

WILL: New policy brief uncovers that retention plus science-based teaching equals better ELA outcomes

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The News: The Wisconsin Institute for Law & Liberty (WILL) released its new educational policy brief: [“Holding Kids Back to Push Them Forward: An Analysis of Retention Policy in Wisconsin.”](#) In this paper, we show that when kids are sent to the next grade without being able to read, they are set up to fail. Based on our research and other studies from around the country, we believe holding kids back as a last resort based on test results back is sound education policy. A statewide requirement, similar to other states, is essential.

The Quote: WILL Research Director, Will Flanders, PhD, stated, “It is clear that changes are needed in our current education system, and a part of that change may focus on getting kids ready for the next grade and not just sending them forward to fail down the road. To improve performance outcomes—and ensure academic success for kids—retention should increase, and it must be paired with the science of reading.”

Background: While Wisconsin was once held up as a model for public education around the nation, recent evidence suggests that the state is losing ground, particularly in the area of reading. Statewide, only 38.1% of students were found to be proficient in reading on the most recent round of state tests. This means that the majority of students are not reaching levels of reading mastery judged to be proficient on the nationally norm-referenced Forward Exam. The COVID-19 pandemic, and the long-lasting shutdowns in some districts, have only served to exacerbate Wisconsin’s worst-in-the-nation racial achievement gaps.

Currently, Wisconsin does not require students to be held back for failing to meet

state benchmarks. While a great deal of focus has been put on the ways of improving educational outcomes in Wisconsin in recent years—particularly in reading—the potential role of retention policy in that improvement remains understudied.

Key Findings:

- 17 States have implemented policies to hold students back. The number of states that hold kids back in third grade has grown in recent years. This includes neighboring states like Michigan and Indiana.
- Retention is not a silver bullet. Retention must be coupled with instruction based on the science of reading, and students who are held back must receive extensive read-focused intervention.
- Retention rates vary extensively. 170 Districts around the state held back 0 kids based on the most recent data from DPI. Of districts that held kids back, rates ranged to as high as 6%.
- High retention improves outcomes for low-income districts. In our analysis, districts with high numbers of low-income students that hold students back at a higher rate see improved future ELA outcomes relative to similar districts that hold kids back at a lower rate.

Policy Solutions: WILL recommends to policymakers that Wisconsin should implement a third-grade reading retention statewide policy for students who score in the lowest level of proficiency on the Forward Exam, or a subset of those students. The third-grade benchmark is often used because a failure to reach proficiency in reading by the end of this school year means that the child has missed the key transition from “learning to read” into “reading to learn.”

Such a change can only be effective if those repeating grades receive instruction based on the science of reading and other interventions. This entails a restoration of the central role of phonics in reading.

Read More:

- [“Holding Kids Back to Push Them Forward: An Analysis of Retention Policy in Wisconsin,”](#) March 16, 2023