



**Testimony Presented to the House Committee on Education
House Bill 4822 – Third-Grade Reading Initiative**

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Good morning, Chair Price and members of the committee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on House Bill 4822. I am Alicia Guevara Warren, Kids Count project director at the Michigan League for Public Policy, a nonpartisan policy institute dedicated to economic opportunity for all. We all understand the important benchmark third-grade reading presents for future academic outcomes. House Bill 4822 represents a much improved strategy to help students by providing early and intensive interventions, good cause exemptions, and parental engagement. While we are mostly supportive of the bill, we do have a couple of concerns we hope can be addressed in the final version of the bill.

According to the most recent Kids Count Data Book, which ranks each state based on 16 indicators related to child well-being, Michigan is ranked 37th in the country in education. We are dead last in the Midwest for both overall child well-being and education. In fact, the second worst state in the region for education is Indiana, which is ranked 25th, more than 10 spots better than Michigan. While Minnesota, ranked first in the country for child well-being, had the best education ranking in the Midwest at 6th.

Two of the four education indicators involving our youngest learners actually worsened from the last year of the Great Recession (2008) compared with the most current data available. Michigan had fewer children attending preschool and fewer fourth-graders considered proficient in reading. The governor's Third-Grade Reading Initiative and the work of this committee on House Bill 4822 are great first steps to improving these trends.

House Bill 4822 outlines tools and structure to ensure early interventions to provide students with individualized plans and includes ongoing screening and monitoring to improve reading proficiency. Research shows that parent engagement is key to successful student outcomes and the bill ensures that parents are a part of the reading improvement plan. However, we are concerned with some of the language in the legislation around this topic, which I will discuss momentarily.

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An important improvement from last session's bill is the move away from mandatory retention for students who are not reading at grade level by the end of third grade. Studies have demonstrated several negative effects of grade retention. The League is supportive of the change to a "smart promotion" system that allows the student to receive instruction in other subjects in fourth grade and to have the opportunity to move forward in his or her learning. The bill also outlines a good cause exemption process to ensure that there is flexibility based on an individual student's abilities or situation.

While we are mostly supportive of House Bill 4822, we do have two main concerns related to the use of parental contracts and Section 12 of the bill regarding the prioritization of funding. The Revised School Code encourages the use of *voluntary* parental involvement contracts. House Bill 4822 alludes to "parental contracts," but does not define them or state if they are voluntary. It should be made clear that these contracts should be voluntary and not required.

Additionally, Section 12 of the legislation states that a school "shall prioritize its state School Aid Funding, Generals Funds, and any federal funds available for these purposes to implement and support activities under this section." Our concern is whether this language would require a school to redirect funding from other priorities, such as dropout prevention, and the consequences from that. It is important that schools be allowed to continue work in other areas that improve student learning.

And, while not necessarily in the purview of this bill, reading and learning begin prenatally with a healthy mom and birth. The most significant brain development occurs during ages 0-3 and programming must reflect this to ensure that children are best prepared when entering kindergarten. Finally, we would strongly encourage you to address child poverty, which affects 24% of all children and 28% of young children in Michigan, as it is also very critical to student achievement and continues to be a strong predictor of educational outcomes.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.