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# The Socioeconomic Effect of the Third Grade Reading Guarantee

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The Socioeconomic Effect on the Third Grade Reading Guarantee

Honors Research Project

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Throughout the state of Ohio's elementary public education, public school districts strive to ensure that all of their early childhood students maintain an overall standard of language and literacy achievement. This criterion exists specifically for children exiting out of the third grade, aptly named the "Third Grade Reading Guarantee". All public school districts must adhere to this accepted benchmark, which, for the child, means that they must succeed to a general literacy level by the time they enter their fourth grade academic year. This guarantee allows every public school district in the state of Ohio to stand by a specific guideline, which ultimately benefits the student from when he or she first begins their early education. From kindergarten until third grade, Ohio public school teachers can now follow an accurate direction in order to make sure their students stay on path with reading standards ("Third Grade Reading Guarantee Guidance Manual", 2016).

Elementary instructors may teach now specifically according to the state's standards based on the Ohio Department of Education's generated manual. This manual can aid, not only for state public school districts, but for nonpublic charter schools, private schools, or the rest of the community. Its requirements are evident and strategic, providing instructional tools and major resources with instructing students at certain age levels; these help in assuring that they are staying "on track" with reading based upon the rest of their peers in the state (Kohler, 2017). The Third Grade Reading Guarantee manual states which specific reading diagnostic tests are approved by the state of Ohio, and they must be given to all students near the beginning of the academic year, between September 30<sup>th</sup> and November 1<sup>st</sup>, for grades kindergarten through third. This style of testing requires every third grader in the state of Ohio to achieve a "Promotion Score" in order to then progress to their next grade the following year. Based on their grade level, they will be expected to score their *previous* grade level's reading criterion; each student

will either be labeled “on track” or “not on track” (“Third Grade Reading Guarantee Guidance Manual”, 2016). A child is identified as “on track” if he or she achieves the reading score at the end of their previous calendar school year. For example, second grade students are deemed “on track” if they can accomplish reading scores that adhere to the end of the first grade academic year’s standards; if their reading diagnostics prove otherwise, they are considered “not on track”. These diagnostic tests allow educators to understand who is on track based upon whether they have retained the last measures they were supposed to have previously learned.

Because so many various diagnostic reading tests measure different levels of reading readiness amongst these grade levels, early childhood teachers may assess how to aid in the students who show results that are not on track yet. If students remain “not on track”, instructors may then give more accurate descriptions of specific services to provide the child, if not already given presently, and they must propose immediate reading intervention in order to lead the child on track (Kohler, 2017). Once a student’s reading deficiencies are noticed and identified, the school must provide a monitoring plan to help the child within sixty days of receiving the diagnostic test results. Those who perform lower than a “proficient” score of 700 on their fall reading tests must be monitored and intervened based on their literacy deficiencies, since they are considered not on the third grade reading track. The district or school shall then provide intensive, extensive, or systematic reading intervention services within the allotted time period. Intensive instruction only involves vigorous reading, while extensive intervention regards how the student makes language and literacy inferences. Systematic intervention strategies then apply all methods of scope and sequence, addressing all categories of reading deficits, and continuously monitoring the individual student’s progress throughout the academic year (“Third Grade Reading Guarantee Guidance Manual”, 2016). Reading curriculum from each grade level

offers standards by the state of Ohio for each of these strategies to follow, even for both those who are on track and those who do not fall under that category. When grade three students do not meet their ongoing benchmarks after poor testing, an official statement then warns their parents/guardians that they will be retained if their third grade reading scores do not improve by the end of the school year. Students containing a previously-identified Individualized Education Program (IEP) become exempt from this state regulation, as long as they are on track according to their specific plan. Other exemptions from third grade retention include, English Language Learners who have not been enrolled in an American school district for three full school years, students have been intensively retained for two years and also once in kindergarten, or students who have scored higher other alternative assessment tests acknowledged by the state (“Third Grade Reading Guarantee Guidance Manual”, 2016).

If a third grade student does not pass the “Third Grade Reading Guarantee” with a “proficient” score, he or she must be retained the next calendar school year. Once students are held back to the same third grade level, the school and district must then provide, at the very least, ninety minutes of reading intervention instruction throughout the regular classroom day. Although this time can be divided into multiple parts and not only allotted to just one time block, instructors can give research-based reading intervention strategies, such as small group instruction, tutoring, mentoring, fewer student-teacher ratios, extended school days, transition classes and/or summer reading camps in between school hours. However, if a student is retained in the third grade due to other subjects, like mathematics or attendance, he or she does not have to have these intervention requirements; they specifically only regard reading discrepancies. Also, third graders may take the reading diagnostic tests, as well as the other subject area tests, in order to gain a “mid-year” Promotion score, where they can score high enough to move onto the

fourth grade or not improve in order to receive more reading intervention and attention throughout the rest of the school year (“Third Grade Reading Guarantee Guidance Manual”, 2016).

With all of these factors pronounced in terms of Ohio’s recognized “Third Grade Reading Guarantee”, school districts must then attempt to determine exactly how to promote the most successful scores amongst their students. Given a set of criteria within a state-set reading curriculum, Ohio public school districts, therefore, deem how to teach intervention strategies, starting from the early age of kindergarten until, hopefully, each student is promoted to the fourth grade level. Reading instruction must be secure and efficient from the beginning of a child’s early education, which may solely depend on their public school system. Of course, public school districts directly correlate with the surrounding area’s jurisdiction, which ultimately affects how their resources are divided and provided; some areas simply do not have enough resources in order to ensure that each individual student receives the precise help he or she actually needs. Ohio is no stranger to a scarcity of necessary funds amongst the elementary public school system, especially the local northeast Ohio area, hence why some districts compare poorly or successfully compared to surrounding regions. For this research project, five relatively close school districts in the northeast Ohio area were quantitatively and qualitatively compared and examined based on their socioeconomic status, thus their resources that are provided to classrooms, and whether or not this affects how well students performed on their Third Grade Reading Guarantee tests.

In order to assess Third Grade Reading Guarantee scores, anyone may acquire state Ohio School Report Card results, stating each specific districts’ statistics on passing of general scores that determine which percentage of students moved onto the fourth grade level; the Ohio

Department of Education website and results is available to everyone who may inquire such answers. Based on the 2015-2016 academic school year, Ohio School Report Card results showed that approximately 6.6% of third graders in the state could not pass with proficient scores on their Third Grade Reading Guarantee test (Ohio Department of Education, 2016).

Why did this percentage of students fail to achieve sufficient reading scores; did somewhere in their public school system fail them for specific reasons? Socioeconomic factors could certainly play a significant role in how each student never succeeded past “not on track” throughout the school year. The main question to ask and research is: does the specific school system’s resources directly and positively correlate to their student’s Third Grade Reading Guarantee results, based upon which district they were enrolled in during their third grade year? Assessing five northeast Ohio districts’ Report Card scores from the 2015-2016 year may provide insight into what may help children succeed in reading and literacy in the long term.

The first public school district examined was the Akron Public Schools district located in the northeast region of Summit County. Historically residing in a multicultural and diverse area, the city of Akron, Ohio, has remained at a financial standstill for the past few decades; about 26.5% of residents fall at or below the poverty line. Only 20.4% of Akron citizens hold a Bachelor’s degree or higher as their most achieved level of education (United States Census Bureau, 2015). Akron Public Schools’ Report Card Achievement scores display a significantly low grade level, possibly based upon these economic results. In terms of the 2015-2016 school year, only 37.9% of third graders scored at least a proficient test result on the Third Grade Reading Guarantee; an estimated 87.0% met the Guarantee’s promotion for fourth grade. The district reported a total of 2,441 struggling readers between the grades of Kindergarten and third grade. Overall, the elementary level received a grade of “D”; 26.4% of Kindergarten through

third grade literacy improvement. This means that, of the totaled 2,441 struggling students counted, only 644 improved onto the next grade level, which is a huge predictor of success throughout later education. Kindergarten received the highest scores of “on-track” students, with 59.3% of Kindergarteners improving to an “on track” status for first grade (Ohio Department of Education, 2016).

The Ohio Department of Education website also provides financial spending data for each district. For Akron Public Schools, 67.3% of spending funds is spent on in-class instruction resources. The district does, however, spend more money per student, around \$9,917, than the overall state of Ohio, which spends a mere \$8,840 per student; thus, Akron does not remain among the twenty percent of public school districts with the lowest operating expenditures per student (Ohio Department of Education, 2016). Akron Public Schools continuously fail on their report card scores, no matter which grade level, most likely based on the lack of actual resources going straight to elementary school. Akron schools lack sufficient support with teachers, tutors, and special interventionists because the city contains so many students in need of help. English Language Learners are growing in population, which may skew results, especially at younger grade levels. Ultimately, low funds per student will likely result in low reading scores from Kindergarten to third grade in Akron, resulting in third graders not passing their Third Grade Reading Guarantee scores and being retained for at least over a year.

Located in Cuyahoga County, the next northeast Ohio public school district assessed and compared was the Cleveland Municipal School District based upon the Ohio Department of Education’s 2015-2016 academic year results. A bit larger and more urban than the city of Akron, Cleveland’s public school district lies in a region where the poverty rate is higher at 36.2% and only 15.6% of its residents have earned a bachelor’s degree or higher, as of 2015

(United States Census Bureau, 2015). These statistics reflect on Cleveland Municipal School District's report card grades, which are also similar to Akron Public Schools'. Their Kindergarten through third grade literacy improvement remains at only 11.7% success overall for struggling readers, consisting of an "F" score for their report card achievement; only 532 out of a total of 4,565 struggling students improved to "on-track" for their grade level. Describing their third graders' Reading Guarantee scores, nearly 85.3% met the requirements to be promoted to the next grade, and only 23.5% of these third grade students scored proficient.

Financially, Cleveland schools' resource allocations remain quantitatively similar to Akron Public Schools'. Around 64% of local funds are spent on classroom instruction, even though they have a large population of students in need of personal resources; approximately an average of \$10,696 was spent toward each student, which is below the state of Ohio's average, but does not account for most students remaining at or below the poverty line, in dire need of more funds to solely catch up to the rest of the state's districts (Ohio Department of Education, 2016). Cleveland's funds derive mostly from the state, but the city still requires basic educational necessities, such as simple technology, intervention specialists for struggling readers, and after-school programs geared toward further retention of literacy and language. Culturally, this city and its schools remain essentially diverse, in language and writing especially, so more resources must be given toward these urban school districts to keep up with the state's third grade reading average scores.

Next, the Canton City School District was compared against the other two urban districts of Akron and Cleveland. This less-populated area resides in the more southern part of the region assessed in Stark County, but its poverty level remains almost as close as Cleveland's at 32.3% near or on the poverty threshold. Also, approximately only 14% of adults over twenty-five years

old have a Bachelor's degree or higher, the lowest of the other two cities. Starkly contrasted against the other two public school districts though, the city of Canton contains very little diversity amid its residents and families; only 3.8% of them speak a native language other than English within the home (United States Census Bureau, 2015). Its Ohio Department of Education Report Card results correlate similarly to the two other public school districts, especially in terms of Kindergarten through third grade reading and language improvement. Canton's "F" score results from only 22.4% (or 277 of 1,239) of reported struggling readers scored high enough to be considered as "on-track" for the next grade level. Like Akron, Kindergarten progress, with almost 55% improvement, remained the highest grade-level performance amongst the others. Regarding the Third Grade Reading Guarantee, an average of about 13% of third graders scored proficient with 65.2% met the requirements for a fourth grade promotion (Ohio Department of Education, 2016).

Out of the local public schooling funds, approximately 65% are expended toward in-classroom strategies. More similar to Akron's statistic, Canton City Schools allocate an average around \$8,896 per student, which is also more similar to the rest of the state's average per individual student (Ohio Department of Education, 2016). Canton, a city along with Akron and Cleveland, is a part of a certain alliance of the major eight urban school districts in the Ohio region, otherwise known as the "Ohio 8", with a variety of early childhood reading preparatory programs (Ohio 8 Coalition, 2017). Their programs though have become severely underfunded, locally and by the state, to ever achieve authentic progress amongst Kindergarten through third graders in time for them to take their Reading Guarantee tests. Much more support staff and intervention specialties remain necessary in order for children to read and write effectively, since families struggle with at-home intervention, as with most urban city school districts.

The fourth school district examined was Solon City School District in Cuyahoga County, Ohio. The majority of this city contains White/Caucasian citizens, about 78% as of 2010, leaving not much language nor cultural diversity (United States Census Bureau, 2015). Solon's public schools rank much higher than the other three's Report Card scores, receiving an "A" or "B" in every category from Kindergarten until high school. Discussing their struggling reader improvement, the Ohio Department of Education did not even rate them, let alone report a score, solely because less than five percent of all Kindergarten students were not "on track" throughout the 2015-2016 school year. Not enough data can be provided on a district's literacy improvement if there is so little to base such evidence on. Legitimately, every single third grader, 100%, met the state's requirements for fourth grade promotion, and almost 89% scored proficient on the reading tests (Ohio Department of Education, 2016). Consequently, Solon outranks most public school districts regarding the Third Grade Reading Guarantee with their outstanding high-scoring elementary students for the past couple of decades.

A significant difference about Solon compared to Akron, Cleveland, and Canton is the substantial amount of wealth within the community; the median household income is around \$95,000 annually. Solon's poverty rate stays at 3.8%, and almost 60% of its adults have obtained a bachelor's degree in college or even higher. Almost every adult over the age of twenty-five, 96.7%, has at least received a high school diploma, a substantially higher rate than most cities in the state of Ohio (United States Census Bureau, 2015). Nevertheless, the Solon City School District performs so well in terms of state diagnostic testing because they have the funds to do so. Nearly 70% of funds are spent toward classroom instruction with almost \$12,300 allotted to each individual student. Amongst other public districts in Ohio that remain socioeconomically similar, Solon ranks the highest on their Performance Index, meaning that

their funds only advocate their public education for the better (Ohio Department of Education, 2016). With more financial stability, Solon City Schools can afford the best technology and staff that fit each IEP or reading intervention, if needed. Their guided reading groups improve each year, giving students more literacy time in the classroom and outside of the classroom in at-home reading strategies as well.

Lastly, the final northeast Ohio school district assessed was Hudson City Schools in Summit County. Hudson City Schools lies most similarly to Solon City School District, concerning public educational Report Card scores. After taking the Third Grade Reading Guarantee, exactly 82.8% of Hudson public third grade students exhibited proficient scores or above, which is close to Solon City Schools' as well. Identically to Solon City Schools, Hudson City Schools likewise had a 100% success rate between all third graders surpassing the test requirements in order to move onto the fourth grade level. These two public schools evidently must have something in common in order for their test results to score so high and distinguished, especially compared to Akron, Cleveland, and Canton school districts (Ohio Department of Education, 2016).

Comparable to Solon, Hudson persists as a mostly Caucasian (92.7%) with trivial minorities and minimal mixtures of culture. Another major, key factor in comparing Solon and Hudson cities is their distributed wealth amongst families; the median annual household income in Hudson is roughly \$124,529 with a 3.8% poverty percentage, which is considerably similar (United States Census Bureau, 2015). An extraordinary 70.5% of funds are spent for classroom instruction with more than half of that money deriving locally from the actual district itself (Ohio Department of Education, 2016).

The Hudson and Solon Boards of Education pass their school levies nearly every single year, with ample amounts of finances directed specifically toward students based on property taxes and the citizens' right to vote for better public schooling. The reason for this reality is most likely because the schools' families can afford it and value quality education. Also, for the city of Hudson, their school district remains the number one reason why new residents choose to live there, and they do not rely on the state of Ohio's funding for its resources ("Levy Information", 2017). Teachers and other staff receive more support in Hudson and Solon schools than they would, for example, in Akron, because they have the means to do so.

After this research was concluded across all various types of qualitative and quantitative data, the conclusion must be made that socioeconomic status of a public school district does indeed influence reading scores, especially amongst the northeast Ohio region. Early childhood instructors should provide with as much of a variety of services as possible, pertaining to each specific child's needs. In order to do this, resources must be easily acceptable and available, whenever necessary. Reading culture must also grow and live within each school and the community so that students will actually want to read and write proficiently, instead of feeling as if they do not have the accurate tools to learn properly. Furthermore, technology advances more and more every single day. Hudson and Solon schools provide their students with individual laptops or Chromebooks, whereas Cleveland Metropolitan schools barely have enough equipment to teach reading and literacy. The more technological resources expand and become more complex, the more lower-end socioeconomic students will suffer in the long term. Concisely, public forums must be clear to inform city residents that diminishing resources and tools will significantly, negatively impact their future leaders. Ultimately, third graders in public school districts like Solon and Hudson will most likely perform outstandingly higher on their

Third Grade Reading Guarantees, rather than third graders living in cities such as Akron, Cleveland, and Canton, exclusively based on how their low-income culture, combined with their lack of public funding, negatively influence their long-term reading progress.

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