, teenage pregnancy, depression, and suicide than promoted students who perform at similar academic levels.

In 91 studies conducted by states and research institutions over the past few decades, various student outcomes have been examined, including:

- **Academic achievement** – Some studies indicate positive or mixed results, but have all seen positive academic gains in the short-term that fade over time.
- **Socioemotional outcomes** – Findings are mixed and debatable. Some studies support the argument that retention lowers student self-esteem significantly, but others indicate improved self-esteem.
- **Behavioral outcomes** – Evidence on behavior is inconclusive. A number of studies found more behavioral problems among retained students, but others found less.

- **Dropout rates** – Studies indicate that retained students are more likely to drop out of school before graduation.

The studies show that certain students are more likely than others to be retained. Retained students are more likely to be:

- Male.
- Minority.
- Younger than classmates.
- From families of lower socioeconomic status.
- Living in single-parent households.<sup>8</sup>

### **FLORIDA'S GRADE RETENTION LAW RESULTS**

While research has traditionally found results that are, at best, mixed on grade retention, research results on Florida's test-based retention law have found more positive effects of retention on students. Many states, including Iowa, followed the path of Florida, where reading scores increased after the 2002-2003 school year when the state started requiring retention of third graders who were not proficient. Research has shown more positive effects of test-based retention on academic achievement in Florida.<sup>9</sup> During the first three years after retention, retained students perform better than their classmates that were promoted. Moreover, retained third graders in Florida have a reduced chance of retention over the following four years, and many would have been retained in the future if they had not been retained in the third grade.

While research has shown increased student performance as a result of Florida's test-based retention law, those positive effects dissipate over time and fade out within five years. Third-grade retention policies may also cause more retention in earlier grades. Furthermore, the positive effects may reflect not only the grade retention policy, but also the effects of reading interventions received by struggling readers. These interventions include summer reading programs and intensive supplemental reading instruction during school hours. When retention is accompanied by supportive interventions, such as summer school, studies show more positive academic outcomes. However, whether the positive academic results were due to retention or the interventions is unclear.

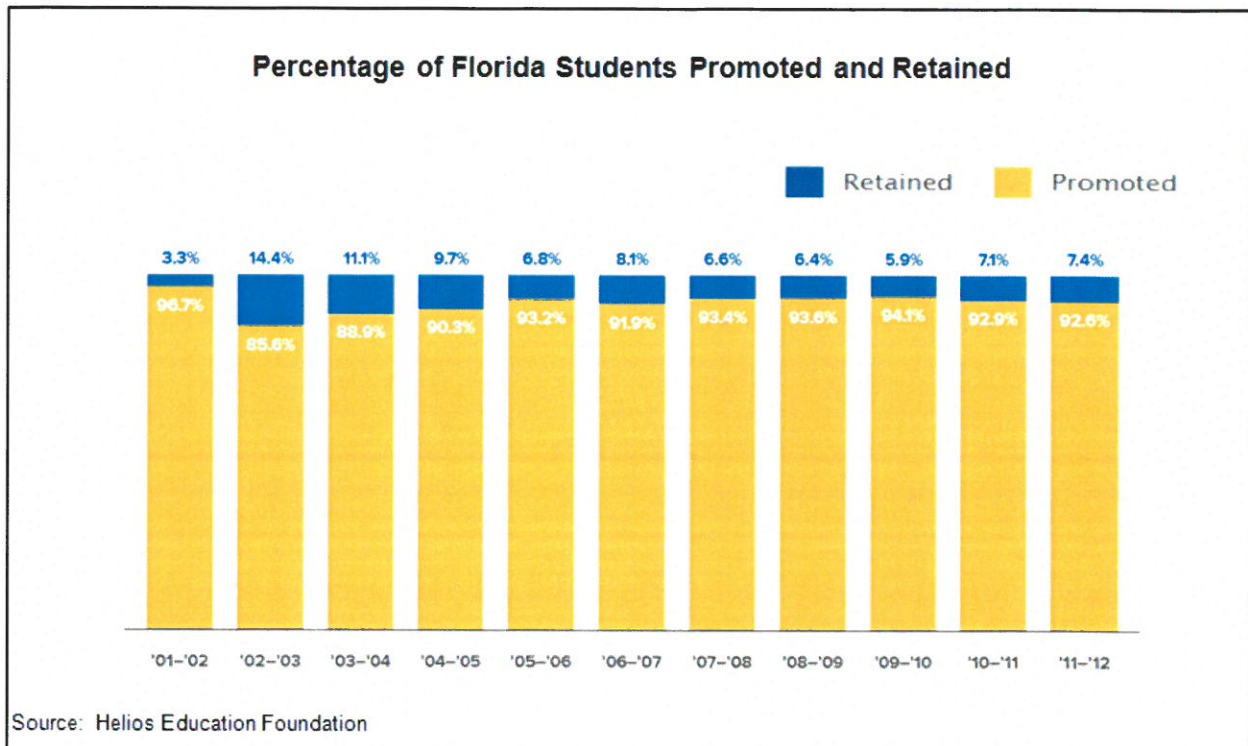
**Figure 2** shows the percentage of Florida students promoted and retained from the 2001-2002 school year through 2011-2012.

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<sup>8</sup> Nailing Xia and Sheila Nataraj Kirby, "Retaining Students in Grade: A Literature Review of the Effects of Retention on Students' Academic and Nonacademic Outcomes," (2009), Rand Education, [http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/technical\\_reports/2009/RAND\\_TR678.pdf](http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/technical_reports/2009/RAND_TR678.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> Guido Schwerdt and Martin R. West, "The Effects of Test-Based Retention on Student Outcomes over Time: Regression Discontinuity Evidence from Florida," (February 2013), Harvard Kennedy School, [http://www.hks.harvard.edu/pepg/PDF/Papers/PEPG12-09\\_West.pdf](http://www.hks.harvard.edu/pepg/PDF/Papers/PEPG12-09_West.pdf).

Figure 2



The 2001-2002 school year was the year before test-based grade retention began in Florida. From that year to the following year, the percentage of third graders retained increased from 3.3% to 14.4%. However, the retention rate began to decline over the next seven years and was below 10.0% at the end of the study. The decrease in retentions was due to an increase in good-cause exemptions and improved scores on the statewide assessment.<sup>10</sup> From the 2002-2003 school year to the 2011-2012 school year, the number of good-cause exemptions increased from 13,046 to 22,114. Students scoring a passing grade on the statewide assessment increased from 77% in 2002-2003 to 82% in 2011-2012.<sup>11</sup>

**Figure 3** outlines similarities and differences between Iowa and Florida's retention policies.

<sup>10</sup> Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability, The Department of Education Has Taken Initial Steps to Improve Student Progression. October 2008 Report No. 08-42, <http://www.oppaga.state.fl.us/reports/pdf/0842rpt.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> Bethany Miller, "Lessons from Florida's Third Grade Reading Retention Policy and Implications for Arizona," Helios Education Foundation, [http://www.helios.org/Media/Default/Documents/Education%20Briefs/Lessons\\_From\\_Floridas\\_Third\\_Grade\\_Reading\\_Retention\\_Policy\\_and\\_Implications\\_for\\_Arizona.pdf](http://www.helios.org/Media/Default/Documents/Education%20Briefs/Lessons_From_Floridas_Third_Grade_Reading_Retention_Policy_and_Implications_for_Arizona.pdf).

Figure 3

## Comparison: Testing-based Grade Retention Laws in Florida and Iowa

Florida	Iowa
Retains students in the lowest of five categories based on the statewide assessment (Level 1).	Retains students in the lowest of three categories, based on numerous assessments, including the statewide assessment, universal screeners, progress monitoring assessments, and class assessments (persistently at-risk).
Allows for six good-cause exemptions.	Allows for five good-cause exemptions.
Requires reading proficiency for grade promotion of students that do not qualify for good-cause exemptions.	Does not require reading proficiency; students may be promoted if they attend at least 85.0% of summer reading program sessions.
Requires four remediation strategies for retained students: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Summer reading camp;</li> <li>• Academic improvement plan;</li> <li>• 90 minutes daily of research-based reading instruction;</li> <li>• Assignment to a “high-performing” teacher in the retention year.</li> </ul>	Requires the remediation strategy of a minimum of 90 minutes daily of scientific, research-based reading instruction.  Requires other remediation strategies that may include but are not limited to the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Small group instruction;</li> <li>• Reduced teacher-student ratios;</li> <li>• More frequent progress monitoring;</li> <li>• Tutoring or mentoring;</li> <li>• Extended school day, week, or year;</li> <li>• Intensive summer reading program.</li> </ul>
Requires early identification of struggling readers in grades K-3, early intervention for struggling readers in K-3, and communication with parent.	Requires early identification of struggling readers in grades K-3, early intervention for struggling readers in K-3, and communication with parent.

Sources: Helios Education Foundation and Iowa Code section [279.68](#)

As in Iowa, Florida provides reading interventions for students struggling to read and gives good-cause exemptions to some students, such as English language learners and students with disabilities. Both states also require early identification of students struggling to read and reading interventions for those students.

The two primary differences between the state laws are determination of reading proficiency and of retention. Florida determines who is reading proficient based on performance on the statewide assessment, the Florida Standards Assessment (the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test before 2015). Iowa determines reading proficiency based on various assessments, including the statewide assessment and classroom assessments. Florida requires retention of third-graders that are not reading proficient and do not qualify for a good-cause exemption. In Iowa, students do not need to be reading proficient to be promoted to the



fourth grade, even if they do not qualify for a good-cause exemption. Satisfactory attendance in an intensive summer reading program permits promotion.

### **CONCLUSION**

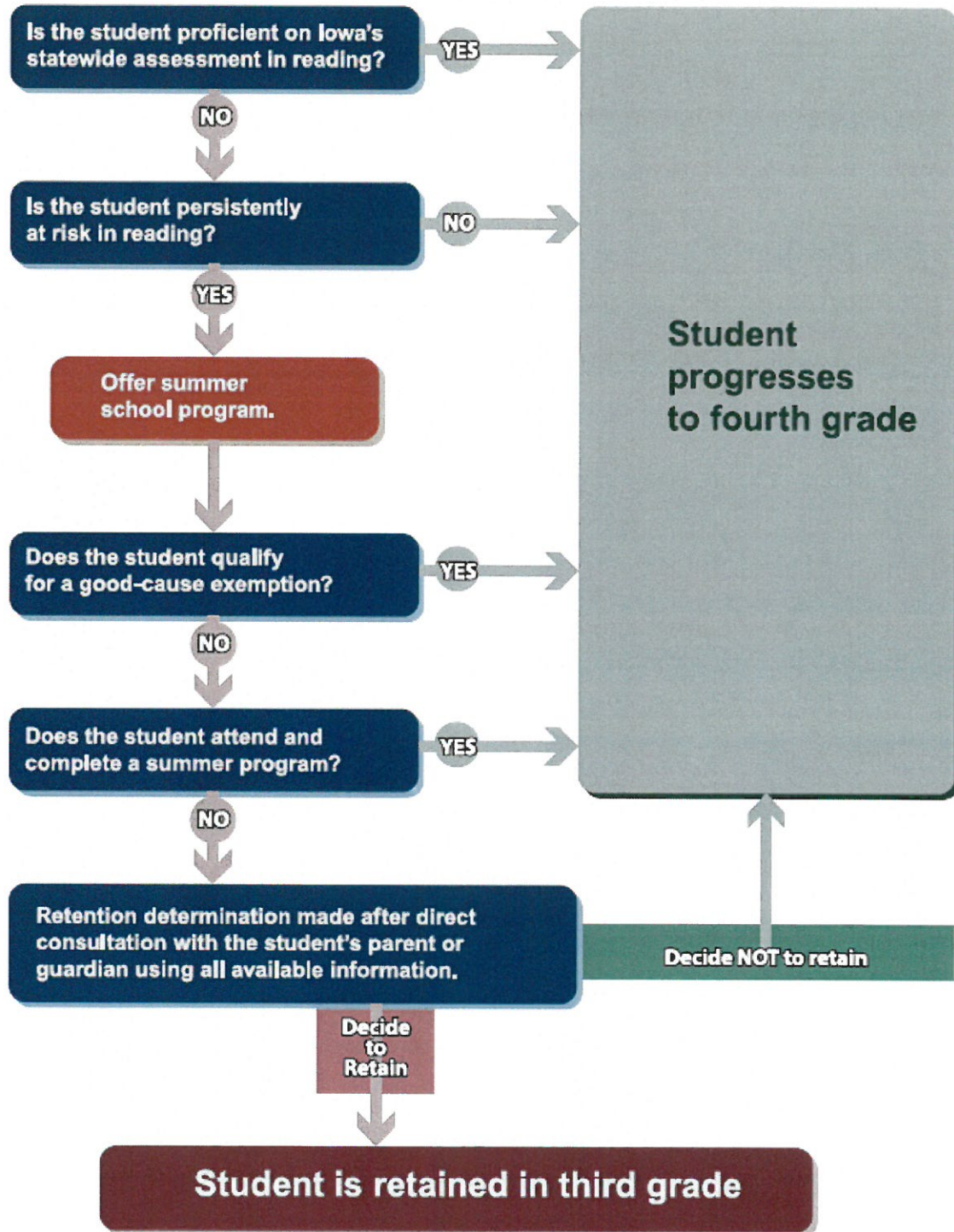
Research conclusions on grade retention have not reached a clear consensus. Grade retention may lower a student's self-esteem and increase the likelihood of the student dropping out of school. But research on Florida's program, the state that other states have used as a model for test-based retention, has found more positive effects. However, test-based retention laws also require reading interventions, such as summer reading programs. Such interventions may explain the positive gains. Researchers are unable to disentangle the effects of grade retention and reading interventions. Therefore, the effects of test-based grade retention are not entirely clear.

The effects of grade retention and reading interventions are important to consider for the state of Iowa, school districts, parents, and students as the state continues to implement [SF 2284](#). Beginning with the 2017-2018 class, third graders that are persistently at-risk in reading must successfully complete their school districts' intensive summer reading program, unless they qualify for a good-cause exemption. If they do not, they could be retained in the third grade.

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Appendix A

Retention Decision Flowchart for 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade Students



## Appendix B

**Reading Interventions in States with Test-Based Grade Retention**

The District of Columbia and most of the states require reading interventions. Some states that do not require them recommend certain interventions. Interventions, whether required or recommended, include the following, in order of most common to least:

- (SS) Summer School - 14 states and D.C.
- (OS) Instruction outside of school hours including extended day and extended year – 16 states and D.C.
- (SI) Supplemental Instruction during regular school hours – 15 states.
- (T) Individual or group tutoring – 10 states and D.C.
- (TI) Instruction tailored specifically to students' needs/deficiencies – 10 states and D.C.
- (HRP) Implementation of a Home Reading Program – information, support, and/or strategies for parents to work with students at home – nine states.
- (AIP) Assignment to an Academic Improvement Program – 10 states.
- (DT) Assignment to a different teacher if retained – six states and D.C.
- (TC) Transition classes – classes that contain students from multiple grade levels, such as third grade and fourth grade students – six states.
- (RS) Involvement of a Reading Specialist (RS) – six states.
- (OI) Online or computer-based instruction (OI) – two states.
- [\(RTI<sup>2</sup>\) Response to Instruction and Intervention program](#) – framework designed to identify both struggling and advanced students and provide them with appropriate interventions – one state.

State	Annual Reading Assessment	Intervention			Code Authority	Retention Grades
		Grades Provided	Required	Recommended		
Arizona	State: 3	K-3	SS, OS, OI, DT	HRP	<a href="#">§15-701</a> <a href="#">§15-704</a>	3
Arkansas	Local: K-2 State: 3	K-3	AIP, SI, TI	none	<a href="#">§6-15-2009</a> <a href="#">§6-15-420</a> <a href="#">§6-15-433</a>	3-8
California	State: 2, 3	2-3	none	SS, OS	<a href="#">§48070.5</a> <a href="#">§60640</a>	2-4, 6, 8
Colorado	Local: K-3	K-3	AIP, SI, TI, HRP	SS	<a href="#">§22-7-1205</a> <a href="#">§22-7-1206</a>	3
Connecticut	State or Local: K-3	K-3	AIP, RS, SI, SS	T, OS, HRP	<a href="#">§10-14</a> <a href="#">§10-265g</a> <a href="#">§10-265l</a>	K-6
Delaware	State: K and 3 Local: 1 and 2	3	AIP	SS, OS, T	<a href="#">HB 334 (2014)</a> <a href="#">§14.1-151</a>	3, 5, 8

					<a href="#">§14.1-153</a>	
District of Columbia	Local: K-3	K-3	SS	T, OS, TI, DT	<a href="#">§38-1803.11</a> <a href="#">§38-1803.21</a> <a href="#">§38-755.03</a> Rule: 5-E2200.9	3
Florida	Local: K-3 (assessment or teacher observation - for identification only) State: 3	K-3, up to grade 10 if needed	AIP, SI, SS, TI, DT (if previous teacher not "highly effective"—retained 3rd grade students must be assigned to a "highly effective" teacher)	TC, OS, T, SI, RS, HRP	<a href="#">§1008.25</a> <a href="#">§1002.20(11)</a>	3
Georgia	Local: K-2 State: 3	K-4	none	SI, TI	<a href="#">§20-2-153</a> <a href="#">§20-2-283</a>	3, 5, 8
Indiana	Local: K-2 State: 3	K-3	TI, DT	T, HRP, OS	<a href="#">§20-32-8.5</a> <a href="#">511 IAC 6.2-3.1-1 et seq</a>	3
Maryland	Decided at the local level	Decided at the local level	Decided at the local level	Decided at the local level	<a href="#">§7-202</a>  * Statute never implemented at the state level	Decided at the local level
Mississippi	State or Local: K-3	K-3	TI, SI	T, TC, OS, SS, DT, HRP	<a href="#">§ 37-177-1</a>	3
Missouri	Local: 3	3-6	AIP, OS, SS	none	<a href="#">§167.645</a> <a href="#">§162.1100</a>	3-6
Nevada - Law Effective 2019	State or Local: K-3	K-3	DT	T, SI, TC, OS, SS, HRP, RS	<a href="#">SB 391 (2015)</a> <a href="#">NRS 386.583</a> <a href="#">NRS 388</a> <a href="#">NRS 392</a>	3
New Mexico	Local: K-2 State: 3-8 and 11			AIP, OS, RS, SI	<a href="#">§22-13-1</a> <a href="#">§22-13-1.3</a> <a href="#">§22-2C-4</a>	K-8
North	State: K-3	K-3	AIP, HRP,	none	<a href="#">§115C-105.41</a>	3

Carolina			SI, TI		<a href="#">§115C-83</a> <a href="#">§115C-174.11</a>	
Ohio	Local: K-3 State: K,3	K-3	AIP, SI, TI	OS, SS, T, TC	<a href="#">§3313.608</a> <a href="#">§3301.0710</a> <a href="#">§3301.079</a>	3
Oklahoma	Local: K-2 State: 3	K-3	AIP, SI, TI, DT	OS, SS, T, OI, HRP, RS, TC	<a href="#">§70- 1210.508C</a> <a href="#">§70- 1210.508E</a>	3
South Carolina - Effective 2017	Local: PreK-2 State: 3	K-3	TI, SI, T	SS, OS, TC	<a href="#">§59-18-310</a> <a href="#">§59-155</a>	3
Tennessee	State: 3	3	RTI <sup>2</sup>	none	<a href="#">§49-6-3115</a>	3
Texas (Retention Policy currently suspended)	State: 5, 8	3-8	SI	OS, SS	<a href="#">§28.0211</a>	5, 8
Washington	State: 2-3	3	none	SS, OS, SI, T, TI, RS	<a href="#">28A.655.230</a> <a href="#">28A.655.235</a> <a href="#">28A.300.320</a>	3 (with parental permission)
West Virginia	Local: K-3	K-3	SI	OS	<a href="#">§18-2E-10</a>	K-3

Sources: Education Commission of the States<sup>12</sup> and state legislative staff

<sup>12</sup> Workman, Emily, "Third Grade Reading Policies," (December 2014), Education Commission of the States, <http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/01/16/44/11644.pdf>.