

# Early Grade Retention: A Conversation About Risks and Benefits

November 7, 2023



# Panelists



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# Early Grade Retention: A Conversation About the Potential Benefits and Risks

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*Policy Director, Early Literacy*

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**BU**  
Boston University Wheelock College of Education & Human Development  
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**WEPC**

## The Effect of Retention Under Mississippi's Test-Based Promotion Policy

Kirsten Slingsaard Mumma and Marcus A. Winters

**POLICY ISSUE**  
Motivated by a need to improve early literacy, over a dozen states have implemented test-based promotion policies that require students who score below a minimum standardized test score threshold to repeat the third grade. These policies are intended to support the most struggling learners, providing them with an additional year of instruction, intervention, and academic reinforcement to build essential reading skills. Research finds generally positive impacts from test-based promotion policies targeted to early grades, though the results are not uniform across localities. This makes it critically important to measure the impacts of such policies in a variety of contexts so that local policymakers can understand the impacts on their constituents, and to provide a broad view to policymakers considering similar policies in hopes of improving outcomes for young students who are struggling to read.

This study examines the impact of third-grade retention under Mississippi's test-based promotion policy, adopted in 2013 as part of a comprehensive statewide effort to improve early literacy. Under the policy, students who score below a set threshold on the third-grade state reading exam must repeat the third grade and receive intensive reading instruction and interventions, unless they qualify for specific "good cause" exceptions. Mississippi has received considerable attention in recent years for its substantial improvements in student reading outcomes, and many states are looking to Mississippi for evidence of promising early literacy initiatives that could work in other localities. The results of this study contribute new knowledge to this important conversation by illustrating the causal effects of being retained in the third grade under Mississippi's test-based promotion policy.

**STUDY DATA AND FINDINGS**  
This study focuses on the first cohort of students subject to Mississippi's policy, those who were in third grade in the 2014-15 school year. Slingsaard Mumma and Winters compare the later test scores, absences, and special education statuses of approximately 4,700 students who scored just above and just below the 2015 state reading test score that determined promotion to the fourth grade. In particular, they examine the differences in these outcomes when both groups of students—those who were retained and those who were promoted—were in sixth grade, the latest grade for which both groups had available end-of-year test score data. More information is available in the full report.

**KEY FINDINGS**  
For students who were in the 3rd grade in 2014-15, retention under Mississippi's policy led to:

- Substantially higher 6th grade ELA scores
- No significant impact on 6th grade math scores
- No significant impact on absences in 6th grade or 4 years after retention
- No significant impact on special education identification in 6th grade or 4 years after retention

**ExcelinEd**  
This study was commissioned by the Foundation for Excellence in Education.

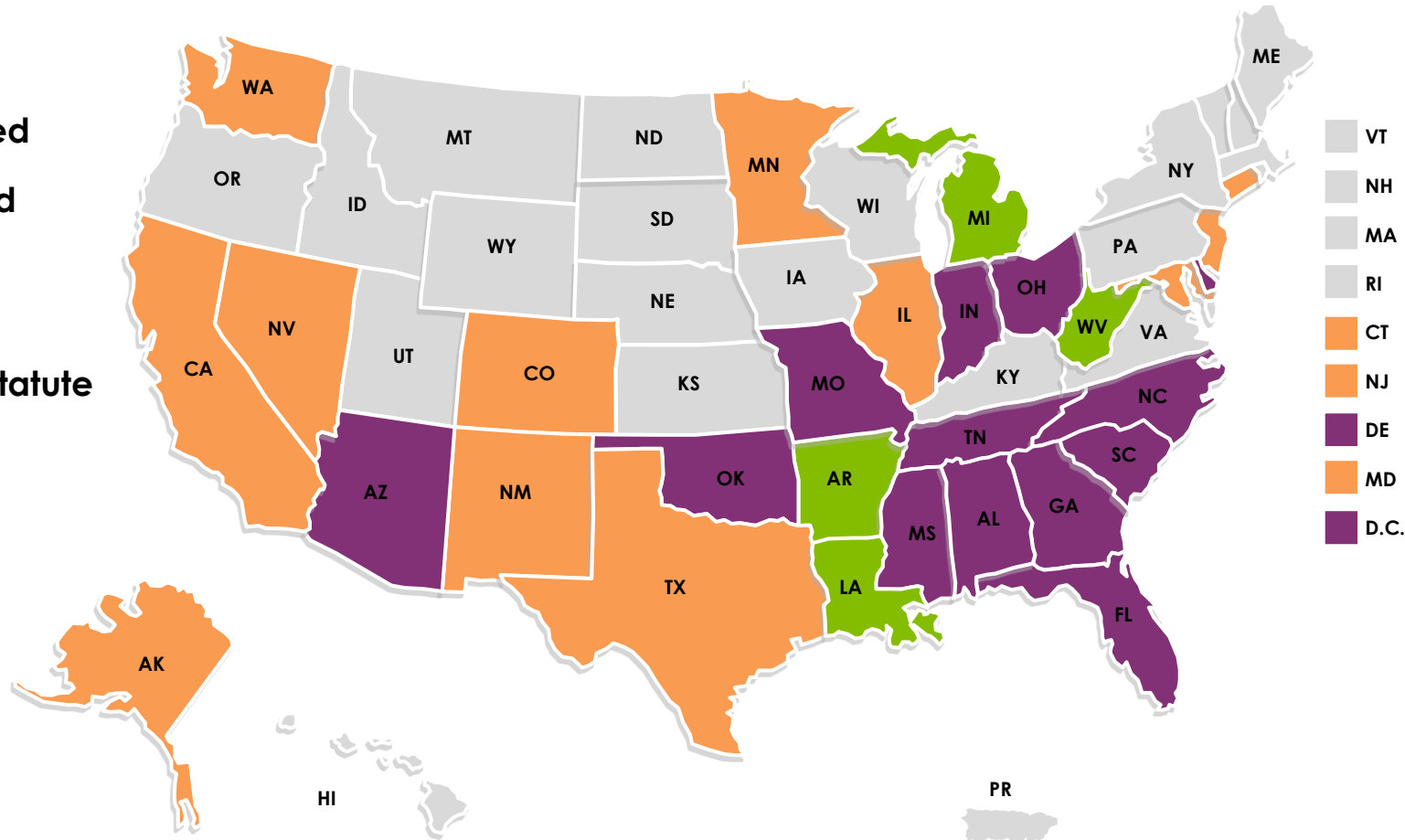
THE EFFECT OF RETENTION UNDER MISSISSIPPI'S TEST-BASED PROMOTION POLICY 2023

## Findings:

- By 6th grade, students who were retained had substantial and sustained literacy gains on their ELA scores compared to their peers who were promoted to 4th grade.
- Literacy gains were especially significant among African American and Hispanic students in the cohort.
- Results indicate the law had no significant impact on student absences or special education identification in the 6th grade.
- Students who were retained did not appear to experience other negative consequences as a result of their retention.

# 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade Retention Policies

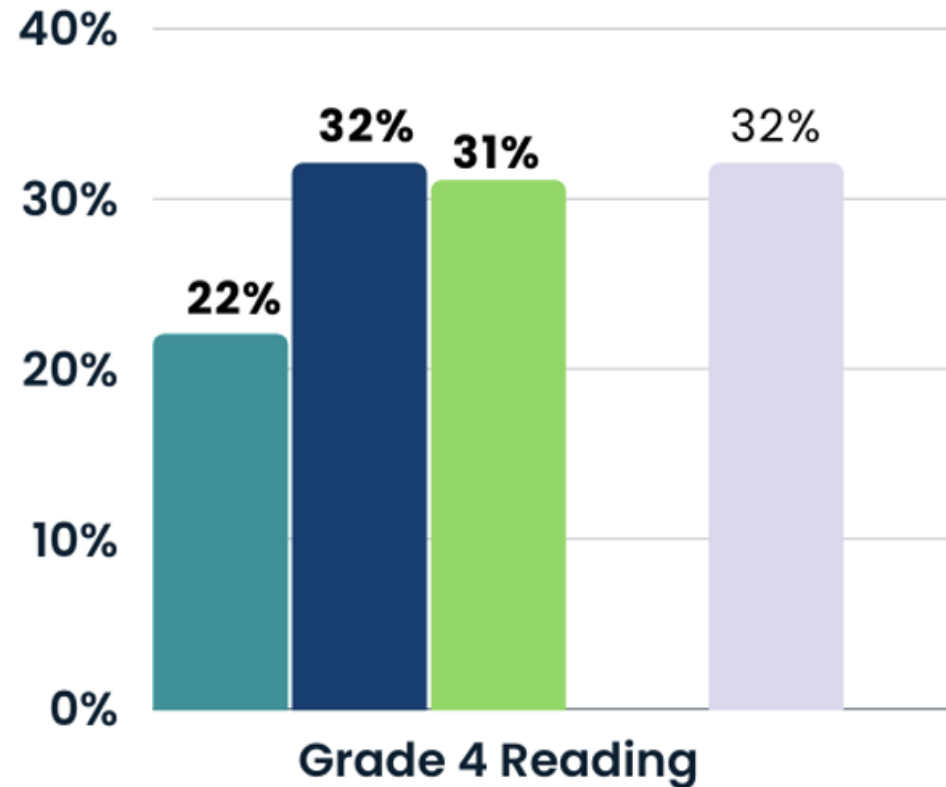
- Retention Required
- Retention Allowed
- Future repeal or enactment
- Not specified in statute or regulation





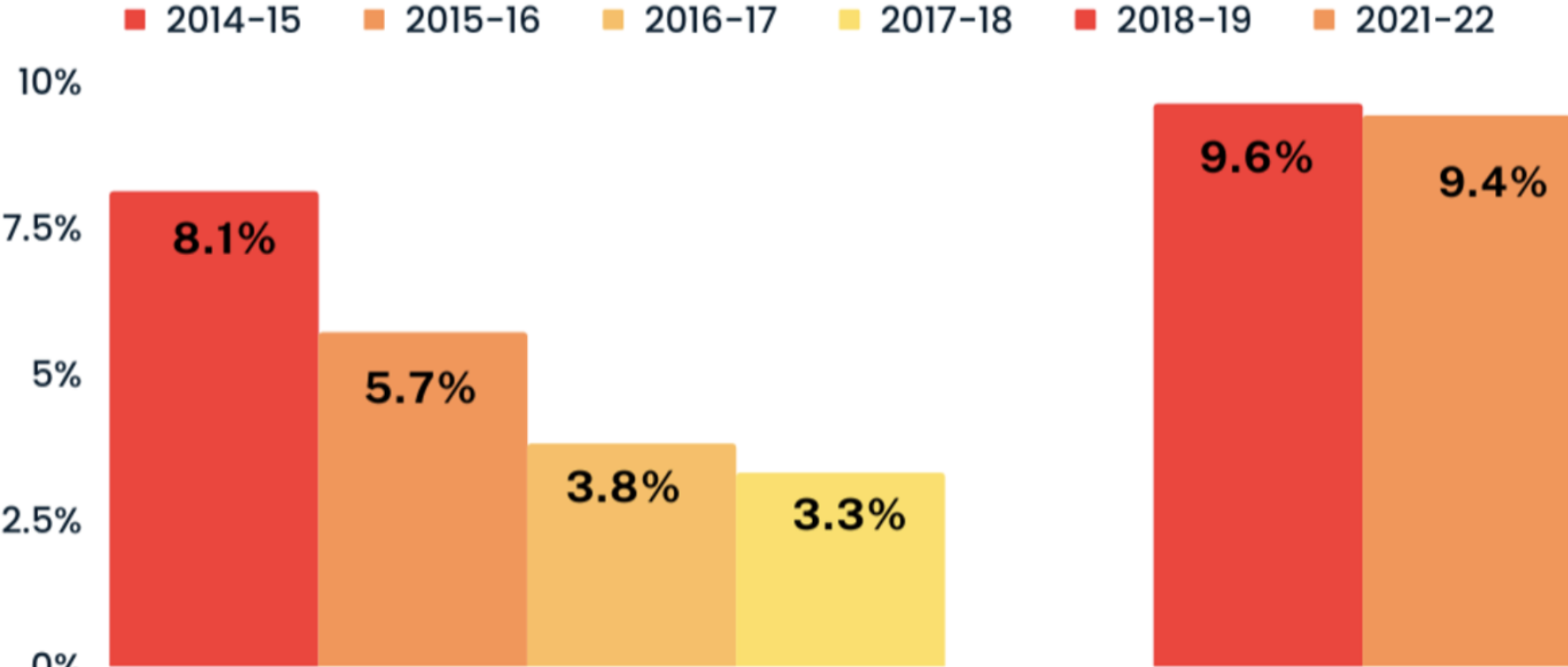
## MISSISSIPPI READING NATIONAL ASSESSMENT OF EDUCATIONAL PROGRESS (NAEP)

■ 2009 ■ 2019 ■ 2022 ■ 2022 National Average





## 3RD GRADE RETENTION RATE



Passing Requirement Increased from Level 2 to Level 3 in 2018-19



# Best Practices in Early Literacy Policy and Implementation: Fundamental Principles



## Prevention

- Science of Reading (SOR) Training
- Literacy/Reading Coaches
- EPP Coursework Alignment to the SOR
- EPP SOR Assessment for Elementary Licensure
- Universal Reading Screener 3 x year (K-3)
- Dyslexia Screener
- Progress Monitoring
- Parent Notification of Reading Deficiency
- Parent Read-At-Home Resources
- High-quality Instructional Materials
- Elimination of Three-Cueing Instructional Materials in early literacy and EPPs

## Intervention

- Individual Reading Plans for Intervention
- Evidence-based Interventions
- Summer Reading Camps
- Promotion to 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade Based on State Assessment
- Multiple Pathways for Promotion
- Good Cause Exemptions for Some Students

# Upcoming GLR Learning Tuesdays Webinars

## CRUCIBLE OF PRACTICE SALON

Community Mobilization and a Shared Agenda: Collective Impact Insights With 313Reads  
Tuesday, November 14, 12:30-2 p.m. ET/9:30–11 a.m. PT

## LEARNING LOSS RECOVERY CHALLENGE

Leaps and Bounds: How Early Learning Supports the “Mississippi Miracle”  
Tuesday, November 14, 3–4:30 p.m. ET/12–1:30 p.m. PT

## FUNDER-TO-FUNDER CONVERSATION

Early School Success: Bolstering the Early Learning Workforce  
Tuesday, November 21, 12:30-2 p.m. ET/9:30–11 a.m. PT

## LEARNING LOSS RECOVERY CHALLENGE

B-flation: New Data Reveals Parent-Teacher Disconnect on Student Learning  
Tuesday, November 21, 3–4:30 p.m. ET/12–1:30 p.m. PT

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