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Few Dearborn students would be retained under state Read by 3 Law

After years of worry and preparation by school districts across the state, last spring Michigan finally announced the threshold for when students might be retained in third grade starting with this year’s class.

Statewide, the rate is only about 5 percent of students who could be held back.

That is far lower than the more than half of third graders who score “not proficient” on the English section of the Michigan Student Test of Educational Progress (M-STEP). The spring M-STEP scores were released late last month.

Under the Read by Third Grade Law, adopted in 2016, students who score more than a year behind in reading at the end of third grade will be recommended to repeat that grade. There are several exceptions for why students would still be allowed to continue to fourth grade.

Apparently, most students who rank as not proficient on the M-STEP at the end of third grade are still reading close enough to grade level by the state’s standards to continue to fourth grade.

Looking at the spring M-STEP scores in Dearborn Public Schools, only 30 students out of more than 1,400 in third grade would have had scores low enough to be recommended for retention. However, most of those students would have automatically qualified for an exemption because they are still in their first few years of learning English or because they are in special education.

Students can qualify to advance for other reasons too, such as transferring from a school that did not provide reading support or proving they were proficient through a complicated alternative process.

The District will not know the exact impact of the law until spring, after the current third graders take the M-STEP and the first retention letters are mailed to parents. However, looking at prior classes should provide a good approximation of how many students will be affected.

Since the beginning, educators have argued the law was not in the best interest of students. Studies show retaining students ultimately increases the risk they will drop out before graduating.

“Dearborn will continue our dedicated strategy to ensuring every student can read at grade level,” said Executive Director of Student Achievement Jill Chochol, who has spearheaded the district’s Read by 3 efforts. Last year, Superintendent Glenn Maleyko commissioned a community Read by Third Grade Task Force to look more at how the community could be involved in addressing the law and reading education in general.

Since the law as passed, the District has made a number of related changes from increasing teacher training on reading to providing even more monitoring and support for struggling students. Elementary teachers and administrators also developed plans for their schools.

“That said, we are relieved that this law will not have the widespread punitive impact we feared for our students,” Chochol added.

Overall, Dearborn Public Schools M-STEP scores are similar to the state average, even while the district has a higher level of low-income students.

On last spring’s tests, Dearborn Public Schools held steady with 47 percent of third graders scoring proficient in English, compared to the statewide rate of 45 percent.

The District dipped less than a percentage point to 28 percent for the total number of students proficient in math and English in grades 3 to 8. Those are the grades covered by the MSTEP. Statewide the total was 30 percent of students proficient in all grades.

The District’s four-year high school graduation rate held at 95 percent compared to the state’s 81 percent, while the District’s average SAT score was 964.

The number of 11th grade students proficient on M-STEP in all subjects leapt 12 points to 27 percent on the spring test. The statewide rate was 30 percent.

“We know that these tests, while important, are only one measure for our students. Dearborn Public Schools tries to take a more holistic approach and use multiple tools to ensure our students are learning and achieving,” said Superintendent Dr. Glenn Maleyko.

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***Photo captions***

***PR 08 Read by 3 Committee –*** *Jill Chochol, standing, talks with one of the subcommittees during a Read by Third Grade Community Task Force meeting in January. Chochol, a Dearborn Schools executive director of student achievement, oversaw the changes related to the Read by Third Grade Law in the District. In May, the state announced the cut scores for which students would be retained under the 3-year-old law. In Dearborn Schools, only a small percentage of current third grade students might be retained when that part of the law kicks in this school year.*