



OKLAHOMA'S NEW THIRD GRADE RETENTION LAW

Better Funding and Planning are Needed to Improve Reading Achievement



In 2011, Oklahoma amended the Reading Sufficiency Act (RSA) to require schools to retain students who do not pass a reading test and do not meet other criteria for exemptions by the end of the third grade. The first group of students affected by this policy will complete the third grade in 2014.

The new law is expected to significantly increase retentions.

The RSA retention requirements could increase third-grade retentions by as few as 2,200 students (if reading scores improve significantly by 2014, and if 40 percent of students are promoted due to exemptions) or by as many as 3,000 students per year (if current trends in reading scores continue and if only 30 percent of students are exempt).

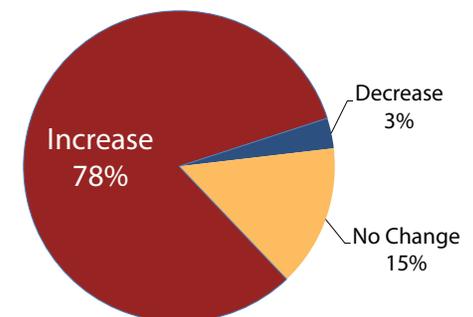
Educating retained students will increase costs for schools.

At the current cost of \$8,301 per student, the additional year of schooling for retained students will cost \$18 to \$25 million statewide in 2023-24. In the short term, the policy will cost an additional \$900,000 to \$1.3 million per year to educate retained students in the third grade. There will also be additional costs of intensive reading acceleration classes for retained students. The estimated statewide costs of these smaller classes is \$400,000 or less per year.

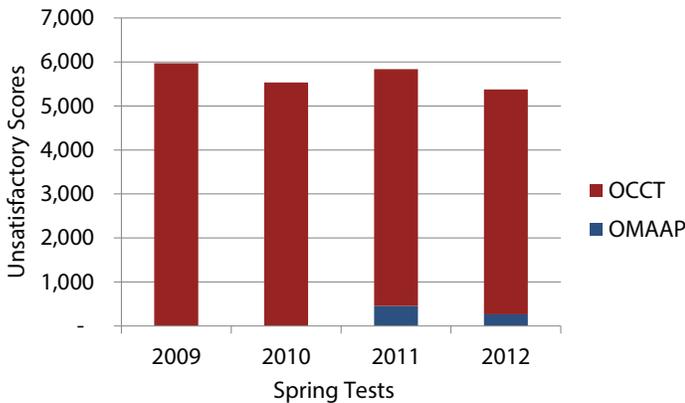
Oklahoma's third grade retention policy was modeled on Florida's but funded only one-fifth as much.

Oklahoma's third-grade retention requirement was modeled on a policy in Florida that has demonstrated success in improving student achievement. However, Florida's successful program involved not just retention, but also annual spending of \$130 million for reading instruction in all grades and schools, with a strong emphasis on schools with many struggling readers. Adjusting for the smaller number of students in Oklahoma, an equivalent level of reading funding would be \$31 million, which is five times more than Oklahoma has ever funded the RSA. In the past two budget years, Oklahoma has defunded the RSA entirely.

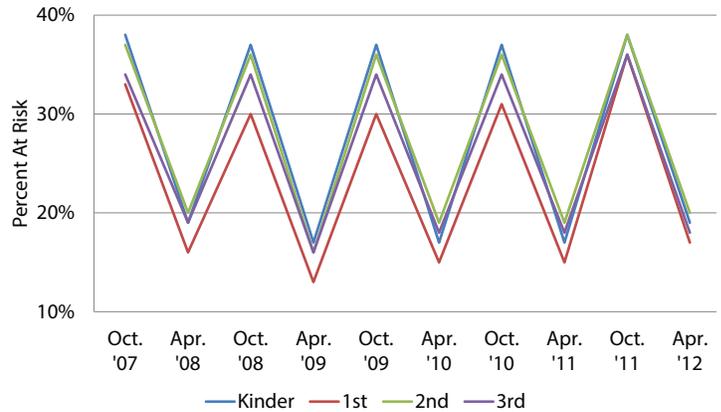
How do you expect the percentage of students retained in kindergarten through the third grade to be affected by this law?



More than 5,000 third graders scored unsatisfactory for reading in 2012



Reading proficiency gains over the school year have not carried over to the next year



To achieve the goals of the RSA, we recommend that Oklahoma should:

- Fully fund the costs of RSA remediation, including extra costs for retained students.** While the amended RSA aims to ensure that students meet reading expectations, it fails to address the many costs of doing so, such as scientific-based reading programs, additional adults working directly with children, extended learning times, and professional development for teachers.
- Improve the RSA legislation.** Minor amendments and changes in administration can make the Reading Sufficiency Act more effective. These include intervening sooner with struggling students, streamlining alternative assessments, and improving communication.
- Clearly prescribe evidence-based strategies for reading remediation.** Research shows that several programs are effective at improving early literacy, across a wide range of costs. Districts should spend their efforts on effective implementation of programs that are proven to work, not on evaluating and testing the dozens of available programs. Further, if school districts are not given clear but limited choices for reading programs, students' progress may suffer when they change schools.
- Improve mandatory professional development for teachers in K-3 to adequately identify and support struggling readers.** It is the consensus that every teacher, particularly in kindergarten and first grade, will now have to become a reading specialist. Training should be geared not only to public school teachers, but to all early childhood professionals in licensed care and Head Start.

Oklahoma's education leaders have rightly embraced third grade reading as a primary goal for schools. By improving the Reading Sufficiency Act and funding the reforms, Oklahoma can set its schoolchildren on a more certain path to success.

To read the full-length issue brief, go to <http://bit.ly/3rdgrdOK>