Iowa, Ohio and Wisconsin among states reshaping K-12 reading laws

By Tim Anderson

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The data alone on fourth-graders’ literacy skills could have prompted this year’s surge in new laws that require early identification of struggling readers and intensive interventions. In every Midwestern state, about one in three students performs below a level considered “basic.”

But those numbers are not new: High percentages of U.S. fourth-graders have consistently scored below basic for reading on a national assessment administered by the U.S. Department of Education.

What has changed, says Stephanie Rose of the Education Commission of the States, is awareness about the link between reading proficiency in the early grades and a student’s long-term academic success.

In 2011, an Annie E. Casey Foundation study found that students not reading proficiently in third grade were four times as likely as their peers not to graduate from high school. The foundation has also launched a national advocacy effort, The Campaign for Grade-Level Reading. Those efforts, along with influential reading initiatives undertaken by states such as Florida in previous years, helped shape legislation this year in capitols across the country.

In all, Rose notes in an August study, 13 states — including Iowa, Ohio and Wisconsin — adopted new requirements for school districts that aim to improve literacy through a mix of three different strategies: identify struggling readers, offer supplemental services, and hold back certain third-graders who don’t meet literacy benchmarks.

Debate over holding back third-graders

Under Iowa’s SF 2284, signed into law in May, children in kindergarten through third grade will be tested at the beginning of each school year; those falling behind must be offered intensive remedial reading instruction (this requirement is contingent on General Assembly appropriations).

As part of that remediation, school districts must offer supplemental instruction during regular school hours as well as summer school to struggling readers. Home-reading programs must be provided to parents as well.

Ohio’s new law requires districts to develop a “reading improvement and monitoring plan” for each student and to give families the option of receiving some services from an outside provider.

Those two states also included the most contentious part of the three-pronged strategy — retention. In Ohio, for instance, most third-graders will be held back if they don’t score at a reading competency level somewhere between “limited” and “proficient.”

“Controversy surrounding retention seems impossible to resolve,” Rose wrote in an e-mail interview with CSG Midwest. For states that move ahead with the policy, Rose says, the decision is usually meant to be a “last resort or ‘credible threat’ to ensure that educators/parents are taking early-literacy efforts seriously.”
“But one thing states have done is include many ‘good cause’ exemptions to retention (for English language learners, special-education students, students previously retained one or two times, etc.),” she adds.

Ohio includes such exemptions, and in Iowa, struggling third-graders will not be retained if they take part in an intensive summer reading program.

Wisconsin lawmakers did not include retention as part of the state’s new policies on reading. Instead, SB 461 allocates funding for a universal kindergarten screener that will evaluate the literacy skills of children entering the K-12 system. The state will also require elementary and reading teachers to pass a more rigorous licensure test. That test will be modeled after one used in Massachusetts, whose students outperform peers from other states on reading scores.

All of these state reforms focus on the youngest learners in a K-12 system. But as Iowa State professor Gayle Joanne Luze notes, “It’s actually late.”

Gaps in children’s reading skills begin and widen early in life — years before they reach kindergarten — as a result of their varying levels of exposure to language. Children from low-income families and from families where English is not the first language are particularly vulnerable to falling behind, Luze says, adding that schools often don’t have the resources to help those students catch up.

And when these children don’t catch up early, their long-term academic success is compromised.

“Reading is a part of every single subject,” Luze says. “You may be able to comprehend a math concept, but if you can’t comprehend what is on the page of your math book, you can’t grow in that subject or any other.”

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