

INTRODUCTION

This information is for parents of Florida's third-grade students. It is designed to help parents understand what Florida law says about reading requirements for third-grade students and promotion to fourth grade. It also describes what the school will do to help if your child is reading below grade level.

BACKGROUND

Reading is the core of the school day for young students. Walk into a kindergarten, first-, second-, or third-grade classroom, and you will find children learning to read. They may be talking about the sounds letters make, listening to the teacher read a story, reading aloud together, working on a computer reading program, or talking and writing about what they have read. Students are engaged in these activities because reading and comprehension are the foundations for all academic learning. Students need strong reading skills in order to learn in all other school subjects, such as science, history, writing, and even math.

Schools regularly assess the reading proficiency of all students in kindergarten through grade three. This allows schools to identify students who are struggling with reading. If your child is reading below grade level, the school will let you know exactly what type of reading difficulty your child is having. The school will then develop a plan to provide special instruction in reading, such as individual help from teachers, aides, volunteer tutors, and parents.

THE PLAN

The law requires schools to develop a **progress monitoring plan (PMP)** for each struggling reader. Parents will be invited to participate in developing this plan. The PMP describes the child's specific reading difficulties. The plan also describes the intensive teaching practices that will be used to help the child catch up in reading. This intensive instruction will be provided during regular school hours in addition to the regular reading instruction. District school boards may also require students who need intensive instruction to attend before or after regular school hours or during the summer. Each student's progress will be monitored frequently. This intensive help will be provided until the reading deficiency is corrected. If the child has a disability, the child's individual educational plan (IEP) may serve as the PMP. Parents are always invited to be a part of the IEP team.

More information on progress monitoring plans is available at the following website:
http://info.fldoe.org/docushare/dsweb/Get/Document-3804/k12_06_84memo.pdf

EXPECTATIONS FOR THIRD GRADERS

The specific skills that students need in reading are described in the Florida Sunshine State Standards. Designed by teachers with input from stakeholders, the Standards tell what Florida students should know and be able to do at each grade level. They are in line with national education standards.

By the end of third grade, students are expected to be able to read independently. This means that they can read and understand words, sentences, and paragraphs without help.

FCAT

The Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) measures students' progress on the Sunshine State Standards. Students in grades 3–10 take the FCAT each spring. Third graders are tested in reading and mathematics. Their scores fall into one of five levels: Level 5 is the highest; Level 1 is the lowest.

The third-grade FCAT requires students to read stories that are approximately 350 words long and answer questions about what they have read. The test also requires them to use charts, graphs, maps, and other materials to gather information to answer questions.





What does scoring Level 1 on the FCAT mean?

When a third grader scores in the lowest level on the FCAT, it warns us that the child is reading at a much lower level than is expected of third graders. Students who score Level 1 may not be able to recognize or sound-out new words or know their meaning. These students may have trouble answering questions that identify a story's main idea, main characters, and order of events. They may not be able to use information from charts, graphs, or maps to answer specific questions.

THE LAW

Florida law says that third graders who score at Level 1 in reading on the FCAT must be retained (not promoted to fourth grade). However, children who demonstrate the required reading level through a state approved alternative standardized reading test or through a student portfolio can be granted a "good cause exemption" and be promoted to fourth grade.

If your child scores at Level 1, you will be notified by the school that your child will not be promoted to fourth grade until he or she achieves the required reading level.

Students who are retained must be given intensive instruction in reading to help them catch up. You will be given information about the intensive instruction that will be provided to help your child make progress in reading.

Note: Some students with disabilities, some students with limited English proficiency, and some students who have already been retained twice can receive a "good cause exemption" and be promoted, even though they are not reading at the required level. If your child is not eligible for the good cause exemption, you will be notified as to why your child is not eligible. Please refer to page 4 of this document for additional information.

What does the law mean?

This law means, "We are not going to give up on struggling students; we are going to invest in them." The results should have a positive effect on our whole state. It will reduce the need for remedial education in middle and high school and may lower dropout rates and juvenile delinquency. It will also help Florida develop the highly skilled workforce needed for a strong economy.



What is the meaning and purpose of retention?

Retention does not mean that the child has failed. It does not mean that teachers or parents are not working hard enough. It does mean that the child needs and will have more time and help to catch up and reach reading proficiency.

The purpose of retention is to give children who have substantial reading deficiencies more time and the intensive instruction they need to catch up in reading.



Why third grade?

A substantial reading deficiency must be addressed before students can move on to the more difficult schoolwork of fourth grade and beyond. As students progress through the grades, the text and tasks that are required for students to understand what they are reading are more complex. Textbooks become more difficult to understand; reading passages are longer. Students use reference books, websites, and other written materials to do research for history reports, science projects, and other schoolwork. Students who have trouble understanding what they read find it very difficult to keep up. Many students become frustrated when they try to tackle this schoolwork without necessary reading skills. For some students, this leads to years of difficulty in school and limited opportunities in adult life.

How will we help students who have been retained?

Schools must provide reading enhancement and acceleration strategies to students who are retained including the following:

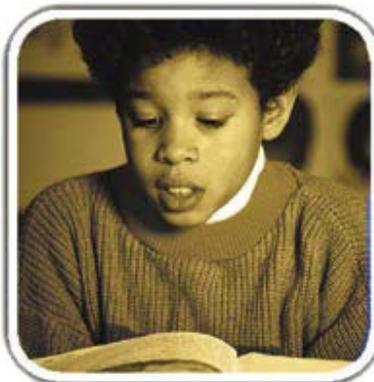
- Using proven, effective teaching strategies and methods
- Providing a high-performing teacher
- Providing a summer reading camp
- Requiring at least 90 minutes of reading instruction each day, which often involves
 - ✓ one-on-one or small group instruction
 - ✓ special books, computer software, and other instructional materials
 - ✓ more frequent progress monitoring
 - ✓ tutoring or mentoring
 - ✓ transition classes that include third- and fourth-grade students
 - ✓ after-school instruction



Parents must also be offered at least one of the following options:

- Tutoring using proven strategies
- Parent workshops and a parent-guided home reading program
- A mentor or tutor with specialized reading training

Once the intensive instruction has begun, the student's progress will be checked frequently and the teaching strategies adjusted as needed.



MAKING PROGRESS

Mid-Year Promotion

If the child can demonstrate the required reading level before the start of the next school year, he or she may be promoted to fourth grade. If the child achieves the required reading level during the next school year, the child may be promoted to fourth grade mid-year. To be promoted to fourth grade mid-year, the child must demonstrate mastery of the third grade reading skills and beginning fourth grade reading skills. This will ensure that the student has made enough progress to be successful in fourth grade. The student may be given a standardized test, or the teacher may put together a portfolio of the student's work.

Intensive Acceleration Class

If the student has already been retained once in third grade and then scores at Level 1 again, the school must provide an intensive acceleration class that focuses on increasing the child's reading level at least two grade levels in one school year. The intensive acceleration class must:

- Have a lower teacher-student ratio than other third-grade classes
- Have a high-performing teacher
- Provide reading instruction for most of the school day
- Give students the opportunity to master the fourth-grade Sunshine State Standards in other subjects, such as math and science
- Use research-based reading, language, and vocabulary instructional programs
- Monitor student progress weekly
- Maintain a portfolio for each student



The district must also offer these students the option of being served in a transitional instructional setting designed to help them meet the fourth-grade Florida Sunshine State Standards, while continuing the remediation of the reading deficiency.

SIX COMPONENTS OF READING

Teachers in the early grades work on improving students' skills in these six components of reading:

1. Oral language provides the foundation for literacy development involving listening and speaking skills.
2. Phonemic awareness is the ability to hear and manipulate the sounds of spoken language. This includes noticing rhyme and recognizing the separate, small sounds in words (phonemes).
3. Phonics is the understanding of the relationships between the written letters of the alphabet and the sounds of spoken language. This knowledge allows a reader to “decode” words by translating the letters into speech sounds.
4. Fluency is the ability to read quickly, accurately, and with proper expression. Fluent readers can concentrate on understanding what they read because they don't have to focus on decoding.
5. Vocabulary includes all the words the reader can understand and use. The more words a child knows, the better he or she will understand what is read. Knowing how words relate to each other is a building block that leads to comprehension.
6. Comprehension is the ability to understand what one has read. This includes understanding the plot of a story or the information in an article. It also includes things like recognizing the main idea of an article or being able to compare and contrast different characters in a story.

EXEMPTIONS FROM THIRD-GRADE RETENTION

Some third-graders who score Level 1 on the FCAT in reading can be exempted from the retention requirement and be promoted to fourth. This is called a “good cause exemption.” Good cause exemptions are given to only the following students:

1. Limited English proficient students who have had less than two years of instruction in an English for Speakers of Other Languages program
2. Students with disabilities whose individual educational plan (IEP) shows that it is not appropriate for them to take the FCAT
3. Students who show an acceptable level of performance on an alternative standardized reading test approved by the State Board of Education
4. Students who show through a teacher-developed portfolio that they can read on grade level*
5. Students with disabilities who take the FCAT and whose IEP or 504 Plan says that they have received intensive remediation in reading for more than two years but still show a deficiency in reading and were previously retained in kindergarten through grade 3
6. Students who have received intensive remediation in reading for two or more years but still have a deficiency in reading and who have already been retained in kindergarten through grade 3 for a total of two years

If you believe your child may be eligible for a good cause exemption, talk to your child's teacher. For a good cause exemption to be approved, the following steps must take place:

1. The student's teacher must submit documentation to the principal.
2. The principal must review the documentation and decide whether or not the student should be promoted. If the principal determines that the student should be promoted, the principal must make the recommendation to the school district superintendent.
3. The school district superintendent must accept or reject the principal's recommendation that the student be promoted.



*The teacher selects the contents of the portfolio. The documents in the portfolio must show that the student has mastered the Florida Sunshine State Standard benchmarks that are assessed by the grade 3 Reading FCAT. Talk to your child's teacher to find out more about portfolios.



Dr. Eric J. Smith
Commissioner of Education