



The Education Trust—Midwest

Making Michigan a Top Ten State through Early Literacy

Thank you for giving us the chance to speak to you today about improving early literacy in the state of Michigan. I am Jason Mancini, director of government affairs at The Education Trust-Midwest (ETM). With me today is Sunil Joy, senior policy analyst at ETM. ETM is a nonpartisan, data-driven, education research, information and advocacy organization. We work to serve as a source of nonpartisan information and expertise—and a partner to state leaders, educators and others—about Michigan education and achievement gap closing. First, we'd like to thank lawmakers for your leadership on bringing the importance of early literacy to the forefront of our state. As you may know, students who are unable to read proficiently by third grade are much more likely to drop out of school, not have access to stable employment, and even end up incarcerated.

And in Michigan, we face an uphill battle. According to the national assessment, Michigan is just one of a handful of states that have witnessed a decline on fourth-grade reading scores since 2003—ranking in the bottom ten states overall in 2015. In fact, only about 30 percent of students in Michigan were proficient on the 2015 national assessment. But it doesn't have to be this way. Leading states have made key investments in early literacy and their students have reaped the rewards.

I'd like to begin with Tennessee, a state that has seen impressive academic gains in recent years. Just over ten years ago, Tennessee students actually performed below Michigan, but have since surpassed our state on the fourth-grade national reading assessment—including for African American and Latino students. Tennessee did this through a laser-like focus on proven strategies. This included a statewide teacher training initiative led by the state's top educators along with a statewide educator evaluation system designed to better support instructional practice.

Another example is the state of Florida. As a part of a set of comprehensive literacy reforms in the early 2000s, Florida's state reading office trained roughly 56,000 of its teachers in scientifically-based reading instruction by 2006—instruction centered on phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension. Professional development, coupled with other strategies, placed Florida among the top ten states for fourth-grade reading scores in 2015, both overall and for African American students. In fact, Florida was also the top state for Latino student achievement in 2015.

And finally is Alabama, one of the first states to lead a statewide effort around early literacy, which it began in the late 1990s. The Alabama Reading Initiative (ARI) is a professional development initiative which today deploys hundreds of reading coaches in school buildings to model and support literacy instruction and practice. As a result, Alabama was in the top five states for fourth-grade reading improvement between 2003 and 2015, including for African American students. This also means that their students were outperforming students in states with similar levels of child poverty.

I'd now like to focus our attention to House bill 4822 and our specific recommendations on how the bill could better support literacy in Michigan long-term:

- 1) Provide adequate investment and support for the bill's literacy strategies and interventions:** While many of the provisions in this bill are well intentioned, we are largely concerned that many districts and schools will not have adequate resources to meet the requirements of this bill. Further, without strong strategies for investment, we can only expect the long-term impact to be minimal at best. In other words, while adequate funding is important, money alone is not enough.

Michigan needs a more effective and comprehensive delivery model for professional development, capacity building and resource delivery. We recommend this be addressed through the early literacy state budget appropriations, which are currently in negotiations in the legislature.

- 2) Prioritize early literacy outcomes in the state school accountability system:** An essential lever for ensuring that schools prioritize literacy and are held accountable for their students' reading ability is to heavily weigh the state's English Language Arts assessment in the state school accountability system. The recent passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) provides an opportunity for Michigan to rework its accountability system, and strongly recommend the Michigan Department of Education incorporate this measure into their new accountability plan.
- 3) Require public posting of reading improvement plans:** To ensure districts have comprehensive plans for improving literacy, districts should be required to post their local reading strategies and plans on their websites.

To conclude, as several leading states demonstrate, educational improvement can start with good policy, but needs investment, strong leaders, comprehensive planning, greater accountability and sustained commitment to get the long-term results Michigan students need and deserve. Thank you for your time today.

The Education Trust-Midwest is a nonpartisan research and advocacy organization dedicated to improving outcomes for all Michigan students, especially for African American, Latino, American Indian and low-income students. The Education Trust-Midwest believes in the power of intelligent education policy and practices — informed by data, research and the successes of other states — to make Michigan a top ten education state for all students.