

Think Again: Is grade retention bad for kids?

by Umut Özek and Louis T. Mariano



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Executive Summary

For many years, the conventional wisdom in the field was that grade retention was a bad idea. A 1997 opinion piece in *Education Week* titled “Grade retention doesn’t work” reflected the prevailing sentiment in the education community and the available research evidence at that time: retained students performed worse than their promoted peers in the years that followed.¹ This brief challenges that notion, based on more recent studies that do a better job of isolating the causal effect of retention.

Key Questions

Can grade retention be beneficial for students?

Answer: Yes. Several recent studies have found that retention in elementary school can be beneficial for students in improving middle school outcomes when the students most likely to benefit are identified and retention is paired with appropriate instructional supports.

What risks are associated with retention?

Answer: There is evidence that students who are retained in middle school are less likely to graduate high school or enroll in college, suggesting that intervening sooner is a safer course.

Is grade retention too costly for school systems?

Answer: Not necessarily, because the long-term costs school systems actually incur could end up being only a fraction of the cost of an additional year of schooling.

The Bottom Line

Retention is more likely to succeed in elementary grades and when coupled with instructional supports that are tailored to the educational needs of retained students.

Recommendations

1. **Ensure that retention policies target elementary school, as opposed to middle school.**
2. **Provide individualized support for students as soon as the risk of retention becomes apparent and continue supporting those who are nevertheless retained.**
3. **When assessing the cost effectiveness of retention policies, consider the long-term costs, the possible benefits for retained students, and the potential for positive spillovers.**

Introduction

In the twentieth century, education researchers conducted dozens of studies of “discretionary grade retention,” which occurs whenever teachers, parents, and/or principals use their individual or collective discretion to require a student to repeat a grade. High-profile meta-analyses based on these studies concluded that grade retention was associated with poorer academic outcomes (including higher dropout rates) and greater risk of behavioral issues.² However, the studies included in these meta-analyses were mostly correlational rather than causal.

Despite these negative findings, concerns about “social promotion,” as well as the increasing popularity of accountability and standardized testing, led to the implementation of universal and theoretically mandatory retention policies in many states and school districts. A decade after President Clinton’s 1998 call to end social promotion, at least six states and twelve large school districts had adopted test-based promotion policies, whereby students had to score above minimum thresholds on standardized tests to advance to the next grade level. By 2020, about half of states required or encouraged school districts to retain students whose third-grade reading scores showed they were struggling to meet basic standards.³

The use of test-based promotion policies, including the requirement that retention decisions be based on a clearly defined cut score, allowed for a more rigorous examination of the causal effects of grade retention. As a result, a new and extensive literature has emerged over the past two decades that paints a much more nuanced picture of grade retention and its consequences. This recent work uses methods that focus on students scoring near the test-score cutoffs around which the promotion or retention decision has been made, and the effects we discuss are applicable to the students scoring at this decision threshold.

Question 1: Can grade retention be beneficial for students?

Contrary to the conventional wisdom in education circles, recent research suggests that retention in earlier grades can benefit students. For example, recent studies from Florida,⁴ Indiana,⁵ Mississippi,⁶ Chicago,⁷ and New York City⁸ provide evidence that grade retention in elementary school (generally in grades 3–5), when implemented as part of a broader remediation effort, can increase test scores through middle school and reduce the need for future remediation.⁹ Retention in elementary school may also increase the likelihood that students take advanced courses in middle and high school.¹⁰ Furthermore, new evidence suggests that these academic benefits may be substantially larger for students with lower baseline achievement at the time of retention.¹¹

In addition to these academic benefits, evidence from descriptive surveys indicates that students retained in elementary school reported a greater sense of school connectedness,¹² lasting several years beyond retention, than comparable students who were promoted. However, research on the effect of grade retention on disciplinary outcomes is skimpy and mixed, with one study finding a short-lived increase¹³ in suspensions and the other finding a similarly short-lived decline.¹⁴

Research also suggests that retention is more likely to succeed when paired with instructional supports that are tailored to the educational needs of students identified as potentially at risk for retention. In fact, all the studies that have found positive effects of retention were of policies that included supplemental instruction for retained students. For example, Florida's third-grade retention policy, which has provided the blueprint for early grade-retention policies in many other states,¹⁵ requires schools to (1) develop academic improvement plans for students that specifically address their learning needs, (2) assign these students to high-performing teachers, (3) provide at least ninety minutes of daily reading instruction, and (4) offer summer reading camp at the end of the year that facilitates intensive reading intervention lasting between six and eight weeks for all students who scored below the retention cutoff. Similarly, in New York City,¹⁶ Indiana, and Mississippi, both retained and at-risk elementary students who were ultimately promoted received instructional support. It is unlikely that retention alone, without such additional instructional help, would produce similar benefits.

Importantly, evidence suggests that providing supplemental services to at-risk students in the time prior to the promotion decision drastically reduces¹⁷ the number of retained students. For example, when New York City's policy was initiated for fifth graders, 22 percent of the first cohort was identified as at-risk of being retained. After exposure to a dedicated set of academic intervention services throughout the school year, only 3 percent of the cohort was ultimately retained. Later cohorts, who were exposed to the policy's intervention services in earlier grades, saw a large reduction in the proportion of students needing intervention services upon entry to fifth grade.

Retention policies that identify students who are likely to benefit from retention are also more likely to succeed. For example, under Florida's legislation, low-performing third graders are exempt from retention if they have certain disabilities and have been already retained once; if they have received intensive reading remediation for two years and have already been retained twice; if they have been in the English-learner program for less than two years; if they can perform at an acceptable level on an alternative reading assessment approved by the State Board of Education; or if they can demonstrate proficiency through a teacher-developed portfolio.

Similarly, establishing the right criteria for promotion is important because retention may be less effective for relatively higher-performing students and because retaining too many students may hinder schools' ability to provide the necessary instructional support. For example, one study finds that students just above Florida's retention cutoff as well as low-performing students who were exempt from the policy would have been less likely to benefit from retention had they received it.¹⁸ In other words, Florida's retention policy may be successful in part because it endeavors to identify the students who are likely to benefit.

In short, recent research has shown that grade retention in elementary school can increase test scores through middle school and reduce the need for future remediation. It is most likely to succeed when it is supplemented with individualized instructional support as soon as the risk of retention becomes apparent and when the students who are ultimately retained are the students who are likely to benefit from the experience.

Question 2: What risks are associated with retention?

While the evidence on grade retention in the elementary grades has become increasingly positive, the research on retention in middle school grades remains negative. Despite the fact that the structure of middle school retention policies has generally mirrored that of elementary retention policies, including requirements for demonstrating a minimum proficiency on applicable state assessments and instructional supports, overall the research on these policies suggests little or no effect on academic achievement and higher levels of student disengagement.¹⁹ For example, students retained in middle school are less likely to graduate from high school²⁰ and more likely to drop out.²¹ Additional evidence from Louisiana finds that students retained in eighth grade are less likely to enroll in college²² and more likely to be involved in criminal activity as adults.²³

Although additional research is needed to understand why negative impacts are more likely to occur when retention is implemented in the higher grades, one common argument against grade retention policies is that they place a significant emotional burden on students: because students can be stigmatized as failing and must adjust to a new peer group, they may feel singled out and disengage from schooling.

One factor that might exacerbate these unintended consequences is inconsistent enforcement of retention policies. After all, despite the important role that test scores play in twenty-first-century retention policies, because many students receive exemptions, only a fraction of students who are identified for retention based on their test scores are actually retained.²⁴ While these exemptions could help schools avoid retaining students who are less likely to benefit from retention, discretionary exemptions (such as using portfolios of student work) can also lead to differential policy enforcement²⁵ because parents from more advantaged backgrounds are more likely to advocate for (and succeed in) avoiding retention, which could contribute to feelings of being excluded or singled out for retained students, especially among traditionally marginalized groups. While differential enforcement is also a concern for earlier grade retention, the negative academic effects found for middle school retention, such as lower graduation rates, do not materialize in the earlier grades.

In short, available evidence indicates that retention in middle school grades is less likely to succeed. This is perhaps because it leads to feelings of being singled out; however, the reasons why middle school grade retention is not as successful requires further study.

Question 3: Is retention too costly for school systems?

Another criticism of grade retention is that it is expensive for school systems because schools must offer an additional school year to retained students. However, to make an informed decision, policymakers must consider the long-term benefits of retention, as well as the timing of the costs.

Recent studies suggest that the long-run cost of early grade retention is only a fraction of the cost of an additional year of schooling²⁶ because retained students are significantly less likely to be identified for remediation or retained again in later grades.²⁷ And conversely, students who

are at risk of retention but are ultimately promoted often take longer than four years to graduate high school.²⁸

As noted, in addition to these fiscal offsets, there is evidence that (in addition to boosting middle school test scores) early grade retention increases the likelihood of taking college-credit-bearing courses in high school, potentially better preparing students for college-level coursework.²⁹ Furthermore, many cost-effectiveness calculations also ignore the potential for spillover effects. For example, the threat of retention could improve outcomes for a broad set of students, as may have happened in Florida, where the share of first-time third graders scoring below the retention cutoff dropped from 21 percent to 14 percent in the first five years of implementation.³⁰ Logically, this change was very likely driven by improved learning experiences for students in earlier grades and during the third-grade year, rather than retention itself. Finally, the threat of retention could lead parents to reallocate their resources (whether in the form of time or money) to avoid the retention of their children. For example, new evidence suggests that the benefits of early grade retention can spill over to the younger siblings of identified students, in part because parents are more likely to move their younger child to a higher-performing school when the older sibling is identified for retention.³¹

From a public policy perspective, all these spillover effects are “free” and as such may have profound effects on the cost effectiveness of early grade-retention policies. The overwhelming majority of students aren’t retained, so even a small spillover effect on the educational outcomes of students not targeted by the policy (e.g., their siblings or their peers not at risk of retention) could offset the costs associated with retention. In short, it is important for policymakers to weigh the long-term benefits of retention and the likely spillover effects on nonretained students against the likely costs.

Despite the volume of research on grade retention, we have much to learn. For example, the long-term effects of early grade-retention policies are not well understood, and there is potential for the effects experienced in middle school to dissipate. We need more research on how early grade retention affects students with lower baseline achievement and/or other educational needs, because some evidence suggests that effects could be substantially different for this population.³² In addition to these gaps, we still know little about the spillover effects of early grade-retention policies on other students (though what we do know seems promising). Finally, additional research is needed to better understand the reasons for the seemingly negative impacts of grade retention in middle school.

The Bottom Line

Empirical research in the twenty-first century provides substantial evidence that grade retention in elementary school can be an effective lever for improving student outcomes. But school and district leaders should absorb the full lessons of the past two decades: waiting until middle school, retaining kids without providing the necessary supports, or failing to identify the students most likely to benefit are unlikely to yield the desired results and could even lead to adverse effects.

Recommendations

- 1. Ensure that retention policies target elementary school, as opposed to middle school.**
- 2. Provide individualized support for students as soon as the risk of retention becomes apparent and continuing support to those who are nevertheless retained.**
- 3. When assessing the cost effectiveness of retention policies, consider the long-term costs, the possible benefits for retained students, and the potential for positive spillovers.**

Endnotes

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