



POLICY BRIEF

ALASKA
POLICY FORUM

Third-Grade Literacy

Alaska's Students Must Read by 9

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January 30, 2019

Introduction

As previously reported by the Alaska Policy Forum,¹ statistics for literacy amongst Alaskan children are dismal. Alaska's K-12 education system has arguably the worst student outcomes in the nation in the fundamental task of teaching children to read by the all-important age of nine.

Alaskan children are just as bright. Alaska's teachers are just as dedicated. Parents in Alaska love their children just as much as parents elsewhere. So why the dismal outcomes? And what can be done about it?

Proven solutions exist. Reading reform programs adopted in other states have led to enormous increases in reading scores over very short periods of time despite less spending. The Florida model, in particular, has had great success. Alaska should strongly consider such reforms.

Importance of Early Childhood Literacy

Reading is fundamental to participating in our way of life. It is also the gateway to learning. By the third grade, students must make the transition from learning to read to reading to learn. If they don't, they can't do their coursework. Each year, as the grade level demands go up, students who are not proficient readers tend to fall further behind and become outsiders inside the classroom.

As they move through life, poor readers often develop coping mechanisms for their illiteracy, sometimes manifesting itself in disruptive and undesirable behavior. Students who cannot read by the end of third grade are four times more likely to drop out of high school.² High school dropouts make up 75% of citizens on food stamps.³ The personal implications of illiteracy are dreadful, but clearly the societal implications are just as staggering.

The importance of early literacy is not theoretical. There is a scientific reason: the brain has a limited window of maximum neuroplasticity.⁴ The ease of learning drops off at a certain point.⁵ This is why children who do not learn to read in early childhood have much greater difficulty reading to learn later in school and life. Missing that window of maximum neuroplasticity makes reading instruction less effective and much more resource intensive.

¹ "Alaska Schools Post Disappointing National Test Scores," Alaska Policy Forum, April 24, 2018, <http://alaskapolicyforum.org/2018/04/alaska-schools-post-disappointing-national-test-scores/>.

² Hernandez, Donald J, "Double Jeopardy: How Third-Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation," The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2012, <https://www.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/AECF-DoubleJeopardy-2012-Full.pdf>.

³ Heflin, Colleen, and Yumiko Aratani, "Changing Demography of Social Safety Net Programs," July 31, 2017, <https://www.mathematica.org/our-publications-and-findings/publications/changing-demography-of-social-safety-net-programs>.

⁴ "How Instruction Changes Brain Circuitry with Struggling Readers," Science Daily, June 14, 2018, <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2018/06/180614213556.htm>.

⁵ Weir, Kirsten, "Catching Reading Problems Early," American Psychological Association, April 2011, <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2011/04/reading-problems>.

Figure 1

4th Grade Reading NAEP Test Scores																																
Low-Income Free or Reduced Lunch (FRL)														Upper/Middle Income Non-Free or Reduced Lunch (Non-FRL)																		
	2017	2015	2013	2011	2009	2007	2005	2003		2017	2015	2013	2011	2009	2007	2005	2003															
1	FL	219	FL	220	FL	218	MA	218	FL	217	ND	215	WY	216	VT	214	DC	249	DC	248	DC	245	MA	246	MA	243	MA	243	MA	239	CT	238
2	MA	219	MA	220	NH	216	ND	216	ND	216	MT	215	DE	214	MN	213	NJ	243	MA	247	MA	245	MD	242	CO	238	CT	239	CT	235	NY	238
3	IN	215	KY	219	MD	216	NH	216	KY	215	MA	214	ND	214	WV	212	MA	243	VA	242	MD	242	CT	241	CT	238	NJ	238	NY	234	MA	236
4	WY	215	WY	217	WY	215	FL	216	VT	215	WY	214	WA	213	WY	212	FL	243	NC	242	CT	242	NJ	240	NJ	238	NY	237	VA	234	NJ	234
5	WV	215	IN	217	DE	215	KY	216	MA	215	DE	214	NH	213	DE	212	GA	241	WA	242	FL	242	CO	239	MD	236	PA	237	VT	234	NC	233
6	KY	215	VT	217	IN	215	NJ	215	DE	214	MN	213	MN	213	ND	210	MI	240	KY	241	NJ	241	FL	239	KY	236	VT	235	PA	233	NH	233
7	NJ	214	NH	216	MN	214	MD	215	MT	214	FL	213	MT	212	MA	210	CT	240	NJ	240	VA	239	PA	238	FL	236	CO	235	DE	233	IL	232
8	OH	213	NC	215	MA	213	WY	214	NY	214	VA	213	KY	212	SD	210	OH	239	CT	240	CO	239	VA	237	VT	236	WA	234	OH	233	MT	232
9	VA	213	OK	214	KY	213	MT	214	NH	213	VT	212	MA	211	KY	209	PA	239	IL	239	PA	239	DE	236	NY	235	FL	234	CO	232	VA	232
10	KS	212	GA	214	VT	213	DE	214	KS	213	IA	212	SD	210	IA	209	VA	238	VT	239	GA	239	KY	236	OH	235	MT	234	NE	232	MO	232
11	NH	212	MN	214	ND	213	VT	213	WY	212	ID	212	VT	210	WA	208	RI	238	PA	239	VT	239	VT	236	VA	235	KY	234	MT	232	CO	231
12	NC	211	NJ	213	MT	212	NY	212	MN	212	NH	212	NY	210	MT	208	IN	238	NE	239	RI	239	NC	236	RI	235	OH	234	MN	232	PA	231
13	CT	211	UT	213	NJ	212	KS	212	NJ	211	KY	212	ID	210	NY	208	MD	238	GA	239	NH	238	KS	236	PA	235	MD	234	NJ	232	DE	231
14	VT	211	MT	213	PA	211	OH	212	ID	211	KS	212	VA	209	MO	208	CO	238	FL	239	KS	238	NY	236	KS	234	KS	233	TX	232	VT	231
15	ID	211	NE	213	NY	211	PA	211	MO	210	OH	211	FL	209	ID	207	AZ	237	NH	238	NY	238	NH	236	MO	234	VA	233	NH	231	FL	231
16	NY	211	OH	212	NC	211	MN	210	IN	210	NJ	210	MN	209	CO	207	WA	237	RI	238	WA	238	AL	235	IL	234	NH	233	WA	231	OH	231
17	MO	211	ND	212	WV	211	ID	210	VA	210	WA	210	MO	209	NE	207	KY	237	KS	238	DE	238	IL	235	NH	234	MN	233	MO	231	MN	231
18	DE	210	MO	211	GA	211	IN	210	MD	210	SD	209	KS	208	OH	206	VT	237	OH	238	NC	237	OH	235	DE	234	MN	233	MD	231	IA	230
19	MT	210	WV	211	MO	211	GA	209	NE	210	NY	209	IA	208	KS	206	MT	237	CO	238	TN	237	GA	235	WA	233	AL	232	MN	231	MD	230
20	PA	210	RI	211	CO	210	AL	209	TX	209	OK	209	CO	208	NH	206	NE	237	IN	238	MN	237	WA	235	MN	233	NE	232	SD	231	SD	230
21	MD	210	AR	211	CT	210	TX	209	SD	209	TX	209	TX	208	UT	206	OR	236	NY	238	OH	237	RI	235	NC	233	TX	232	FL	230	WA	230
22	UT	209	ID	211	KS	210	NE	209	IA	208	IN	209	UT	208	NC	206	NH	236	SC	237	KY	237	TX	234	IN	232	DE	232	ND	230	KS	230
23	NE	209	PA	211	UT	209	NC	208	OH	208	MO	208	IN	207	OR	205	NC	236	MD	237	IN	237	MO	234	TX	232	WI	232	AR	230	MN	230
24	RI	209	NY	211	NE	209	RI	208	WA	208	UT	208	AR	206	CT	205	MN	236	OR	237	OR	236	NE	234	MT	232	AR	232	IL	230	MI	229
25	OK	209	VA	210	WA	209	OK	208	CT	207	NE	208	WV	206	WI	205	AL	236	MN	236	MO	236	MT	233	NE	232	ID	232	ID	230	KY	229
26	GA	209	WA	210	VA	209	AR	207	OK	207	GA	207	OH	206	IN	205	CA	235	AZ	236	AL	236	MN	233	MN	232	IL	232	KS	230	RI	229
27	AR	209	DE	210	MN	209	SD	207	GA	207	MD	207	OK	205	TX	205	IL	235	MO	236	IL	235	AR	233	GA	231	WY	231	WI	230	NE	229
28	MS	208	OR	210	AR	209	VA	207	AR	207	PA	207	NE	205	FL	205	NV	235	WI	236	NE	234	IN	232	WI	231	ND	231	GA	229	IN	229
29	CO	208	IA	210	ID	208	MO	207	WV	206	CO	206	PA	205	VA	205	WY	235	MT	235	MN	234	WI	232	AL	231	SD	231	NC	229	SC	228
30	SD	208	LA	209	OH	208	UT	206	PA	206	WV	206	WI	204	AR	204	UT	235	TN	235	TX	234	MN	232	ND	231	IA	231	UT	229	WY	228
31	ND	208	CT	209	IA	208	WI	206	CO	206	MN	206	OR	204	OK	204	MT	234	WY	235	IA	234	IA	231	OR	231	GA	231	KY	228	WV	228
32	ME	207	IL	208	OK	208	IA	206	RI	205	AR	205	NJ	203	NJ	203	KS	234	TX	235	WI	233	SC	231	AR	230	IN	231	WY	228	WI	228
33	MN	207	TX	208	AL	207	CO	205	TN	205	WI	205	NC	202	MN	203	ID	234	IA	234	AR	233	ID	231	SC	230	MO	230	RI	228	ND	227
34	OR	207	AL	208	OR	207	CT	205	UT	205	NC	205	CT	202	SC	202	NY	234	MN	234	WY	233	WY	231	SD	230	RI	230	SC	228	GA	227
35	AL	207	CO	208	RI	206	MN	205	NC	205	MI	204	MI	201	MI	201	ME	234	OK	234	MT	233	MI	231	IA	229	NC	229	MI	227	OK	227
36	TN	206	KS	208	TX	206	MI	205	SC	204	IL	204	GA	201	RI	200	LA	234	UT	234	SC	232	ND	231	MI	229	MI	229	IA	227	AR	227
37	IL	206	TN	207	MI	206	WV	204	MI	204	AL	203	SC	200	GA	200	IA	233	ID	233	UT	232	OR	230	ID	229	UT	229	IN	227	TX	226
38	IA	206	MS	207	WI	205	WA	204	AL	204	HI	203	LA	200	MD	199	WV	233	AR	233	CA	232	CA	230	OK	229	TN	229	LA	226	ID	226
39	NV	206	MD	207	TN	205	OR	204	OR	204	NM	203	TN	200	PA	198	SC	233	MS	233	MI	231	DC	230	WY	228	NM	228	TN	226	UT	226
40	WA	205	WI	207	NV	203	TN	204	MN	203	RI	202	NM	199	TN	198	NM	232	CA	233	MS	231	TN	230	TN	228	SC	228	OK	225	MS	226
41	TX	205	SC	206	SD	203	IL	203	MS	203	TN	202	IL	198	IL	197	OK	232	DE	232	NV	230	SD	229	MS	227	OR	228	OR	225	AZ	225
42	DC	204	NV	205	LA	203	SC	202	IL	202	SC	202	MD	198	HI	197	AR	232	AL	232	ID	230	UT	229	CA	226	AK	227	NM	225	AL	224
43	LA	204	MN	205	IL	202	LA	202	WI	202	CT	201	RI	197	MS	197	SD	232	SD	232	OK	230	MS	229	UT	226	OK	227	WV	225	LA	224
44	MI	203	SD	205	SC	202	NV	202	LA	201	MS	200	HI	197	NM	195	WI	231	ND	231	ND	230	LA	228	DC	226	CA	225	CA	224	AK	224
45	WI	203	MI	204	MS	201	MS	202	NV	200	OR	200	MS	196	LA	195	TN	231	WV	231	LA	230										

Understanding the Problem in Alaska

The National Assessment of Educational Progress⁶ (NAEP) from the U.S. Department of Education is an apples-to-apples comparison of achievement between public school students in all 50 states and the District of Columbia that takes place every odd year. NAEP scores are statewide averages only, meaning there are no results released for individual students or schools. Among other subjects, NAEP tests reading achievement.

This policy brief uses NAEP results broken down by economic status. This normalizes results between states with very different rates of economically disadvantaged families. This brief compares low-income students from families which qualify for “free or reduced lunch” programs (FRL) and middle-and-upper income students from families which do not qualify for FRL (Non-FRL). Alaska’s students are thus compared to students from the same economic strata in other states.

According to the latest NAEP result in 2017, Alaska lags dramatically behind the U.S. in fourth-grade reading.⁷ On the 2017 NAEP, Alaska’s public schools scored 51st (dead last) in fourth-grade reading for both upper-to-

middle-income and low-income students – behind every other state and the District of Columbia (Figure 1).

The achievement gap between Alaskan students and the U.S. average in fourth-grade reading is significant. According to Dr. Matt Ladner, Senior Advisor of Policy and Research at the Foundation for Excellence in Education,⁸ a ten-point difference in NAEP scores indicates approximately one school-year difference in achievement. In 2017, upper- to middle-income Alaskan children were 12 points below the U.S. average and Alaskan low-income students were 18 points below the U.S. average.

Alaska’s disappointing fourth-grade reading results are not a new phenomenon. They have been persistent. Alaskan students have been ranked in the bottom ten states in fourth-grade reading scores since NAEP scores were first published for all 50 states and DC in 2003 (Figure 1).

Is This a Rural Problem?

For the most part, NAEP test scores are not broken down by individual school districts. Thus this policy brief uses our state government’s Performance Evaluation for Alaska’s Schools (PEAKS)^{9,10} English/Language

⁶ "Nation's Report Card," National Assessment of Educational Progress, July 17, 2020, <https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/>.

⁷ "Alaska Schools Post Disappointing National Test Scores," Alaska Policy Forum, April 24, 2018, <http://alaskapolicyforum.org/2018/04/alaska-schools-post-disappointing-national-test-scores/>.

⁸ "Matthew Ladner," Wikipedia, March 29, 2020, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Matthew_Ladner.

⁹ "Performance Evaluation for Alaska's Schools (PEAKS) and Alaska Science Assessment," Alaska Department of Education and Early Development, Accessed July 29, 2020, <https://education.alaska.gov/assessments/peaks>.

¹⁰ "2018 Assessment Results," Alaska Department of Education and Early Development, Accessed July 29, 2020, <https://education.alaska.gov/assessments/results/results2018>.

Arts proficiency rates to compare urban and rural school district achievement differences. While it is true many rural school districts in Alaska have very disappointing scores, the top ten highest-performing districts in Alaska in English/Language Arts in 2018 were actually rural districts : Skagway, Haines, Petersburg, Galena, Unalaska, Sitka, Denali, Valdez, Wrangell, and Kake (Figure 2).

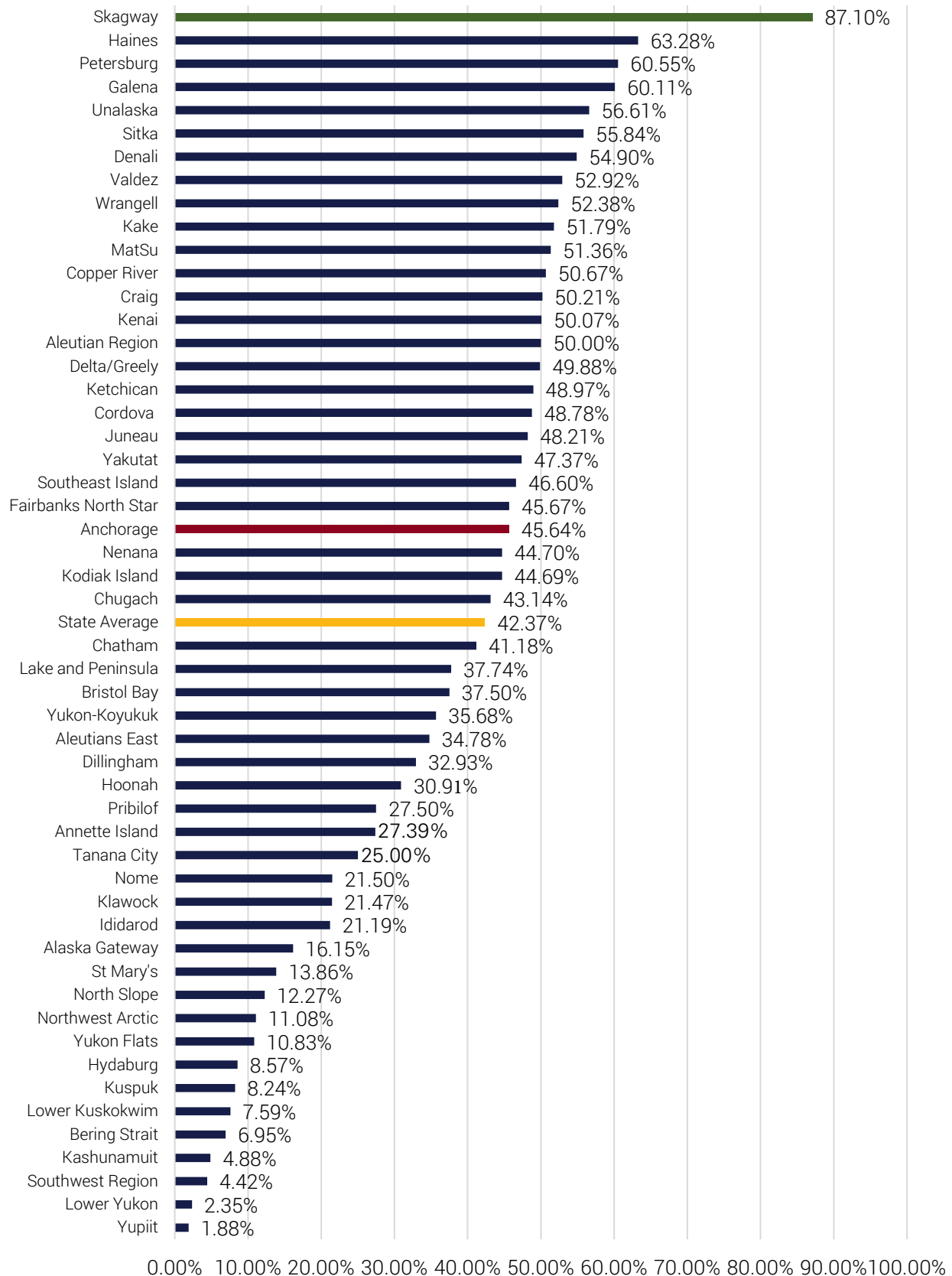
Skagway's leading proficiency rate of 87.10% of students at or above grade level indicates that

the PEAKS test standards are certainly achievable by Alaskan students. Alaska's largest urban school district, Anchorage (accounting for a little more than 1/3 of all the students in the state) ranked 23rd in the state in the 2017-18 school year, with 45.64% of students at or above proficient. The Alaska state average English/Language Arts proficiency for public school students in 2017-18 was 42.37% (Figure 2).

¹¹ Ibid.

Figure 2

Alaska School Districts English Language Arts Proficiency 2017-2018 PEAKS



Source: Performance Evaluation for Alaska's Schools, 2017–2018.

Is This a K-12 Spending Problem?

In 2015, Alaska ranked #3 in the nation (includes DC) in total per pupil inflation-adjusted spending at \$22,379.¹² This was 73.4% above the U.S. average of \$12,903.¹³ Florida was 44th, spending less than half that at \$9,717 per student.¹⁴ Between 2013 and 2015 Alaska had the fourth-highest percentage increase in per student spending in the U.S.¹⁵ Between 2014 and 2015, Alaska had the highest increase in K-12 per student spending at 8.7%.¹⁶

Spending per pupil is not necessarily the only indicator of a state's financial commitment to K-12 education. K-12 spending can also be broken down per capita. When K-12 spending per capita is compared to personal income (a good proxy for differences in cost of living between states) Alaska is first in the nation in contributing to K-12, at the equivalent 6.2% of all personal income going to K-12 public education, according to the latest figures from the National Education Association (NEA) Rankings & Estimates.¹⁷ By this standard, Alaska's financial commitment to K-12 is 68% above the U.S.

average. Compare this to Florida at the equivalent of 2.8% of personal income going to K-12 (which is 24% below the national average).

Florida's FRL fourth-graders have scored #1 on NAEP reading in four of the last five NAEP cycles (Figure 1). Thus, even while the state of Florida spends a much lower percentage of personal income on K-12 education, it has managed to ensure Florida's children are learning to read.

Is Poverty the Cause?

Alaska's disappointing reading results don't appear to be related to poverty. U.S. Census data for 2018 shows Alaska with a poverty rate less than average for the U.S.A. At 11.1%, Alaska has the 13th lowest in the nation (Figure 3).¹⁸ Other states with much higher reading scores have higher poverty rates than Alaska. In fact, Florida has a poverty rate of 14%, which is the 19th highest in the nation.¹⁹ It bears repeating: while Alaska's students score 51st on NAEP reading, Florida's FRL fourth-graders have scored #1 in four of the last five NAEP cycles (Figure 1).

¹² Cornman, Stephen Q., Lei Zhou, Malia Howell, and Jumaane Young, "Revenues and Expenditures for Public Elementary and Secondary Education: School Year 2014–15 (Fiscal Year 2015)," National Center for Education Statistics, January 2018, <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2018/2018301.pdf>.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ "Rankings of States and Estimates of School Statistics," National Education Association, Accessed July 29, 2020, <http://www.nea.org/rankings-and-estimates>.

¹⁸ "QuickFacts Florida; Alaska; United States," United States Census Bureau, Accessed July 29, 2020, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/fl,ak,US/IPE120217>.

¹⁹ "QuickFacts United States," United States Census Bureau, Accessed July 29, 2020, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/IPE120217>.

Does Alaska Have A More Significant Diversity Challenge?

From time to time, the great diversity of the Anchorage School District is pointed to as a specific challenge to producing better student outcomes. In Miami-Dade Public Schools (MDPS) in Florida, 92% of all students are

members of a racial minority group or of Hispanic heritage.²⁰ Nearly 60% of MDPS students don't speak English as the primary language at home and 66% qualify for free or reduced lunches.²¹ Despite these apparent challenges, in 2017, MDPS fourth graders scored five points higher in NAEP reading scores than upper- and middle-income fourth graders in Alaska.^{22,23}

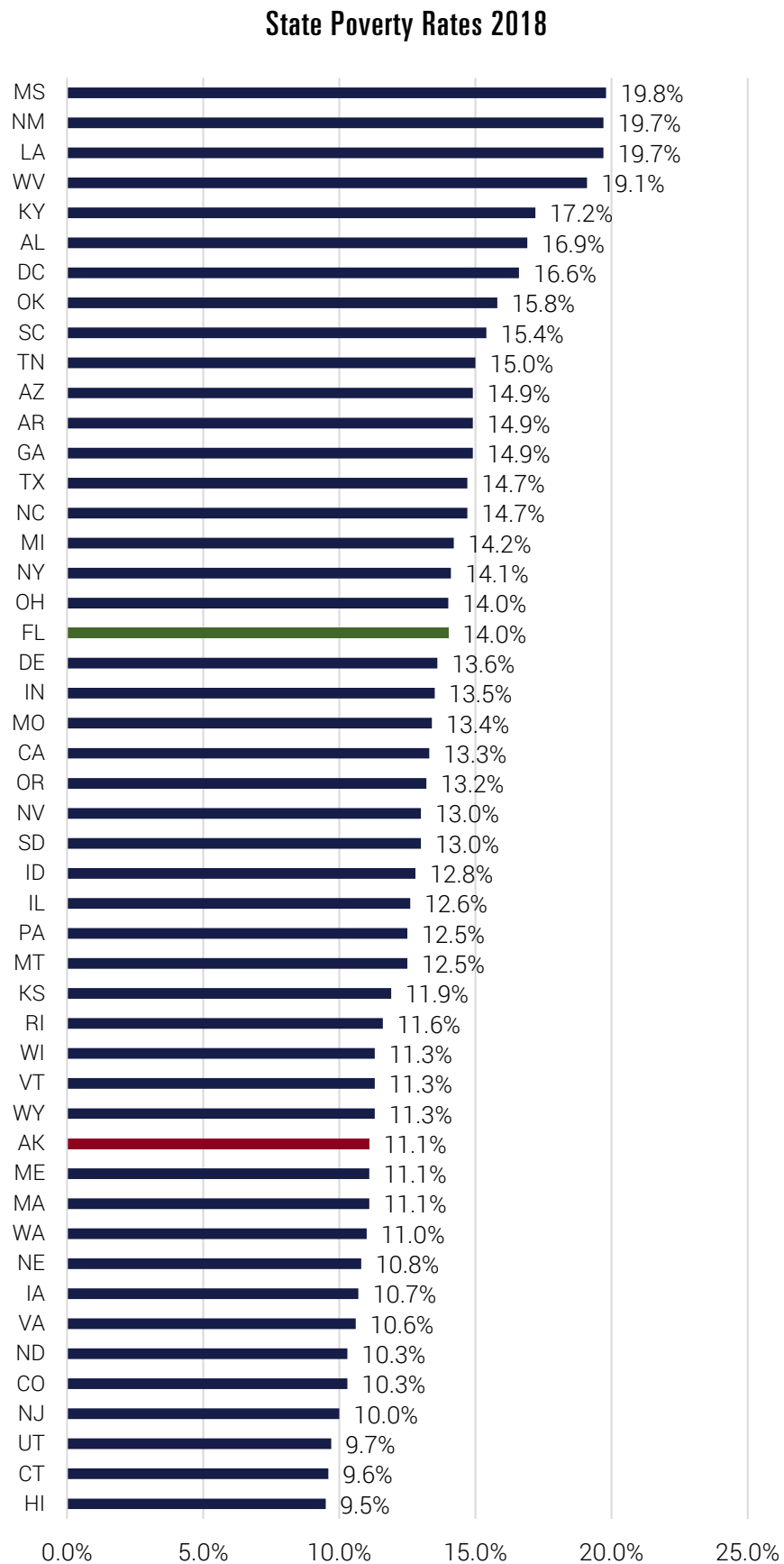
²⁰ "Statistical Highlights 2017-2018," Miami-Dade County Public Schools, April 2018, <http://drs.dadeschools.net/StatisticalHighlights/SH1718.pdf>.

²¹ Ibid.

²² "Miami-Dade District Comparisons, Grade 4 Reading, 2017," The Nation's Report Card, Accessed July 29, 2020, https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/profiles/districtprofile/overview/XI?cti=PgTab_ScoreComparisons&chort=1&sub=RED&sj=XI&fs=Grade&st=MN&year=2017R3&sg=Gender: Male vs. Female&sgv=Difference&ts=Single Year&tss=-2017R3&sfj=NL.

²³ "2017 Reading Trial Urban District Snapshot Report: Miami-Dade, Grade 4, Public Schools," The Nation's Report Card, Accessed July 29, 2020, <https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/subject/publications/dst2017/pdf/2018041X14.pdf>.

Figure 3



Source: US Census Data, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PST045218>.

Could Pre-K Be the Solution?

Pre-K is classroom-based school that children attend before they reach kindergarten age. Some posit that those earlier years of time spent in the classroom are what make a difference in better literacy scores. Whether pre-K produces positive student results in any proportion to the cost is the subject of several conflicting study results.

An extensive multi-decade study of nearly 5,000 Head Start pre-K students²⁴ for the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services found no differences in Head Start students compared with non-Head Start students after third grade.²⁵

Today, Florida has voluntary pre-K (VPK).²⁶ However, it is important to note that Florida achieved the number one ranking in the nation in NAEP low-income fourth-grade reading in 2009 -- before any of the original Florida VPK students (started age 4 in 2005) were old enough to take the fourth grade NAEP test in 2009.

The Real Solution

What Florida did much earlier, in 2002, was implement a new reading program, as passed by the state legislature.²⁷ The model includes a variety of components, several of which are currently in use in some of Alaska's schools:

- Close monitoring of K-3 student reading progress and skills
- Intensive reading intervention to identify weak readers early and create reading improvement plans as needed
- Early and continuous parental notification, to include a description of services being provided, proposed interventions and support services, and suggested parental strategies
- Pairing weak readers with highly effective teachers
- Home reading programs
- Summer school reading programs
- Before- and after-school reading programs
- Reprioritization of education funding
- Instruction in phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension
- As a final safeguard, students who do not meet proficiency are retained in third grade with more intensive intervention focused on rejoining their peers
 - Eliminates social promotion and requires students demonstrate sufficient reading skills through a variety of assessment options
 - Includes common-sense exemptions to retention for some students with special needs (disabilities and English language learners)

²⁴"Third Grade Follow-up to the Head Start Impact Study: Final Report," Head Start Research, October 2012, https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/head_start_report.pdf.

²⁵Maxwell, Lesli A, "Head Start Advantages Mostly Gone by 3rd Grade, Study Finds," Education Week, December 21, 2012, http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/early_years/2012/12/head_start_advantages_mostly_gone_by_third_grade_study_finds.html.

²⁶"Voluntary Prekindergarten," Office of Early Learning, Accessed July 29, 2020, <http://www.floridaeearlylearning.com/vpk>.

²⁷"Read to Learn," Florida Department of Education, Accessed July 29, 2020, <http://www.fldoe.org/core/fileparse.php/7539/urlt/readtolearn.pdf>.

Appendix A contains a full draft proposal of Read by 9 legislation.

Some educators and administrators oppose the policy of retaining non-proficient readers, asserting that retention is socially harmful to students. But a full body of academic research refutes such claims and shows the benefits of ending social promotion in favor of competency-based retention (Appendix B).

Conclusion

In 2003, just after implementing this comprehensive new program, Florida scored 28th for fourth-grade FRL reading. Alaska was 49th that year. Florida made huge jumps over the next two NAEP cycles, landing in the #1 spot in 2009, dipping to 4th in 2011, and then back up to #1 in 2013, 2015 and 2017. It is quite

a winning streak. Meanwhile, Alaska continued vacillating between 50th and 51st (Figure 1).

Florida is not the only state to have implemented third-grade literacy reform, but it was the first. Many others have followed. By 2018, 35 other states had adopted some form of the reading program that Florida enacted.²⁸ All have seen improvements. Alaska state law prescribes no such third-grade literacy program.

Florida's winning streak and the ripple effect through other states provides a proven policy model that Alaska should emulate. Alaska must give our children the fundamental skills they need to succeed. Alaska's children deserve to read by age 9. Alaska's children must Read by 9.

²⁸ "Comprehensive K-3 Reading Policy Fundamental Principles State Analysis," Excellence in Education, 2018, https://www.excelined.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/ExcelinEdPolicyToolkit_K-3Reading_StatebyStateAnalysis_2017-1.pdf.

Appendix A

Read by 9 Act

Draft Legislation

{Intent} It is the intent of the Legislature that each student's progression from one grade to another be determined, in part, upon proficiency in reading; that district school board policies facilitate reading instruction and intervention services to address student reading needs; and that each student and his or her parent be informed of that student's reading progress.

- (A) Reading Instruction and Intervention – It is the ultimate goal of the Legislature that every student read at or above grade level by grade 3. Districts shall offer a reading intervention program to each K-3 student who exhibits a reading deficiency to ensure students can read at or above grade level by the end of grade 3. The reading intervention program shall be provided in addition to core reading instruction that is provided to all students in the general education classroom. The reading intervention program shall:
- (1) Be provided to all K-3 students identified with a reading deficiency as determined by local or statewide screening assessments administered within the first thirty (30) days of school;
 - (2) Provide explicit and systematic instruction in phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension, as applicable;
 - (3) Monitor the reading progress of each student's reading skills throughout the school year and adjust instruction according to student needs; and
 - (4) Be implemented during regular school hours through any available method including in-person or online teachers/coaches.
- (B) Reading Deficiency and Reading Improvement Plan – Any student in Kindergarten or grades 1-3 who exhibits a deficiency in reading at any time, based upon local or statewide screening assessments, shall receive an individual reading improvement plan no later than 30 days after the identification of the reading deficiency. The reading improvement plan shall be created by the teacher, principal, other pertinent education personnel and the parent(s), and shall describe the research-based reading intervention services the student will receive to remedy the reading deficit. Each student must receive intensive reading intervention (in person, online or both) until the student no longer has a deficiency in reading.
- (C) Parent Notification – The parent of any K-3 student who exhibits a deficiency in reading at any time during the school year must be notified in writing no later than 15 days after the identification of the reading deficiency, and the written notification must include the following:
- (1) That his or her child has been identified as having a deficiency in reading, and a reading improvement plan will be developed by the teacher, principal, other pertinent education personnel, and the parent(s).
 - (2) A description of the current services that are provided to the child.

- (3) A description of the proposed research-based reading interventions and supplemental instructional services and supports that will be provided to the child that are designed to remedy the identified area(s) of reading deficiency.
 - (4) Notification that the parent will be informed in writing of their child's progress towards grade level reading at least every two weeks.
 - (5) Strategies for parents to use at home to help their child succeed in reading.
 - (6) That if the child's reading deficiency is not corrected by the end of grade 3, the child will not be promoted to grade 4 unless a good cause exemption is met.
 - (7) That while the statewide reading assessment is the initial determinate for promotion, it is not the sole determiner at the end of grade 3. Additionally, students are provided with a test-based student portfolio option and an alternative reading assessment option to demonstrate sufficient reading skills for promotion to grade 4.
- (D) Elimination of Social Promotion – Beginning with the 2020-21 school year, grade 3 students must demonstrate sufficient reading skills for promotion to grade 4. Students shall be provided the following options to demonstrate sufficient reading skills for promotion to grade 4:
- (1) Scoring above the lowest achievement level on the grade 3 statewide reading assessment;
 - (2) Earning an acceptable score on an alternative standardized reading assessment as determined and approved by the State Board of Education; and
 - (3) Demonstrating mastery of all grade 3 state reading standards as evidenced through a student reading portfolio. Regulation must be established to set criteria for the student reading portfolio and to define "mastery" of all grade 3 state reading standards.

If the student cannot demonstrate sufficient reading skills on one of the three options and does not qualify for a good cause exemption the student must be retained.

- (E) Summer Reading Camp – The school district must provide summer reading camps either in person or via an approved online/distance delivery option) to all grade 3 students scoring at the lowest achievement level on the grade 3 statewide reading assessment. Summer Reading Camps must be staffed with highly effective teachers of reading as demonstrated by student reading performance data and teacher performance evaluations. The highly effective teacher of reading shall provide explicit and systematic reading intervention services and supports to correct the identified area(s) of reading deficiency. Summer Reading Camps must include, at a minimum, 70 hours of instructional time in reading. If funding allows, districts shall extend Summer Reading Camps to students in grades 1-2 identified with a reading deficiency.
- (F) Good Cause Exemptions – The district school board may only exempt students from mandatory retention, as provided in paragraph (D), for good cause. A student who is promoted to grade 4 with a good cause exemption shall continue to receive intensive reading intervention that includes specific reading strategies prescribed in the student's individual reading improvement plan until the deficiency is remedied. The school district shall assist schools and teachers with the implementation of reading strategies that research has shown to be successful in improving reading among students with reading difficulties. Good cause exemptions shall be limited to the following:
- (1) Students with Disabilities whose Individual Education Plan indicates that participation in the statewide assessment program is not appropriate, consistent with state law.

- (2) Students identified as English Language Learners who have had less than 2 years of instruction in an English Language Learner program.
 - (3) Students with Disabilities who participate in the statewide reading assessment and who have an Individual Education Plan or a Section 504 plan that reflects that the student has received intensive reading intervention for more than 2 years but still demonstrates a deficiency in reading and was previously retained in kindergarten, grade 1, grade 2, or grade 3.
 - (4) Students who have received intensive reading intervention for two or more years but still demonstrate a deficiency in reading and who were previously retained in kindergarten, grade 1, grade 2, or grade 3 for a total of 2 years. No student shall be retained twice in grade 3.
- (G) Requests for Good Cause Exemptions – Requests to exempt students from the mandatory retention requirement using one of the good cause exemptions as described in paragraph (F) shall be made consistent with the following:
- (1) Documentation shall be submitted from the student’s teacher to the school principal that indicates that the promotion of the student is appropriate. Such documentation shall consist only of the good cause exemption being requested, and the existing reading improvement plan or Individual Education Plan, as applicable.
 - (2) The school principal shall review and discuss the recommendation with the teacher and make the determination as to whether the student meets one of the good cause exemptions. If the school principal determines that the student met one of the good cause exemptions based on the documentation provided, the school principal shall make such recommendation in writing to the district school superintendent. The district school superintendent shall accept or reject the school principal’s recommendation in writing.
- (H) Parent Notification of Retention – The school district shall assist schools with providing written notification to the parent of any student who is retained that his or her child has not met the reading level required for promotion, the reasons the child is not eligible for a good cause exemption, and that his/her child will be retained in grade 3. The notification must include a description of the proposed interventions and supports that will be provided to the child to remedy the identified area(s) of reading deficiency in the retained year.
- (I) Successful Progression of Retained Readers – Beginning with the 2020-21 school year, students retained under the provisions of paragraph (D) must be provided intensive reading intervention to remedy the student’s specific reading deficiency. The reading intervention services must include effective instructional strategies to accelerate student progress. Each school district shall conduct a review of student reading improvement plans for all students retained in grade 3. The review shall address additional supports and services, as described in this subsection, needed to remedy the identified area(s) of reading deficiency. The district shall provide the following for retained students:
- (1) A highly effective teacher of reading, either in person or online, as demonstrated by student reading performance data and teacher performance evaluations.
 - (2) Reading intervention services and supports to correct the identified area(s) of reading deficiency, including, but not limited to:
 - (a) More dedicated time than the previous school year in scientifically research-based reading instruction and intervention;

- (b) Use of reading strategies and/or programs that are scientifically research-based and have proven results in accelerating student reading achievement within the same school year;
 - (c) Daily targeted small group reading intervention based on student needs, either in person or online;
 - (d) Explicit and systematic instruction, either in person or online, with more detailed explanations, more extensive opportunities for guided practice, and more opportunities for error correction and feedback; and
 - (e) Frequently monitoring the reading progress of each student's reading skills throughout the school year and adjust instruction according to student.
- (3) The option of a transitional instructional setting. Such setting shall specifically be designed to produce learning gains sufficient to meet grade 4 performance standards in
- (4) all other core academic areas while continuing to correct the area(s) of reading deficiency.
- (5) Before and/or after school supplemental research-based reading intervention delivered by a teacher or tutor, either in person or online, with specialized reading training.
- (6) A "Read at Home" plan outlined in a parental contract, including participation in parent training workshops and/or regular parent-guided home reading activities.
- (J) Intensive Acceleration Class – Establish at each school, where applicable, an Intensive Acceleration Class, either in person or online, for any student retained in grade 3 who was previously retained in kindergarten, grade 1, or grade 2. The Intensive Acceleration Class shall include criteria established in (J) and:
- (1) Have a reduced teacher-student ratio; and
 - (2) Provide explicit and systematic reading instruction and intervention for the majority of student contact time each day.
- (K) District Annual Reporting – Each district school board must annually report in writing to the Department of Education & Early Development by September 1 of each year, the following information on the prior school year:
- (1) The district school board's policies and procedures on student retention and promotion.
 - (2) By grade, the number and percentage of all students in grades K-3 performing below grade level on local or statewide assessments.
 - (3) By grade, the number and percentage of all students retained in grades K-3.
 - (4) The total number and percentage of students in grade 3 who demonstrated sufficient reading skills for promotion on the test-based student portfolio.
 - (5) The total number and percentage of students in grade 3 who demonstrated sufficient reading skills for promotion on the alternative reading assessment.
 - (6) The total number and percentage of students in grade 3 who were promoted for good cause, by each category of good cause as specified in paragraph (F).
 - (7) For all grades beyond grade 3, the performance of students retained and those promoted with good cause exemptions on the statewide reading assessment.
- (L) Department Responsibilities – The Department of Education & Early Development shall establish a uniform format for school districts to report the information required. The format shall be developed with input from district school boards and shall be provided to each school district no later than 90 days prior to the annual due date. The department shall annually compile, validate and approve the information required along with state-level summary information, and report such

information to the State Board of Education, the public, Governor, the President of the Senate, and the Speaker of the House of Representatives by October 1 of each year. The department shall provide technical assistance to aid district school boards in implementing the Read by 9 Act.

(M)State Board Authority and Responsibilities - The State Board of Education shall have authority to enforce this chapter.

Derived from material provided by Excellence in Education,

https://www.excelined.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/ExcelinEdPolicyToolkit_K-3Reading_ModelLegislation_2017-1.pdf.

Appendix B

Reading Retention Policy Research

Key Findings from 2017 *Journal of Public Economics*: “The Effects of Test-based Retention on Student Outcomes Over Time: Regression Discontinuity Evidence from Florida”

Link: <https://www.nber.org/papers/w21509>

- Retention in third grade reduced retention probabilities in future years.
- After six years, the achievement gains from retention remain substantial when compared to peers in the same grade.
- Retention in third grade increased students’ high school GPAs and led them to take fewer remedial courses.
- Retention under Florida’s third grade policy has no negative impact on graduation.

Key Findings from 2012 *Manhattan Institute*: “The Benefits of Florida’s Test-Based Promotion System”

Link: <https://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/benefits-floridas-test-based-promotion-system-5850.html>

This paper studies the impact of Florida’s policy to end the social promotion of struggling third grade readers. By studying the long-term performance of children who just barely passed the test, and therefore promoted, as well as those who were just barely left behind, and therefore received intensive reading interventions, the researchers found that:

- On average, the students who received targeted intervention performed better academically, in both the short and long term, than those who were promoted.
- The benefits of the remediation were still apparent and substantial through the seventh grade (which is as far as the data can be tracked at this point).

Key Findings from 2009 *RAND Corporation*: “Ending Social Promotion Without Leaving Children Behind”

Link: <https://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG894.html>

Positive Effects of Promotion-Policy Services Continued Into Later Grades

They examined how specific groups of low-performing students subject to the promotion policy performed in later grades relative to comparable groups of students. Overall, the estimates show small to moderate positive effects of components of the promotion policy in the 6th and 7th grades:

- Small, positive effects of early identification and intervention
- Small, positive effects of summer school.
- Moderate, positive effects of an additional year of instruction due to retention.

Retained Students Did Not Report Negative Socioemotional Effects

The student surveys showed that retention did not have negative effects on students' sense of school belonging or confidence in mathematics and reading; retained students reported comparable or higher levels than those of their at-risk promoted peers. In addition, retained students reported a greater sense of school connectedness than at-risk promoted students and not-at-risk students, even three years after the retention decision. The mean differences were small but statistically significant. These results mirror what other studies have found.

Near-Term Benefits Hold Promise for the Possibility of Longer-Term Benefits

The study found positive near-term benefits of NYC's promotion policy. Students affected by the 5th grade promotion policy performed better than they would have in absence of the policy in the 5th grade and into 7th grade. In addition, the study found no negative effects of retention on students.

Key Findings from 2007 *Education Finance & Policy*: "Revisiting Grade Retention: An Evaluation Of Florida's Test-Based Promotion Policy"

Link: <https://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/pdf/10.1162/edfp.2007.2.4.319>

- This study is an evaluation of Florida's Third Grade retention policy, and the policies impact on student reading performance in the first two years after students were retained.
- The study uses individual student data.
- The findings suggest that retained students slightly outperformed socially promoted students in reading the first year after the retention.
- These gains increased significantly in the second year.

Key Findings from 2006 *OPPAGA Report*: "Third Grade Retention Policy Leading to Better Student Performance Statewide"

Link: <http://www.oppaga.state.fl.us/reports/pdf/0666rpt.pdf>

- Students retained under the third grade FCAT policy improved on the third grade FCAT upon repeating third grade.
- Students who repeated third grade under the policy outperformed similar students who were promoted.
- These students also often maintained their improved performance in fourth grade, outperforming similar low-scoring students who were not retained.
- Students who received exemptions based on alternative assessments or a student portfolio outperformed
- students who received other types of exemptions.
- Retention increased in grades K-2 statewide after the third-grade retention policy went into effect.

- Schools setting high expectations tended to produce stronger learning gains

Key Findings from 2006 *Manhattan Institute*: "Getting Farther Ahead by Staying Behind"

Link: <https://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/getting-farther-ahead-staying-behind-second-year-evaluation-floridas-policy-end-social>

- After two years of the policy's implementation, Florida third graders who were retained made significant reading gains relative to their socially promoted peers.
- These academic benefits grew substantially from the first to the second year after retention.
- Students lacking basic reading skills who are socially promoted fall farther behind over time, whereas retained students appear to be able to catch up on the reading skills they need to be successful.

Derived from material provided by Excellence in Education: <https://www.excelined.org/>.

About the Authors

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About Alaska Policy Forum

Alaska Policy Forum (APF) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit think tank dedicated to empowering and educating Alaskans and policymakers by promoting policies that grow freedom for all. Our vision is an Alaska that continuously grows prosperity by maximizing individual opportunities and freedom. APF does not accept any form of government funding.

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