

For Parents: Frequently Asked Questions

Q: Why does our school test children in reading in kindergarten through third grade?

A: Reading assessments are part of a comprehensive statewide early literacy initiative that focuses on making sure Iowa students are successful readers by the end of third grade. Early intervention is critical for struggling readers. Reading assessments serve as a screening tool to identify students who are struggling and to get them the help they need to get back on track.

Q: How exactly does our school identify children with reading problems?

A: Schools screen students in kindergarten through third grade three times a year, in the fall, winter and spring. Students perform either above or below a target score. Students who are below the target score on one screening assessment are provided with regular monitoring to ensure they stay on track; they also may be provided with additional reading instruction, called intervention. Based on two consecutive screenings, schools then determine for all of the screened students whether they are “adequately progressing,” “at risk,” or identified as having a “substantial deficiency.” Interventions are provided for students identified as having a substantial deficiency.

Q: What tests are used to screen my child for reading problems?

A: School districts can choose from a state-approved list of high-quality screeners:

<https://www.educateiowa.gov/sites/files/ed/documents/Approved%20Literacy%20Assessments%202015-2016.pdf>

Most schools use the Formative Assessment System for Teachers (FAST):

<https://www.educateiowa.gov/sites/files/ed/documents/FASTBrochure.pdf>

Q: What does “adequately progressing,” “at risk,” and “substantial deficiency” specifically mean?

A: Definitions are as follows:

- Adequately progressing: Students who perform above the screening benchmark in two consecutive screening periods and are predicted to be on track to make adequate progress in reading.
- At risk: Students who perform below the benchmark for the first time or perform above the benchmark after having previously been identified as having a substantial deficiency. These students are projected to be at risk for a substantial deficiency in reading.
- Substantial deficiency: Students who perform below the benchmark in two consecutive screening periods or who perform below the benchmark after having been identified as “at risk” in the previous screening period. These students are projected to have a substantial deficiency in reading if intervention is not started.

Q: What happens if my child is identified as having a “substantial deficiency” in reading?

A: For students identified as having a substantial deficiency in reading, parents must be notified, research-based interventions must be provided, and the school must monitor the child’s progress. *It is critically important that children with a substantial deficiency in reading get back on track. Under Iowa law, schools will provide intensive summer reading programs starting in May 2017 for students who have a substantial deficiency in reading at the end of third grade. Students who have a substantial deficiency in reading at the end of third grade MUST complete the school’s intensive summer reading program to advance to fourth grade, unless they qualify for an exemption.*

Q: Why is this state law in place?

A: Reading is a critical component of learning, and early intervention is critical when students are struggling. This is why Iowa lawmakers adopted a comprehensive early literacy progression law in 2012 that focuses on making sure students are successful readers by the end of third grade. Reading at all grade levels is important, but third grade is observed as the gateway grade when students transition from learning to read to reading to learn. In Iowa, we have work to do in reading: Nearly one in four third-graders is not proficient in reading, according to state test results. We must break this pattern by changing how we find and help students with reading challenges. The sooner a potential problem is identified, the sooner it can be corrected, while the problem remains small.

Q: What does the law require, and when does it take effect?

A: The law requires the following:

- An early warning system to screen students in kindergarten through third grade, to identify struggling readers in those grades, and to provide research-based intervention and progress monitoring to get struggling readers back on track.
- Communication between schools and parents of children who are struggling.
- Intensive summer reading programs starting in May 2017 for struggling readers at the end of third grade.
- Retention at the end of third grade for students who have a substantial deficiency in reading, who did not complete a summer program, and who do not qualify for an exemption.

The summer reading and retention components of this law go into effect May 1, 2017. All other requirements are in place.

Q: How will I receive information about my child if he/she is identified as having a substantial deficiency?

A: The school will notify parents of students who are identified as having a substantial deficiency in reading in kindergarten through third grade and will communicate periodically about the students’ progress. The school also will connect parents with reading strategies that can be used at home.

Q: If my child has a substantial deficiency at the end of third grade, will he/she be forced to repeat third grade?

A: A substantial deficiency in reading at the end of third grade does not mean a student will be retained automatically starting in May 2017; this identification qualifies a student for an intensive summer reading program offered by the school. Students who complete the summer program will not be retained. Retention applies only when the parent or guardian of a student with a substantial deficiency in reading at the end of third grade opts the child out of the intensive summer reading program, and the student does not qualify for an exemption.

Q: Can parents choose the summer reading programs for their children?

A: Starting in May 2017, intensive summer reading programs that meet state criteria must be provided by schools for children with a substantial deficiency in reading at the end of third grade. Parents also have the option of requesting that their school district enter into an agreement with a private provider of intensive summer reading instruction; under this alternative, parents must pay the cost of instruction.

Q: If my child has a substantial deficiency at the end of third grade, is there a test he/she needs to pass in order to be promoted to fourth grade?

A: There is no third-grade test or exit exam that students must pass to advance to fourth grade.

Q: How can I help my child at home?

A: Reading resources for parents are available through the Iowa Reading Research Center, an Iowa Department of Education affiliate at the University of Iowa:

- Literacy Resources for Families and Educators:
<http://www.iowareadingresearch.org/literacy-resources/teacher-family-resources/>
- Parent Support Checklist:
<http://www.iowareadingresearch.org/literacy-resources/supporting-materials/#checklist>
- Blog:
<http://www.iowareadingresearch.org/blog/>
- Common Questions about Universal Screening:
<http://www.iowareadingresearch.org/blog/universal-screening/>

Parents also can become familiar with the Iowa Core, our state standards for what students should know and be able to do in reading and other subjects, through these parent guides:

<https://iowacore.gov/content/iowa-core-parent-guidesgu%C3%ADa-para-padres>

Q: Will summer reading programs be required for/available to students in kindergarten through second grade?

A: Many schools provide programs earlier than third grade, but the early literacy progression law requires intensive summer reading programs only for students at the end of third grade.

Q: Do these rules apply to children who receive special education or English Language Learner services?

A: The early literacy progression law applies to all children except a very small percentage of children with severe cognitive disabilities and children who do not qualify for an exemption.

Q: What are the exemptions to the retention decision?

A: Exemptions:

- A student whose first language is not English has fewer than two years of instruction in an English as a Second Language program.
- A student has an Individualized Education Program (IEP) for special education services that indicates participation in assessments required by the early literacy progression law is not appropriate.
- A student has demonstrated an acceptable level of performance on an alternative assessment based on scientifically based research.
- A student has demonstrated mastery through a portfolio review that meets Department-required criteria.
- A student was previously retained and has received intensive remediation for at least two years.

Q: Where can I find information about the requirements of the early literacy progression law?

A: Requirements are addressed in both Iowa Code and state administrative rules:

- [Iowa Code](#) 279.68(1)(a):
279.68 Student progression — remedial instruction — reporting requirements — promotion.
 1. *Reading deficiency and parental notification.*
 - a. A school district shall assess all students enrolled in kindergarten through grade three at the beginning of each school year for their level of reading or reading readiness on locally determined or statewide assessments, as provided in [section 256.7, subsection 31](#). A school district shall provide intensive reading instruction to any student who exhibits a substantial deficiency in reading, based upon the assessment or through teacher observations. The student’s reading proficiency shall be reassessed by locally determined or statewide assessments. The student shall continue to be provided with intensive reading instruction until the reading deficiency is remedied.
- State Administrative Rules (Iowa Administrative Code 281.62.2):
<https://www.legis.iowa.gov/docs/ACO/IAC/LINC/02-19-2014.Rule.281.62.2.pdf>