



Reading for Life-Long Learning

Policy: End the practice of promoting students who can't read from the third to fourth grade.

From kindergarten through third grade, students learn to read. First, they master letters and sounds. Then, they learn words and begin to build a vocabulary. As their vocabulary grows, they become more fluent readers. As they gain speed, students begin improving comprehension of increasingly complex material.

In the fourth grade, reading becomes the primary tool for gaining knowledge in every other subject – science, social studies, even math. Students are no longer “learning to read;” students are “reading to learn.”

Graduating students to the next grade based on age, rather than aptitude, is known as social promotion. The hope is that students who are struggling in one grade will catch up with their peers in the next. Research shows that students who enter this gateway year without mastering this basic life skill will fall further and further behind, subject after subject, year after year. The common practice of social promotion is perhaps most damaging in elementary school, which defines the academic career of the overwhelming majority of students.

In Florida, the lack of a clear and consistent policy on retention meant a myriad of other pressures – from parents to budgets to class size to teacher shortages – influenced the decision of whether to promote a student to the next grade. As a result, far too many students were moved to fourth grade unprepared for the rigors of reading that awaited them.

That ambiguity – along with social promotion – ended in 2003. Since then, students in 3rd grade who earn the lowest score on the state's annual standardized test are retained, with some good faith exceptions to prevent the policy from being punitive in cases where promotion is plainly justified.

Promotion to fourth grade requirement

FCAT Reading scores affect students in grade 3 for promotion and retention purposes. Students in grade 3 must score a Level 2 or higher on FCAT Reading, on a scale of 1-5,

to be promoted. Students who score the **lowest level** in reading on the 3rd grade FCAT **must be retained** unless the student meets good cause exemptions.

Some districts may have additional requirements for promotion as part of their local Student Progression Plan adopted by their local school boards. There are also good cause exemptions that may apply to eligible grade 3 students.

Good cause promotion options

Some students in grade 3 who score Level 1 on FCAT Reading can be exempted from the retention requirement and be promoted to fourth grade. This is called a “good cause exemption.” The good cause exemptions are:

- Students who show an acceptable level of performance on alternate reading tests, scoring at least at the 45th percentile on the Stanford Achievement Test (SAT) 10; at least at the 51st percentile on the SAT 9; or at least at the 45th percentile on the Norm-Referenced Test (NRT) portion of the FCAT
- Students who demonstrate mastery (equal to at least a Level 2 performance on the FCAT) of the Sunshine State Standards through a teacher-developed portfolio
- Limited English Proficient students who have had less than two years of instruction in an English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) program
- Students with disabilities whose Individual Educational Plan (IEP) shows that it is not appropriate for them to take the FCAT
- Students with disabilities who take the FCAT and whose IEP or 504 Plan states that they have received intensive remediation in reading for more than two years but who still show a deficiency in reading and who were previously retained in kindergarten through grade 3
- Students who have received intensive remediation in reading for two or more years but who still have a deficiency in reading and who have already been retained in kindergarten through grade 3 for a total of two years

Results

The results are remarkable. Before the policy, nearly one-third – 29 percent – scored at the bottom of the grading scale in reading. Reading performance in Florida at every grade level is increasing, specifically after the retention policy was put in place. The trends show for all students below mirror the trends Florida is achieving for all subgroups, white, black, Hispanic, students with disabilities, English Language Learners and economically disadvantaged students.

Since the policy was adopted, the number of struggling readers has steadily declined to a low of 16 percent last year. On the nation’s report card, the National Assessment of Education Progress, Florida’s 4th graders moved from the bottom to above the national

average. The story behind the statistics is that tens of thousands more students are reading than before the policy.

The process wasn't painless. In the first year, retention rates soared – more than quadrupling from about 3% to more than 13%.

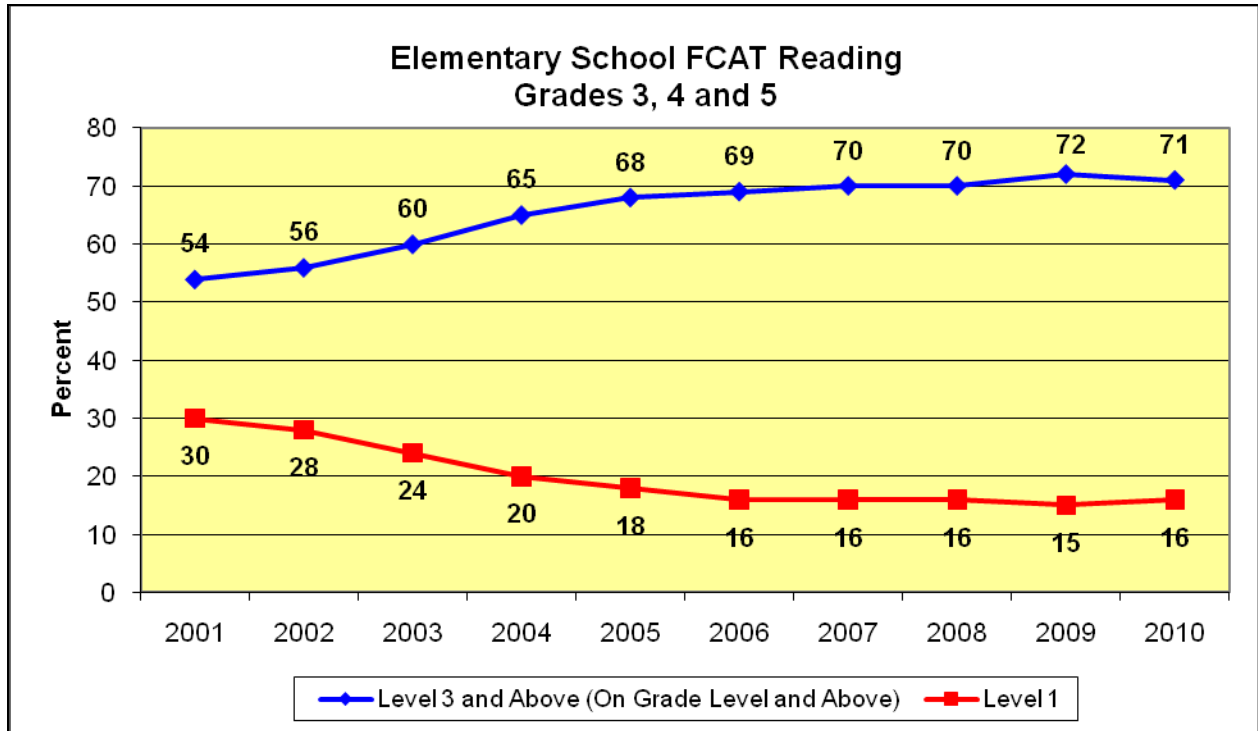
Year	Third Graders at FCAT Reading Level	Third Graders Retained
2000-01	29%	2.8%
2001-02	27%	3.1%
2002-03	23%	13.2%
2003-04	22%	10.2%
2004-05	20%	9.8%
2006-07	19%	8.1%
2007-08	16%	6.6%
2008-09	17%	6.4%
2009-10	16%	Data not yet available

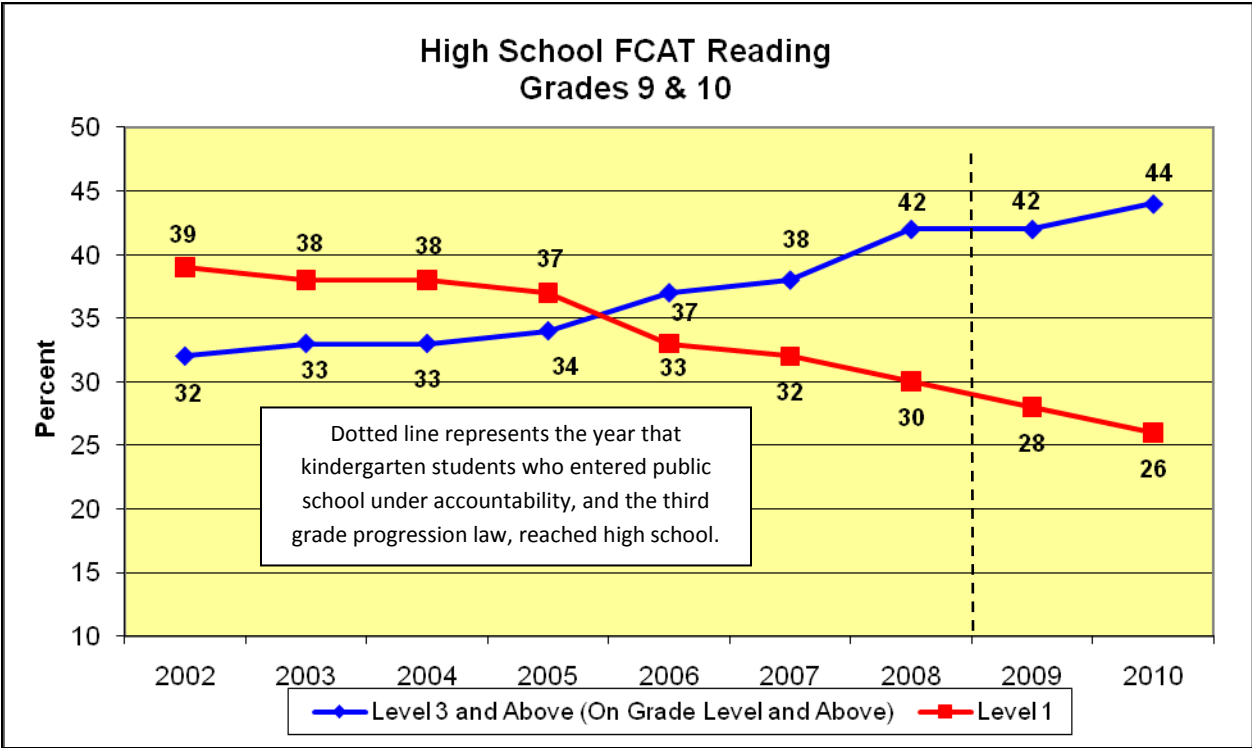
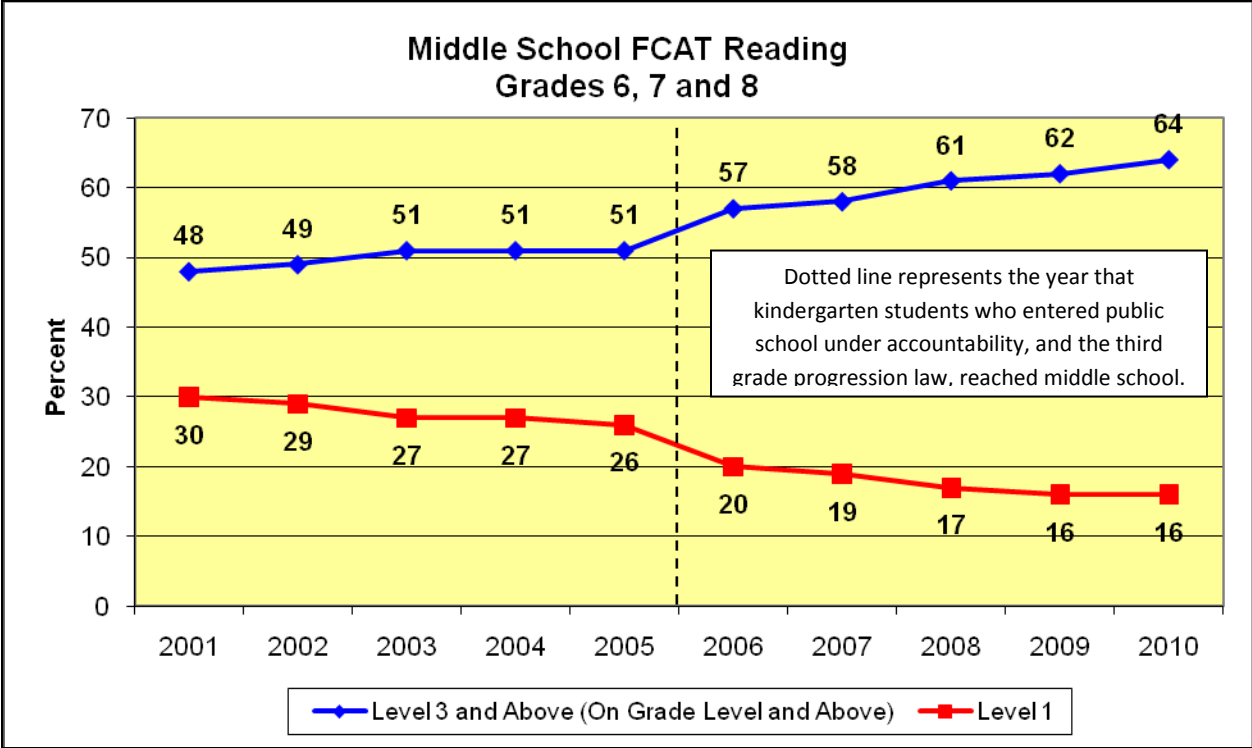
Florida did not just retain students for the sake of retention -- we implemented improved professional development for teachers in the research on reading, put reading coaches in place, etc. This clear consequence organized schools around avoiding failure. The sad reality was that the impact of a double digit retention rate spurred more action than a near 30 percent failure rate. Schools began to intervene with struggling readers earlier than the third grade. Those efforts started as early as kindergarten. And schools were creative in getting these students the help they needed: from creating summer reading camps to implementing 90-minute blocks of time for reading to working with educators in other subjects, such science and social studies, to help teach reading skills.

Options are available for parents of retained third graders to ensure their child is given every chance for improvement. The law requires the provision of one of the following:

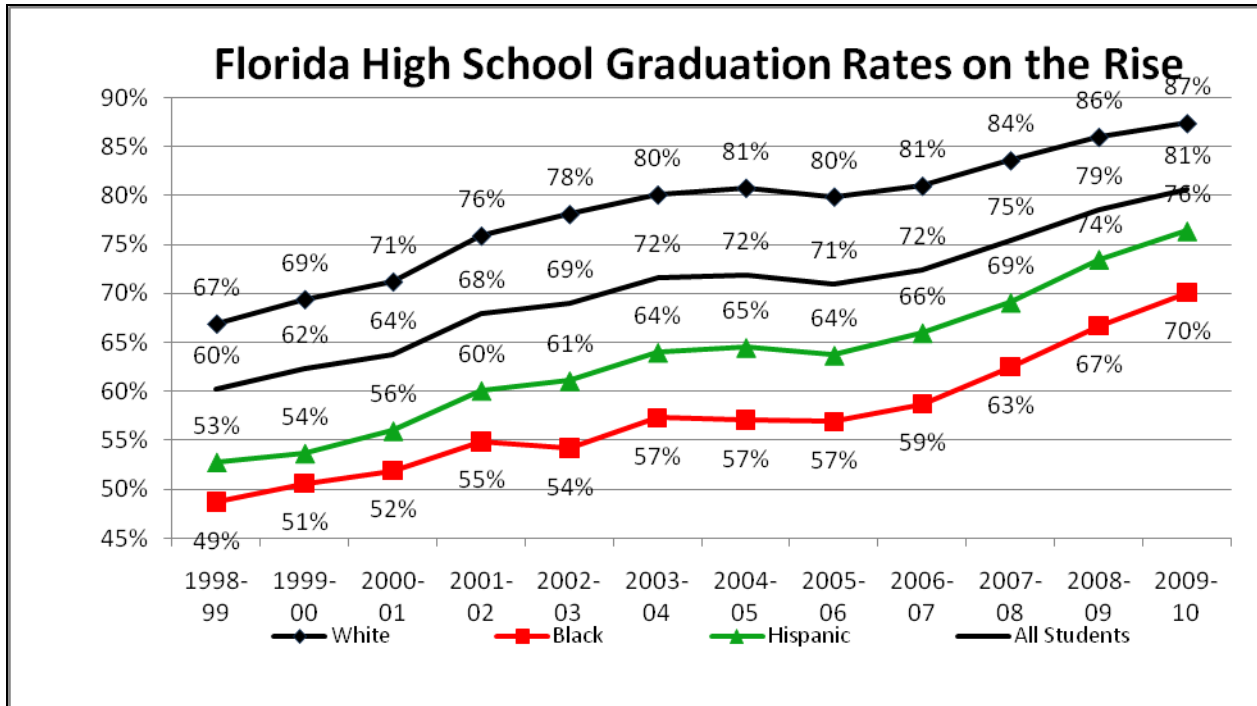
- Supplemental tutoring in scientifically research-based reading services including tutoring before and/or after school;

- A “Read at Home” plan outlined in a parental contract including participation in “Families Building Better Readers” parent workshops and regular parent-guided home instruction, or;
- A mentor or tutor with specialized reading training.





Florida's graduation rates have consistently increased and they are at the highest levels ever and at the same time dropout rates have consistently decreased to be the lowest rates ever!



Myth:

- It is unfair to label kids with failure.
- Holding a kid back will hurt their self-esteem.
- It is unfair to expect all kids to learn to read by the third grade.

Fact:

- Reading is the most fundamental life skill. If you can read, you can learn.
- When schools place a command focus on reading, more and more students learned to read.
- Ignoring illiteracy doesn't help students learn to read.
- Promoting students to the fourth grade without the skills to succeed only sets them up for greater failure in the future.
- School doesn't get any easier as students move up, so the idea that students will catch up in the next grade provides a false sense of hope.
- Teaching a child will build their self-esteem for the long-term. Certainly more than promoting them.
- More likely, students who can't read by the end of the third grade will fall further and further behind.
- If schools can't teach a kid to read, that is a problem.

Research

Cohort research conducted on Florida's third grade retention policies has shown there are statistically significant positive effects of the policy over time. The Manhattan Institute has conducted three different studies analyzing program data for three years and has a longer-term study of the policy underway. Manhattan Institute studies found:

- Retained third graders made significant gains compared to socially promoted students.
- These gains actually grew substantially from the first to the second year after retention.
- Students who are socially promoted appear to fall farther behind over time, while retained third graders are able to catch up and succeed in later grades.
- Retention policies have had greatest impact on minority student learning.

Must Read:

"Retaining Students Forces Schools to Act" by Jay Greene, Endowed Chair and Head of the Department of Education Reform at the University of Arkansas, in the *Indianapolis Star* on February 21, 2010.

No one would expect that babies should leap to their feet and run before they have even learned to walk. So why do schools promote third-graders who lack basic reading skills to fourth grade in the hopes that they will somehow join the academic gallop without having first developed the academic equivalent of walking?

Unfortunately, that is exactly what most schools in Indiana and across the country do. They promote students to the next grade regardless of how well prepared they are to learn increasingly challenging material.

But there is another way. In Florida, students have to demonstrate basic skills in reading by the end of third grade to be automatically promoted to fourth grade. If students can't demonstrate basic reading skills on the state test, they typically repeat the third grade to ensure that they have acquired those skills before being promoted. Mastering basic reading skills before fourth grade is critically important. Until third grade, students are mostly learning how to read. After third grade, students are mostly reading to learn. If students can't read after third grade, they lack the basic tools to benefit from being in school and tend to fall further and further behind.

The decision to retain students in third grade in Florida is not based on a single test. Students are given the opportunity to succeed on an alternative test. If they can't do that, the teacher can assemble a portfolio of work that demonstrates the student can

read sufficiently well. And if the student has a disability, is newly learning English, or has been held back before, the student is exempted from retention.

When Florida first changed its promotion policy in 2002, 41 percent of the students who were unable to pass the state's initial test demonstrated skills in an alternative way or received an exemption. The rest repeated third grade.

It may seem like being retained was failure for these students, but it was actually helping to set them up for success down the road. In a published evaluation of the program I conducted with Marcus Winters, we found that retained students learned at a significantly faster rate over the next two years than students just like them who were promoted to fourth grade. Making sure students have mastered walking helps them run in later years.

Retaining students also forces schools to focus more attention on ensuring that students have basic reading skills by the end of third grade so that they don't have to be retained. Those efforts have succeeded in Florida, where significantly fewer students are now unable to pass the state reading test and need to be retained.

Some oppose test-based promotion because they fear that holding students back damages their self-esteem, discourages them, and ultimately causes them to drop out. But this argument has things exactly backwards: promoting students who lack basic reading skills sets them up for failure as they fall further behind academically.

Likewise, the greatest source of lasting self-esteem is genuine academic success, not the artificial success of being pushed into the next grade, regardless of how much one has learned. The best way to address self-esteem and low graduation rates in the long term is to improve student reading skills before fourth grade so that they are back on track to make progress in school.

Some wonder whether we can afford to retain students. This argument is strange because it suggests that the more than \$10,000 spent per pupil in Indiana so far was just for baby-sitting. Actually getting kids to read at a basic level will cost extra. The real question is not whether we can afford a retention policy but whether we can afford not to ensure basic reading skills before fourth grade.

Research Cites

An Evaluation of Florida's Program to End Social Promotion, Jay Green and Marcus Winters, Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, www.manhattan-institute.org/html/ewp_07.htm

Getting Farther Ahead by Staying Behind: A Second-Year Evaluation of Florida's Policy to end Social Promotion, Jay Greene and Marcus Winters, Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, www.manhattan-institute.org/html/cr_49.htm

Essential Reading (chapter 5, Reforming Education in Florida), E. D. Hirsch Jr, Hoover Institution, http://media.hoover.org/documents/ktf_florida_book_85.pdf