



TESTIMONY

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HOUSE BILL 2872: EARLY LITERACY REFORM

By Cory Koedel and Avery Frank

Testimony before the Missouri House Elementary and Secondary Education Committee

TO THE HONORABLE MEMBERS OF THIS COMMITTEE

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. Our names are Cory Koedel, Director of Education Policy, and Avery Frank, Senior Policy Analyst. We are from the Show-Me Institute, a nonprofit, nonpartisan, Missouri-based think tank that advances sensible, well-researched, free-market solutions to state and local policy issues.

The ideas presented here are our own and are offered in consideration of Missouri's educational environment.

MISSOURI'S READING CRISIS

According to the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 42 percent of Missouri's fourth graders scored *below basic* in reading—our worst result in 20 years.¹ Some of these children are illiterate; others can barely read. One can quibble over the technical meaning of "below basic," but it is hard to put a positive spin on it.

FOCUSED REFORM

States with strong 4th-grade reading test scores, and states with large recent gains in rankings on the National

Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), have implemented laws that emphasize phonics as the primary method for teaching reading in schools, and the strongest laws ban the three-cueing method. Successful states also typically measure literacy with a uniform reading test at the end of the 3rd grade, and they impose an objective standard for promotion from 3rd to 4th grade based on the test.²

House Bill 2872 implements these key features of successful literacy reforms. Specifically, it emphasizes phonics and prohibits the use of three-cueing, establishes a universal reading screener that all Missouri students will take, and creates a strong third-grade retention policy based on the screener. It also aligns the curricula used in teacher-preparation programs with these reforms by requiring preparation programs to teach phonics-based instruction and banning instruction on the three-cueing method.

The bill implements these reforms while minimizing the burden on school districts, charter schools, and the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE), especially with respect to required testing.

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PHONICS VERSUS THREE-CUEING

Phonics-based instruction teaches the relationships between letters and sounds so students learn to decode words by sounding them out. Three-cueing encourages students to identify words by using contextual cues—like pictures, sentence meaning, and first letters—and prompts them to guess words rather than decode them letter by letter. Research is clear that phonics is an effective instructional strategy, and that three-cueing is not.³ Skilled readers do not read by guessing; they perceive each and every letter of print.

If students should not be taught using three-cueing, then teachers should not be trained to use it. HB 2872 recognizes the importance of aligning teacher-preparation programs with evidence-based reading instruction. In 2023, the National Council on Teacher Quality evaluated teacher-preparation programs nationwide and found that nearly half of Missouri's participating institutions received an "F" for their coverage of scientifically based reading instruction.⁴

HB 2872 allows DESE to bring teacher preparation programs into alignment with the science of reading.

THE MISSOURI UNIVERSAL READING SCREENER

Currently, different Missouri school districts use different literacy tests, and there is no universal score that qualifies as passing. A universal screener would help Missouri reliably identify struggling readers, measure progress consistently, and hold all students to the same standard.

HB 2872 reduces administrative burden by using one screener, and it also reduces time spent testing by allowing the screener to fulfill Missouri's existing dyslexia screening requirement. Tennessee already does this.⁵

We note that HB 2872 excludes kindergarten students from the screening requirement. This reflects the bill's minimalist approach to testing. It is burdensome to administer assessments to very young children, and even when they are administered the results are less reliable than for older children.⁶

THIRD-GRADE RETENTION

Retention of struggling readers in the third grade is necessary because in fourth grade, students begin the transition from learning-to-read to reading-to-learn.⁷ Children who enter fourth grade without basic literacy skills have dim prospects for academic success. The third grade is also early enough in a child's developmental process that negative behavioral consequences of grade retention are not yet problematic, in contrast to older children who are retained.⁸

Missouri officially has a third-grade retention law, but retention is neither mandatory nor tied to a uniform, objective assessment, and there is no evidence it is in active use.

HB 2872 creates a mandatory third-grade retention policy based on the results of the universal screener. If a student scores below basic on the screener at the end of third grade, they will be retained unless they score basic or higher on a retest opportunity (after summer school) or qualify for a clearly defined good-cause exemption.

Successful states have employed strong retention policies. One comprehensive analysis from Michigan State University found "no consistent evidence that reading scores increase in states without a retention component."⁹

It is important that HB 2872 require the establishment of a clear, objective retention rule, with limited exemptions, as written in the current bill. Experiences of states that permit exemptions broadly tell us that without a firm rule, retention policies fall flat. Michigan is an example—the widespread use of exemptions in that state has meant that only eight percent of students who are flagged for retention are actually retained.¹⁰

CONCLUSION

HB 2872 implements literacy reforms that have proved to be effective in other states. It offers a clear path toward improved literacy and will give more Missouri children the opportunity to become confident, capable readers.

NOTES

1. Frank, Avery. Third-Grade Retention and Early Literacy Policies, Show-Me Institute, 11 Sept. 2025, showmeinstitute.org/publication/performance/third-grade-retention-and-early-literacy-policies.
2. States that use this exact bundle of policies include Florida, Indiana, and Louisiana. Many other states have largely overlapping policies—e.g., Mississippi uses a common test at the end of the third grade to assess literacy and imposes an objective standard for promotion to the 4th grade based on the test, but it does not have an outright ban on three-cueing (although legislation currently under consideration in Mississippi would ban it).
3. Frank, Avery. Third-Grade Retention and Early Literacy Policies, Show-Me Institute, 11 Sept. 2025, showmeinstitute.org/publication/performance/third-grade-retention-and-early-literacy-policies.
4. Ellis, C., Holston, S., Drake, G., Putman, H., Swisher, A., & Peske, H. Teacher Prep Review: Strengthening Elementary Reading Instruction, Washington, DC: National Council on Teacher Quality, June 2023. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED628762.pdf>.
5. *Tennessee Code Annotated*. Title 49, Chapter 1, Part 9, Section 49-1-905.
6. Goldstein, J. & Flake, J.K. (2016). Towards a framework for the validation of early childhood assessment systems. *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability* 28, 273–293.
7. Chall, J.S. (1996). *Stages of reading development* (2nd ed.). Fort Worth, Tex.: Harcourt Brace.
8. Hwang, NaYoung & Koedel, C. (2025). “Helping or Hurting: The Effects of Retention in the Third Grade on Student Outcomes.” *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 47(1), 65–88.
9. Westall, John & Cummings, A. “The Effects of Early Literacy Policies on Student Achievement,” Education Policy Innovation Collaborative, June 2023, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4427675>.
10. Kilbride, Tara, et al. “Retention and Exemption Decisions under the Read by Grade Three Law,” Education Policy Innovation Collaborative, June 2024, epicedpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/EPIC_RetentionDecisionReport_June2024.pdf.



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