



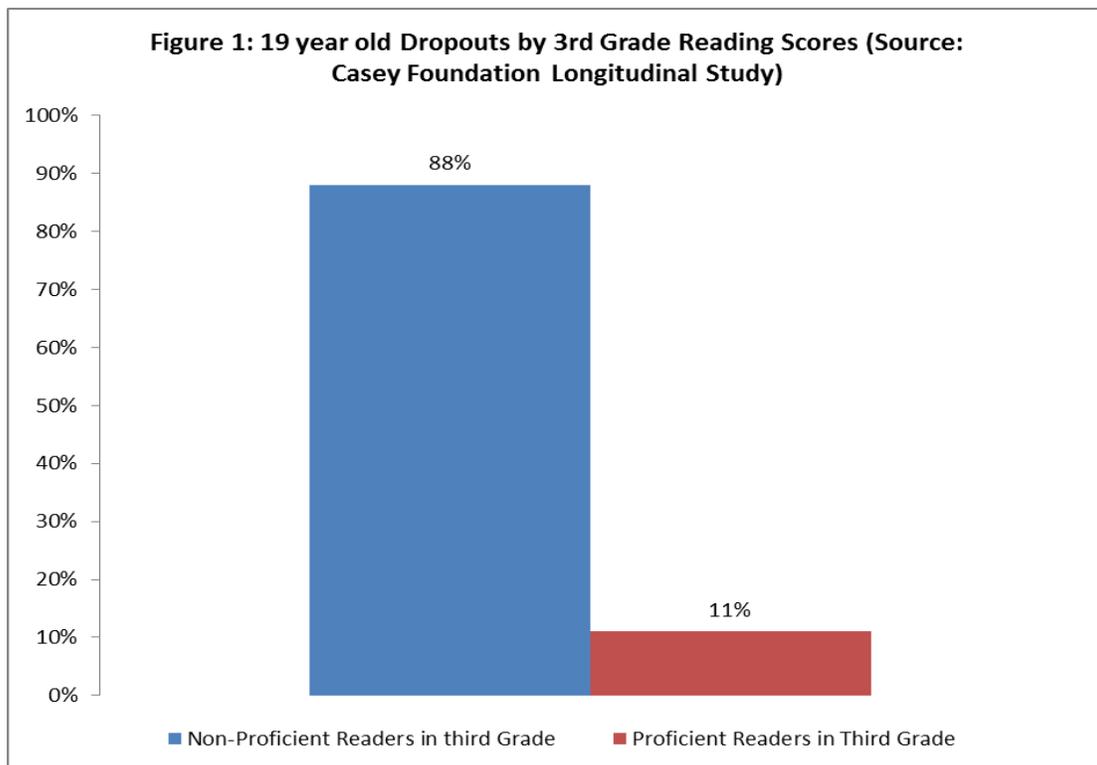
Florida's Education Revolution

Reading for Learning

PREVENTING A CRISIS: READING TO GRADUATE

If you are concerned about poor graduation rates, you might be a decade too late to do anything about it. According to a recent study by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, literacy in third grade – yes, third grade – may affect the chances that a student will graduate from high school.

Based on an analysis of reading scores and graduation rates of 3,975 students over ten years, students who could not read by the end of the third grade were four times more likely to drop out of high school. In fact, 88 percent of students who failed to earn a high school diploma were struggling readers in third grade.¹



¹ Hernandez, Donald J. 2011. *How Third-Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation*. Publication of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, available on the internet at <http://www.aecf.org/~media/Pubs/Topics/Education/Other/DoubleJeopardyHowThirdGradeReadingSkillsandPoverty/DoubleJeopardyReport040511FINAL.pdf>.

Reading may also be the key to closing the achievement gap. The analysis found that differences in reading achievement explain differences in graduation rates between students of different races and ethnicities. Conversely, proficient third grade readers of all races – White, African American and Hispanic – graduate at similar rates. Eighty-nine percent of economically disadvantaged students in the study, who achieved proficient reading skills by the 3rd grade, graduated.

The societal impacts and costs of low graduation rates are profound. Researchers have found a strong association between dropping out of high school and lower lifetime income, higher use of public assistance and higher incarceration rates. Estimates on the total lifetime cost to society for each new cohort of dropouts accumulate into hundreds of billions of dollars.²

PROMOTING ILLITERACY: THE HARMFUL IMPACTS OF PREVAILING POLICY

Each year, millions of children, including a disproportionately high number of low-income and minority children, fail to learn basic literacy skills in the developmentally critical grades. Rather than addressing these problems head on, standard practice involves simply socially promoting students to the next grade. Our collective failure to reform this shameful practice preserves a system of schooling that routinely gives the least to the students who start with the greatest needs. For students, the impact lasts a lifetime.

The prevailing practice of social promotion proves especially destructive for children in the early grades. Learning to read does not get easier with age. As a result, illiterate 3rd graders move on to become illiterate 4th graders, and then 5th, 6th and 7th graders.

Third grade is the year that students transition from “learning to read” to “reading to learn.” Imagine a 5th grader, reading on a 1st grade level, sitting in a science class. These students will not grasp the scientific concepts described in their textbook because they cannot read - literally. Grade level material keeps increasing year after year, but these students cannot keep up because they *cannot read*.

“Disruptive,” “bored,” and “restless” are among the common adjectives used to describe illiterate middle school students, long since aged out of their literacy acquisition window. Let down by the system, these students often do not finish school, let alone go on to college. Many may wonder why they attend school at all. Students begin dropping out of school in large numbers in the 8th grade.

FLORIDA’S FIGHT TO END ILLITERACY: LITERACY-BASED PROMOTION

Florida placed a command focus on reading in the 3rd grade even before the data confirmed the critical importance of literacy in the developmental elementary years. In 1999, Florida lawmakers enacted a suite of reforms aimed at substantially improving student achievement. Believing more needed to be done to end the blight of illiteracy, Florida

² Alliance for Excellent Education. 2007. The High Cost of High School Dropouts, What the Nation Pays for Inadequate High Schools. Alliance for Excellent Education Issue Brief, available on the internet at <http://www.all4ed.org/files/archive/publications/HighCost.pdf>.

policymakers in 2002 took bold steps to make reading a requirement of third grade, but Florida did not implement the usual retain and repeat model, as you will see below.

Simply, Florida requires students to demonstrate their ability to read before entering fourth grade. Florida educators now retain students who cannot read and provide intensive instruction until they can read well enough to be successful in the fourth grade and beyond.

Florida uses the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) to measure student progress in relation to state academic standards. The FCAT uses five achievement levels to describe academic performance. The lowest of these five levels, achievement level 1, equates to “functional illiteracy.” The Florida reading for promotion policy sets a minimum literacy expectation for 3rd grade students. Students receive multiple chances to demonstrate literacy and possess the option to utilize alternative tests. Under the policy, a student repeatedly scoring achievement level 1 on the Reading FCAT and/or the equivalent on alternative tests must repeat the 3rd grade, unless the student is eligible for a good cause exemption or can demonstrate literacy through a test-based portfolio of work.³

The 2002 Florida statute requires school officials to notify parents of literacy deficiencies, the actions taken to remediate the deficiency, and the possibility of retention. The law requires schools to develop individual remediation plans for students in danger of retention, and to provide intensive literacy instruction that is different from what was previously used. Obviously, just doing more of the same will not achieve results.⁴

READING TO LEARN: THE IMPACT OF THE FLORIDA’S READING POLICY

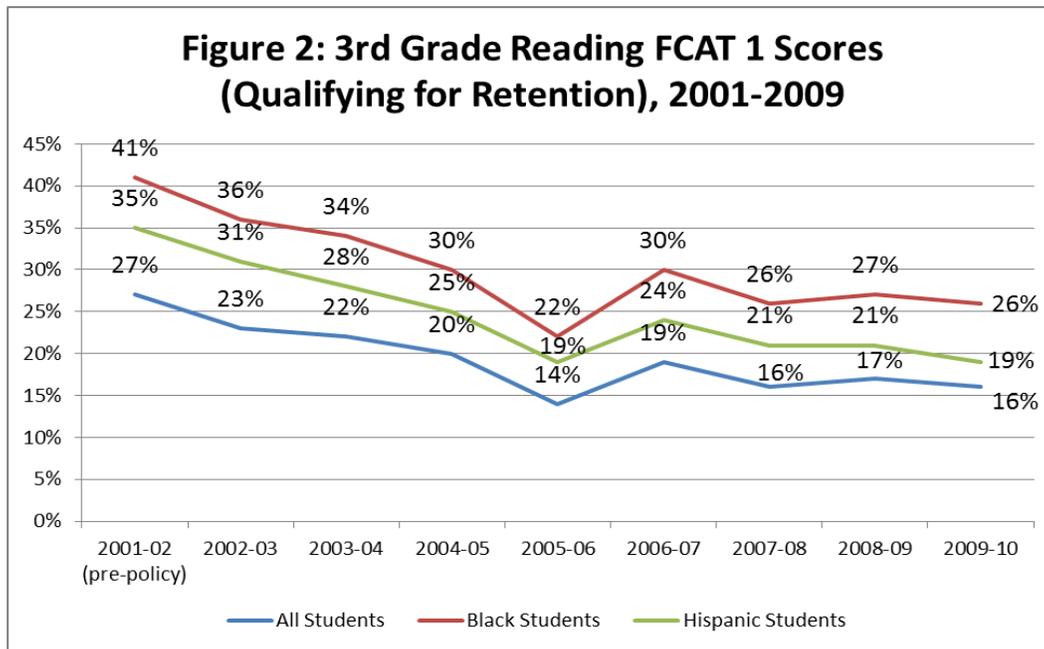
Since the advent of literacy-based promotion, reading scores for all Florida students, but especially for low-income and minority students, have soared. When Florida ended social promotion, retention skyrocketed to more than 13 percent. Talk about a tough year. Sadly, a 13 percent retention rate caused more outrage than a 29 percent illiteracy rate.

After that initial shock, elementary schools placed a command focus on reading. The result: illiteracy is on the decline. Since 2001-2002, the number of Florida 3rd graders scoring at the lowest achievement level has *declined by 41 percent*. The percentage of African-American and Hispanic students scoring at the lowest level has *declined by 37 percent and 46 percent respectively*.

³ The good cause exemptions for the Florida retention policy are: 1. Students with Limited English Proficiency (LEP) who have less than two years of instruction in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) program. 2. Students with disabilities for whom participation in the statewide assessment program is not appropriate. 3. Students who demonstrate an acceptable level of performance on an alternative standardized reading assessment. 4. Students who demonstrate, through a student portfolio, that they are reading on grade level (based on mastery of the Sunshine State Standards). 5. Students with disabilities who were previously retained in grades K-3. 6. Students who were previously retained in grades K-3 for a total of two or more years.

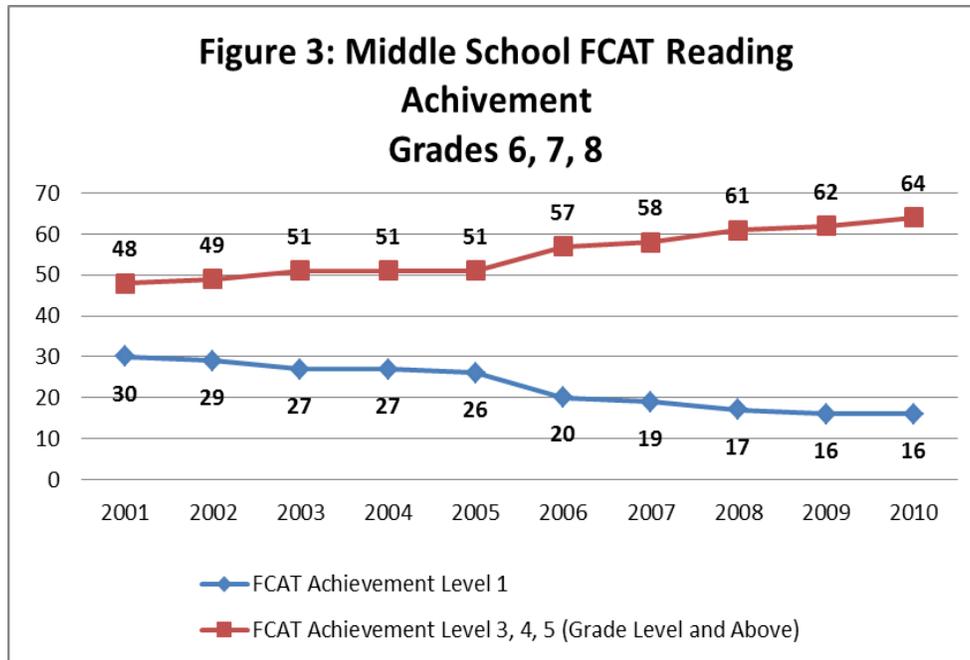
⁴ Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability. 2006. *Third Grade Retention Policy Leading to Better Student Performance Statewide*. Available online at <http://www.oppaga.state.fl.us/MonitorDocs/Reports/pdf/0666rpt.pdf>, page 2.

Florida's surging scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) serve as a source of external validation for these gains.⁵



The benefits of literacy-based promotion became crystal clear when students under the policy entered middle school. The percentage of middle school students scoring at FCAT achievement level 1 on reading declined from 30 percent in 2001 to 16 percent in 2010. The percentage of Florida middle school students scoring at grade level or above (FCAT achievement levels 3, 4 or 5) increased from 48 percent to 64 percent during that same period. One finds the same pattern in the high school FCAT data, with the percentage of 9th and 10th graders scoring at the lowest level on reading falling from 39 percent in 2002 to 26% in 2010.

⁵ Note that the Florida Department of Education found technical problems with the 2005-06 FCAT, ultimately resulting in the Department invalidating the results for that school year. Whether or not these glitches explain the large and temporary drop in FCAT 1 reading scores during that school year (see Figure 2) is not clear, but the overall trend in the data remains unchanged.



Scholars at the Manhattan Institute studied the impact of the literacy-based promotion policy on student test scores. The statisticians carefully compared the academic progress of students retained under the policy to two very similar groups of students: those who avoided retention by narrowly scoring over FCAT achievement level 1 on reading, and students who scored low enough for retention but received a good cause exemption. One year after retention, the retained students scored higher than the comparison groups. After two years, the advantage of the retained students had grown larger, equaling approximately 5.6 additional months of reading instruction over the comparison group students. Florida’s retention policy proved to be a successful intervention for these students.⁶

During the debate over the law, some had argued that the reading or retention policy would be cruel to some children. Ironically, the statistical analysis reveals that the cruelty of the policy, if any, falls upon those promoted without literacy skills. These students continue to fall behind.

COST-BENEFIT OF RETENTION

Many people often assume that Florida’s literacy-based promotion policy must have entailed massive expense. This, however, is not the case. In the first year of the policy (2002-03) Florida retained more than 27,000 students in 3rd grade, but the Digest of Education Statistics reveals that spending per pupil in the state only increased by \$112 per pupil in inflation adjusted dollars- from \$7,935 in 2001-02 to \$8,047 in 2002-03.⁷ This increase is well within the normal

⁶ Greene, Jay P. and Marcus A. Winters. 2006. Getting Farther Ahead by Staying Behind: A Second-Year Evaluation of Florida’s Policy to end Social Promotion. Manhattan Institute Civic Report No. 49, available on the internet at http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/cr_49.htm.

⁷ See United States Department of Education *Digest of Education Statistics*, Table 168 online at http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d09/tables/dt09_186.asp?referrer=list.

range of year-to-year variation, and in fact falls below the normal inflation rate.

Such a result seems counter-intuitive but the reasons for the lack of a major fiscal impact follow: schools have a capacity to adapt to changes. On staffing, imagine an elementary school in the first year of the policy with the statewide average of 27 percent of 3rd graders retained. The school had far more 3rd graders than expected, *but also fewer 4th graders*. From a staffing perspective, an elegant solution for many was to shift one or more teachers from a 4th grade assignment to a 3rd grade assignment.⁸

The literacy-based promotion policy forced schools to organize themselves around the hugely critical goal of ensuring effective reading instruction. Schools focused greater amounts of time and effort on reading, and encouraged parental involvement. Schools intensified reading instruction in grades K-3 as part of an overall focus on literacy and teachers intervened in earlier grades to ensure student stayed on track to achieve reading success.

The policy also created a significant incentive for greater involvement by parents. Recommendations to read to children 30 minutes a day carry greater force with the retention policy in place. Florida teachers have a new tool to encourage the parents of their children to show greater diligence about homework assignments. The retention policy provides an important nudge to parents to focus on helping their children learn to read.

COST-BENEFIT OF INTERVENTION

Of course, Florida schools did not simply retain students. They also provided aggressive remediation, tutoring, and home-based strategies for literacy acquisition.

Florida enacted these strategies using grant money from the United States Department of Education that is available to all 50 states, and repurposed pre-existing funding streams along with additional state funding. A national review of the federal program found ambiguous results nationwide, but Florida's sizeable literacy improvement has been clear both on the FCAT and on NAEP.⁹ With per-student funding levels below the national average, the Florida success rested upon making better use of existing funding and maximizing the effectiveness of federal dollars.

Florida's success with the use of federal reading funds may have been unique because state lawmakers leveraged those funds rather than simply dispersing them to districts and hoping for the best. Florida developed a statewide effort, coordinated by the "Just Read, Florida" office which had been created in 2001 in the Florida Department of Education. The state required school districts to develop literacy improvement plans as a qualification for receiving the federal reading funds. The Florida Department of Education had to certify these plans before dispersing funds.

The effort allowed districts to vary their plans according to local needs and capacity, but

⁸ With the advent of mid-year promotions, many students will no longer spend an additional year in school despite having been "retained."

⁹ See Reading First Impact Study Final Report, Executive Summary, available on the internet at <http://www.edpubs.gov/document/ed005062p.pdf?ck=83>.

the district strategies ultimately all drew upon the latest scientific literacy instruction research from the Florida Center for Reading Research. The district plans included professional development for teachers and principals and the hiring and training of literacy coaches for schools.

A NATIONAL MOVEMENT: LITERACY-BASED PROMOTION

Florida is no longer alone in successfully implementing retention policies. Former New York City Schools Chancellor Joel Klein's team studied the Florida policy, and implemented a retention strategy for New York City schools. The RAND Corporation conducted a formal study of the New York City policy. This careful study not only identified statistically significant academic gains associated with the policy, it also measured the psychological impact on retained students. On this subject, the RAND team found:

- Retention had no negative effects on students' sense of school belonging or confidence in mathematics and reading. On all three measures, the mean responses of retained students were comparable to or higher than those of their promoted peers.
- Retained students reported a greater sense of school belonging than at-risk promoted and not-at-risk students, even four years after the retention decision. In all instances, the mean differences were small but statistically significant. These results are consistent with prior literature.¹⁰

Florida's retention success has inspired lawmakers in Arizona, Indiana, Oklahoma and Utah to pass laws to emulate the practice in addition to other elements of Florida's comprehensive approach to reform. Americans broadly support the concept of equality of opportunity for all. Only an urgently serious approach to literacy truly squares with this deeply held value. Florida radically improved the literacy skills of their children. Lawmakers and educators in your state can as well.

LITERACY AS A RESPONSIBILITY FOR STUDENTS, PARENTS AND SCHOOLS

Florida's policy recognizes the overwhelming importance of literacy acquisition by creating accountability for educators, parents and students alike. Social promotion sets students up for failure rather than success. Florida's literacy-based promotion policy served as a vital piece of an overall strategy that improved Florida's national test scores from among the worst to among the best within the span of a decade. Florida's reforms have narrowed achievement gaps by moving all students forward, but doing the most for the students who start with the least.

¹⁰ McCombs, Jennifer Sloan and Shelia Nataraj Kirby. 2009. *Ending Social Promotion Without Leaving Children Behind The Case of New York City*. Publication of the RAND Corporation, page 189. Available on the internet at: http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/2009/RAND_MG894.pdf .