

Year 1 Findings Brief

Move On When Reading: Implementation of a Third Grade Retention Policy in Arizona

Lenay Dunn, Patricia Castillo, Scott Vince

Copyright: © 2016 WestEd and Helios Education Foundation.
All rights reserved.

AUTHORS

Lenay Dunn, Patricia Castillo, Scott Vince
WestEd

REVIEWERS

Karen Ortiz, Vice President, Early Grade Success Initiatives
Helios Education Foundation
Paul Perrault, Vice President and Director of Research and Evaluation
Helios Education Foundation

ABOUT WESTED

WestEd is a nonpartisan, nonprofit research, development, and service agency that works with education and other communities throughout the United States and abroad to promote excellence, achieve equity, and improve learning for children, youth, and adults. WestEd has more than a dozen offices nationwide, from Massachusetts, Vermont, and Georgia to Illinois, Arizona, and California, with headquarters in San Francisco. More information about WestEd is available at WestEd.org.

ABOUT HELIOS EDUCATION FOUNDATION

Helios Education Foundation is focused on creating opportunities for individuals in Arizona and Florida to succeed in postsecondary education by advancing the academic preparedness of all students and fostering a high-expectation, college-going culture. Through a decade of strategic partnership and investment, Helios has identified Early Grade Success, College and Career Readiness, and Postsecondary Completion as the three most critical reform priorities in achieving our long-term goal. As an engaged foundation, embedded in communities across both states, the Foundation is contributing its expertise and financial resources to better prepare students for college and career and to compete successfully in a global economy. Since 2006, Helios has invested over \$167 million in education-related programs and initiatives in Arizona and Florida. For more information about the Foundation, visit www.Helios.org.

FOREWORD BY HELIOS EDUCATION FOUNDATION

At Helios Education Foundation, we believe that the early grades are critical to a child's future academic success. We believe that strengthening early childhood systems to promote language acquisition and emergent literacy will enable more children to read at grade level by the end of third grade. This accomplishment in turn will improve success in both middle school and high school, ultimately better preparing each student for college and career.

Despite these beliefs we recognize that currently Arizona students as a whole are struggling to read at grade level by the end of third grade. Specifically, in 2014/15, only 40 percent of third grade students demonstrated proficiency in reading under the state's assessment, AzMERIT. Similarly, on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the percentage of fourth-grade students who performed at or above proficiency was 30 percent, 6 percentage points lower than the national average.

Seeking to improve grade-level reading, Helios sought to learn how Arizona's Move On When Reading (MOWR) legislation is being implemented in local education agencies. Modeled after a similar policy that has been viewed as successful in Florida, the legislation aims to increase reading proficiency for third grade students. While a significant portion of the legislation focuses on having schools create education plans to improve students' literacy skills and to have schools collect and track student progress, a key component of the policy requires districts and schools to retain those students at the end of third grade who score in the lowest category of reading achievement on the state reading assessment. The legislation requires districts and schools to provide intensive reading support to these retained students so that the students can achieve proficiency.¹

Such a policy raises important questions. At Helios, we wondered how districts and schools were making sense of the policy, and how they were implementing it. Specifically, we wanted to know what interventions and the quality of such interventions the schools were using to support students who were retained at the end of

third grade. What challenges, if any, confronted the schools? Overall, how were schools implementing the policy? Is the policy having any impacts on student achievement?

In 2014, these questions, along with our desire to improve education through rigorous research, led us to commission a two-part research study. The multi-year study focused on implementation and impact of the Move On When Reading policy. To assess impact, we commissioned Marcus Winters and Martin West to conduct an assessment of the long-term impact of retention policies in Florida. The state provides a rich setting in which to study impact because Florida — for more than a decade — had already been implementing a policy similar to Arizona's. We also commissioned Winters and West to assess the early impacts of the MOWR third grade retention policy on student achievement in Arizona. Second, we commissioned WestEd to conduct an implementation study of Arizona's MOWR policy. The WestEd-led study is meant to describe MOWR implementation and any systemic changes associated with it.

This brief, authored by several WestEd evaluators, focuses on the first year of the implementation study on Arizona's MOWR policy. We hope the brief will be used by policy leaders and educational experts to make more informed decisions on how to further support implementation of MOWR.

¹ Retention policies were implemented in spring 2014; a change in Arizona's assessment system in 2014/15 led the state to put the retention requirement on hold for one year; the retention portion of the policy resumed in spring 2016.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2010 the Arizona legislature passed Move On When Reading (MOWR), a policy requiring schools to retain third grade students whose reading scores on the state test are within the lowest performance level. With support from Helios Education Foundation, WestEd is conducting a two-year study of MOWR implementation in a small set of districts and schools.

This brief reports on Year 1 of the study, describing initial implementation of MOWR in the study sites and presenting preliminary findings based on qualitative data collected during summer 2014 through spring 2015. This study's interviewees and observations from 2014/15 indicate that MOWR was contributing to an increased focus on reading in the early grades. Some teachers and administrators reported that students felt more pressure to perform and parents were more willing to be involved than before MOWR. Many respondents expressed concerns about the retention portion of the policy and doubts that retention was the best path for supporting student growth, but staff from the five sites reported implementing varied strategies to support K-3 reading. Teachers and administrators focused on identifying students at risk of retention, providing struggling readers with interventions in the classroom and/or after school, and monitoring student progress. Most districts reported some successes related to this focus, both in terms of student test scores and student learning, though they were concerned that a change in Arizona's assessment system in 2014/15 could stymie that success. Year 1 data collection revealed the following implementation findings:

- Districts and schools made intentional efforts to prevent retention. Those efforts continued even when the retention portion of MOWR was on hold in spring 2015.
- Teachers, students, and parents were reportedly impacted by the possibility of retention under MOWR in both positive and negative ways.
- Teacher, principal, and district staff knowledge and understanding of MOWR varied across sites.
- To implement MOWR, districts leveraged financial and material resources beyond those provided by MOWR literacy plan funds.
- Schools and districts faced implementation challenges related to communication and lack of clarity regarding policy expectations.

- School and district respondents reported being concerned about the impact of the state's recently introduced assessment (AzMERIT) on retention, formative assessments, and planning.

While MOWR implementation varied in this small sample of sites, these findings suggest implications for how Arizona can approach the future implementation of the policy. Key recommendations for the future implementation of MOWR include:

- To continue to build awareness and momentum around the importance of a strong literacy foundation, the state and other support entities could facilitate opportunities for districts and schools to share promising practices and engage in professional learning.
- While districts strategically used MOWR literacy plan funds as well as Title I and other funding sources to support K-3 literacy, state entities could provide specific guidance on how to best leverage funding to effectively support literacy efforts.
- State entities and school districts may need to prepare for how to support a potentially larger number of students who — based on projected AzMERIT reading scores — may be retained under MOWR in 2016 and beyond.
- To address communication gaps and confusion about MOWR, state entities could provide districts with communication plans, templates, or guidelines for sharing MOWR information with schools, parents, and communities. Furthermore, state and other support entities could help districts more intentionally engage teachers in discussions about MOWR and its implications.
- Districts and schools could use the reported increase in family involvement related to MOWR as an opportunity to better equip parents with the knowledge and tools to support literacy at home.
- Districts and schools could more systematically assess which K-3 instructional supports and structures are successful and how they support struggling readers, including those students who were exempted from retention.
- To address the added pressure for third grade teachers that some respondents noted, state entities, districts, and schools may need to find new ways to support and incentivize teachers to take on these increased challenges.

At this point in Move On When Reading implementation, districts are solidifying what works and what does not, and this may be the most opportune time for districts to share strategies with each other.

POLICY BACKGROUND

Third grade is often referred to as a “critical point” (Coffman & Kauerz, 2012, p. 3; Hernandez, 2012) in a student's academic development, marking the student's transition from what has been called learning to read to reading to learn (Snow, Burns, & Griffin 1998). Accordingly, policymakers across the United States are designing statewide policies to address third grade reading achievement. In 2010, Arizona's legislature created Move On When Reading (MOWR), a policy requiring schools to retain third grade students whose reading scores on the state test are within the lowest performance level. MOWR was modeled after a similar policy in Florida, and several other states have adopted or are considering adopting third grade reading retention policies (Miller, 2014).

Under MOWR, students who demonstrate a certain level of proficiency — specifically in phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension, and writing — move on to fourth grade. Students who do not demonstrate this proficiency are identified for retention, and MOWR outlines four types of interventions for these students: assignment to a different third grade teacher for reading instruction; summer school reading instruction; extended school day during regular academic school year; or online reading instruction.

MOWR was passed in 2010, and the portion of the policy that affects student retention in third grade first took effect in spring 2014. Initially there were two categories of students who were exempted from the policy's retention requirement: students who were receiving special education services and whose Individualized Education Program (IEP) team agreed that promotion would be appropriate; and English Language Learners (ELL) who had had less than two years of ELL instruction. Amendment SB 1461, passed in March 2015, added exemptions for students who are in the process of a special education referral or evaluation and students who have been diagnosed as having a significant reading impairment, including dyslexia. In 2015, the retention portion of the policy was not enforced because Arizona was transitioning from

Arizona's Instrument to Measure Standards (AIMS) to a different statewide achievement assessment, AzMERIT.

With the support of Helios Education Foundation, WestEd is conducting a two-year study of MOWR implementation by documenting how five school sites within five different districts in Arizona are implementing the policy. This study does not aim to assess the effectiveness of MOWR nor to generate generalizable findings about the policy; rather, it aims to contribute to the understanding of the context of the policy's implementation by documenting how a sample of diverse schools and districts are implementing MOWR. Policy implementation is important to document because implementation can influence a policy's effectiveness (Pressman & Wildavsky, 1974; McLaughlin, 1987).



DATA COLLECTION

WestEd researchers collected data during the 2014/15 school year from five sites across Arizona, representing a variety of school types and locations.² The sites included a district on a Native American reservation (“Reservation School District”), an urban elementary district (“Urban Elementary School District”), an urban unified district (“Urban Unified School District”), a charter district (“Charter School District”), and a rural district (“Rural School District”). These districts are located in Northern Arizona, Eastern Arizona, Central Arizona, Northeastern Arizona, and Southern Arizona. WestEd researchers collected data from 54 unique individuals³ at these five sites through methods including:

- Interviews with 10 district administrators;
- Interviews with nine principals/site administrators;
- Interviews with 13 reading specialists/coaches (or similar roles);
- Interviews with 23 third grade teachers; and
- Observations of third grade classrooms (two to seven classrooms at each school).

During interviews, teachers and administrators were asked about their backgrounds, the structure of third grade instruction and supports, their knowledge of the policy, and how MOWR was implemented at their school.⁴ During classroom observations, WestEd staff focused on documenting instruction, classroom climate, and the use of literacy strategies.

² The research team conducted site visits during summer school 2014, fall semester 2014, and spring semester 2015. Two of the sites, the Charter and Rural School Districts, were not visited in the summer.

³ Though the count totals 55, one individual was interviewed in two different roles – once as a site administrator when she was in that role for the summer and once as a district staff person. Therefore 54 unique individuals were interviewed.

⁴ The interviews and observations were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using NVivo coding software. After several rounds of group coding to build inter-rater reliability, at least two researchers reviewed and coded each transcript, and a third researcher provided a final review. WestEd staff then analyzed the codes to identify findings for each of the three data collection points during the year and synthesized these findings to describe findings for the 2014/15 school year implementation of MOWR.

MOWR IMPLEMENTATION

The information in this section about the five districts provides context for the findings related to MOWR implementation.

Third Grade Structures

While the five schools varied in the specifics of how they provided different kinds of reading instruction for different students’ needs, all the schools exhibited some type of flexible student grouping based on formative assessments. Flexible grouping included activities such as strategic push-ins/pull-outs for interventions and instructional support, re-teaching, leveled modeling, small independent groups, and centers.

Curriculum

The five sites used a large and varied assortment of curriculum programs⁵ in their third grade classrooms. The districts worked to provide schools with materials that were aligned with the Arizona College and Career Ready Standards. Three of the five districts had newly adopted reading curriculum or were in the process of adopting a new curriculum for core reading instruction.

Assessments

Formative assessment played a central role in guiding district and school efforts to target struggling readers. The schools used various assessments⁶ to help teachers and interventionists sort students into classroom groups for targeted instruction. All sites used assessments to group students and determine the need for re-teaching topics. Districts also used assessment data to identify teachers who were struggling in teaching reading strategies and to provide those teachers with guidance. Further, districts used the data to help parents understand why their child was at risk of retention, and to assist students in understanding the academic growth targets they needed to achieve.

⁵ Curriculum programs cited include: Scott Foresman Reading Street, Beyond Textbooks, Saxon, myOn, Harcourt, Houghton Mifflin, McGraw Hill, A-Z Reading, EngageNY, ReadWorks, QuickReads, Comprehension Plus, Read Naturally, Soar to Success program, Anita Archer’s vocabulary, Teacher Toolbox, Super Teacher Worksheets, Pearson products, and Tumble Books.

⁶ Assessment programs cited include: Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS); Galileo; Beyond Textbooks formative assessments; WADE Assessment (Wilson Assessment for Decoding and Encoding); Reading A-Z Diagnostic Tool; Common Core Test (CCT); custom district and school formative assessment plans, such as Common Formative Assessment A and Common Formative Assessment B; AIMSweb; and SchoolNet.

Teacher Qualifications

The experience level of third grade teachers varied across the five sites. Most of the teachers were certified, but few had additional reading endorsements. With the exception of the Urban Unified School District (where the third grade teachers at the observed school had been in the district for between five and 27 years), the remaining four sites noted teacher turnover challenges.

Interventions for Retained Students

Although MOWR requires the use of one or more of the four possible interventions for retained third grade students, some schools in this study were delivering interventions like extended learning before and during the third grade year to minimize the chance of retention. For example, two districts (Rural School District and Charter School District) reported using after-school instructional time to target struggling K–3 students.

The sites varied in terms of which of the intervention options they chose in 2014/15, and all sites anticipated continuing with the same intervention options for the 2015/16 school year. Summer school for struggling readers was the most popular intervention option chosen (Table 1). All five sites held summer school in 2014, targeting the lowest-performing students as determined by formative assessments. After completing several weeks of summer school, students at risk of retention were tested using assessments chosen by the district.⁷

Those who demonstrated sufficient proficiency were promoted to fourth grade following summer school participation. However, there was a reported lack of clarity regarding exactly which assessment should be used to determine sufficient growth to inform the retention decision.

Use of Literacy Funds

At the time of this study, the Arizona State Legislature appropriated \$40 million a year statewide to support reading instruction in kindergarten through third grade. Schools received approximately \$130 per student. To be eligible for these funds, districts submitted a literacy plan that outlined the curriculum, interventions, and strategies used to improve K–3 reading.

The five sites all described using these funds to support literacy initiatives. The Charter and Urban Unified Districts reported using literacy funds to target Tier III interventions in the Response to Intervention (RTI) model, an intervention approach for differentiated instruction to identify and support struggling readers. The Urban Elementary District reported using literacy funds to pay substitute teachers to cover teacher time to attend reading-focused professional learning and to hire a district literacy coach. The Reservation District reported using literacy funds to buy reading materials and to pay for K–3 teachers to attend literacy training. The Rural District reported using literacy funds to help support summer school and pay for classroom aides in lower grades.

Table 1. Policy Interventions by Site

Policy Interventions	Charter School District	Reservation School District	Rural School District	Urban Elementary School District	Urban Unified School District
Assignment to a Different Third Grade Teacher for Reading Instruction		✓	✓		✓
Summer School Reading Instruction	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Extended School Day During Regular Academic School Year	✓		✓		✓
Online Reading Instruction		✓			

⁷ Staff reported using various assessments, including I-Ready, Phonics for Reading, Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS), and district-developed assessments as pre- and post-tests to determine student reading proficiency and growth.

Retention

While approximately 3 percent of third graders scored in the Falls Far Below category on the statewide test (AIMS) in spring 2014 and therefore were targeted for retention, most of these students were eligible for exemption. Consequently, across the state, less than 1 percent of third graders were retained in spring 2014 as part of MOWR (Arizona State Board of Education & K-12 Academic Standards, 2014). Three of the five visited sites retained students under MOWR; yet, the number of retained students at each site was small (1-13 students). The sites reported using a team approach to discuss the retention process and its implications. They indicated that the teams either simply informed parents of the decision or included the parents in the team discussions. During the spring 2015 visits, the retention portion of MOWR was on hold because of a change in the state assessment to AzMERIT. A principal from the Urban Unified School District indicated that MOWR influenced retention decisions in kindergarten through second grade in that district. The principal reported that the school retained students earlier than third grade in an attempt to minimize what they perceived as long-term negative impacts, believing that giving retained K-2 students “another year to grow” with “a new teacher to see what they can do” would help prevent required retention under MOWR in third grade.

In all five sites, teachers and administrators expressed concerns about the required retention portion of the MOWR policy and its potential impact on students.

Exemptions

District stakeholders in three of the sites indicated initial confusion regarding MOWR exemptions. For example, district staff in the Urban Elementary School District and the Charter School District reported confusion regarding exemptions related to IEPs for students in special education programs. Staff from both districts reported that the Arizona State Board of Education provided clarity on exemptions before the end of the 2013/14 school year. All five sites reported that students exempt from retention under MOWR would receive additional targeted supports in fourth grade.

Midyear Promotion

Under MOWR, districts may exercise midyear promotion of retained third grade students. Staff from three sites reported that their district did not have a midyear promotion policy or they did not know whether such a policy exists. District staff at the other two sites indicated that their district did have a midyear promotion policy or would allow midyear promotion, based on data. The Reservation School District’s data specialist stated, “There is a policy on the book, but in order to be promoted midyear, the student has to demonstrate they are capable of functioning at that level. The parents and the principal then talk to the superintendent, who has the final say.”

YEAR 1 FINDINGS

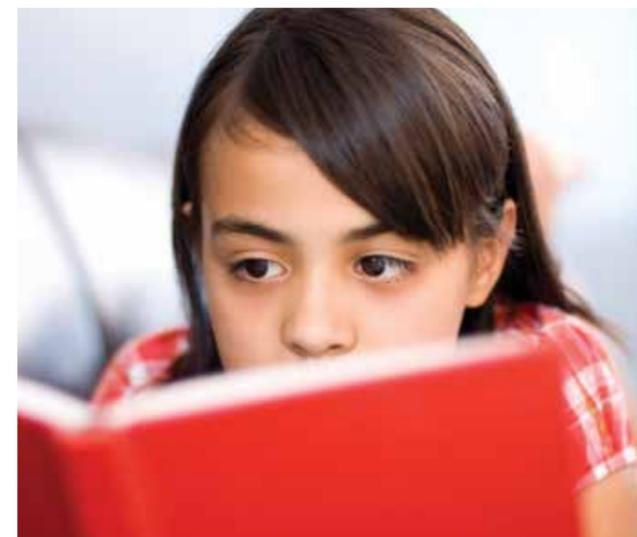
The findings reported in this brief are from 2014/15, the first year of a two-year study, and the first year that the retention portion of MOWR went into effect.

Districts and schools made intentional efforts to prevent retention. Those efforts continued even when the retention portion of MOWR was on hold in spring 2015.

- All five sites reported that MOWR contributed to an increased focus on reading from kindergarten through third grade, particularly in earlier grades. As a Rural School District administrator pointed out, the district targeted earlier grades because “it’s so much harder to remediate [once students get to third grade].” To set a foundation at the kindergarten level, the Urban Unified School District created a six-week summer school for lower-income students entering kindergarten. Third grade teachers in the Rural School District reported that — even though their resources were not cut — the district focused efforts so intently on the lower grades that in comparison the third grade teachers felt they were left with fewer resources to support reading instruction.

- All five sites planned to offer summer school in 2015 despite the moratorium on the retention portion of MOWR. District and school staff cited a desire to strengthen the literacy foundation of their students as a reason for continuing summer school. Further, all five sites expressed satisfaction with the effectiveness of summer school in 2014. A district staff member charged with coordinating summer school commented, “I started getting a lot of calls from parents whose students did [summer school] last year, or teachers who had students do it last year who wanted to make sure their students were able to do it again because they felt like it made a positive [difference]” (Urban Unified School District, District Staff).
- Despite explicit efforts to ensure third grade students attain the best outcomes possible, none of the districts appeared to have specific systems in place to track students who had been exempted from retention or had demonstrated sufficient growth during summer school and therefore had been promoted to fourth grade.

Teachers, students, and parents were reportedly impacted by the possibility of retention under MOWR in both positive and negative ways.



Teachers

- There was a reported increase in teachers’ awareness of the importance of building a literacy foundation as early as possible. Some districts provided additional support to K-3 teachers, such as training opportunities to help teachers meet the needs of all students. Interviewees reported that MOWR led some teachers to better ensure their instruction builds towards comprehension (Urban Unified School District); encouraged school leaders to work alongside teachers as a team (Reservation School District); and reminded teachers of the importance of ensuring that students attain reading proficiency (Charter School District). One teacher reported that MOWR forced her to grow as a teacher: “[The policy helped me] stretch [my] teaching strategies ... and inspire[d] me to be more critical of [my] own effect on children” (Urban Unified School District, Teacher).
- In three school districts (Charter, Rural, Urban Unified), teachers mentioned fearing the possibility of termination or low evaluation scores based on how their students fared on the state exam. Teachers reported that the majority of the pressure was on the third grade team, leading some teachers to feel overwhelmed under the pressure of sensing “that you are the sole ... almost the sole person [responsible for helping the kids pass]. That’s tough” (Rural School District, Teacher). This type of pressure even led one reading interventionist to exclaim, “It just drains the joy of teaching right out of [teachers]. Are we going to be evaluated, getting paid based on the test scores?” (Urban Unified School District, Reading Interventionist).

Students

- All districts in fall 2014 indicated that MOWR placed pressure on students to perform. Students “feel the pressure as well [as teachers]” (Rural School District, Teacher). Kids were “stress[ed], kids [were] in tears, kids [were] panicking when the test comes out ... ” (Urban Unified School District, Reading Interventionist). In the Charter School District, a teacher agreed that while students were pressured to perform, she believed the pressure to perform helped them overall.

Parents

- Parental involvement varied widely across sites, but districts generally reported increased parental awareness of their children’s progress after the implementation of MOWR. In fall 2014, staff at all five sites reported that K–3 parents were more engaged than they had been before MOWR. Several respondents across districts referred to MOWR as an attention getter or “wake-up call” (Urban Unified School District, Teacher) for parents, which helped increase the parents’ level of engagement. District and school staff reported that parents increased contact with their children’s school, asked specific questions about their student’s progress, and attended more parent–teacher meetings and parent events than before MOWR.
- District and school staff in three districts reported that some parents tried to work around the retention portion of the policy. For example, a teacher in the Reservation School District indicated that some parents attempted to have their children screened for special education to receive the exemption from retention. A district administrator in the Urban Elementary School District described instances in which parents mistakenly thought that moving districts after a student had been identified for retention would allow their child to enter fourth grade. A principal in the Urban Unified School District indicated that a few parents were pulling children out of school before third grade for home schooling, then re-enrolling them for fourth grade.
- While there was a fear among staff that parental involvement would decrease without the MOWR retention risk in spring 2015, the pause in the MOWR retention requirements did not appear to notably change parental involvement.

Teacher, principal, and district staff knowledge and understanding of MOWR varied across sites.

- District and school staff in all five of the districts were generally aware of the retention portion of MOWR and knew about the cutoff point for retention on AIMS.
- The extent to which district and school staff were aware of the specifics of other aspects of the policy, such as exemptions and policy options, varied. Staff in the Charter and Rural schools expressed the most limited knowledge. In the Rural School District, teachers admitted they were not really knowledgeable about the policy beyond the retention provision. A Rural School District administrator acknowledged that the district could “definitely increase that awareness. ... Our third grade teachers probably don’t know a whole lot of what Move On When Reading is because [the focus on literacy] happens in the younger grade levels.” In the Charter School District, teachers discussed MOWR using a different name and were unsure if MOWR was a federal or state policy. As a Charter School District teacher reported, teachers were “very unfamiliar with what [MOWR] is and what our role is in it.”
- At three sites, teachers reported a desire for more strategies to support student literacy development as it relates to MOWR. These strategies specifically included: how to help students show growth (Charter School District); how to increase student awareness of the implications of MOWR (Urban Elementary School District); and how to help the students most in need (Urban Unified School District).

To implement MOWR, districts leveraged financial and material resources beyond those provided by MOWR literacy plan funds.

- All five school districts reported strategically using the \$130–per–student allocation provided by MOWR to support literacy. They hired parent coordinators/ liaisons and reading interventionists, provided training to K–3 teachers, and funded summer school with the funds.
- Districts also supplemented MOWR literacy plan funds with other state and federal funding, such as Title I, to assist in strengthening their overall approach to reading instruction. One district described using these funds to build an “infrastructure through which we can do a lot to support specific groups and specific communities” (Urban Elementary School District, District Staff).
- Districts used curricular and assessment programs to provide targeted support to struggling readers. Leveraging the structures and supports already in place (e.g., after–school tutoring) with formative assessment data helped districts better target the students who were at risk of retention.



Schools and districts faced implementation challenges related to communication and lack of clarity regarding policy expectations.

- There were reported communication gaps around different aspects of the policy. For example, in spring 2015, after Amendment SB1461 had been passed — regarding exemptions from retention for students with dyslexia and students referred for special education — district staff from the Charter, Reservation, Urban Unified, and Rural Districts had heard of the amendment, but school staff in these same districts were generally unaware of it.
- One district respondent commented that receiving clear answers on MOWR questions depended on whom you spoke with at the state level. Another district staff member stated that information regarding MOWR, particularly in relation to SPED students in 2014/15, “... kept changing, I mean, regularly ... literally, they were giving new information almost weekly ...” (Urban Unified School District, District Staff).
- There was a lack of clarity regarding exactly what assessment should be used as a post–test to determine summer school growth to inform the retention decision. As one summer school site administrator explained, “[The state] didn’t give us a specific test we needed to use for pre and post to show growth. ... And they also didn’t say anything about how to quantify the growth, so it’s just kind of like if they show growth. ... Well, you can take that a lot of different ways.” (Urban Unified School District, Site Administrator).

School and district respondents reported being concerned about the impact of AzMERIT on retention, formative assessments, and planning.

- Staff at all five sites were concerned with the increased difficulty of AzMERIT in comparison with AIMS; consequently, they expressed concern with the possibility that the new test would identify more students for retention.
- In spring 2015, all five districts expressed some degree of confusion or frustration regarding when AzMERIT scores would arrive. Respondents from one district were under the impression that AzMERIT scores may not be provided at all, while respondents from other districts expected the scores sometime in fall 2015. A district staff member from the Urban Unified School District described frequent communication changes from state entities and remarked that attempting to make plans for summer and fall 2015 without AzMERIT scores was similar to trying “to hit a moving target because everything keeps changing. ... We’re just doing the best we can on everything.”
- The Rural District expressed concern that AzMERIT would not line up with that district’s formative assessments. On the other hand, respondents from the Urban Unified School District were not particularly concerned with how their students performed since the respondents felt that the formative assessment that district used did align with the AzMERIT.
- The Urban Elementary, Urban Unified, and Rural Districts expressed concerns about the transition from paper-based to computer-based AzMERIT. Many of the paper-to-computer concerns were about the students’ lack of exposure to computers, particularly for low-income students who may not have computers at home.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As stated earlier, based on these findings, key recommendations for the future implementation of MOWR include:

- To continue to build awareness and momentum around the importance of a strong literacy foundation, the state and other support entities could facilitate opportunities for districts and schools to share promising practices and engage in professional learning.
- While districts strategically used MOWR literacy plan funds as well as Title I and other funding sources to support K-3 literacy, state entities could provide specific guidance on how to leverage funding to effectively support literacy efforts.
- State entities and school districts may need to prepare for how to support a potentially larger number of students who — based on projected AzMERIT reading scores — may be retained under MOWR in 2016 and beyond.
- To address communication gaps and confusion about MOWR, state entities could provide districts with communication plans, templates, or guidelines for sharing MOWR information with schools, parents, and communities. Furthermore, state and other support entities could help districts more intentionally engage teachers in discussions about MOWR and its implications.
- Districts and schools could use the reported increase in family involvement related to MOWR as an opportunity to better equip parents with the knowledge and tools to support literacy at home.
- Districts and schools could more systematically assess which K-3 instructional supports and structures are successful and how they support struggling readers, including those students who were exempted from retention.
- To address the added pressure for third grade teachers that some respondents noted, state entities, districts, and schools may need to find new ways to support and incentivize teachers to take on these increased challenges.

FUTURE RESEARCH

In the second year of this study, WestEd will further explore the extent to which key findings and issues from the first year continue, especially how AzMERIT and its ensuing changes are affecting the implementation of MOWR. Data collection methods will continue to inquire about the districts’ and schools’ use of structures, strategies, and supports to implement MOWR. In addition, a survey will be administered to a sample of districts across the state to gain a broader perspective on district implementation of MOWR in Arizona.

REFERENCES

- Arizona State Board of Education & K-12 Academic Standards. (2014). *Move On When Reading: An opportunity for 3rd graders* [PowerPoint slides]. Retrieved from www.azed.gov/populations-projects/files/2015/03/mowr-azmerit.pptx
- Coffman, J., & Kauerz, K. (2012). *Evaluating preK-3rd grade reforms*. Seattle, WA: College of Education, University of Washington.
- Hernandez, D. J. (2012). *Double jeopardy: How third-grade reading skills and poverty influence high school graduation*. Baltimore: The Annie E. Casey Foundation.
- McLaughlin, M. W. (1987). *Learning from experience: Lessons from policy implementation*. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 9(2), 171-178.
- Miller, B. (2014). *Lessons from Florida's third grade reading retention policy and implications for Arizona*. Phoenix, AZ: Helios Education Foundation.
- Pressman, J., & Wildavsky, A. (1974). *Implementation: How great expectations in Washington are dashed in Oakland; Or, why it's amazing that federal programs work at all, this being a saga of the economic development administration as told by two sympathetic observers who seek to build morals on a foundation of ruined hopes*. Oakland Project Series. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Snow, C. E., Burns, M. S., & Griffin, P. (Eds.). (1998). *Preventing reading difficulties in young children*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.



