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The Republic | azcentral.com
Fri Apr 26, 2013 11:34 PM

New 3rd-grade reading requirement goes into effect this fall

Third-grade teacher Christine Ford sits behind a desk with three students, each with a book in hand. For seven minutes of the day, she gives them her undivided attention.

Then, the timer rings.

“If you are cleaned up, get ready to rotate. Please walk to the next station,” Ford says to her class — 25 students in all — on a recent Tuesday morning at Glendale American School.

[More: What it takes to pass the third-grade reading test.](#) (follows)

The three students move on to the next area of focus and are quickly replaced with new ones.

Another group huddles in the back corner, listening to an audiobook through oversize headphones, the hard-copy version lying in front of them. Others work independently on the computer, writing paragraphs, even playing flash-card games.

Maximum group size for each reading station? Three.

In the dozen years since Ford began teaching, she has fine-tuned the use of small groups to help students advance.

Advance far enough, she hopes, to perform well on the state reading test.

Ford is among thousands of elementary-school teachers across the state using small groups and other techniques to boost their students’ reading skills, a method fueled by a state literacy law that kicks in next school year. Next year, third-graders must pass a state reading test or risk being held back.

The new requirement puts added pressure on teachers already faced with dwindling resources and larger class sizes.

However, research shows that third-graders’ ability to read is a clear link to future academic and career success. Third-graders who can read at grade level are more likely to graduate from high school and enroll in college.

Those who can’t meet basic reading requirements tend not to catch up.

“Third grade is really important because it’s when students switch over from learning to read to reading to learn,” said Emily Workman, associate policy analyst at Education Commission of the States, a Colorado-based non-profit. “If they’re not able to make that transition when they go into fourth (grade), they begin to struggle and generally struggle throughout their entire educational career.”

These findings have led 32 states, including Arizona, and Washington, Washington, D.C., to pass laws that identify and retain students if they are unable to read by third grade, according to the Education Commission of States.

But holding students back offers its own negative consequences. Some research indicates that retaining students may not improve a student’s reading ability, can create social stigmas and lead students to drop out of high school anyway.

Retention also tends to target disadvantaged students. In 2007, about four times as many students from poor families were retained than their more affluent peers, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.

“The real meat to (the retention law) was what happens in the kindergarten, first and second grade, when you can already see a kid isn’t on track and how you can capture that data and intervene before they become a third-grader that (scores) far below,” said Rebecca Gau, director of the Arizona Governor’s Office of Education Innovation.

In Arizona, school districts and charters will be expected to test students regularly to identify those in need of extra help. School officials also are required to notify parents of students in kindergarten through third grade if their children might be held back.

Arizona modeled its high-stakes reading mandate after Florida’s retention law, which has been largely hailed as a success.

Florida has seen the rate of third-graders passing state reading tests increase to 56percent from 41percent when the law passed in 2002. A majority of students retained in third grade also performed better in fourth grade, according to the Florida Legislature’s Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability.

During the same period, however, Florida students dropped out of high school at a higher rate, about 3.7percent in 2002 compared with 4.9percent in 2012.

Passed in 2010, Arizona’s version, known as Move On When Reading, retains third-graders who fall far below on the Arizona’s Instrument to Measure Standards reading test. Exceptions are made for those who have disabilities or are still learning English.

In the 2014-15 school year, the state will replace AIMS with a new test aligned to tougher Common Core standards, but it is expected to maintain the same reading requirement.

If a child is held back, schools must provide remedial options, such as summer and online classes.

Robin Eichner, who has two daughters at Mountain Shadow Elementary School in Glendale, isn’t worried about her kids, but she noted that she’s reserving judgment on the law.

“Something needs to be done to raise expectations on kids in school,” Eichner said. “I don’t know if holding them back because they don’t pass their reading test is going to change the fact that there might be something (wrong) with the system as opposed to the child.”

The Arizona Department of Education estimates about 3,345 students, which represents about 4percent of third-graders, will score far below what’s needed, based on 2012 AIMS scores. But most will qualify for an exemption. Last year, the students who struggled most on the AIMS reading test were those with disabilities or limited English proficiency, or those who are Native American or come from migrant families.

About 1,500 students likely will be held back, said Stacey Morley, the department’s director of government relations.

That number may be smaller because teachers in early-elementary classrooms have been teaching to more rigorous Common Core standards in the past year or two, potentially better preparing students for AIMS.

“I really don’t know what will happen,” Morley said.

Success of the new law will be dependent on identifying at-risk students early on and providing them with tools to succeed, educators say.

Terri Clark was appointed as the state’s literacy director last June. Her team is working on compiling effective strategies that schools are using to improve reading.

“Everyone’s looking for the program that’s the silver bullet,” but improving literacy requires schools to work together and share information, she said.

Clark added that there’s still plenty of work to be done before the law goes into effect: “Arizona has been trying to get ready. I don’t know if we have the resources and the infrastructure yet to really be ready.”

This year, school districts and charters with kindergarteners through third-graders are expected to receive an extra \$132 per student in those grades, totaling \$40million, if they submitted plans to the State Board of Education detailing how they would improve reading scores. Nearly all eligible schools applied.

Schools must show that they are testing students in their early years, providing teachers extra training focused on building reading skills and implementing intervention strategies, such as small groups.

The Roosevelt Elementary School District in Phoenix is one of about 180 school districts and charters that applied for the money.

Susan Iñiguez, director of curriculum and assessments at Roosevelt, expects to use the funds to maintain one reading specialist on each of the district’s 18 campuses and provide additional training to K-3 teachers.

Next year, the district also will increase the amount of time teachers devote to reading beyond the 90 minutes recommended by the state. The district plans to increase reading time by a half-hour. “Do I think its enough? Well, there’s never enough,” Iñiguez said.

What it takes to pass the third grade reading test:

Students at the “Falls Far Below the Standard” level will be retained next school year unless granted an exception for limited English knowledge or a disability. Students falling far below on the test have gaps in knowledge and skills.

Apart from those students falling far below, third-graders are placed into one of three categories based on their reading skills.

Students who approach the standard generally are able to:

Alphabetize words to the 3rd letter.

Identify common suffixes and root words.

Identify correct word order for sentences.

Apply spelling patterns.

Identify common synonyms.

Use context clues and pictures to determine the meaning of simple words.

Identify sensory images and repetition in poetry.

Identify specific facts in text.

Students who meet the standard generally know the skills required at the previous level and are able to:

Identify synonyms and antonyms.

Identify the topic sentence in a paragraph.

Describe character traits.

Identify and describe the speaker or narrator using text evidence.

Identify rhyme in poetry.

Use graphic organizers to comprehend text.

Identify main idea and supporting details in informational text.

Sequence events and place multi-step directions in order.

Interpret information in functional text.

Identify persuasive vocabulary.

Students who exceed the standard generally know the skills required at the other levels and are able to:

Divide words into syllables.

Identify features of a paragraph.

Use context clues to determine the meaning of words and phrases.

Identify the genre of literary text.

Differentiate fact from opinion in informational text.