



TESTIMONY

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SENATE BILL 1442: EARLY LITERACY REFORM

By Cory Koedel and Avery Frank

Testimony before the Missouri Senate Committee on Education

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.

4TH GRADE NAEP READING,
MISSOURI
STATE RANKING (1 IS BEST)

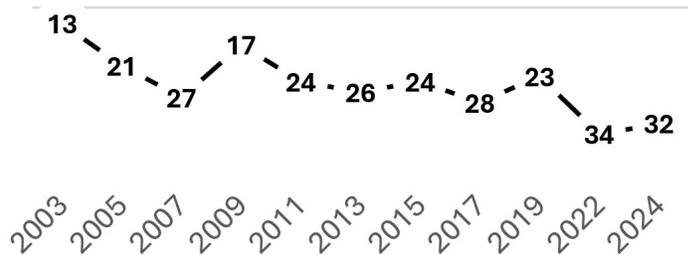


MISSOURI'S READING CRISIS

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.

The following charts show the changes over time in Missouri's national rank on NAEP, in fourth- and eighth-grade reading, since about the turn of the century:

8TH GRADE NAEP READING,
MISSOURI
STATE RANKING (1 IS BEST)



ADVANCING LIBERTY WITH RESPONSIBILITY
BY PROMOTING MARKET SOLUTIONS
FOR MISSOURI PUBLIC POLICY

FOCUSED REFORM

States with strong fourth-grade reading test scores and states with large recent gains in rankings on the 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 at the end of third grade, and they impose an objective standard for promotion to fourth grade based on a common reading test.²

Senate Bill 1442 implements the most important aspects of literacy reforms that are in place in other states. These include an objective, assessment-based third-grade retention rule and the requirement that the curriculum in teacher-preparation programs be aligned with evidence-based reading strategies. These are structural pillars of needed early literacy reform in Missouri.

Requirements for Teacher-Preparation Programs

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.

Teachers should not be trained to use ineffective methods like three-cueing. In 2023, the National Council on Teacher Quality evaluated teacher-preparation programs nationwide and awarded nearly half of Missouri’s participating institutions an “F” for their coverage of scientifically based reading instruction.⁴ SB 1442 recognizes the importance of aligning teacher training with evidence-based reading instruction.

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.⁵ 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 the negative behavioral consequences of grade retention are not yet problematic, in contrast to older children who are retained.⁶

Some view retention as too harsh on children, but this view is misguided. It is not a kindness to socially promote a student who cannot read to the fourth grade. Such unwarranted promotion is setting the student up for failure. Moreover, students can benefit from a retention policy if they are not retained. In most states with retention policies, the retention rate ends up being low; it is the threat of retention, more than retention itself, that spurs widespread literacy gains.

Successful states have strong retention policies. One comprehensive analysis from Michigan State University found “no consistent evidence that reading scores increase in states without a retention component.”⁷

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. SB 1442 creates a mandatory third-grade retention policy based on the reading portion of the Missouri state test (currently the MAP). A number of states—Mississippi, Louisiana, Indiana, Florida, and Tennessee—use similar retention policies. These states have seen significant gains in reading, and all have higher test scores than Missouri.

It is important that SB 1442 requires 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.⁸

CONCLUSION

SB 1442 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 fourth 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. Chall, J. S. (1996). *Stages of reading development* (2nd ed.). Fort Worth, Tex.: Harcourt Brace.
6. Hwang, NaYoung, and Cory Koedel (2025). “Helping or Hurting: The Effects of Retention in the Third Grade on Student Outcomes.” *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 47(1), 65–88.
7. Westall, John, and Amy Cummings. The Effects of Early Literacy Policies on Student Achievement. Education Policy Innovation Collaborative, June 2023, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4427675>.
8. 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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