



# **Read by Grade Three Law Initial Retention Decisions for the 2021-22 School Year**

A Research  
Report  
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# Read by Grade Three Law Initial Retention Decisions for the 2021-22 School Year

## AUTHORS

**John Westall**, *Postdoctoral Researcher, EPIC*

**Andrew Utter**, *Research Assistant, EPIC*

**Tara Kilbride**, *Assistant Director for Research, EPIC*

**Katharine O. Strunk**, *Faculty Director, EPIC*

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# Overview and Purpose

The Education Policy Innovation Collaborative (EPIC) is the strategic research partner to the Michigan Department of Education (MDE). Since 2019, EPIC has been working closely with researchers from the University of Michigan, MDE, and the Center for Educational Performance and Information (CEPI) to study the effect of the Read by Grade Three Law as the policy takes effect. The Read by Grade Three Law aims to improve early literacy outcomes for students across the state through improved instruction, implementation of early monitoring and identification systems, required interventions for students identified as having a “reading deficiency” under the Law, and required retention for students who do not meet a state standard for reading proficiency by the end of 3<sup>rd</sup> grade.

Under the Read by Grade Three Law, students who score below a state-determined cut-off on the 3<sup>rd</sup>-grade ELA M-STEP assessment each year are eligible for retention. Districts are responsible for determining whether each eligible student is retained in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade or provided with a good cause exemption that allows promotion to 4<sup>th</sup> grade. In the spring of 2019, MDE announced the cut score that would eventually be used to determine which students are eligible for retention. EPIC researchers used this cut-score to estimate the number and characteristics of students who would have been eligible for retention in spring 2018 and spring 2019 had the retention policy been in effect at the time (see EPIC’s [Estimated Read by Grade Three Retention Rates reports for 2018 and 2019](#)).

The retention component of the Law went into effect for the first time for students who were in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade in the 2020-21 school year. EPIC released two reports detailing retention outcomes for this first cohort of 3<sup>rd</sup>-grade students subject to retention under the Law. The first report ([Preliminary Read by Grade Three Retention Estimates](#)) provided an overview of retention-eligibility rates for this first cohort of 3<sup>rd</sup>-grade students subject to retention under the Law. The second report ([Read by Grade Three Law Initial Retention Decisions](#)) provided the first look at districts’ decisions about whether each eligible student would be retained in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade or promoted to the 4<sup>th</sup> grade using a good cause exemption. We showed that districts retained very few students under the Read by Grade Three Law in 2020-21, but there were substantial disparities in retention eligibility and outcomes across districts.

EPIC researchers conducted similar analyses for students who took the 3<sup>rd</sup>-grade ELA M-STEP in 2022. Our [2022 Preliminary Read by Grade Three Retention Estimates report](#) provided retention-eligibility rates for this second cohort of students subject to retention under the Read by Grade Three Law. Now that districts have determined

which students to retain and which to promote using good cause exemptions and reported this information to CEPI, we prepared a follow-up report to examine districts' reported retention and exemption decisions, compared these results to those from the previous year, and used survey responses from Michigan teachers, principals, and superintendents to better understand how districts approached these decisions.

In this report, we show that, in 2021-22, districts intended to retain a larger proportion of retention-eligible students than in 2020-21, but districts still promoted the vast majority of eligible students. However, there were substantial differences in retention rates across student and district types, with Black and economically disadvantaged students more likely to be retained than their White or wealthier peers and lower-performing and urban districts, as well as charter schools more likely than other districts to retain all their retention-eligible students. Disparities in districts' propensities to retain students may be attributable to differences in educators' perceptions of the efficacy of retention as an intervention to improve student literacy and in variations in districts' implementation of the Law. Indeed, educators in districts that retained all or some of their students in 2020-21 were more likely to view retention as effective at improving achievement and less likely to view the retention process as burdensome than educators in districts that promoted all eligible students.

# Data and Methods

The main sources of data in our analyses include results from the spring 2022 3<sup>rd</sup>-grade ELA M-STEP and districts' reported retention decisions and exemption reasons for students who scored below the state-determined cut score. We also use enrollment and demographic data from the Michigan Student Data System to add context about the characteristics of these students and the districts where they attend school. We use similar data about students who were in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade in 2020-21, allowing us to compare retention outcomes over time. Finally, we supplement the administrative data with responses to a survey of Michigan educators administered in the spring of 2022 to help understand the motivations underlying districts' retention decisions.

## RETENTION ELIGIBILITY AND EXEMPTION DATA

The retention outcomes of 3<sup>rd</sup>-grade students under Michigan's Read by Grade Three Law depend on their ELA M-STEP scores:

- 1272 or above: Students who score 1272 or above are promoted to 4<sup>th</sup> grade;
- 1253 to 1271: Students who score 1253 to 1271 are promoted to 4<sup>th</sup> grade but with recommended additional literacy support;
- 1252 or below: Students who score 1252 or below can be retained in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade or promoted to 4<sup>th</sup> grade through a good cause exemption;
- Not tested: Students who did not take the 3<sup>rd</sup>-grade ELA M-STEP cannot be retained based on their test score and are therefore not subject to the Read by Grade Three retention policy.

For each student scoring at or below 1252, districts must decide whether to retain or promote through a good cause exemption. The Read by Grade Three Law defines the following categories of good cause exemptions:

- English learners with fewer than three years of English language instruction;
- Students with disabilities (i.e., those with an Individualized Education Program [IEP] or Section 504 Plan);
- Students who were previously retained and received intensive reading interventions for two or more years;
- Students who have been enrolled in their current district for less than two years and were not provided with an appropriate individual reading improvement plan (IRIP);

- Students who demonstrated proficiency in other subject areas and/or through an alternative assessment or portfolio of work; and
- Students whose parents requested an exemption provided their superintendent agrees that retention is not in the student's best interest.

The Read by Grade Three Law requires that families of retention-eligible students request a good cause exemption and districts make retention or promotion decisions within an established time limit. CEPI sent notification letters to the families of retention-eligible students as soon as preliminary M-STEP scores were available from MDE. In 2021-22, 5,680 students were eligible for retention under the Law. CEPI sent 5,677 notification letters to the families of retention-eligible students and reached out directly to the remaining three families of the students. Districts reported their decisions to promote or retain each eligible student for all except 42 of the 5,680 retention-eligible students in 2021-22. For the promoted students, districts also reported the reason why the student received an exemption. While students can qualify for multiple exemption categories, districts can report only one reason. Although districts report only their intentions to retain students, which may differ from actual retention outcomes, throughout the remainder of the report, we refer to districts' recorded intentions to retain students as "retention decisions."

## STUDENT ENROLLMENT AND DEMOGRAPHICS

We use student-level administrative records collected and maintained by MDE and CEPI to identify the full populations of students enrolled in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade in 2020-21 and 2021-22, as well as their characteristics and the characteristics of their districts. There were 102,346 3<sup>rd</sup>-grade students enrolled in Michigan in 2020-21 and 102,375 enrolled in 2021-22. Our analyses focus on the 99% of Michigan 3<sup>rd</sup>-grade students who attended a traditional public school (TPS) or charter school (101,602 in 2020-21 and 101,798 in 2021-22), excluding a small number of students who were enrolled in a specialized school run by an intermediate school district or who participated in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade M-STEP but did not have demographic information available in the Michigan Student Data System. Of the 5,680 retention-eligible students in 2021-22, 5,657 (99.6%) are represented in our analyses.<sup>1</sup>

We use these data to identify subgroups of students based on their demographics and the characteristics of the districts in which they were enrolled. We compare patterns in districts' retention and exemption decisions across the following student and district subgroups:

- **Student demographics:** Race/ethnicity, gender, economically disadvantaged status, identification as a student with a disability (SWD) or English learner;
- **District type:** Sector (TPS or PSA); district size, as measured by districts that fell at or below the 25th, between the 25th and 75th, or at or above the 75th percentile in overall student enrollment; district performance, as measured by



districts that fell in the top or bottom quartile of ELA performance in 2019; and districts in different types of locales (urban, suburb and town, or rural); and

- **Mode of instruction:** Districts' primary planned instructional modalities for 2020-21 (in-person, hybrid, or remote). We define this as the instructional modality that a district offered most frequently in 2020-21, based on its responses to the Reconfirmed COVID-19 Learning Plan Monthly Questionnaire.<sup>2</sup> Based on this definition, 68% of districts were primarily in-person in 2020-21, 16% were primarily hybrid, and 16% were primarily remote.

## SURVEY OF MICHIGAN EDUCATORS

We supplement the student administrative data with educator survey responses to provide further insight into districts' retention decisions. EPIC surveyed Michigan educators in TPS and charter schools in the spring of 2022.<sup>3</sup> Among other questions, we asked educators about their opinions of retention under the Law and how retention is implemented in their district. While this survey was administered before districts made retention decisions based on the spring 2022 M-STEP results, educators' responses provide insight into the prior year's retention process and how districts may implement retention in the 2021-22 school year.

The survey was administered online from April 4th, 2022 through June 17th, 2022. EPIC used multiple channels to contact eligible educators to invite them to participate in the survey, including through direct emails to educators and their supervisors<sup>4</sup>. We also promoted the survey through the EPIC website, Twitter, and several Michigan education associations, including the state's Early Literacy Task Force (ELTF); the Michigan Education Association (MEA); the Michigan chapter of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT); the Michigan Association of Public School Academies (MAPSA); the Michigan Association of School Administrators (MASA); and the Michigan Elementary and Middle School Principals Association (MEMSPA).

We focus on the responses of K-5 teachers, K-5 principals, and district superintendents in TPS and charter schools. Overall, 7,166 K-5 teachers, 395 K-5 principals, and 89 district superintendents responded, representing 21% of K-5 teachers, 20% of K-5 principals, and 16% of district superintendents across Michigan. Given the small number of superintendents who responded to the survey, we interpret data from these administrators cautiously. The survey samples are not representative of the general populations. We, therefore, weight the survey responses to be representative of Michigan's K-5 teachers, K-5 principals, and district superintendents.

# Results

## THIRD GRADE RETENTION OUTCOMES

### Districts Retained More Students Than in 2020-21

Figure 1 shows the end-of-year retention outcomes for all 3<sup>rd</sup>-grade students (left panel) and tested 3<sup>rd</sup>-grade students (right panel) in both the 2020-21 and 2021-22 school years.

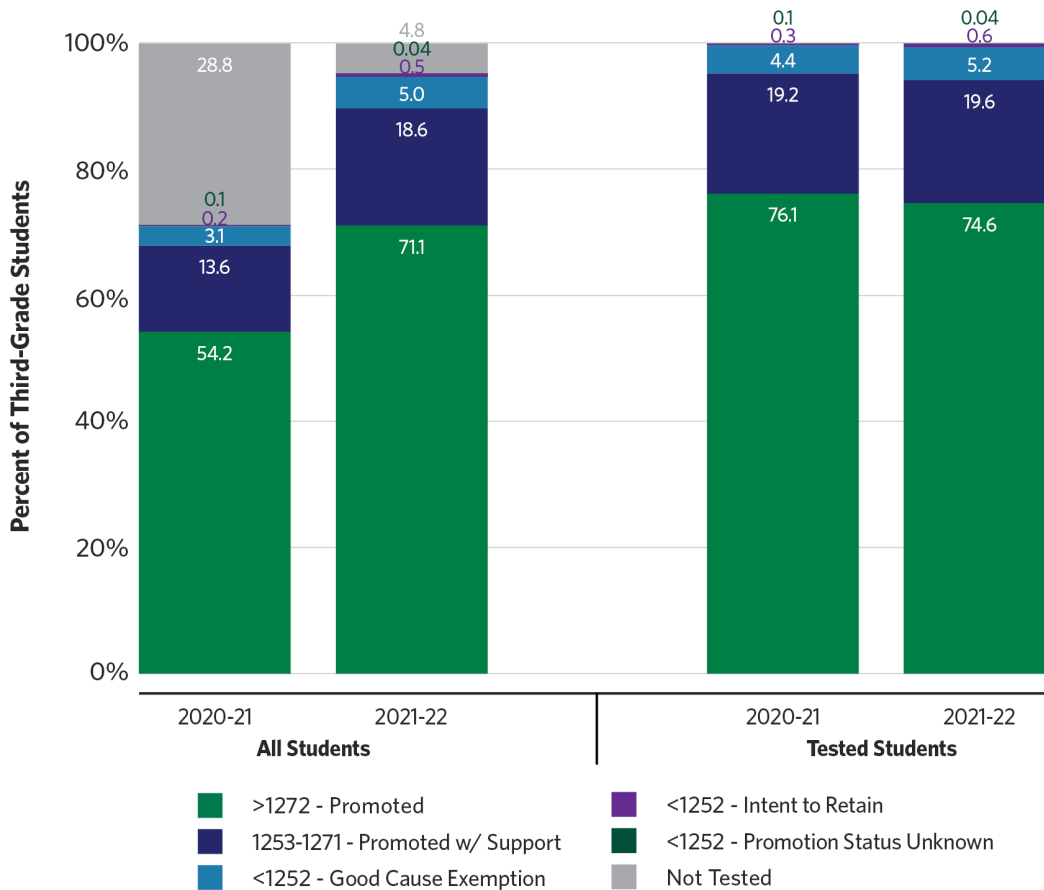
Of the students who participated in the ELA M-STEP in 2021-22 (shown in the right panel of Figure 1), retention-eligibility rates increased from 4.8% in 2020-21 to 5.8% in 2021-22. While this change is only 1.0 percentage points, it represents a 20.8% increase from 2020-21. Relative to 2020-21, a slightly smaller proportion of tested students were eligible for promotion without additional literacy support, and nearly the same proportion were eligible to be promoted with recommended literacy support.

Several factors likely contributed to this increase in retention eligibility. As noted in our [prior report](#), 3<sup>rd</sup>-grade ELA M-STEP test participation rates increased substantially from 71% in 2020-21 to 96% in 2021-22. Since, under the Law, districts can retain only tested students, this increase means that more students are subject to the Read by Grade Three Law's retention policy. Moreover, since many of the districts with lower participation rates in 2020-21 were remote for much of the 2020-21 school year due to the outsized impacts of the pandemic on urban districts with higher proportions of low-income and lower-performing students and students of color, it is likely that any changes in the proportion of retention-eligible students will be in part attributable to differences in the tested population of students.<sup>5</sup> In addition, the [pandemic impacted student achievement in Michigan](#), as it did throughout the country, with the most severe effects found in already lower-performing districts with high proportions of low-income students and students of color. These adverse consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic translated into lower 3<sup>rd</sup>-grade ELA achievement and therefore into greater retention eligibility rates.

School districts promoted most retention-eligible students in 2021-22, as they had done the year prior. While 5.8% of tested 3<sup>rd</sup>-grade students were retention-eligible, districts retained just 0.6% (545) of all tested students. While this is a small proportion, it represents more than twice as many students as were retained the year prior when districts identified 228 students for retention. This increase in the sheer number and proportion of retained students also represents a larger proportion of retention-eligible students slated for retention; in 2021-22, districts retained 9.6% of retention-eligible students, an increase of three percentage points over 2020-21 (or a 45% increase).

While we do not know why districts chose to retain more eligible students in 2021-22 than the year prior, it may be that administrators, educators, and parents or guardians were hesitant to retain students in 2020-21 as a result of their performance during the COVID-19 pandemic. While the low rates of retention in 2021-22 suggest a continued hesitancy to retain students who scored below a 1252 on the ELA M-STEP in 2021-22, it may be that the relatively higher rates of retention in that year are due to the return towards “normalcy” in the 2021-22 school year. At the end of this report, we delve into data from our educator surveys that address educators’ beliefs in the efficacy of retention as an intervention to improve literacy and their feelings about the difficulty of implementing the retention process to begin to uncover potential reasons why educators may or may not have retained eligible students.

Figure 1. End-of-Year Retention Outcomes for 3<sup>rd</sup>-Grade Students in 2020-21 and 2021-22



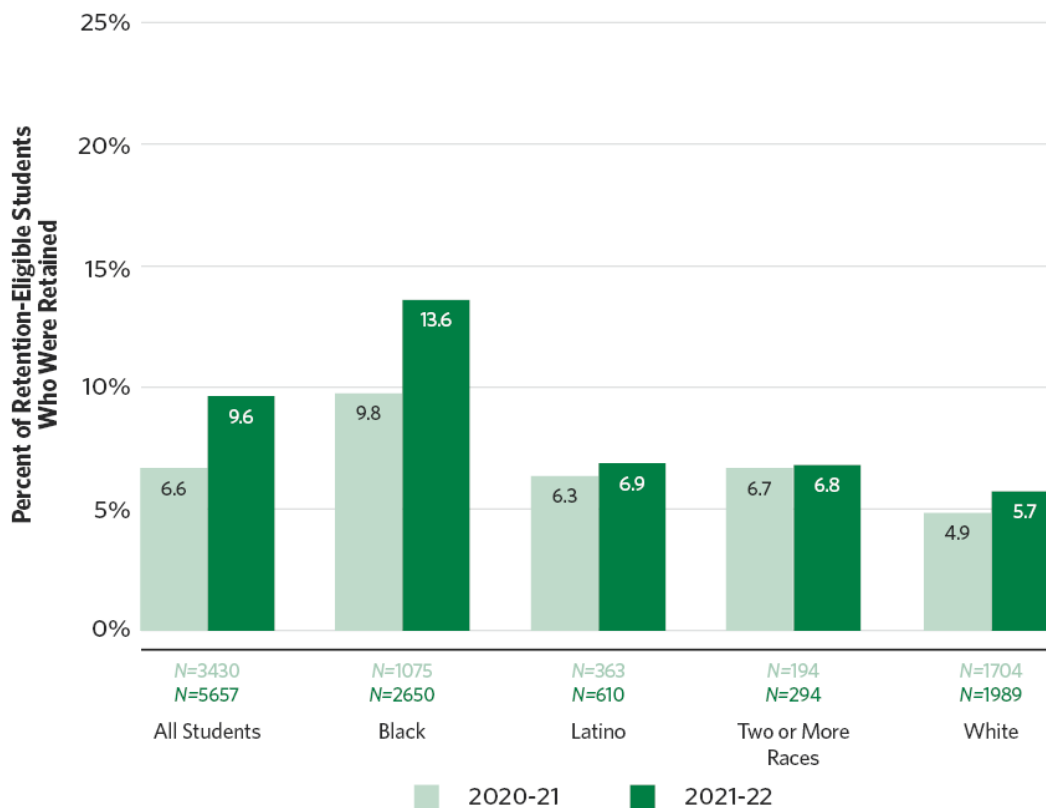
Note: Students who scored between 1253 and 1271, inclusive, were not eligible for retention under the Law but were recommended additional literacy support. Students who scored at or above 1272 were not eligible for retention under the Law. The percentages shown may not sum to exactly 100% due to rounding.

## Districts Were More Than Twice as Likely to Retain Black Than White Students

While districts promoted the vast majority of retention-eligible students in 2021-22, there were substantial disparities in districts’ reported retention decisions by student and district subgroups. Figures 2 through 6 show the proportion of retention-eligible students that districts retained overall and by student and district subgroups. We provide the number of retention-eligible students in each subgroup on the x-axis. There are several subgroups, including Asian and American Indian or Alaskan Native students, where very few students were retention eligible. To protect student anonymity, we omit these groups from the results.

Figure 2 shows that, like in 2020-21, districts retained retention-eligible Black students (13.6%) at higher rates than students of any other race or ethnicity in 2021-22. Whereas White and Latino students experienced only marginal increases in retention rates between years, Black students experienced substantial increases relative to 2020-21. As such, disparities in retention rates between Black and White or Latino students grew larger between 2020-21 and 2021-22. For instance, in 2020-21, districts were twice as likely to retain Black students than White students, whereas, in 2021-22, districts were 2.4 times as likely to retain Black than White students.

Figure 2. Retention Decisions by Student Race/Ethnicity



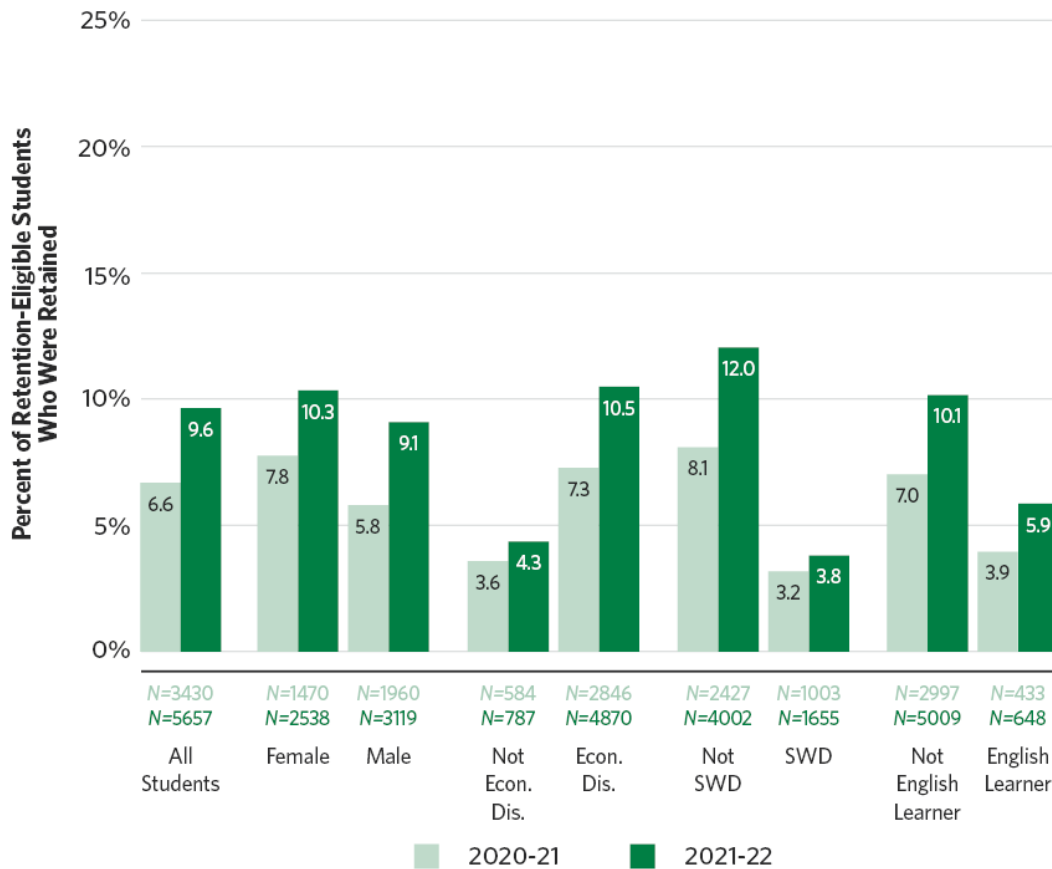
Note: These are percentages of retention-eligible 3<sup>rd</sup>-grade students. The Ns refer to the total number of retention-eligible 3<sup>rd</sup>-grade students associated with each group.

## Districts Retained Economically Disadvantaged Students at Higher Rates Than Their Wealthier Peers

Figure 3 shows that in both 2020-21 and 2021-22, economically disadvantaged students were more than twice as likely to be retained than their wealthier peers. Economically disadvantaged students also experienced a larger increase in retention rates than did their wealthier peers, resulting in increased disparities in retention rates by economic disadvantaged status.

As we saw in 2020-21, districts were less likely to retain students with disabilities and English learners than students not in these groups. This is consistent with the good cause exemptions available to these groups. However, both students with disabilities and English learners experienced increased retention rates in 2021-22 relative to 2020-21.

Figure 3. Retention Decisions by Student Characteristics



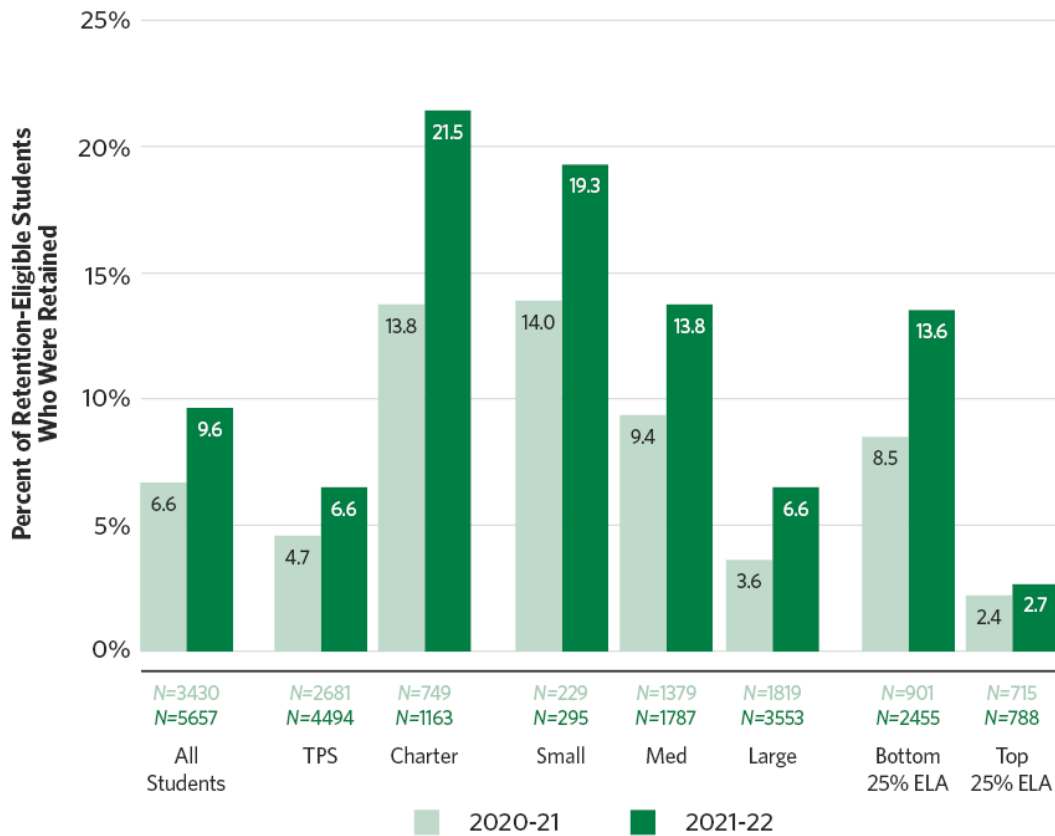
Note: These are percentages of retention-eligible 3<sup>rd</sup>-grade students. The Ns refer to the total number of retention-eligible 3<sup>rd</sup>-grade students associated with each group. Econ. Dis. stands for economically disadvantaged. SWD stands for students with a disability.

## Lower-Performing, Charter, and Urban Districts Retained Students at Higher Rates Than Others

Figure 4 shows the broad disparities in districts' retention decisions by districts' prior ELA performance. Lower-performing districts were five times as likely to retain students than higher-performing districts. While lower-performing districts also retained a larger proportion of students in 2020-21, retention rates in lower-performing districts substantially increased between years while remaining relatively constant in higher-performing districts. Thus, the gap in retention rates grew larger over time.

We also see increasing levels and gaps in retention rates across school sectors, with charter schools retaining more than one in five retention-eligible students in 2021-22, up 56% relative to 2020-21. By contrast, traditional public schools retained 40% more students in 2021-22 relative to the year prior.

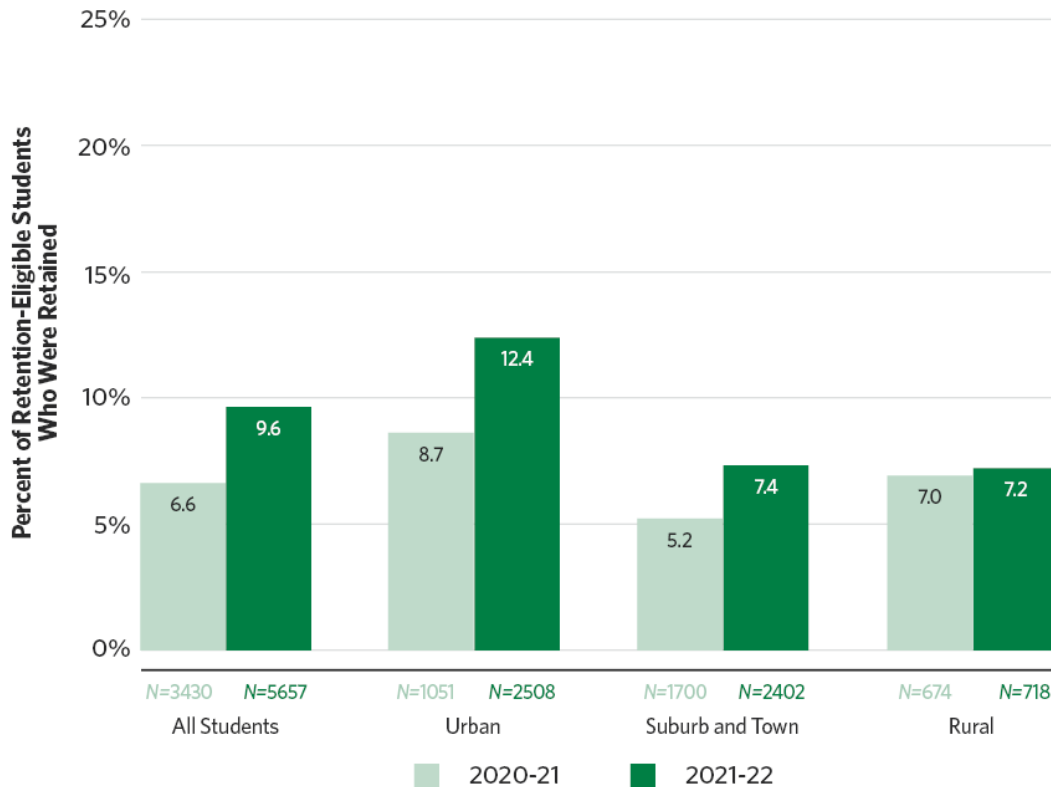
Figure 4. Retention Decisions by District Characteristics



Note: These are percentages of retention-eligible 3<sup>rd</sup>-grade students. The Ns refer to the total number of retention-eligible 3<sup>rd</sup>-grade students associated with each group. Small districts are at or below the 25th percentile of overall district enrollment. Medium districts are between the 25th and 75th percentiles of overall district enrollment. Large districts are at or above the 75th percentile of overall district enrollment.

There were also substantial disparities in retention rates by districts’ urbanicity (see Figure 5). Urban districts indicated they would retain a larger proportion of retention-eligible students than suburban and town or rural districts in 2021-22. Urban districts also experienced the largest increase in retention rates. By contrast, rural districts retained nearly the same proportion of students in 2021-22 as in 2020-21.

Figure 5. Retention Decisions by District Urbanicity



Note: These are percentages of retention-eligible 3<sup>rd</sup>-grade students. The Ns refer to the total number of retention-eligible 3<sup>rd</sup>-grade students associated with each group.

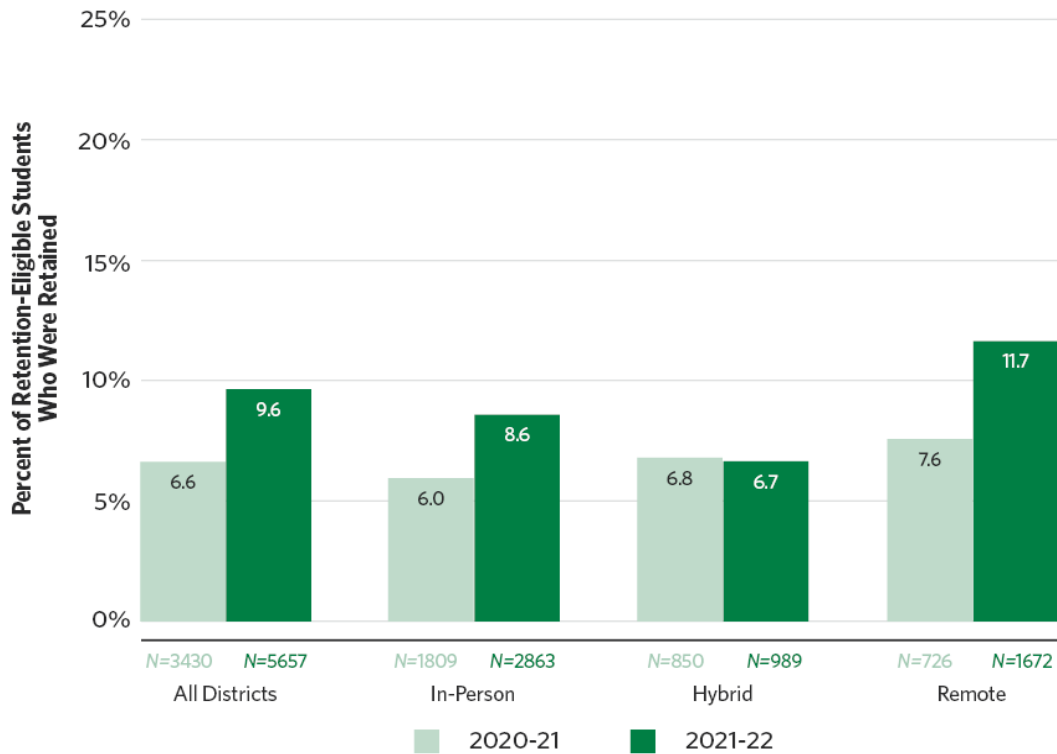
### Districts That Operated Remotely in 2020-21 Retained More Students Than Districts That Operated In-Person

We also find differences in retention rates across districts that primarily offered in-person, hybrid, or remote instruction during the 2020-21 school year. We examine variation by 2020-21 modality because of the growing evidence base suggesting remote instruction disrupted student learning, with effects persisting into the 2021-22 school year.<sup>6</sup>

Figure 6 shows that primarily remote districts in 2020-21 retained a greater proportion of students in 2021-22 than primarily in-person or hybrid districts. Remote districts also experienced the largest gains in their retention rates, increasing from 7.6% in 2020-21 to 11.7% in 2021-22 (a 54% increase). In contrast, hybrid districts retained a marginally smaller proportion of their retention-eligible students, and in-person districts retained only 2.6 percentage points (43%) more students in 2021-22 than in the year prior.

We note, however, that the instructional modality districts offered in 2020-21 is related to their test participation in that same year, as students receiving fully remote instruction were not required to participate in M-STEP testing.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, conclusions stemming from differences in reported retention decisions over time by modality group should be made cautiously.

Figure 6. Retention Decisions by Primary 2020-21 District Modality



Note: These are percentages of retention-eligible 3<sup>rd</sup>-grade students. The Ns refer to the total number of retention-eligible 3<sup>rd</sup>-grade students associated with each group.

In summary, we show that, while districts continued to promote the vast majority of eligible 3<sup>rd</sup>-grade students in 2021-22, they retained more students than in the prior year. Moreover, the disparities in retention rates across student groups and district types grew. Students from historically disadvantaged groups and low-performing districts were even more likely to be retained than their more advantaged peers in 2021-22 than in 2020-21.

## DISTRICTS' APPROACHES TO RETENTION AND EXEMPTION DECISIONS

Under the Read by Grade Three Law, districts have substantial discretion in their decisions about which retention-eligible students to retain and which to promote. In both 2020-21 and 2021-22, some districts decided to grant good cause exemptions for *all* retention-eligible students. In this section, we first examine which good cause

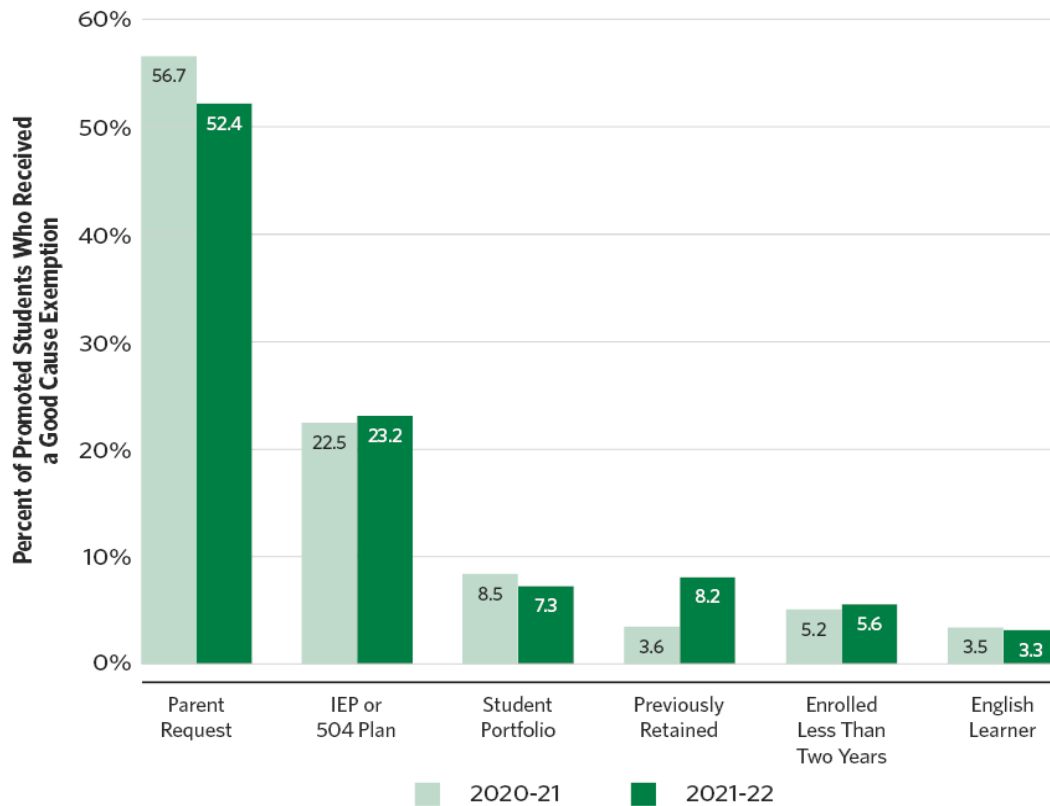


exemptions districts used and how districts made their promotion decisions. Then, we take a closer look at districts’ approaches to making these retention and exemption decisions. We compare districts’ retention decisions over time and across subgroups and examine new survey data to provide more context about educators’ perceptions about and experiences during the decision-making process.

## The Majority of Retention-Eligible Students Who Were Promoted Received a “Parent Request” Exemption

Figure 7 shows the frequency with which districts used each type of good cause exemption. The light and dark green bars represent the proportion of promoted students receiving a given good cause exemption in 2020-21 and 2021-22, respectively. Good cause exemption types follow similar patterns in both years. Most students received a promotion due to a parent’s request.<sup>8</sup> The second most frequently used exemption was for students with an IEP or Section 504 Plan. Fewer than 10% of promoted students received any other good cause exemptions in either 2020-21 or 2021-22.

Figure 7. Types of Good Cause Exemptions Granted in 2020-21 and 2021-22



Note: These are percentages of retention-eligible 3<sup>rd</sup>-grade students who districts intend to promote. Summing all bars of the same color together will equal 100%. However, the percentages shown may not sum to exactly 100% due to rounding.

## More Students Received Exemptions Due to Being Previously Retained in 2021-22 Than in the Year Prior

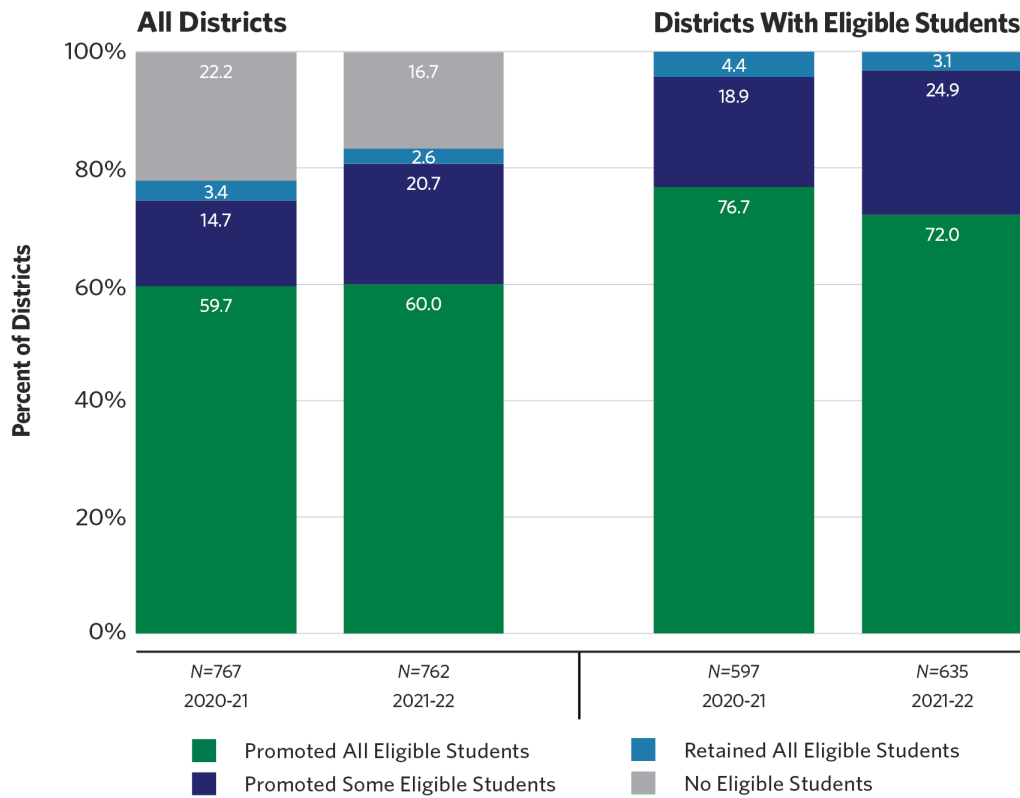
Notably, and also shown in Figure 7, more than twice as many promoted students received a good cause exemption for being previously retained in 2021-22 (8.2%) than in 2020-21 (3.6%). This increase is likely due in part to the high overall retention levels in 2020-21 (though not all attributable to the Read by Grade Three Law). In addition, districts reported a 2 percentage point increase in developmental kindergarten enrollment between 2020-21 and 2021-22, possibly contributing to the increase in exemptions due to prior retention.

## Most Districts Continued to Promote All Retention-Eligible Students

We categorize school districts based on their promotion and retention decisions in Figures 8 through 12.

Figure 8 breaks down the retention decisions of all districts in Michigan that enroll 3<sup>rd</sup>-grade students (767 and 762 districts in 2020-21 and 2021-22, respectively) on the left and districts with at least one retention-eligible student (597 and 635 districts in 2020-21 and 2021-22, respectively) on the right.<sup>9</sup> The diminished grey portions of the bars in the left side of the figure indicate that more districts had at least one retention-eligible student in 2021-22 relative to 2020-21. This may partly reflect the substantial increase in test participation between 2020-21 and 2021-22 but may also be due to decreased test performance over time. In both years, about 60% of all districts promoted all their retention-eligible students (shown in green). However, a larger proportion of all districts retained some students in 2021-22 than in 2020-21, and fewer districts retained all students (the dark and lighter blue areas of the bars).<sup>10</sup>

Figure 8. Breakdown of Districts by Decisions to Promote All, Retain All, or Promote Only Some Eligible Students



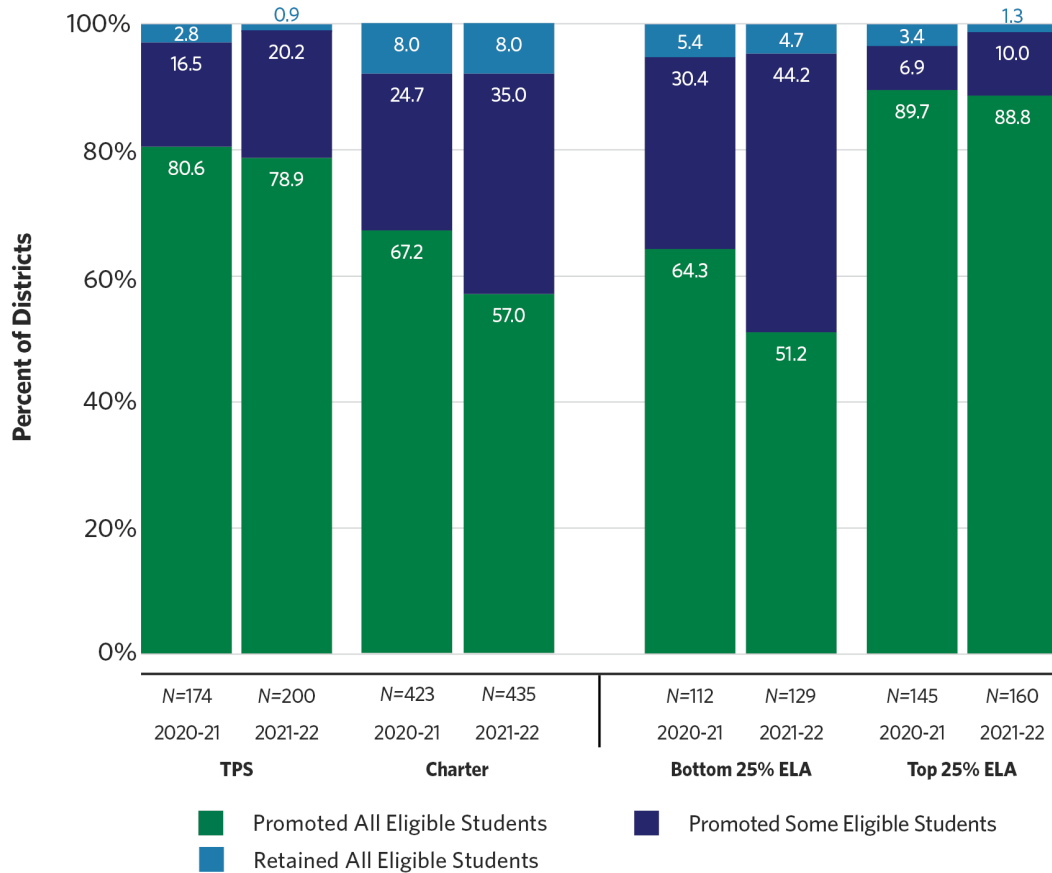
Note: These are percentages of districts with 3<sup>rd</sup>-grade students enrolled. The percentages shown may not sum to exactly 100% due to rounding.

The right side of Figure 9 shows that 72% of districts with at least one retention-eligible student promoted all eligible students, a slight decrease from 2020-21. A substantially larger proportion of districts retained some students in 2021-22 than in 2020-21. Fewer districts retained all eligible students in 2021-22 than they did in the prior year.

### Charter, Urban, and Lower-Performing Districts Were More Likely to Retain All Eligible Students

Figures 9 through 12 show differences in districts’ retention decisions by subgroup, focusing only on districts with at least one retention-eligible student. Figure 9 shows these retention decisions varied by district sector, size, and 2018-19 average ELA achievement. Like last year, TPS and high-performing districts were more likely to promote all eligible students and less likely to retain all students than charter or low-performing districts. Notably, charter school districts were more than eight times as likely as TPS districts to retain all eligible students.

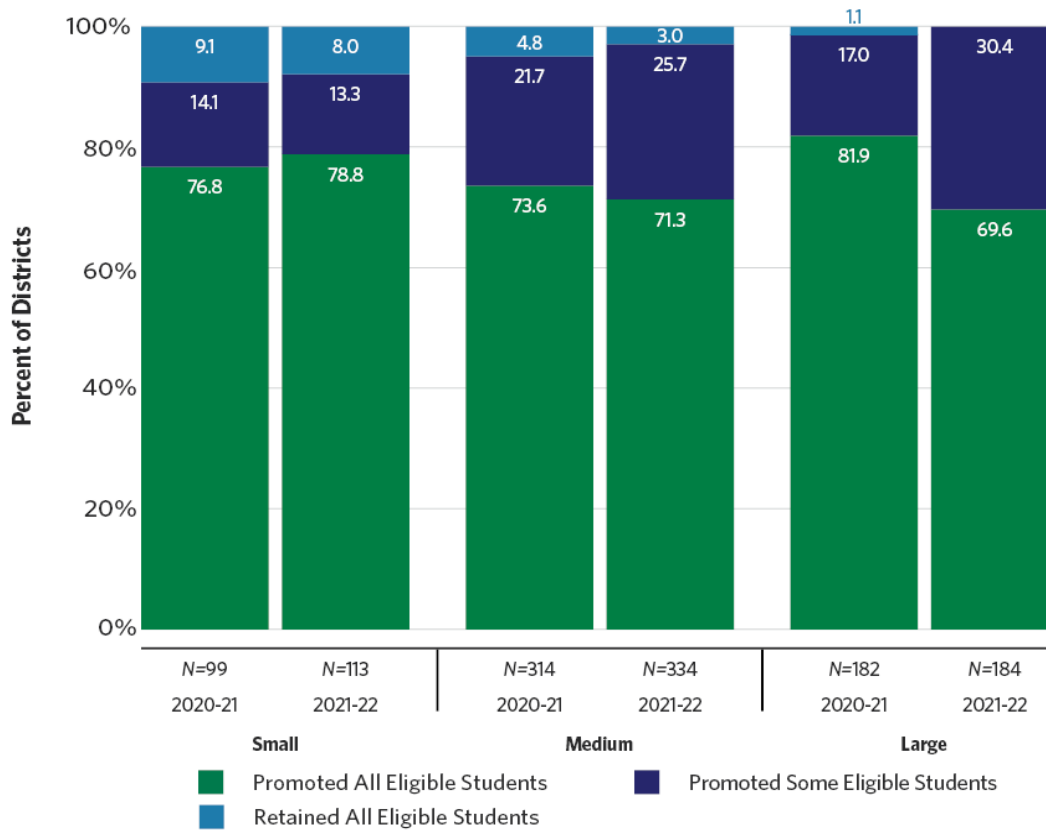
Figure 9. Breakdown of Districts by Decisions to Promote All, Retain All, or Promote Only Some Eligible Students by Sector and ELA Performance



Note: These are percentages of school districts with at least one retention-eligible 3<sup>rd</sup>-grade student enrolled. The percentages shown may not sum to exactly 100% due to rounding.

Figure 10 shows that smaller districts were more likely than larger districts to either promote or retain all eligible students. This is partly because it is more common for small districts to have just one retention-eligible student, such that the singular decision categorizes them as either retaining or promoting all eligible students. Notably, however, the relationship between district size and retention decisions contrasts with 2020-21, when larger districts were more likely to promote all students than smaller districts.

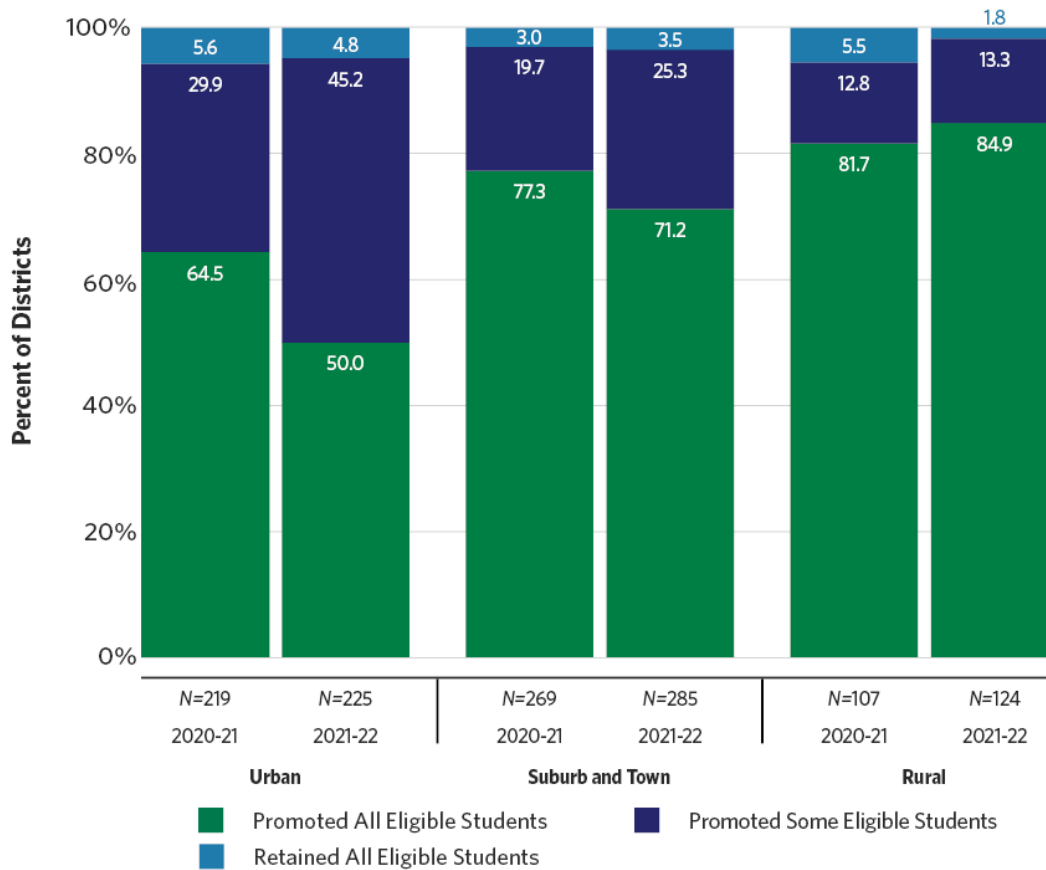
Figure 10. Breakdown of Districts by Decisions to Promote All, Retain All, or Promote Only Some Eligible Students by Size



Note: These are percentages of school districts with at least one retention-eligible 3<sup>rd</sup>-grade student enrolled. Small districts are at or below the 25th percentile of overall district enrollment. Medium districts are between the 25th and 75th percentiles of overall district enrollment. Large districts are at or above the 75th percentile of overall district enrollment. The percentages shown may not sum to exactly 100% due to rounding.

Figure 11 and Figure 12 show differences in district retention decisions by urbanicity and primary 2020-21 modality, respectively. Urban districts were substantially more likely to retain some of their eligible students in 2021-22 than in the prior year. In contrast, there was only a small increase in the number of suburban and town districts that retained some of their eligible students relative to 2020-21. These changes may reflect the increase in lower-performing students who participated in the 2021-22 M-STEP and were subject to retention under the Law.

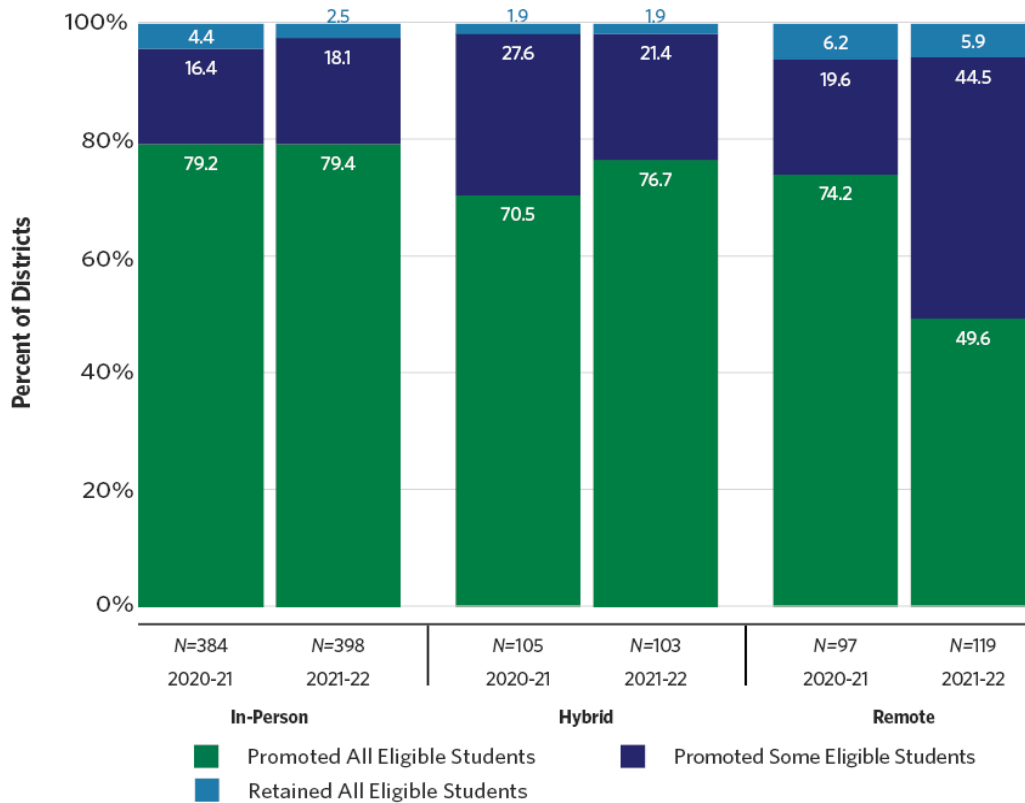
Figure 11. Breakdown of Districts by Decisions to Promote All, Retain All, or Promote Only Some Eligible Students by District Urbanicity



Note: These are percentages of school districts with at least one retention-eligible 3<sup>rd</sup>-grade student enrolled. The percentages shown may not sum to exactly 100% due to rounding.

Districts that were primarily remote in 2020-21 were more likely than hybrid or in-person districts to retain all or some eligible students in 2021-22. Moreover, the proportion of remote districts retaining all or some of their students increased substantially from 2020-21 to 2021-22. In-person districts were more likely than hybrid or remote districts to promote all eligible students in 2021-22. We note that these relationships likely correlate with the others we discussed earlier because districts that operated primarily remotely in 2020-21 were more likely to be in urban areas, be lower-performing, and educate more low-income and Black students.<sup>11</sup>

Figure 12. Breakdown of Districts by Decisions to Promote All, Retain All, or Promote Only Some Eligible Students by District’s Primary 2020-21 Instructional Modality



Note: These are percentages of school districts with at least one retention-eligible 3<sup>rd</sup>-grade student enrolled. The percentages shown may not sum to exactly 100% due to rounding.

### Principals Are the Most Likely to Believe That the Retention Process is Burdensome, Whereas Teachers Are the Most Likely to Perceive That Retention is Effective

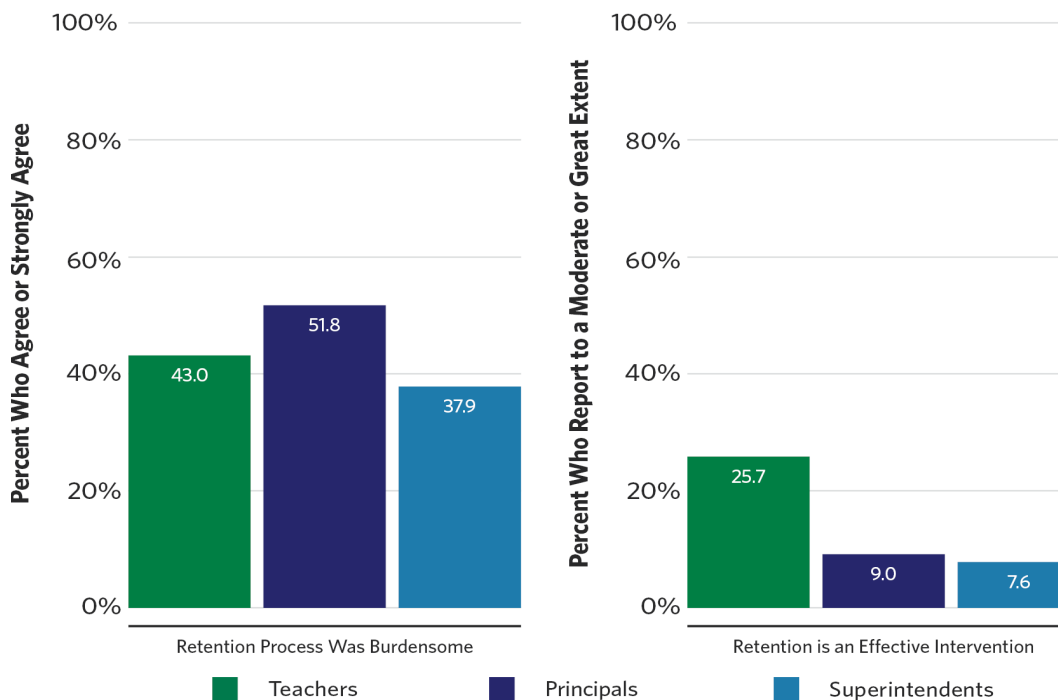
In our surveys, we asked educators about their perspectives on the degree to which the retention process was burdensome and whether retention is effective in increasing student achievement. Figure 13 summarizes educators’ responses to these two survey questions. The left-hand side of the figure shows the percentage of survey respondents who indicated that identifying and following up on retention-eligible students was either moderately or greatly burdensome. The right-hand side of the figure shows the percentage of respondents who agreed or strongly agreed that retention is an effective intervention. We use green, dark blue, and light blue bars for both questions to depict responses from K-5 teachers, K-5 principals, and district superintendents, respectively.

Principals were more likely than teachers or superintendents to report that following up on retention-eligible students was burdensome, while superintendents were the least likely. This may reflect the different roles educators and administrators play in the retention

process; although the Law stipulates that superintendents are responsible for granting good cause exemptions, it is reasonable to assume that in districts where superintendents are less involved in day-to-day operations, they might delegate these decisions and processes to principals, who might be better informed on the individual cases.

Interestingly, teachers were far more likely than principals or superintendents to indicate that retention is an effective intervention. However, even this group does not appear to overwhelmingly support retention as an effective intervention; just 26% of teachers believe retention is at least moderately effective.

**Figure 13. Educators’ Views on the Burdensomeness of the Retention Process and the Effectiveness of Retention**



*Note: On the left-hand side, educators were asked the extent to which they agreed with the statement, “Identifying/following up on retention-eligible students was burdensome.” On the right-hand side, educators were asked, “Please indicate the extent to which you believe each of the following elements [Retention] of the Read by Grade Three Law will be effective in increasing student achievement.”*

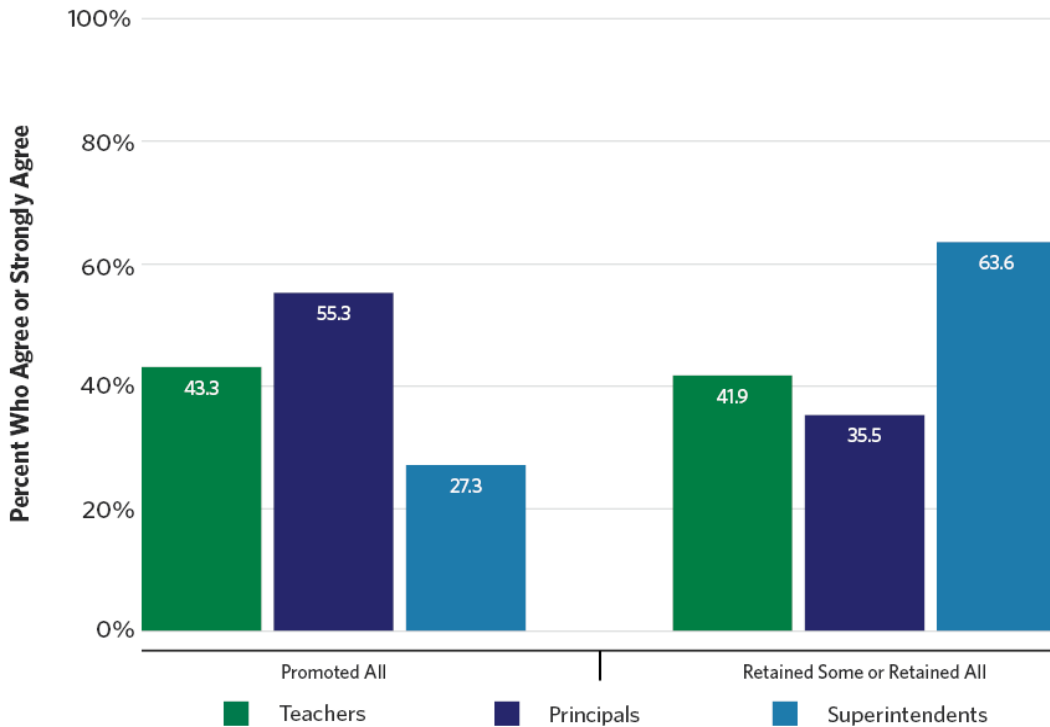
### Principals in Districts That Retained All or Some Eligible Students Thought the Retention Process Was Less Burdensome Than Those in Districts That Retained None

Next, we examine whether educators’ perceptions of the burden associated with student retention differed by whether their districts retained at least some or retained no eligible students.<sup>12</sup> We focus on districts’ retention decisions in 2020-21 because the survey questions specifically asked educators to respond based on their reflections about that year.



Figure 14 shows that principals in districts that retained all or some of their retention-eligible students in 2020-21 were less likely to report that the process was burdensome compared to principals in districts that did not retain any students. This may be because principals are more likely to retain students when they feel it is not overly burdensome or because principals who retain students believe the process is not particularly burdensome once they have engaged with it. In contrast, superintendents in districts that retained at least one student in 2020-21 were *more* likely to report the retention process was burdensome. This divergence might reflect the different roles principals and superintendents play in the retention process. Teachers reported similar levels of burden from following up with retention-eligible students regardless of whether their districts retained at least some or none of their eligible students.

**Figure 14. Views on the Burdensomeness of the Retention Process by Retention of Eligible Students**



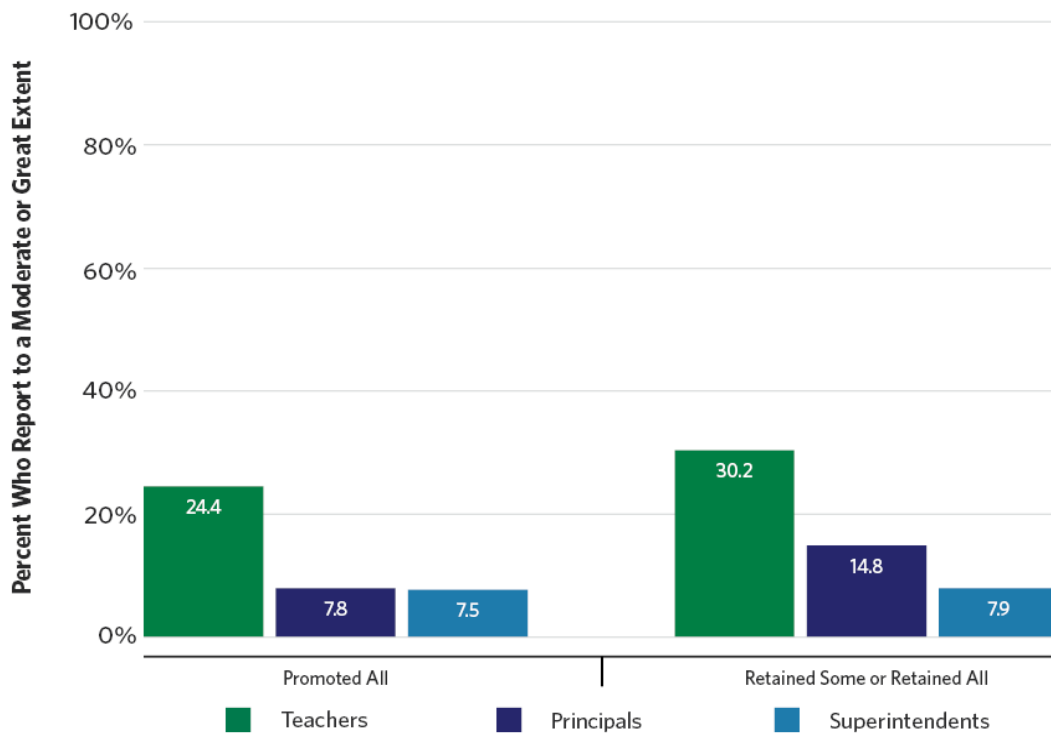
*Note: Educators were asked the extent to which they agreed with the statement: "Identifying/following up on retention-eligible students was burdensome."*

### Educators in Districts That Retained Students Thought Retention Was More Effective Than Those in Districts That Retained None

Figure 15 suggests that teachers and principals working in districts that retained some or all of their retention-eligible students in 2020-21 were more likely to respond that they viewed retention as effective than teachers and principals in districts that

retained none of their eligible students that year. This suggests that there may be a relationship between the perceived effectiveness of retention and the propensity of districts to retain students. In other words, districts are more likely to retain students if they believe retention is an effective intervention to improve student achievement.

Figure 15. Breakdown of Teacher and Principal Views on the Effectiveness of Retention by Retention of Eligible Students



Note: Educators were asked, “Please indicate the extent to which you believe each of the following elements of the Read by Grade Three Law will be effective in increasing student achievement.”

In summary, the majority of school districts promoted all retention-eligible 3rd-grade students to 4th grade through good cause exemptions. However, increases in test participation from lower-performing students, and the increase in the number of retention-eligible students, led to more districts retaining students in 2021-22 than in the prior year. Our survey data suggest that principals in districts that retained students tend to think the retention process is less burdensome than those in districts that promoted all students. Moreover, teachers, principals, and superintendents in districts that retained some students believed retention was more effective at improving students’ outcomes than educators in districts that promoted all students, suggesting that educators are more likely to retain students if they are optimistic about the efficacy of retention.

# Key Takeaways

There are several takeaways from this report that illustrate the characteristics of 3<sup>rd</sup>-grade students who school districts chose to retain and promote under the Read by Grade Three Law. Most point to increasing disparities in the likelihood of retention for retention-eligible students across district and student types compared to the prior year.

- **Districts retained more students under the Read by Grade Three Law in 2021-22 than in 2020-21.** Districts still promoted the vast majority of retention-eligible students in 2021-22. However, districts retained 545 students in 2021-22, more than twice the number of students flagged for retention in 2020-21 (228). In both years, about three-quarters of districts with at least one eligible student decided to promote all eligible students to the 4th grade. However, the increase in eligible students, in combination with the increased test participation of lower-performing students, led to a greater number of districts retaining at least some eligible students in 2021-22.
- **Disparities in retention outcomes by race, economic disadvantage, and district type grew larger in 2021-22.** Black and economically disadvantaged students are more than twice as likely to be retained as their White and wealthier peers. These gaps increased in 2021-22 relative to the prior year. Low-performing, urban, and primarily remote (in 2020-21) districts, as well as charter schools, were substantially more likely to retain students than other district types. Again, disparities in retention rates across district types grew relative to 2020-21.
- **Most educators do not believe that retention is an effective strategy to improve student literacy. However, educators in districts that retained students under the Read by Grade Three Law were somewhat more optimistic that retention would increase student achievement.** Teachers and principals in districts that retained at least one student in 2020-21 were more likely to believe retention was an effective intervention than those in districts that promoted all students, suggesting that districts are more likely to retain students if they believe it is effective. Overall, teachers were more likely than principals or superintendents to believe that retention effectively improves student outcomes.
- **In districts that promoted all their retention-eligible students through good cause exemptions, principals found the process to be more burdensome.** Principals in districts that retained at least one student in 2020-21 thought that the retention process was less burdensome than those in

districts that promoted all students. The relationship was the opposite for superintendents, likely reflecting differences in the involvement of principals and superintendents in the retention process.

- **More than twice the proportion of students received good cause exemptions because they were previously retained in the 2021-22 school year relative to the year prior.** While the frequency of good cause exemption types stayed relatively stable relative to 2020-21, more than twice the proportion of students received an exemption due to prior retention than in the previous year.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> A description of the retention process in 2020-21 can be found in EPIC's 2020-21 Read by Grade Three Law Initial Retention Decisions Report here: [https://epicedpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/EPIC-Initial\\_Retention\\_Decisions\\_October2021\\_v2.pdf](https://epicedpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/EPIC-Initial_Retention_Decisions_October2021_v2.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> See EPIC's Extended COVID-19 Learning [ECOL] Reports for full definitions here: <https://epicedpolicy.org/ecol-reports/>

<sup>3</sup> See EPIC's Michigan's Read by Grade Three Law: Year Two Report for additional details regarding the history and development of EPIC's surveys of Michigan educators. <https://epicedpolicy.org/rbg3-year-two-report/>

<sup>4</sup> Although there is no database of district-provided e-mail addresses for all teachers in the state, MDE provided the e-mail addresses associated with teachers' accounts in the Michigan Online Educator Certification System (MOECS). Additionally, some districts authorized us to access their staff e-mail rosters from the Michigan Data Hub and we incorporated them into a survey outreach effort to bolster response rates.

<sup>5</sup> See EPIC's 2020-21 Preliminary Read by Grade Three Retention Estimates report here: <https://epicedpolicy.org/preliminary-read-by-grade-three-retention-estimates/>

<sup>6</sup> For more information see EPIC's reports on the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on achievement in Michigan here: <https://epicedpolicy.org/covid-19-education-policy/>

<sup>7</sup> See the MDE's "Spring 2021 Spring Summative Assessments: Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)" memo here:

[https://www.michigan.gov/documents/mde/Spring\\_2021\\_Summative\\_Assessments\\_FAQ\\_721789\\_7.pdf](https://www.michigan.gov/documents/mde/Spring_2021_Summative_Assessments_FAQ_721789_7.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> The superintendent must approve parent requests. The superintendent must agree that promotion to 4<sup>th</sup> grade is in the student's best interest.

<sup>9</sup> The total number of districts with 3<sup>rd</sup>-grade students changes slightly from year to year due to structural changes (e.g., district closures, consolidations, or grade configuration changes) and small, rural districts that have 3<sup>rd</sup>-graders enrolled in some years and not in others.

<sup>10</sup> Of the districts serving 3<sup>rd</sup>-grade students, 597 had at least one retention-eligible student in 2020-21 and 635 had at least one retention-eligible student in 2021-22. Of the districts with at least one retention-eligible student, 130 had exactly one eligible student in 2020-21 and 126 had exactly one in 2021-22. These districts with exactly one retention-eligible student can only fall in the "retained all" or "promoted all" categories.

<sup>11</sup> See EPIC’s May 2021 ECOL report for comparisons between the characteristics of districts that offered different modes of instruction throughout the 2020-21 school year:

[https://epicedpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/EPIC\\_ECOL\\_report\\_May2021.pdf](https://epicedpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/EPIC_ECOL_report_May2021.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> We combine the “retained all” and “retained some” groups because the number of districts that retained all students was too small to make meaningful comparisons.