

## Student Retention vs. Social Promotion: A False Dichotomy

### Highlights

#### The Ultimate Goal

For all students to work to their potential and become productive, engaged citizens.

#### The Problem

Some children enter school significantly behind peers or fall behind once enrolled. Many never catch back up.

#### Symptoms of Problem

Social promotion keeps age groups together but fails to address substantial learning deficits.

#### Popular Response

Retain students who cannot pass high-stakes tests at key grades, such as third-grade reading.

#### Possible Unintended Consequences

Retained students are often placed back in the same environment in which they originally failed and many never catch up. Repeated failure leads students to become stigmatized and unmotivated. Students may be retained in grade for every subject after failing only one or two.

#### Keep Thinking

Retention is not the only antidote to social promotion. Other strategies focus on catching problems well before students must take high-stakes tests. They include: close monitoring begun in the earliest grades; frequent, high-quality classroom assessments to inform instruction; intensive tutoring tailored to specific needs; summer school and before- and after-school programs to provide extra learning time; and efforts to increase parental engagement. When students must be retained, schools can find creative ways to reteach the specific skills they failed while introducing new concepts to keep them engaged.



## Key Issues and Findings from the Research

Requiring students to repeat a grade if they cannot pass a high-stakes standardized test is an increasingly popular intervention in the age of standards and accountability. Grade retention is commonly used to end “social promotion” – passing students along without regard to their academic proficiency – with advocates holding that retention will provide the tools students need to keep up as they move through the grades, graduate from high school, and succeed in college or a desirable job. Such successful outcomes are important for the economic and social well-being not only of students but also of the communities where they live.

This brief looks at test-driven retention from several perspectives. It lays out the traditional arguments for and against retention, reviews the research on the effectiveness of some high-profile test-driven retention programs, and presents a framework for assessing the benefits and costs of retention. But it also seeks to do more. It raises questions, presents alternatives to retention, and challenges policy makers to think beyond common practices. For example, does holding children back so that they repeat the same material – often with little modification – make them learn more or faster? Does it restore their interest in school and motivate them to work harder? Or does it bore and discourage them? Why do many retained students eventually drop out? This brief seeks to help policymakers tackle such questions and weigh retention against other interventions in the interest of arriving at the best practices to help struggling students.

The theory behind retention is that students who have an extra year to learn material they failed to master the first time will emerge with stronger skills and a greater likelihood of academic success. Some also believe it gives socially and intellectually immature students a chance to catch up, while conveying the message that success requires hard work. From a pragmatic perspective, it also allows schools to narrow the range of skills in a classroom in the face of pressure to meet accountability standards. Retention is most commonly advocated for students lagging in reading and math, the essential foundations for learning other subjects. It is used most often in early grades when popular opinion holds that children are less likely to suffer ill

effects. For example, a growing number of states and districts advocate retaining students who cannot pass third-grade reading tests on the theory that reading skills must be mastered in the primary grades if students are to read and understand assignments in later grades.<sup>1</sup>

Opponents of retention counter that ill-effects are pervasive and serious, particularly when retention is used without other support services, such as summer school and tutoring outside of class. Negative consequences most often cited include social stigma, behavior problems, disengagement from school, and a greater likelihood of dropping out. Another concern is that retention is used much more frequently for certain groups of students: boys, African-Americans, Hispanics, and low-income students. Critics also note that because high-stakes testing often doesn’t begin until third grade, academic problems that surface in earlier grades can snowball by the time test-based policies kick in. They advocate identifying and addressing problems as soon as they emerge because reading problems become harder to correct as children age, and third grade might even be too late.

Retention has been heavily researched over the last several decades, and while most studies have found little if any academic benefit from retention it is important to note that many investigated policies that did not use test scores as the main retention trigger.<sup>2,3,4</sup> Policies based heavily on standardized test scores – in contrast to decisions by teachers who may consider academic performance in context with many factors, such as attendance, behavior, and parental consultation – may have different effects. Test scores provide a hard-and-fast standard that is clearly defined and less subjective than a teacher’s judgment, although using high-stakes tests may introduce different biases.<sup>3,4,5</sup> Objective testing standards are generally applied at “gateway” points to catch students as they move into upper elementary school from the primary grades or into middle school or high school.

Many researchers and education organizations argue that neither social promotion nor retention raises student achievement over the long haul and they urge policymakers to find different interventions. A 1999 report from the U.S. Department of Education stated:

*Does repeating a grade make children learn more or faster?*

*Neither promoting students when they are unprepared nor simply retaining them in the same grade is the right response to low student achievement. Both approaches presume that high rates of initial failure are inevitable and acceptable. Ending social promotions by simply holding more students back is the wrong choice. Students who are required to repeat a year are more likely than other students to eventually drop out, and few catch up academically with their peers. The right approach is to ensure that more students are prepared to meet challenging academic standards in the first place.<sup>6</sup>*

Thus, it is important when considering “promotion policies” to examine the extent to which they include a variety of supplemental services that are demonstrated to increase achievement. Such services may include early identification of academic problems, frequent monitoring through classroom assignments, specially designed summer schools, and tailored, intensive tutoring. Table 1 shows key services built into the policies of three large jurisdictions that use test scores in promotion decisions. It also shows that test-score triggers do not have to be absolute; factors such as parental appeals and alternative measures of student proficiency can also enter the equation.

**Table 1. Retention Practices in Florida and Chicago and New York City**

	<b>Year Begun</b>	<b>Grades Affected</b>	<b>Subjects Tested</b>	<b>Exemptions to Retention</b>	<b>Interventions and Services in Addition to Retention</b>
<b>Florida</b>	2002	3	reading	Exemptions are allowed for some students with disabilities or limited English, or students who demonstrate proficiency through portfolios or alternative tests.	Identification of reading deficiencies begins in kindergarten, with “intensive reading instruction” required immediately based on specific skills identified. Students in any grade not meeting testing standards must have an “academic improvement plan” that includes supplemental instruction or remediation. For third-graders the plan must identify specific areas of reading deficiency.
<b>Chicago</b>	1996	3, 6, 8	reading and math (plus writing for grade 8)	Exemptions are allowed for some students with disabilities or limited English. Parents can appeal retention decisions.	Summer school required for students who fail the test. Those who pass in August can be promoted. Each retained student must have an individual academic plan. Eighth-graders who are overage or have been retained before attend special schools that provide intensive skill development in reading and math and small classes.
<b>New York City</b>	2003	3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8 (phased in)	English language arts and math	Exemptions are allowed for students who produce portfolios of work deemed to meet promotion standards by teachers and principals. Exemptions are also allowed for some students with disabilities and limited English. Parents can appeal retention decisions.	Periodic monitoring of skills and use of interventions starts in primary grades. Beginning in grade 3, teachers identify students with lagging skills early in the school year, notify their parents, and work out an improvement plan. Students who fail the spring test or do not submit a satisfactory portfolio are encouraged to attend summer school. Those who improve sufficiently over the summer can move up in August. For students who are retained, teachers are required to develop an “instructional strategic plan” early in the school year and to conduct ongoing measures of progress.

Sources: Florida Department of Education; Florida SB 20-E; Chicago Public Schools; New York City Department of Education <sup>1,7,8,9</sup>

While the vast majority of research on retention looks at decisions initiated by teachers or administrators, most studies reviewed in this brief investigate more recent test-driven policies. This brief also only cites

*Studies in Chicago found mixed results from retention and some benefit from summer school.*

studies that used sophisticated designs to deal with selection biases that arise when students aren't randomly retained in grade or assigned to services, and those using longitudinal data to allow researchers to track the same students over multiple years. One note of caution: even research using the best design has limitations. Several studies cited here measure student progress for only a few years, making them unsuitable for long-term projections. Some do not isolate the effects of special services such as summer school and tutoring from those of retention. Most fail to address whether alternatives to retention such as identification and remediation of problems in the earliest grades would have kept students on grade level and obviated the need for retention in the first place.

The available research provides some cautionary notes for policy makers. Several studies found that retention improved student achievement in elementary grades, at least in the short run, but no clear benefit was identified for older students and some studies found serious hazards, including an increased likelihood of dropping out. What is clear from most of these studies is that students are most likely to benefit if retention is woven into a safety net of well-designed services and is reserved for children who still struggle after receiving earlier interventions. Because a student's performance is affected by all parts of a policy, from retention triggers to summer school to appeal options, studies that disentangle the impact of specific components of a retention policy are most useful for crafting effective policy.

For example, a study of retention in Florida found that third-graders who were retained performed somewhat better than students who also had low scores but were promoted to the next grade, with particularly large gains appearing the second year after retention.<sup>10</sup> However, a key aspect of the Florida policy was the additional supports that students at risk of retention received. As noted in Table 1, deficiencies are identified early and targeted for specific help and schools do

not simply place students back where they were the previous year to get a rerun of the same instruction. When schools do place students back in the same situation in which they previously failed to thrive, there is little reason to believe they will experience extraordinary gains. Indeed, boredom may lead to behavior problems. A Chicago-based study conducted in-depth interviews of 22 retained sixth- and eighth-graders as well as their teachers and found that all but two students received essentially the same instruction during the repeated grade as they had the year before, an effect the authors called "recycling."<sup>11</sup>

New York City's promotion policy requires retention only after low-scoring students have received an academic year's worth of special services and have had repeated opportunities to meet the standard for promotion, either through improved test scores or satisfactory portfolios of work. In a study of this policy, researchers found that fifth-graders who received pre-retention services showed better-than-expected improvement on several measures, and that the few students who still struggled and were retained outperformed low-scoring peers who were promoted. The benefits for both groups lasted at least two years. One key observation was that students in schools that received more consistent or intensive services – i.e. one-on-one tutoring versus small group sessions – were more likely to improve. Also important, some part of the improved performance found by the multi-year study, including declines in the number of low-scoring students, could also have been due to an extensive network of reforms implemented by both the city and state.<sup>12</sup>

A study of third- and sixth-graders in Chicago Public Schools also noted the importance of support services in finding that summer school generally helped low-scoring students in both reading and math improve their scores in hopes of avoiding retention, and that the improvement persisted for two years. The authors surmised that the summer program's small classes, structured curriculum, and cadre of specially-selected teachers likely deserved some piece of the credit. However, that study and another of Chicago students in the same grades found that students who were retained did not fare as well. While third-graders showed some improvement in reading and math, sixth-graders showed no improvement or lost ground when compared to peers who were promoted. The second Chicago study concluded that neither retention nor social

promotion helped struggling students catch up, and noted that many students who qualified for retention showed very low achievement in the earliest grades raising the question of whether third grade was too late to begin interventions. The authors thus recommended identifying struggling students as early as possible for extra help.<sup>13, 14</sup>

A report by the National Research Council on appropriate uses of high-stakes tests advises against basing retention on test scores without also considering other evidence of a student's skill level such as grades, teacher recommendations, and extenuating circumstances.<sup>15</sup> Recommendations in the report include:

- If the test is supposed to indicate whether a student is ready for the next grade, make certain that scores “predict the likely educational effects of future placements—whether promotion, retention in grade, or some other intervention options.”
- Allow students to retake the test before a retention decision is made, even if that means creating an alternative form of the test.
- Provide alternatives to test-driven remediation such as early identification of learning problems coupled with proven remediation techniques.

## Current Practices & Policies

About 10 percent of U.S. students are retained sometime between kindergarten and high school. The largest numbers are in kindergarten and first grade, followed by second and third grades; black, Hispanic, and low-income students are most likely to be affected.<sup>16</sup> Policies requiring retention to end social promotion vary in several ways, including the grades at which students are retained and the kinds of services provided to help struggling students succeed.

Although several jurisdictions have test-based retention policies, Florida's is possibly the best known. The program was promoted by former Gov. Jeb Bush as part of his A+ Plan for education reform and was part of an extensive accountability system that included school report cards, performance based funding, and several options for school choice. Bush continues to promote his education policies as founder and president of the Foundation for Excellence in Education, which encourages other states to adopt some or all of Florida's policies.<sup>17</sup>

While Colorado currently does not mandate retention for students who score poorly on the CSAP, it does require third-graders to meet certain reading standards to be promoted as part of the Colorado Basic Literacy Act of 1997. The law also requires schools to monitor the progress of students in kindergarten through third grade toward meeting standards for literacy and reading comprehension and to create an “individual literacy plan” for students who are lagging. Those students must receive adequate instruction time to meet the prescribed standards, periodic reassessment, and placement in intensive summer tutoring if necessary.<sup>18</sup>

## What's Next?

Retaining large numbers of students is expensive, and policymakers deciding whether to use retention and/or other interventions should consider the potential costs and benefits of each course of action. Table 2 shows a possible framework using criteria suggested by the education economist Henry Levin.<sup>19</sup>

Additional cost-benefit considerations specific to test-based retention include whether any benefits to society at large are offset by the potential fairness issues for students who may not receive high-quality instruction in all knowledge and skills tested, especially given the greater likelihood of poor long-term outcomes for retained students. One scholar frames this question in ethical terms:

*I contend that current test-based retention policies so deeply frustrate the educational goals of public education, and infringe so heavily on the life chances of low-performing students, that they constitute an undeniable violation of fairness. Even if a net economic benefit results from a test-based retention policy for society as a whole—and whether such a net benefit exists is currently unknown—accepting such a benefit at the cost of a severe educational detriment for some students creates a breach of fairness that must be acknowledged and addressed.<sup>5</sup>*

This brief's discussions of potential costs and benefits are incomplete, however, because too little high-quality research exists yet to answer some important questions about retention definitively. For example, the studies discussed in this brief do not establish whether

**Table 2. Potential Costs and Benefits or Savings of Retention**

<b>Potential Benefits or Savings</b>		<b>Potential Costs</b>
<i>Repeated exposure to material could help retained students master the skills needed to reach grade level and stay abreast through graduation.</i>	<i>but . . .</i>	<i>Per-pupil spending increases by the amount required to educate each retained child for an additional year.</i>
<i>Students, parents, teachers, and school administrators could work toward a clear, easily understood standard for promotion.</i>	<i>but . . .</i>	<i>Basing promotion heavily on test performance may lead to a narrowed curriculum geared to material included on the test to the exclusion of other important but less readily measured outcomes.</i>
<i>If large enough numbers of students are retained in a given school, they can be assigned to the same teacher and given a curriculum and services tailored to their needs instead of being mixed in with children learning the material for the first time.</i>	<i>but . . .</i>	<i>Students who are retained may experience non-financial costs such as a feeling of stigmatization or a loss of self-esteem that can have real effects on future educational and labor market successes.</i>
<i>If retained students drop out, they consume no education funding for the years of high school – and college – not attended.</i>	<i>but . . .</i>	<i>If retained students drop out, their failure to complete high school is associated with several economic and social outcomes, including lower lifetime earnings, fewer taxes paid, fewer contributions to the economy, reduced political participation, consumption of more social services, greater health costs including for Medicaid, and increased costs related to crime and incarceration.</i>

retention improves student achievement in districts and subject areas beyond those considered by the researchers. More clarity is also needed on how much of any measured achievement growth is due to retention and how much it is due to other interventions included in policies.

Future research will be most valuable if it uses data that follow students over several years. Because the effects of retention can last long after a grade is repeated, it is important that researchers track each student throughout school. It is also important that each child's records be linked to other important information about family income and demographics as well as characteristics of teachers and schools. Such databases allow scholars to measure long-term effects and determine which features are most likely to turn struggling students around and put them on a path toward academic and life success.

The research literature contains several recommendations for alternatives to both retention and social promotion likely to improve students' academic performance and attitudes towards school. Attention to the specific needs of students and the quality of services is key. For example, schools may be able to avoid or minimize the need for remediation if they start measuring key skills and identifying academic delays, particularly with reading, in preschool and kindergarten and create age-appropriate interventions tightly targeted to the specific needs of each child.

Teachers who use frequent, high-quality benchmark tests and exercises throughout the school year can monitor student progress and tailor instruction to immediate needs as they arise. This practice also removes some pressure – and unwelcome surprises – from high-stakes accountability tests at the end of the year. Providing adequate training for teachers before they start using such assessment will improve their

ability to interpret assessment data in order to focus instruction on students' weakest skills.

The research also suggests some strategies to help struggling students, such as providing a fresh curriculum for those who are retained to prevent boredom. Intensive, focused tutoring in summer school and before- or after-school programs have been shown to help low-achieving students, whether they are retained or not. High-quality preschool can raise the odds children will start kindergarten with the skills they need. Finally, close monitoring of students who have been retained for problems such as disruptive behavior and

poor attendance can provide signs of disengagement from school, which can be an early predictor that a child is on the road to dropping out.

## About the Education Innovation Institute

The Education Innovation Institute, created in 2009 by the Colorado General Assembly, identifies and interprets the nation's best research on current education issues to help shape policy and reform. It is housed at the University of Northern Colorado, a leader in teacher education since 1889. For more information about EII and its work, visit [www.unco.edu/eii](http://www.unco.edu/eii).

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*NOTE: The citations below are hyperlinked to their source, simply click on the blue citation title.*

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