IS RETENTION IN THE EARLY YEARS AN EFFECTIVE, RESEARCH-BASED APPROACH FOR IMPROVING STUDENT OUTCOMES?

Southeast Comprehensive Center Community of Practice

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Agenda

- Background on retention

- What the research tells us

- How this information can be used

- Additional resources

The Context of Retention in Early Education

- Common practice for many decades

- Retention is incorporated into many states' reading performance policies

- Retention as practice and policy is an emotional issue with both proponents and opponents

- Retention is a nuanced issue; not an open-and-shut case

- Research on retention provides information, perhaps conflicting, as to the practice's effectiveness

- Retention is typically part of a systemic approach to support student learning

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Third Grade Reading Policies

- 36 states plus D.C. require a reading assessment in at least one grade, preK-3; mix of state mandated and locally determined approaches.

- 33 states plus D.C. require or recommend that districts offer some type of intervention or remediation for struggling readers for a P-3 grade.

- 16 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.

Workman, E. (2014) Third grade reading policies. Denver: ECS.

Third Grade Reading Retention Policies

Of the 16 states plus D.C. that retain students:

- 12 will promote students if they participate in an intervention.
- 16 states plus D.C. provide good cause exemptions for at least one of the following reasons:
  - Students receiving special education services (14 states plus D.C.)
  - Students previously retained either once or twice on the basis of a reading deficiency (10 states plus D.C.)
  - English language learners (11 states plus D.C.)
  - Recommendation from a principal or teacher (2 states)
  - Parental appeal (1 state)

Workman, E. (2014) Third grade reading policies. Denver: ECS.

How prevalent is retention in the primary grades?

- 6% of kindergartners in 1993 retained

- Rates doubled between 1992 – 2002

- 450,000 elementary school students were held back a year in 2011–2012
    - 140,000 were kindergartners
    - 12% of Kers in AR and HI retained

- 15 states & DC require 3rd grade retention for students not meeting grade-level reading expectations
    - Exemptions permitted

Is research design a consideration for understanding retention?

- Literature can be categorized into individual studies, reports, literature reviews, and meta-analyses

- Various commissioned reports and policy reviews may not have been subject to external or peer-review processes

"While the weight of evidence seems to suggest that the impact of retention on those retained is harmful, methodological disagreements have fostered continued uncertainty." (Hong, 2007)

Research Design

- Same-grade or same-age studies

- Much research examines older children; limited for younger children

What Criteria are Used to Determine Retention?

- Test-based
  - Often mandated by state legislatures in accordance with federal accountability efforts
    - Restricted to single measure of literacy in most states
    - Exemptions and "second chance testing" may be included
    - May or may not include provisions for early identification or required supplemental instruction

- Teacher-based/school-based
  - Criteria vary
    - Subjective, inconsistent criteria across teachers and schools
    - Decision based on more comprehensive data about academic performance and social-emotional maturity

What does research says about test- and teacher-based retention?

- Both test- and teacher-based retention has resulted in short-term academic gains; may motivate older at-risk students who believe academic success is within their reach to work harder toward proficiency.

- Test-based policies result in disproportionate number of minority, vulnerable students and encourage questionable educational practices.

- Both teacher- and test-based retention policies associated with short-term academic gains that fade over time; retention correlated to increased high school dropout decisions by students.

Does the age or grade when retention occurs make a difference in students' outcomes?

- Retention, if enacted, is better done at the earliest time possible to formatively improve academic performance and minimize emotional or social distress.

- Retention has a positive short-term effect on achievement for third graders but not sixth graders.

- Limited research currently examines the short- or long-impact of students below third grade.

- Multiple retentions increased the probability that students will drop out of school.

Are school or community characteristics associated with retention?

- Nonpublic schools, suburban schools, schools with a comparatively low percentage of minority students, and schools with a higher percentage of white teachers tend to adopt retention policies for low-performing kindergartners.

- Retention schools had smaller kindergarten class sizes, more parent involvement, and better order in classrooms, schools, and communities.

- Decisions to retain in non-test-based programs are influenced by kindergarten class composition, teacher qualification, and level of principal experience in early childhood education.

What does the research say about retention as an effective educational strategy for young children?

- Studies examine retention differently using different methods to test various hypotheses.
  - Short-term versus long-term impact
  - Academic performance versus social/emotional/behavioral consequences

- Meta-analyses of teacher-based retention provide more comprehensive analysis than individual studies

  - generally conclude little compelling justification for the claim that retention alone has lasting benefits.

Academic Performance

Short-term

Mixed results

- Retaining students in kindergarten does not boost academic achievement

- Several large city and state studies focusing on academic achievement initially reported positive effects of retention

- Many retained children continue to struggle during retention year and many placed in special education

- By third grade, little evidence was found that students who were retained did better than their low-achieving counterparts who were promoted (Chicago)

Academic Performance

Long-term

- Short-term academic gains dissipate within several years

- Retained children are 20 – 30% more likely to drop out of school

- Retained students had lower achievement in language arts, reading, math, and social studies than promoted students

Social/emotional/behavioral

Short-term

- Social, emotional, attitudinal, and behavioral effects on retained students were mixed; not solely negative.

- Retention is harmful from the student's perspective.

- The relative standing of kindergarten retainees was generally favorable when compared with children from a younger cohort.

- Retained students in one study examining children in grades 3 – 8 did not exhibit negative emotional effects; they had confidence in reading or math skills and reported a greater sense of connectedness to school than at-risk students who were promoted.

- Third grade retention had no effects on student absences, special education placement, or attrition from Florida public schools.

Social/emotional/behavioral

Long-term

- Retained students scored lower on personal adjustment measures than promoted students though not statistically significant differences in the subcategories of social adjustment, emotional adjustment, and behavior.

- Retention is a powerful predictor of failure to complete high school.
  - Students retained more than once are at a considerably greater risk of dropping out

- Retention is associated with persons working in low-paying jobs and lower likelihood of pursuing postsecondary education .

Does retention affect certain groups of students differently?

- African-American, Latino-American, eligible for special education, or low-income are more likely to fail standardized tests and consequently be retained.

- Boys represent 61% of kindergarteners retained.

- Students with disabilities served by IDEA represent 17% of students retained in elementary schools

- Studies examine sub-groups most frequently retained, not the short- and long-term effectiveness of retention on sub-groups

Are there supplemental/alternative strategies to retention?

Exposure to the same educational material a second year alone is unlikely to produce results unless combined with supplemental instructional opportunities.

Options:
- using classroom assessments to better identify at-risk and struggling learners early and inform teaching
- more effectively implementing differentiated, individual, and small group instruction
- increasing instructional effectiveness with effective, targeted curricula
- increasing instructional time, including pre-K and summer school
- Assigning highly effective teachers to classrooms with groups of struggling students

Conclusion

The decision to retain a young child, while well-intentioned, is an important, potentially life-changing event that must consider multiple factors as to its advisability for a particular child. Establishment of a uniform policy based on a single point-in-time assessment on a single topic or skill while ignoring individual and contextual characteristics is not fully supported by research to ensure intended short- and long-term outcomes for all students.

The debate about retention and social promotion will likely continue. It is advisable to address issues of prevention (early education), early identification, formative assessment paired with research-based intervention, and professional development. Further, policymakers should consider both the short- and long-term consequences of retention and the critical importance of providing students and teachers with the educational support and resources throughout a student's career, particularly at the earliest signs of difficulty.

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