



Powered by  3P Learning



Creating lifelong learners

The Critical Role of Fluency in Third-Grade Retention Policies



Why prevention, not retention, should be the focus of early literacy interventions

Third grade is a pivotal year in a child's education—the time when they transition from *learning to read* to *reading to learn*.

Yet, across the U.S., thousands of students are held back each year because they can't meet literacy benchmarks.

While third-grade retention policies aim to give struggling students more time to catch up, research shows that retention alone isn't enough. Without targeted, evidence-based interventions, these students often fall further behind.

In our recent 3P Learning webinar, Dr. Tim Rasinski, a leading literacy expert and professor at Kent State University, highlighted a critical but often overlooked factor in early literacy: **reading fluency**.



Why fluency matters more than you think

Reading fluency—the ability to read with speed, accuracy and expression—is a key predictor of comprehension. Yet, many early literacy programs focus solely on phonics, leaving fluency by the wayside. As Dr. Rasinski puts it:

“Phonics is necessary, but it’s not sufficient. It’s like giving students all the ingredients for a meal but never teaching them how to cook. Fluency is the bridge between word recognition and true comprehension.”

Without fluency, even students with strong phonics skills struggle to process and understand what they read. This is where traditional retention strategies fall short: repeating the same instruction without fluency-focused interventions leads to the same outcome—frustrated students who continue to fall behind.

Retention policies: Are they helping or hurting?

Over 30 states have implemented third-grade retention policies, requiring students to meet reading proficiency standards before moving to fourth grade. Each year, an estimated **62,000 students repeat third grade** because of these mandates.

While retention provides more time for struggling students, research shows it doesn't significantly improve long-term literacy outcomes. Worse, it can harm a child's self-esteem, motivation and academic trajectory.

So, what's the alternative?

A research-backed solution: The Fluency Development Lesson (FDL)

Dr. Rasinski shared an evidence-based strategy proven to accelerate literacy growth in as little as **four months**: the **Fluency Development Lesson (FDL)**. This 15-minute daily practice combines multiple research-backed techniques to dramatically improve fluency and comprehension.

How it works:

- **Modeled reading:** Teachers read texts aloud, demonstrating proper pace and expression.
- **Assisted reading:** Students read alongside a fluent reader (teacher, peer or audiobook).
- **Repeated readings:** Students re-read the same text to build automaticity.
- **Performance reading:** Students 'perform' a poem or passage for an audience.
- **Word study:** The lesson ends with phonics and vocabulary reinforcement.



Proven results: What the research says

In one study, a fourth-grade teacher implemented FDL with six struggling readers, each at risk of retention. In just four months:

- **Fluency increased by an average of 28 words per minute**—twice the expected growth rate.
- **Comprehension levels jumped by more than a full grade level.**
- **Students caught up to their peers faster** than traditional interventions allowed.

These findings mirror those of the National Reading Panel and other literacy researchers: fluency-building strategies accelerate literacy gains more effectively than phonics alone.

How schools can implement this approach

District leaders should advocate for fluency-based interventions within their literacy programs rather than relying on retention as a primary strategy.

Here's what school leaders and educators can do now:



1. **Embed fluency instruction into daily literacy blocks:**
Integrate explicit and structured fluency practice as a core component of daily literacy instruction.
2. **Incorporate repeated readings and performance-based activities:**
Encourage students to read and re-read meaningful, engaging texts, including poetry, scripts and song lyrics.
3. **Leverage technology for assisted reading:**
Digital tools like **Reading Eggs** provide read-aloud features, fluency tracking and guided support to help students build automaticity.
4. **Ensure struggling readers receive targeted fluency interventions:**
Replace retention with structured fluency-building practices, like the FDL, to help struggling students catch up quickly and confidently.

The future of early literacy: From retention to acceleration

The message is clear: Fluency is the missing piece in early literacy instruction. Instead of relying on retention as a fallback, schools must prioritize fluency development to ensure students don't just decode words but truly understand and engage with texts.

By shifting the focus from catching up to accelerating growth, we can prevent the need for retention altogether.



About Dr. Timothy Rasinski

Dr. Timothy Rasinski is a professor of literacy education at Kent State University and director of its award-winning reading clinic. A leading expert in reading fluency and word study, he has authored over **50 books** and **200+ articles** on literacy education. His research has been cited by the National Reading Panel and published in top journals, including Reading Research Quarterly and The Reading Teacher. Dr. Rasinski has served on the Board of Directors for the International Reading Association, co-edited The Reading Teacher and Journal of Literacy Research and was elected to the **International Reading Hall of Fame**. He has received multiple awards for his contributions to literacy education.

A former classroom and Title I teacher, Dr. Rasinski previously taught at the University of Georgia and is a U.S. Armed Forces veteran.

Want to learn more?

- [Watch our full webinar recording](#): Access the full discussion with Dr. Tim Rasinski.
- [Explore Reading Eggs](#): Our ESSA-certified, research-backed online literacy program provides fluency-building tools, decodable texts and engaging reading activities to help students cross the bridge from decoding to comprehension.

