Spelling it out — policies directed at ensuring early reading success

DENVER — The Education Commission of the States focuses on third-grade reading proficiency in a new report highlighting policies in all 50 states plus the District of Columbia.

Research shows that a student’s ability to read proficiently by the third grade is of monumental importance. It significantly impacts a child’s ability to successfully progress through school and meet future grade-level expectations. Studies have even shown that children not reading at grade level by third grade are four times less likely to graduate from high school on time and are at greater risk of dropping out of school.

State policymakers are keenly aware of the importance of reading at grade level by third grade. Policymakers in many states have been advocating for policies aimed at three key levers:

- Identifying reading deficiencies with state or local assessments.
- Providing interventions for struggling readers in grades K-3.
- Retaining outgoing third-graders not meeting grade-level expectations.

With the release of Third-grade reading policies, ECS captures current statutory provisions specifically for these three levers. This comprehensive look at third grade reading policies in all 50 states plus the District of Columbia will assist education policymakers and stakeholders as they look to continually improve early reading success for all students.

Highlights from this report, which looks at all 50 states and the District of Columbia, include:
- 35 states plus the District of Columbia require a reading assessment in at least one grade, preK-3, with the primary purpose to identify reading deficiencies. The assessments are a mix of state-mandated and locally determined approaches.
- 31 states plus D.C. require or recommend that districts offer some type of intervention or remediation for struggling readers for a P-3 grade. Some states require specific interventions while others let districts choose from a list of suggested interventions.
- 14 states plus D.C. require the retention of third grade students who do not meet grade-level expectations in reading. Three additional states allow students to be retained based on a recommendation from teacher, parent or superintendent.

“Research clearly demonstrates the importance of reading at grade level by third grade and, unfortunately, we know that only one-third of our nation’s children are meeting this academic milestone,” said Bruce Atchison, director of ECS’ Early Learning Institute. “Education policymakers are dedicated to ensuring their state’s students are reading at grade level by third grade. This new ECS report provides stakeholders with a complete view of policies addressing this universal education priority.”

ECS was created by states, for states, in 1965. We track policy, translate research, provide unbiased advice and create opportunities for state policymakers to learn from one another.