

Prohibiting social promotion: The third-grade gate

Ellen Ciurczak, USA TODAY NETWORK - Mississippi 6:24 p.m. CST December 18, 2016

VIDEO: Kimbra Dawkins, Hattiesburg Public School District third-grade reading teacher, talks about working with different levels of students on their reading skills as they get ready to take the third-grade reading test. Ellen Ciurczak/Hattiesburg American

Story Highlights

- Literacy Based Promotion Act: See details at end of story

Melinda Green enjoys reading with her son Seth, a fourth-grader at Rowan Elementary in Hattiesburg. Their bedtime ritual almost always involves story time.

When Green enrolled Seth in third grade, their story hour took on new meaning when she got a slew of instructions from his teachers.

"Within the first month of us being there, the teachers let me know there was going to be a third-grade reading exam that would determine proficiency and basic literacy," she said. "They said he would be held back if he wasn't proficient."

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Green had just been introduced to the [Literacy Based Promotion Act](#), signed into law by Gov. Phil Bryant in 2013. As of the 2014-15 school year, a third-grader scoring at the lowest achievement level in reading on the state test would not be promoted to fourth grade unless the student qualified for a good cause exemption. Those exemptions could affect students such as English language learners or some children with disabilities.

The act, known colloquially as the third-grade gate, calls for the inclusion of parents.

"(The teachers) advised me to shoot for 30 minutes of reading with him (a night) and to make certain to introduce fifth-grade vocabulary words," Green said. "Those were two things that were impressed upon us."

Lawmakers stipulated the goal of the Literacy Based Promotion Act was to improve the reading skills of kindergarten through third-grade students in the public schools so every student completing third grade is able to read at or above grade level. The law prohibits "social promotion" — sending a child to the next grade regardless of skills solely to promote the child's self-esteem.

Katie Tonore, clinical instructor of curriculum instruction and special education at the University of Southern Mississippi, said she is not sure keeping children from progressing to fourth grade is a good idea.

"Research typically does not support retention," she said. "It shows students who have been retained more than once are high school dropouts anyway."

VIDEO: Reading ability is crucial for students in Mississippi, ever since the passage of a law requiring third-graders to show proficiency on the state's reading test. Ellen Ciurczak reports. Ellen Ciurczak/Hattiesburg American

The act calls for intensive intervention for those students who are held back. Any student who is diagnosed with a deficiency, beginning in kindergarten, is given an individual reading plan, which includes how progress will be monitored and evaluated, the type of additional instruction the student will receive, the research-based curriculum the teacher will be using, the strategies the student's parents are encouraged to use, any additional services deemed appropriate and the goals and benchmarks for growth.

"The plan holds the interventionist, the teacher and the school accountable for any interventions that are given," Tonore said.

Mississippi patterned its law after a similar one in Florida, she said, but there was one significant difference.

"Mississippi did not have the money that Florida had," Tonore said. "We did not have the money for literacy coaches, and we did not have the infrastructure that Florida had."

"Florida did a lot of things right, but Florida last May put a hold on its retention policy because of a groundswell from the community, districts and legislators. They weren't seeing gains from retention."

The Mississippi Department of Education has hired some literacy coaches to work with staff at schools with the lowest reading scores. The coaches assist the school's K-3 teachers on best practices in reading instruction. The department currently has more than 75 literacy coaches working with more than 125 elementary schools.

Woodley Elementary reading teacher Kimbra Dawkins doesn't have a literacy coach to help her, but she is working hard to make sure none of her third-grade students are held back. She uses what is called differentiated instruction to reach her students — using varied techniques to help students who are at mismatched skill levels.

"We need to meet them where they are and grow them where they need to be," she said. "We see what they're missing, and we can bridge that gap and bring them to grade level work."

Dawkins and fellow teacher Undra Varnado set up centers in their room where students are placed according to their reading levels as determined by test data. Then the teachers work with them on the skills they need.

Varnado also sends work home for the students to do with their parents — assignments that have a time limit because the reading test is timed.

"They have (passages), and they read it within a minute with the parent," she said. "The parent has to sign (the work). If they can't do a whole passage, we give phrases that are fit for the

Varnado is reluctant to speak freely about what she thinks of the Literacy Based Promotion Act, but she admits it has made her job harder.

"Each year we're not sure what to prepare for," she said. "It's very stressful. The students are different. This is a whole different avenue."

Teachers like Varnado are eligible for reading training, which Tonore sees as a great benefit of the law.

"Teachers have been allowed to attend high-level training free of charge," she said. "We have better prepared third-grade teachers, and now assistant teachers are being trained."

In addition, new teachers are getting reading training while they are in college, Tonore said.

"Mississippi universities are required to issue a reading endorsement — that's very positive," she said. "Our students that are graduating — they are coming out of college with the foundation for reading as opposed to needing that in the field."

The [National Council on Teacher Quality](#) ranked three Mississippi colleges and universities as tops in the nation for undergraduate elementary teacher preparation programs. The University of Southern Mississippi, Mississippi College and University of Mississippi were especially noted for their early reading programs. In fact, the council said 82 percent of Mississippi programs earned an A or a Pass in early reading compared with 29 percent of programs nationally.

In addition to teacher prep, state literacy director Kymyona Burk, with the Mississippi Department of Education, touts other benefits of the act.

"We have just made some great strides," she said. "We have seen some advances in education in this state that are unprecedented in kindergarten readiness and the (National Assessment of Educational Progress) NAEP fourth-grade reading scores."

The department's most recent release of kindergarten readiness scores in June showed the majority of the state's kindergarten students made significant gains during 2015-16 with the average statewide score exceeding the previous school year.

Mississippi was also the only state in the country to show significant score increases in both fourth-grade reading and math on NAEP.

Burk said both those factors show the third-grade gate is having an effect by getting kids started on reading earlier and increasing their reading skills going into fourth grade.

"We feel on our vantage point we are really making great gains," she said. "If we're saying a child is proficient on the (third-grade reading assessment), we can be confident that child can (eventually) go to (college in) California, Nevada or Alabama because we are comparable on a national level."

But not everyone is confident Mississippi's third-graders are reading and reading well.

Catherine Bomhold, director of the [Council on Community Literacy and Reading](#) at Southern Miss, said her group works with parents to get them to read to their children, ages birth to 5. It's not easy, she said.

"It's a simple message, and yet it doesn't happen," Bomhold said. "What the council is trying to do is to get parents to understand that reading aloud to children gives them emergent literacy skills.

"People think you don't need to read to kids until (the kids) can read to themselves."

The council raises money to buy books to give out free to parents at parades and events in Hattiesburg.

"The poverty rate in Hattiesburg is so high that acquiring books (is hard)," Bomhold said. "The more books there are at home correlates with a high level of educational attainment.

"When families are poor, there are so many stressors in their life that trips to the library and getting books into the house are at the bottom of the list."

Angela Rutherford, director of the Center for Excellence in Literacy Instruction at the University of Mississippi, said children from families that don't read enter kindergarten behind other students.

"The solution is you identify kids in kindergarten and provide interventions," she said. "The Literacy Based Promotion Act should be more about prevention and intervention than retention.

"It should not be a surprise to schools, principals and teachers that a child can't read, but if you're doing the screeners and providing the interventions and progress monitoring so the child is making the progress toward the benchmark — that's how it should be."

Teresa Jenny, Lamar County School District's director of federal and elementary programs, said, however, that sometimes the students don't make the necessary progress.

"If children do not have the early learning standards mastered before kindergarten, they start at a disadvantage and are constantly playing catch-up," she said in an email. "Oftentimes, they are not caught up by the time they reach third grade, even with intensive interventions."

Pine Belt school district officials are working with local day care providers and Pre-K groups to help them with reading instruction.

Teresa Poole, assistant superintendent with Hattiesburg Public School District, said the district is reaching out to parents and providers alike.

"We're starting earlier with literacy," she said. "We're working with parents of 3- to 5-year-olds. We're working with our daycare centers, doing professional development."

The district's reading specialist, Kiana Pendleton, said she emphasizes the early learning of phonics and phonemic awareness — how words and letters sound.

"Those children who did fail (the third-grade gate) — they had problems with those two areas specifically," she said. "What sound the letter 'L' makes is different from what sound the letter 'P' makes. That's the first step in learning how to read."

Third-graders who are currently being held back may soon be joined by others in their class. Beginning in the 2018-19 school year, students must score higher on the test to pass on to fourth grade. They must be above the lowest two levels to show proficiency rather than just the lowest tier.

The most [recent state Department of Education figures](#), from the 2015-16 school year, show 9.4 percent of third-graders scored at level 1. Of those, 5.7 percent, or 2,307 students, were retained in third grade. Others were promoted by good cause exemption.

Linda Smith, Lumberton Public School District superintendent, said students in her district are not coming to school as ready as they should be, but she takes what she is given.

"The reading gate is just an additional reminder that high quality educational experiences must be provided for our students," she said in an email. "We have always known the stakes were high. This is just the bar right now."

Literacy Based Promotion Act

2013: Act signed by Gov. Phil Bryant.

2014-15: Act takes effect. Student must score above lowest proficiency level in reading on state test to move on to fourth grade.

2018-19: Standards raised. Student must score above lowest two proficiency levels in reading on state test to move on to fourth grade.

Purpose: An act prohibiting social promotion to improve the reading skills of kindergarten through third-graders so every student enrolled in public school and completing third grade is able to read at or above grade level.

Students with deficiencies: Given intensive reading instruction and intervention that must be documented in an individual reading plan.

Reading screener: Given in first 30 days of school year in kindergarten through third grade to determine student progression in reading.

Parents notified: Upon determination of a reading deficiency.

Good cause exemptions: Limited English students who have less than two years' instruction in English language learner program, some students with disabilities, students who demonstrate acceptable level of reading proficiency on alternate standardized assessment, students who receive intensive intervention for two or more years and have previously been retained in kindergarten through third grade for a total of two years.

Mississippi Reading Panel: Established to collaborate with Mississippi Department of Education on recommending alternative standardized tests for students who do not score at required achievement level on state accountability assessment or for children who were unable to take state assessment.

By the numbers

1 in 3: Children who arrive at kindergarten without necessary skills

0 to 3: Critical years for development of language skills

48: Percent of U.S. children who are read to each day

15: Minutes of reading aloud each day that make a difference in child's development

27,375: Minutes that add up in a year, if child is read to 15 minutes a day

9.4: Percent of state's third-graders who scored at level 1 on the 2015-16 reading test

5.7: Percent of third-graders retained in 2015-16

Sources: www.ReadAloud.org and Mississippi Department of Education