



# The District's Dime

Going Beyond the Budget Book

The DC Fiscal Policy Institute blog

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## Is Student Retention the Answer for Struggling Students?

By Soumya Bhat

Ensuring that children can read proficiently by the end of the third grade is now considered a standard for a child's educational progress. Experts say it is the time when children "stop learning to read and start reading to learn" in school.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, 2012 test scores show that fewer than half of DC students are able to read proficiently. One of the education bills being considered by the DC Council, the [Reading Development and Grade 3 Retention Act of 2013](#), attempts to tackle this issue.

The bill focuses on identifying struggling readers at the beginning of the third grade and offering them targeted instruction. If, however, they are not reading proficiently by the end of the year, they would not be promoted to the fourth grade and would be required to take summer reading classes.

The student retention aspect of this bill seems to be part of a larger trend across the country. At least 15 states have incorporated retention policies into their efforts to improve student literacy.<sup>2</sup> Many cite a Florida study that showed dramatic student gains after retention policies were implemented. But researchers who studied the Florida experience found that those gains were not due only to holding students back a grade, but also a result of comprehensive academic prevention and intervention strategies, such as evidence-based literacy instruction.<sup>3</sup> Others say that any initial improvement in student performance is often short-lived and tends to fade over time, while students who are held back a grade face an increased risk of dropping out of school before graduation and not enrolling in postsecondary education.<sup>4</sup>

What does this mean for the District? New retention policies may have a place, but they also could do more harm than good if retention is not paired with academic and other supports, including active parent engagement and high-quality summer and school year reading programs. These policies should also be aligned with other efforts currently being planned by DCPS for the next school year. For example, the Chancellor has invested in staff positions specifically focused on literacy, including reading specialists at ten low-performing schools.

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<sup>1</sup> Early Warning: Kids Count Special Report, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> New America Foundation, "What States are Doing to Help Children's Reading," 2012.  
[http://earlyed.newamerica.net/blogposts/2012/what\\_states\\_are\\_doing\\_to\\_help\\_improve\\_children\\_s\\_reading-72680](http://earlyed.newamerica.net/blogposts/2012/what_states_are_doing_to_help_improve_children_s_reading-72680)

<sup>3</sup> Martin R. West, "Is Retaining Students in the Early Grades Self-Defeating?" Center on Children and Families at Brookings, 2012.  
<http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2012/8/16%20student%20retention%20west/16%20student%20retention%20west>

<sup>4</sup> RAND Corporation, "Retaining Students in Grade," 2009.  
[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)

Making sure students can read by the end of the third grade is a worthwhile goal, and identifying students falling short makes sense. But identifying and retaining students is the easy part. The hard part is designing effective reading interventions that help struggling students reach this important milestone.