



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

Alicia S. Guevara Warren, Kids Count Project Director

March 8, 2016

Good afternoon, Chair Pavlov 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 for kids. 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 supportive of the bill, we do remain concerned with the retention policy, however, we believe that there are measures included to help reduce its impact.

According to the most recent national KIDS COUNT Data Book, which ranks each state based on 16 indicators related to child well-being, Michigan is ranked 37<sup>th</sup> 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 25<sup>th</sup>, 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 6<sup>th</sup>.

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 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. The "Read at Home" plans and the encouragement of summer camps included in the bill help provide additional enhanced learning opportunities.

The League is supportive of the compromise represented by a "smart promotion" system allowing a student to receive instruction in other subjects in fourth grade. This is an improvement from complete mandatory retention without any flexibility. However, studies have demonstrated several

negative effects of grade retention which cannot be ignored, including the higher likelihood that the student will become disengaged and ultimately drop out in high school, and it remains an area of concern. Although, with the inclusion of several good cause exemptions, the ability to use alternative means to demonstrate proficiency, and the delayed implementation of the retention policy, we expect that the impact of retention will be reduced.

Finally, 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. Additionally, we would strongly encourage you to address the high level of poverty, which affects 23% of all children and 26% 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.