

Third-Grade Promotion Training for District Leaders

Arkansas Department of Education
Division of Elementary & Secondary Education
September 4, 2025



Agenda

Objective: Update districts on the state's new requirements for third-grade promotion and the district requirements to support its students.

Agenda:

- Background and the LEARNS Act
- Identifying at-risk students before third-grade
- Good cause exemption
- Services for students not meeting the third grade reading standard
- Our shared responsibility
- Resources

Background and the LEARNS Act

The State of the State

Arkansas is facing a critical challenge in third grade reading proficiency. Far too many of our students are falling behind national benchmarks, signaling a growing gap that demands urgent attention.

	4th	8th
NAEP Reading Proficiency	28%	25%
NAEP State Rank	36	35

As leaders in education, we understand the profound, long-term consequences when children do not read proficiently by the end of third grade. **This milestone is not just an academic benchmark, it's a pivotal predictor of future academic success, high school graduation, and lifelong opportunity.**

LEARNS Response

In an effort to ensure our students are reading by 3rd grade, the LEARNS Act charged the Arkansas Department of Education to update its requirements for 3rd grade promotion.

The LEARNS Act outlines requirements for:

- Criteria for promotion to 4th grade
- Good cause exemptions
- Required supports and interventions



In alignment with the **Arkansas LEARNS Act**, beginning at the end of the **2025-2026 school year**, third-grade students are expected to meet a minimum reading standard to be promoted to fourth grade.

This requirement aligns with the vision set forth in Arkansas' Right to Read Act, reinforcing the state's commitment to literacy as a foundation for lifelong learning, ensuring that every student receives the support needed to read by third grade.

Third Grade Promotion

At the end of the 2025–2026 school year, third graders who do not meet the state-defined minimum reading standard AND do not qualify for a good cause exemption will **not** be promoted to fourth grade.

ATLAS Scores

Overview of ATLAS Assessment performance levels and the resulting recommendation for promotions:

Will be promoted to the next grade level	Level 4	Students demonstrate an advanced understanding of the knowledge and skills required of the grade-level standards. These students are on track for career and college, and demonstrate readiness for advanced content at the next grade/course
	Level 3	Students demonstrate a mastery understanding of knowledge and skills required of the grade-level standards. These students are on track for career and college.
	Level 2	Students demonstrate a basic understanding of knowledge and skills required of the grade-level standards and personalized support may be needed to access content taught in the next grade/course.
Reading Standard		
At risk of retention	Level 1	Students demonstrated limited understanding of knowledge and skills required of the grade-level standards and will require substantial support/scaffolding to access content taught at the next grade level.

Supporting Every Student's Right to Read

The intent of the 3rd Grade Promotion Law is to identify and support struggling readers early and ensure every student receives the support they need to become a successful reader.

Students will...	Families will...	Teachers will...	Principals will...	Districts will...	Co-Ops will...	ADE will...
Achieve success as learners by improving their academic skills through dedicated intervention , better preparing them for future grades and beyond.	Be engaged partners on their child's progress, and feel confident their child is being supported to become a strong reader.	Use screeners to identify students who need support, implement effective, evidence-based reading instruction and interventions, develop and monitor IRPs , and communicate with families about student growth.	Assign students to well-equipped teachers, support intervention planning , and lead family communication efforts.	Support schools to provide interventions and staffing to meet the requirements of the law, offer professional development , and track screener data to ensure early, consistent intervention.	Train districts on policy details and best practices, and support implementation of high-quality literacy instruction within an MTSS system.	Set a statewide vision that prioritizes early reading success, provide technical assistance and implementation guidance , develop family- and educator-facing tools , and monitor progress toward full implementation of the promotion policy.

Identifying At-Risk Students Before Third Grade

Role of the District

To ensure students are on track to meet the third-grade reading standard, districts should identify and provide early, targeted support to kindergarten through grade 2 students who show signs of reading difficulty, including in-class support and Intersession & Summer Programs.

At-risk Indicators from Kindergarten to Grade 2

- A score of “Potential Risk” on the ATLAS K–2 screener or “Level 1” score on the summative assessments
- Consistently low performance on:
 - Classroom literacy assignments and/or activities
 - Curriculum-based measurements (CBMs)
 - Interim assessments and/or common formative assessments
- Difficulty with foundational reading skills such as phonemic awareness, decoding, encoding, fluency, and comprehension

The goal is to intervene early, well before promotion decisions are necessary. Early identification allows for timely intervention, reducing the need for retention decisions at the end of grade 3.

Response to At-Risk Students

If a student is identified as at risk for reading difficulties, **districts and schools must act quickly** by implementing proven practices provided by highly qualified staff:

- **Explicit and systematic interventions** focused on literacy skills
- **Individualized instruction** based on each student's specific reading needs, provided through one-on-one or small-group settings
- **Frequent progress monitoring** to track whether interventions are effective—and make adjustments when they are not
- **Ongoing communication with families** to share student progress, risk indicators, and strategies for supporting reading at home
- **Professional learning for educators** to ensure instruction is aligned to the science of reading and delivered with integrity
- **A well-thought-out and detailed Individual Reading Plan (IRP)** with input from parents, legal guardians, or persons standing in loco parentis to a student.

Refer to the **District Toolkit** for specific examples and actionable steps to implement each of these supports.



Good Cause Exemption

What is Good Cause Exemption?

Under the Arkansas LEARNS Act, students who do not meet the third-grade reading standard may still be promoted to grade 4 if they qualify for a **good cause exemption**.

These exemptions apply when a student does not meet the reading standard but meets specific criteria that warrant promotion.

Qualifying for Good Cause Exemption

Students may qualify for a good cause exemption and be promoted to 4th grade if they fall into one of the following categories:

Students with the most significant cognitive disabilities	Students with the most significant cognitive disabilities who are eligible for the Dynamic Learning Map (DLM) assessment.
Students with disabilities (Non-DLM)	Students with a disability who have a current IEP or 504 Plan <i>and</i> have more than 2 years of well-documented Science of Reading (SoR)-aligned interventions delivered with fidelity.
English Learner	Students who have had less than 3 years of formal English Learner instruction. • For students who attended 3 to 4 years of instruction, the LPAC Committee will need to convene and look at all data points to determine if EL students have received meaningful access to core (Tier 1 with appropriate linguistic accommodations) to make an individual decision concerning promotion. • For newcomers with fewer than 3 years of instruction, the LPAC team will need to convene and look at all data points to make individual student decisions.
Students Previously retained	Students who have already been retained.
Students receiving intensive support	Students who were previously evaluated for special education services and did not qualify, who have had intensive and evidence-based intervention for 2 or more years, and continue to demonstrate a reading need.
Assessment portfolio	Students who have consistently performed at grade level in current and prior school years but score a Level 1 on the Grade 3 ATLAS assessment may demonstrate proficiency if the school provides substantial evidence through a student portfolio showing that the results do not accurately reflect the student's reading ability. This may include students who scored a Level 2 in Reading on ATLAS.
Other students with necessary, justifiable good-cause exemptions	Students who experienced an isolated traumatic event that directly impacted performance on the assessment.

Students with Disabilities

Students with disabilities who do not meet the third-grade reading standard **are not automatically eligible for promotion based solely on the presence of an IEP or 504 plan.**

Promotion must be based on clearly defined criteria and documented evidence in the student's IEP or 504 plan of instructional history and ongoing needs.

These students must meet the criteria of a good cause exemption in order to be promoted.

The Student Assessment Portfolio

In rare cases, a Student Assessment Portfolio may serve as an alternate assessment for students who:

- Score Level 1 on the Grade 3 ATLAS summative assessment but are otherwise performing at grade level **and**
- Were not previously identified for intervention in grades 2 or 3.

Portfolio use should be limited to exceptional circumstances and only for students meeting both of these criteria.

This pathway is intended for students showing inconsistency, whose summative test results may not reflect their true reading ability based on consistent classroom performance throughout the school year.

Services for Students Not Meeting the Third-Grade Reading Standard

Required Services for Identified Students

Students who do not meet the third-grade reading standard and are not promoted to grade 4 or promoted through a good cause exemption must receive intensive, targeted support to accelerate their reading development and progress toward grade-level proficiency. These students shall:

- Be assigned to a highly qualified teacher
- Receive at least 90 minutes of daily, evidence-based reading instruction aligned with the Science of Reading
- Receive a Read-at-Home Plan aligned with their Individual Reading Plan (IRP), including strategies based on the Science of Reading
- Be prioritized for at-home literacy tutoring grants
- Have access to additional interventions tailored to their individual literacy needs
- Be tracked through a school-maintained data system to monitor progress and evaluate the effectiveness of interventions

Districts are responsible for ensuring ongoing monitoring and timely adjustments to interventions throughout the school year to help each student reach grade-level proficiency.

Please refer to the [District Toolkit](#) for more information.

Identifying a Highly-Qualified Reading Teacher

All third-grade students who are either **retained** or **promoted through a good cause exemption** must receive instruction from a highly qualified **reading** teacher.

A teacher is considered highly qualified under this policy if he/she meets any of the following:

- Earn an **ELA growth score in the top quartile statewide** based on the three-year average found in the [Teacher Growth Data and Trends module](#) in LEA Insights
 - First priority for student assignment
- Earn a highly-effective rating according to the Educator Effectiveness System (EES)
- Hold a [Master Professional Educator Designation](#)
 - **DESE is working to develop Master Designation Pathways with a focus on Science of Reading**

Need Help Developing Your Staffing Plan? Refer to the **District Toolkit** for alternative options for identifying a highly-qualified teacher. The Arkansas Department of Education is committed to supporting your district with building a plan that makes sense in your community.



Family Communications

Consistent Family Communication

Schools must communicate with families **early and often** to ensure they are informed partners in supporting their child's reading development.

Communication should happen **throughout the year**, not just when a child is identified as at risk.

Schools should share assessment results, progress updates, and information about available supports in a timely, clear, and proactive way. Families should be given opportunities to ask questions and participate in their child's support plan.

Next Steps for District Leaders

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1. **Identify At-Risk Students (Grades K-2):** Use ATLAS early warning indicators to identify students at risk of not meeting 3rd grade reading standards and collaborate with school leaders to ensure accuracy and completeness of the list.
2. **Coordinate Special Education Review:** Direct school SPED leads to review their caseloads. Determine which “at risk” students may need an Individualized Reading Plan (IRP), even if they are already receiving special education services.
3. **Review & Strengthen Intervention Plans:** Audit intervention plans for all “at risk” students and ensure plans are evidence-based, targeted to specific reading needs, and monitored for effectiveness.
4. **Align Supports Across Teams:** Facilitate collaboration between general education, SPED, and intervention teams. Promote consistent communication and data-sharing to support student success.
5. **Prepare for Fall Implementation:** Set timelines for IRP development and progress monitoring and plan professional development or support structures as needed.

Our Shared Responsibility

Supporting Student Success

Ensuring that all students read proficiently by the end of third grade is a shared responsibility—and a critical milestone for long-term academic success.

The policies and supports outlined in this guidance are designed to promote early identification, timely intervention, and sustained progress for every learner.

By working in partnership with families, implementing evidence-based practices with integrity and using data to drive decisions, districts can create a strong foundation for student literacy and support successful transitions to fourth grade and beyond.



Resources

Resources: District Planning Toolkit



Arkansas's Third-Grade Promotion District Toolkit

This toolkit includes resources and training to help schools carry out Arkansas's Third Grade Promotion requirements under the LEARNS Act.

QUICK REFERENCE

-  **Understanding AR Third Grade Promotion At-a-Glance**  **LINK**
This at-a-glance reference offers a high-level overview of third grade promotion information from the Technical Assistance Manual (TAM).

-  **Technical Assistance Manual for Third Grade Promotion**  **LINK**
This technical assistance manual provides districts with guidance for implementing student promotion requirements.
-  **District Training**
The training slide deck on 3rd-grade promotion is available for district & school leaders at the provided link.


Beginning at the end of the 2025-2026 school year, third-grade students are expected to meet a minimum reading standard to be promoted to fourth grade.



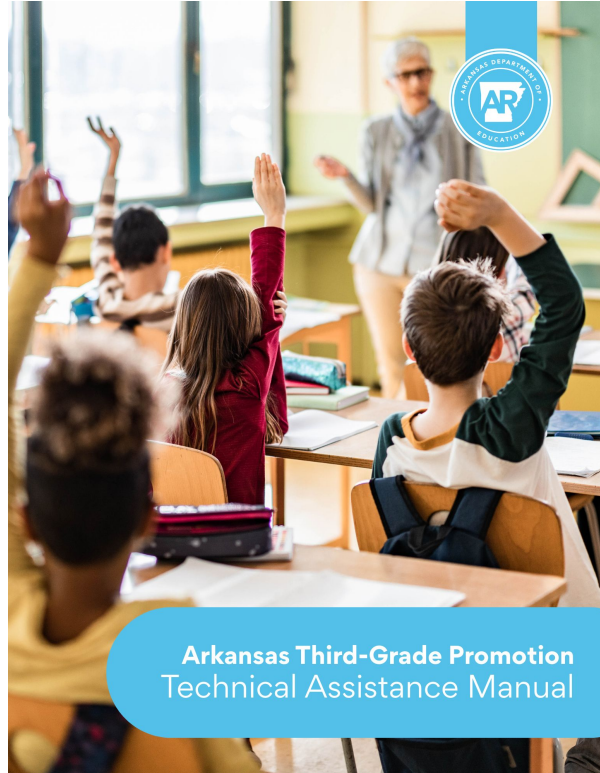


The Arkansas Department of Education developed the **The District Planning Toolkit** resources to support you in your implementation of the third-grade promotion requirements:

[DESE Website](#)
[Third Grade Promotion](#)



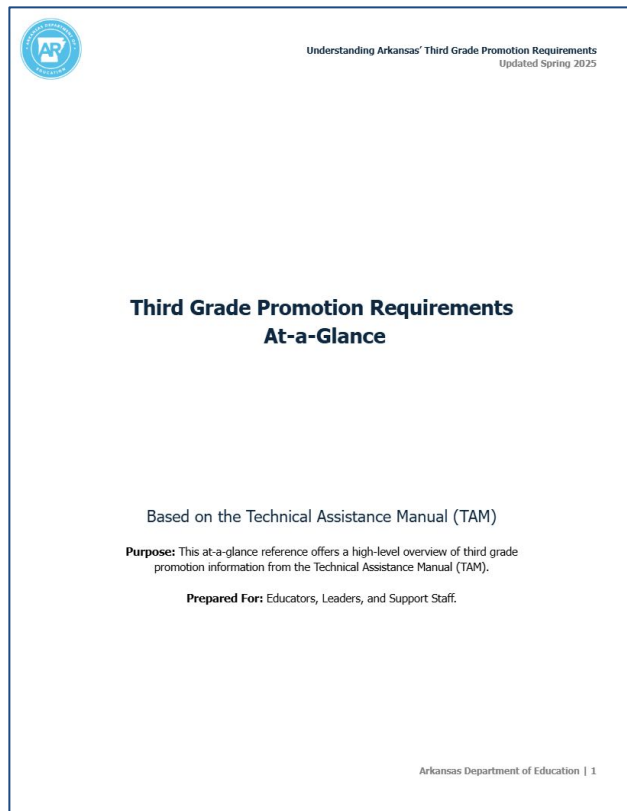
Technical Assistance Manual (TAM)



The TAM provides districts with guidance for implementing student promotion requirements.



TAM - At-a-Glance



This at-a-glance reference offers a high-level overview of third grade promotion information from the Technical Assistance Manual (TAM).



K - 3 Assessment Schedule

Assessment Name	Who is Assessed	What is Assessed	What is Reported Out
BOY Universal Screener	All K-3 students	Prior grade level or early progression skills	Potential Risk or Ready
MOY Adaptive	All K-2 students	On grade level skills*	An overall scale score and performance by reporting category.
MOY Screener	K-3 As needed**	Early grade level skills	Potential Risk or Ready
EOY Adaptive	All K-3 students	On grade level skills*	An overall scale score and performance by reporting category.

*Every student will not see every question but all skills are assessed.

** This is for students who have not been screened and enters a school after the BOY window closes on December 31st.

What's Coming?!

- Technical Assistance will be provided by ESCs in your region.
- Family Resources and Training Tools will be added to the district toolkit for school leaders and classroom teachers.



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