

Third Grade Testing Bill
Briefing
June 12, 2023

TEST AND PUNISH DOES NOT HELP STUDENTS LEARN TO READ

Call to Action: All educators are urged to contact [their legislators and Governor Evers](#) in opposition to the Third Grade Testing bill. The bill will tie reading teachers' and reading specialists' hands in ways that will harm students and educators. When legislators ignore teachers, dictate what happens inside the classroom and penalize students for one test taken on one day, our union must stand up.

Our opposition to the bill falls along the following lines:

The bill requires the state's education experts to create a retention policy they know is harmful to students.

The latest version of the bill includes a requirement that DPI develop a retention policy that requires every student not attaining a certain standardized test score be held back for an entire year, an idea DPI has called a "non-starter" that is proven "harmful to learners, families, and communities."

(<https://dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/news-release/dpinr2023-44.pdf>)

DPI was included in early discussions of the bill and agrees with the idea of funding and redeveloping a literacy program but was shut out of the final process where all of the political dog whistles were inserted. (<https://dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/news-release/dpinr2023-44.pdf>)

No matter how appealing it is to politicians, grade retention is usually a bad idea.

An [April 2021 report from DPI and UW-Madison](#), based on numerous studies, found that grade retention often has a net negative impact on students. One key finding in the report: "Grade retention often causes more harm than good, especially for those in early education (K-3rd grade)." Another key finding: "No one test score or teaching experience should decide retention decisions."

Almost every learner is different, but this bill treats every learner of reading as if they are the same.

Every teacher of reading appreciates the importance of phonics. Some learners benefit from more phonics than other learners. Some learners derive less benefit from phonics. Almost every learner is different. We have people in Wisconsin who are very good at finding, accommodating, and nurturing these differences: They're called "teachers."

Research shows that 30-40 percent of students benefit from reading lessons that rely heavily on phonics. That's a lot, but it also means 60-70 percent do not. That's a lot, too.

(<https://apnews.com/article/phonics-science-reading-c715dea43f338f163715b01b83bb1066>)

The legislation will require tradeoffs in the allocation of resources for teacher development and among children having literacy learning difficulties.

These tradeoffs have the potential to privilege students experiencing some types of literacy learning difficulties while limiting instructional resources for and attention available to students whose literacy difficulties are not due (exclusively) to word reading difficulties.

(<https://plthomasedd.medium.com/dismantling-the-science-of-reading-and-the-harmful-reading-policies-in-its-wake-d15d9fe6d8e0>)

The term ‘Science of Reading’ is ironic because it ignores most of the science and only includes the science it likes.

In 2000, a government-formed National Reading Panel released the findings of its exhaustive examination of the research. It declared phonics instruction was crucial to teaching young readers, along with several related concepts.

(<https://www.nichd.nih.gov/sites/default/files/publications/pubs/nrp/Documents/report.pdf>).

The Science of Reading oversimplifies the science of reading it doesn’t ignore.

The National Education Policy Center: “The truth is that there is no settled science of reading. The research on reading and teaching reading is abundant, but it is diverse and always in a state of change. Accordingly, the joint statement highlights the importance of ‘professionally prepared teachers with expertise in supporting all students with the most beneficial reading instruction, balancing systematic skills instruction with authentic texts and activities.’

“This key idea of a ‘balanced literacy’ approach stresses the importance of phonics, authentic reading, and teachers who can teach reading using a full toolbox of instructional approaches and understandings. It is strongly supported in the scholarly community and is grounded in a large research base.”

(<https://dianeravitch.net/2020/03/19/nepc-there-is-no-science-of-reading/>)

The National Council of Teachers of English: “Suffering amnesia over past misdeeds (think Reading First), ‘experts’ once again call for a one-size-fits-all, phonics-centric classroom, mischaracterizing Whole Language and Balanced Literacy as ‘willy-nilly,’ when in reality both place a high value on teaching the complexities of language. These essential literacy experiences are not left to chance, as often mischaracterized, but are facilitated by a teacher-researcher with a deep understanding of the development, nuances, and power of language. This expert-guided approach requires no computer programs, scripted lessons, nor books of scaffolded mini-lessons, and it prevents big-box publishers from cashing in at the expense of a quality education.” (<https://ncte.org/blog/2020/10/critical-story-science-reading-narrow-plotline-putting-children-schools-risk/>)

Education Week: “While ‘science of reading’ proponents see comprehension as the ultimate goal of *reading*, they don’t prioritize it as a goal or focus of *reading instruction*. They argue that, as long as readers come to texts with strong decoding skills and a broad knowledge base, comprehension is all but assured. Therefore, the thinking goes, instruction should focus on developing students’ phonics knowledge (which is the foundation of decoding) as well as broad topical knowledge.

“The two of us—a teacher-educator specializing in literacy and a veteran elementary school teacher—argue instead that teachers must actively support students’ comprehension. This means two things. First, we must teach comprehension as a multidimensional experience. We want children to comprehend what’s happening literally in the text (who did what when), but we also want them to be able to analyze how parts of the text (literary devices, figurative language, structural choices) work together to develop ideas. And we want them to interpret the purpose and significance of the text in relation to their lives and to society.” (<https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/opinion-when-the-science-of-reading-goes-too-far/2022/07>)

Research supports the use of phonics, but not the over- or exclusive reliance on phonics that this will unleash.

Reams of research support instruction that purposely develops children’s ability to analyze speech sounds (phonological/phonemic awareness), and to relate those sounds to patterns of print (phonics and orthographics), in combination with instruction to develop comprehension, vocabulary, fluency, and a strong positive and agentive relationship with literacy. (<https://plthomasedd.medium.com/dismantling-the-science-of-reading-and-the-harmful-reading-policies-in-its-wake-d15d9fe6d8e0>)

Evidence does not justify the use of a heavy and near-exclusive focus on phonics instruction, either in regular classrooms, or for children experiencing difficulty learning to read (including those classified as dyslexic). (<https://plthomasedd.medium.com/dismantling-the-science-of-reading-and-the-harmful-reading-policies-in-its-wake-d15d9fe6d8e0>)

Creating a panel appointed exclusively by three partisan politicians sounds like a particularly bad idea in the current political environment.

The bill would require the creation of a Council on Early Literacy Curricula, which would recommend curricula and instructional materials for grades K-3. The state superintendent, the assembly speaker and the senate majority leader would each be allowed to appoint three council members. The council would meet each year to make recommendations for the coming school year. The partisan Joint Finance Committee would have final say in whether the recommendations are adopted.

The new Office of Literacy Coaches would also be a partisan political body.

Housed under DPI, the office would be required to consult with a newly created Council on Early Literacy Curricula and subject to the advice and consent of the Wisconsin Senate. The Office of Literacy would hire the equivalent of 64 full-time literacy coaches.

The Legislature is the last body that should place bans on teaching practices.

The bill includes several measures to prohibit three-cueing from being used in public or voucher schools. For the purposes of the bill, three-cueing refers to any model that teaches reading based on meaning, structure and syntax, and visual cues or memory. It would prohibit the state superintendent from

approving teacher prep programs that incorporate three-cueing. It requires teachers to complete instruction on phonics before they can be licensed to teach reading or language arts in PreK-6.