



Institute for School Innovation



# **A Retention Prevention Strategy**

*Project CHILD's Impact on Third Grade Retentions  
at Fifteen Florida Schools*

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## **Institute for School Innovation**

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## Executive Summary

This report is a continuation of previous reports that have investigated the effects of Project CHILD on third grade retentions in Florida. Two previous studies have shown that CHILD third grade students in 2004 and 2005 were promoted at much higher rates than their peers in non-CHILD classrooms. Would this trend continue in 2006, especially for students participating in Project CHILD prior to third grade?

The answer is a resounding yes. Only 1% of the CHILD students were held back in third grade, compared to 14% statewide. School-by-school analysis from 12 of the 15 schools reporting data shows that not one Project CHILD student was retained. That's 100% success.

Notwithstanding the social benefits to young children who are promoted to the next grade along with their peers, the fiscal impact is staggering. A failure rate of 1% compared to 14% would save the taxpayers over \$180 million.

Project CHILD is a retention prevention strategy that should be widely expanded. Just as children must be inoculated against disease before starting school, children could be inoculated against failure by participating in CHILD classrooms in the early grades (K-2). We can and must leave no third grader behind.

*“School-by-school analysis from 12 of the 15 schools reporting data shows that not one Project CHILD student was retained. That’s 100% success.”*

*Project CHILD students engaged at a classroom computer learning station*



## Project CHILD's Impact on Third Grade Retentions in Florida in 2006

Since its founding in 1995, the Institute for School Innovation (ISI) has been collecting achievement data for students participating in Project CHILD classrooms. Reports compiled by independent agencies such as Florida TaxWatch have documented the success of CHILD students in reading, writing, and mathematics when compared to their peers.<sup>1</sup>

This report further substantiates 2004 and 2005 reports on Project CHILD's impact on third grade retentions in Florida.<sup>2,3</sup> confirming that fewer Project CHILD students were retained than non-CHILD students. Furthermore, there were significantly less retentions for students participating in Project CHILD prior to third grade.

The research question for this report is whether this trend would continue for CHILD third grade students in 2006. Does participation in Project CHILD in the early grades act as an inoculation against failure? The answer is, YES.

### About Project CHILD (Changing How Instruction for Learning is Delivered)

Project CHILD, developed at Florida State University in 1988, is an innovative instructional system for elementary schools. For the 2005-2006 school year, over 15,000 students, in five states, participated in CHILD classrooms.



*Project CHILD students on task at their work stations, while the teacher is working one on one with individuals at a Teacher Station.*

The CHILD model differs from the traditional single grade classroom with one teacher covering all subjects. In CHILD, teachers form cross-grade cluster teams: primary clusters for grades K-2, and intermediate clusters for grades 3-5. Each cluster teacher chooses a core subject (reading, writing, or mathematics) as their specialty. Students then rotate to each of the three classrooms in a cluster spending 60-90 minutes in each classroom working at a variety of learning stations focused on the core subject for that class. Each CHILD classroom has six learning stations:

- Computer Station** for learning with instructional software;
- Teacher Station** for small-group tutorials;
- Textbook Station** for written work;
- Challenge Station** for learning in a game-like format;
- Exploration Station** for hands-on activities and projects; and,
- Imagination Station** for creative expression.

CHILD students are highly engaged and on-task, both factors strongly associated with academic achievement. Students stay with the same team of cluster teachers for three years. In addition to having more time to work with students, each teacher receives special training to use technology and cooperative learning techniques in his or her designated specialty area. The teachers still cover the school's required curriculum and use their basic texts and other school resources. The change with Project CHILD comes through the delivery method that moves beyond lecture and seatwork, now enhanced with technology and hands-on active learning.

## **Grade Retention Vs Social Promotion**

Mandatory third grade retention is a huge policy issue which some have characterized as a ticking time bomb. The fiscal impact of retaining students notwithstanding, the academic and social impact on young children raises troubling questions. The long term impact on student dropout rates remains to be seen.

At the same time, there is a valid argument against social promotion where students are passed along unprepared for the grades to come. Political leaders in Florida have taken a hard line against social promotion. Florida law requires that third grade students who do not score at Level 2 or higher on the Florida Comprehensive Achievement Test (FCAT) must be retained, i.e., not promoted to fourth grade.<sup>4</sup>

*A proud Project  
CHILD first  
grade "Station  
Patrol" assisting  
in classroom  
responsibilities.*



## **Review of the Research**

There has been extensive research on the effects of grade retention. A briefing paper from the professional education association Phi Delta Kappa<sup>5</sup> notes that "a summary of 19 studies conducted during the 1990's indicates that grade retention has a negative effect on achievement in reading, math, and language as well as on social issues such as behavior, school attendance, and peer relationships."

Other sobering findings from the research show that:

- Achievement may increase during the year a student is held back, but gains fade after two or three years. By then students do no better or perform more poorly than students not retained.
- Retained students are more likely to drop out and are less likely to go on to postsecondary schooling.

- Retention at both kindergarten and first grade is quite common and surprisingly harmful.
- In a 2001 study, sixth-grade students ranked grade retention as their number one fear, behind death of a parent and going blind!

A contrary view has been advanced via a recent study from the Manhattan Institute.<sup>6</sup> It reports that in 2002-2003 low-performing third-grade students in Florida who were retained improved 4.1 percentile points on the FCAT reading test compared with similarly low-performing students who were promoted. The authors of this study point out that this is the first analysis of grade retention based on objective criteria (FCAT scores) as opposed to subjective measures such as teachers' evaluations of who should be retained. The authors caution that "further research following these same groups of students will be necessary to track the effectiveness of Florida's retention program over time."

### **The Prevention Option**

While well-meaning people on both sides debate the pros and cons of third grade retentions, all can agree that preventing failure from occurring in the first place is a more desirable approach. Prevention is the goal of Project CHILD.

Answering the research question of whether the trend for Project CHILD to prevent failure would continue, the answer is a resounding yes. The analysis of the 2006 data for third-grade CHILD students who had been in CHILD classrooms in the primary grades (K-2) indicates a 99% passing rate. This strongly supports the argument that CHILD students are prepared for third grade and can pass the FCAT. Project CHILD is a retention prevention option.

### **Looking at the Data**

ISI requested third grade retention data from Florida CHILD schools that had both CHILD and non-CHILD classrooms so that we could compare results. Fifteen schools from nine districts responded with the following information:

- Number of CHILD third graders in CHILD classrooms with at least one year of CHILD experience in the primary grades; and the number retained.
- Number of non-CHILD third graders; and the number retained.

There were a total of 1,404 non-CHILD students, of which 111 were retained, or 8 percent. There were a total of 682 CHILD students, of which 8 were retained, or 1



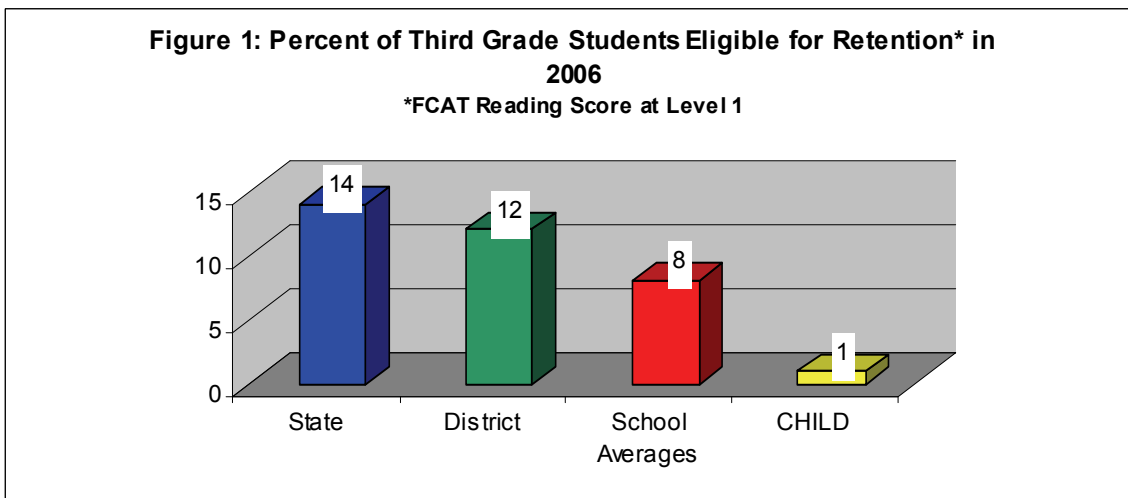
percent. It should be noted that no (zero) CHILD students were retained at 12 of the schools.

**Table 1: 2006 Third Grade Retentions at 15 Florida Schools**

	Number of Students	Number Retained	Percent Retained
<b>Non-CHILD</b>	1,404	111	8%
<b>CHILD</b>	682	8	1%

The fifteen schools represented a diversity of socio-economic levels that ranged from 9%-86% of the students receiving free and reduced lunch. Over half of the schools were from high poverty neighborhoods where over 50% of the students were eligible for free and reduced lunches. The CHILD students are reflective of the overall school populations, with special needs students and non-English speaking students included in the CHILD classrooms.

Data published by the Florida Department of Education<sup>7</sup> showed that fourteen percent (14%) of Florida's third-grade students statewide scored at Level 1 on the FCAT reading, thus failing to meet the promotion criteria. Of the 9 districts included in this report, the average was twelve percent (12%) for third-graders scoring at Level 1. See Figure 1.



Further analysis comparing individual districts follows in Figures 2-10. In every case the CHILD students had significantly fewer retentions than the district average, and in all but one case the CHILD students had significantly fewer retentions than their school counterparts in non-CHILD classrooms.

**See Figures 2-10 which represent the percent not promoted.**

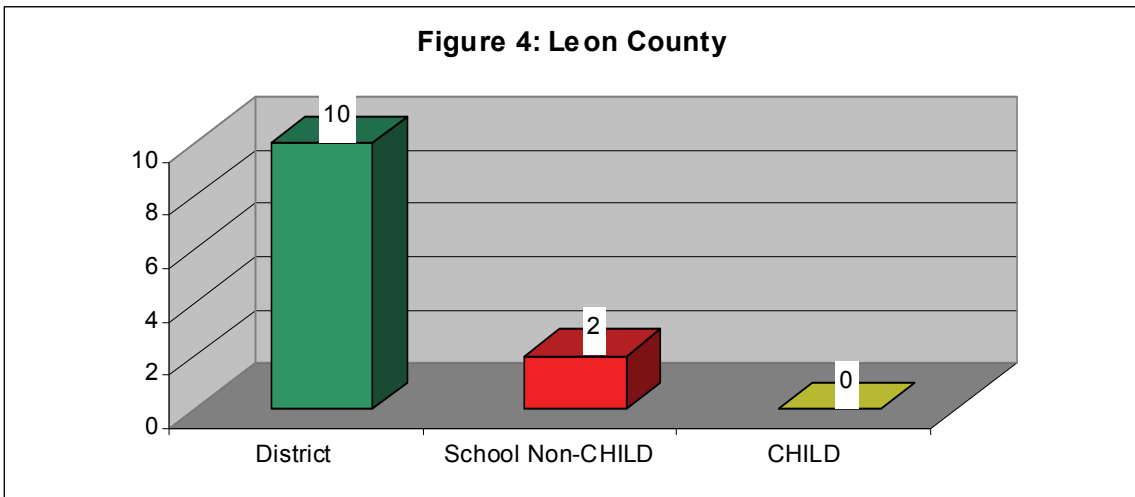
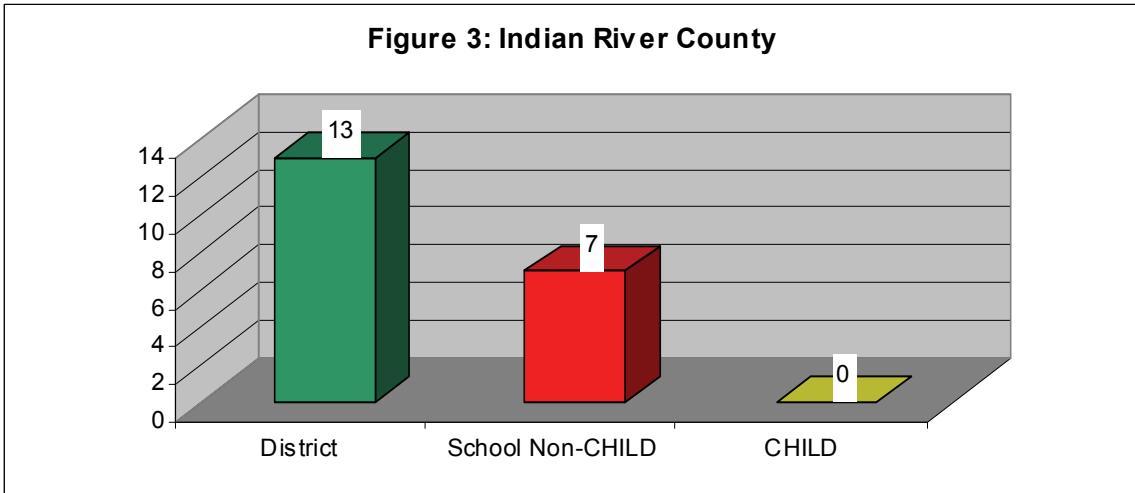
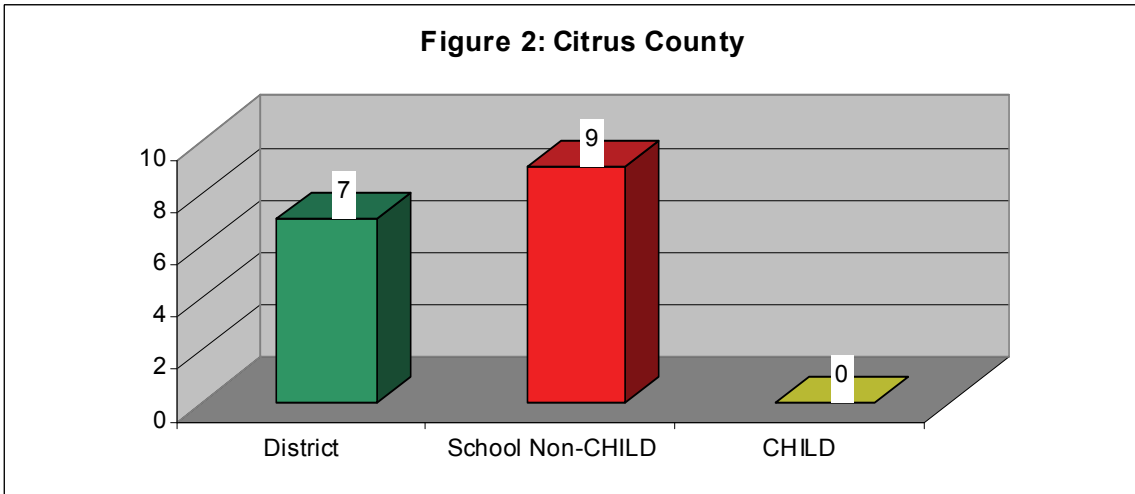


Figure 5: Marion County

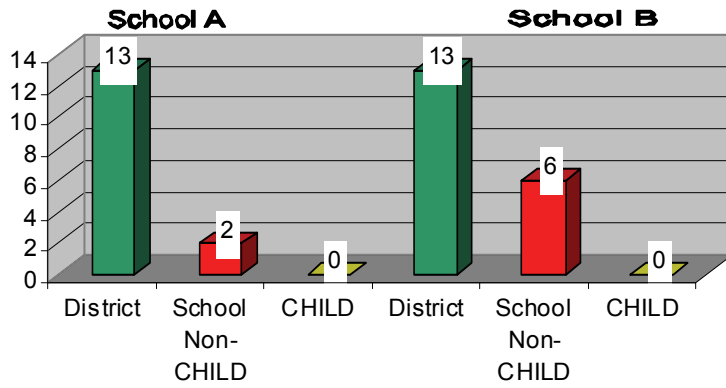


Figure 6: Okaloosa County

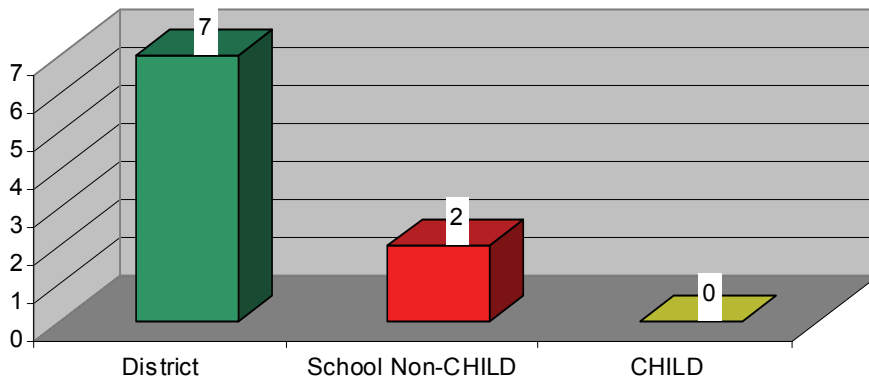
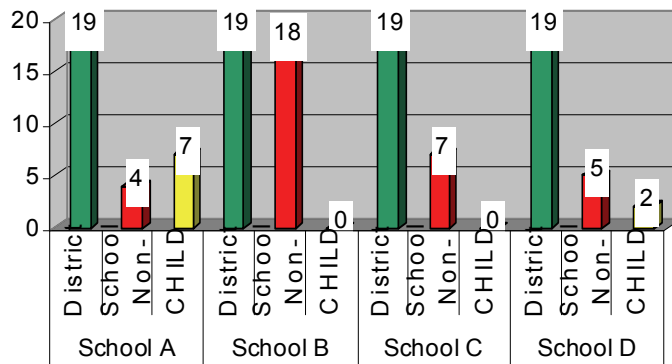
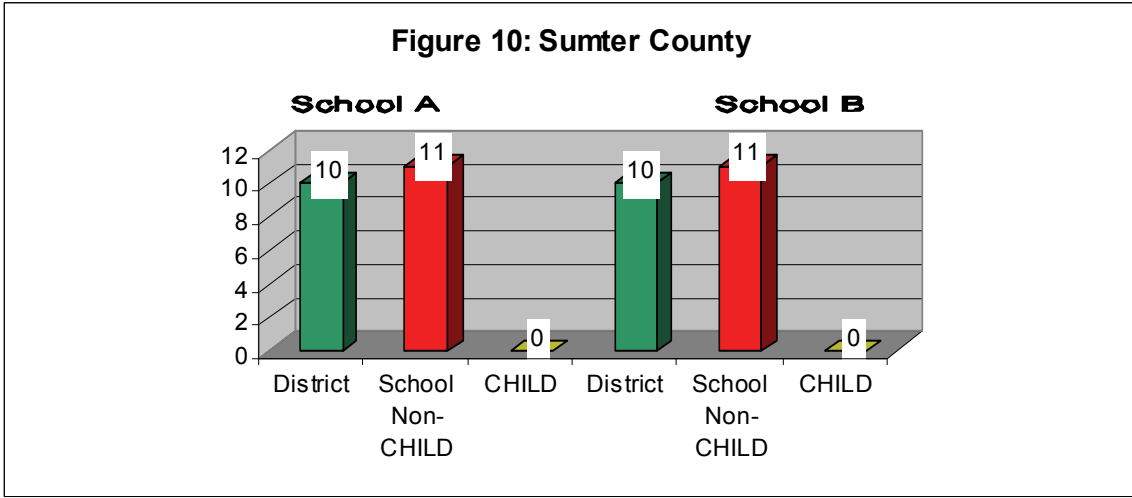
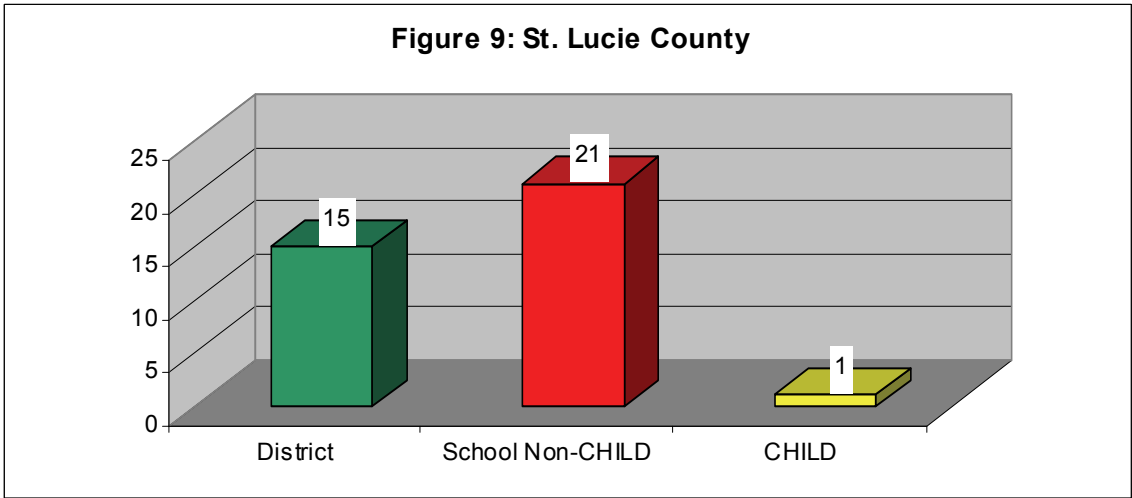
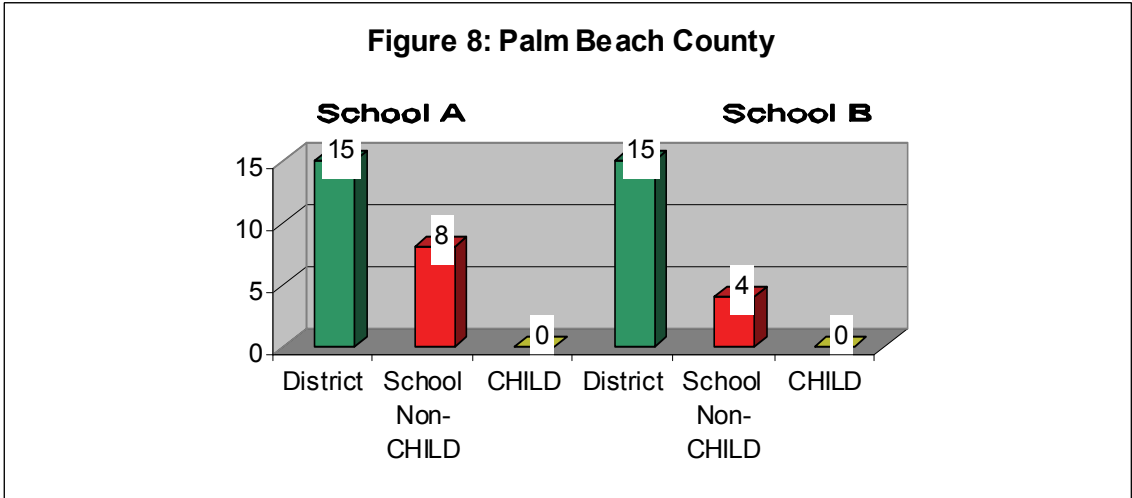


Figure 7: Osceola County





**Fiscal impact**

Failure is very expensive. The cost to educate a student in Florida in 2006-2007 will be \$6,790 based on the unweighted FTE.<sup>8</sup> The number of third-grade students taking the FCAT exam in 2006 was 204,238.

If all 14% who failed the FCAT were retained, this would be 28,593 students. The fiscal impact of another year of schooling for these students is \$194.2M. Assuming that even half are eventually promoted for cause<sup>9</sup>, the fiscal impact would still be over \$97M. One should also calculate the additional long-term cost of failure on the welfare and judicial systems should these students eventually drop out of school.



Assuming that a prevention strategy like Project CHILD was in place to reduce the retention rate to 1%, the fiscal impact would be \$13.9M. The resulting savings at the 14% failure rate would be \$180.3M, with a savings of \$83.2M at the lower rate.

**Table 2: The High Cost of Failure**

Retention Rate	Number of Students	Cost @\$6,790 FTE	Savings @1%
<b>14%</b>	<b>28,593</b>	<b>\$194,146,470</b>	<b>\$180,274,970</b>
7%	14,296	\$97,069,840	\$83,198,340
<b>1%</b>	<b>2,043</b>	<b>\$13,871,500</b>	<b>-0-</b>



*Technology, like books, is a daily-use delivery tool built into Project CHILD's instructional design.*



## **Conclusion and Policy Implications**

Project CHILD is an effective instructional model that continues to prove that it prevents failure, especially when introduced to students in grades K-2. Project CHILD is a retention prevention strategy that is easily replicable and should be expanded throughout the state. The positive impact on children and the fiscal impact on the state cannot be ignored.

Project CHILD is poised to expand statewide if funding is made available to the innovators ready to take on the challenge. These innovators also need flexibility in delivery mechanisms while still requiring accountability standards. Restrictive policies that hamper innovation must be challenged.

Innovation means change, and change is a deliberate and complex process that evolves with time and unyielding leadership. The initial implementation of Project CHILD within a school requires a visionary leader willing to restructure and secure resources for the initial investment in training, materials, and on-site coaching. Teachers must be willing to put forth considerable effort in the start-up phase as they move beyond their traditional training and comfort zones.

The transformation of an elementary school usually begins in a few classrooms. Schools and districts cannot use operating budgets for selected classrooms. Therefore, supplemental funding in the form of grants is required to kick start the process at the local level. However, central office-mandated district or state initiatives usually eat up available supplemental funds. Therefore, expansion of independent proven initiatives like Project CHILD requires independent funding.

Project CHILD has vast support from innovative educators, parents, and legislative leaders. They have seen the power of Project CHILD to surpass other programs that have come and gone year after year. The integrity of the CHILD instructional design, along with the dedicated people who have sustained it over the years, is testament to sustaining real and meaningful change.

Project CHILD has developed through decades of systematic research. It is a tried, tested, and proven instructional system with test scores and retention prevention data documenting its success. ISI will continue to share published empirical data to inform future leaders and policy makers. This historical research offers the rationale to support more flexibility for schools to implement proven programs, as well as a case to provide funds to expand retention prevention programs like Project CHILD.

Florida's ability to prepare our students, teachers, and communities for today's global economy is vital. Creating caring, informed, and productive citizens is vital to ensure Florida's future success. Laying the foundation begins in the elementary grades.

There is no time to waste. The success of our state is at stake.



## Endnotes

1. *Florida TaxWatch's Comparative Evaluation of Project CHILD: Phase IV*. Research Report, Florida TaxWatch Center for Educational Performance & Accountability, Tallahassee, FL, March 2005.
2. *CHILD Program Reduces Student Retention and Could Save Tens of Millions of Dollars*. Briefings, Florida TaxWatch Center for Educational Performance & Accountability, Tallahassee, FL, September 2004.
3. *An Evaluation of the Effectiveness of Project CHILD on Third Grade Retentions in Florida*. EPPC Management, Tallahassee, FL, December 2005.
4. 2004 Florida Statutes, Title XL VIII, Chapter 1008.
5. *Grade Retention and Social Promotion*. Phi Delta Kappa, Topics & Trends, Volume 5, Issue 10, Bloomington, IN, 2006.
6. *An Evaluation of Florida's Program to End Social Promotion*. Manhattan Institute for Policy Research, Education Working Paper No. 7, Davie, FL, December 2004.
7. Florida Department of Education, Office of Assessment and School Performance, April 26, 2006.
8. Florida Education Finance Program Final Conference Report, May 08, 2006.
9. The actual number of students being retained statewide has not been announced as this document goes to press. Some students who fail the FCAT may be promoted after attending summer school, as well as "for cause."

*Reading is a core  
Project CHILD  
component.  
Students here  
created reading  
buddies to aid in  
purposeful  
practice to en-  
courage life long  
reading skills.*

