CEELO Center on Enhancing Early Learning Outcomes fastFACT

Retention in the Early Years

Is early retention an effective, research-based strategy for improving student outcomes?

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, many states have incorporated retention as a consequence for poor school performance, often the result of legislative mandates focused on literacy and high-stakes assessment practices. These decisions increasingly impact young children in the primary grades, rippling throughout the field of early childhood education. Debate persists regarding the research base supporting retention as an effective educational strategy as state laws and policies are crafted. The purpose of this FastFact is to review literature on research and practice about the effects of early retention, and highlight considerations that make retention a nuanced rather than definitive research based approach to enhancing student outcomes.

Background

Retention of students has been common practice in education for many decades. Proponents and critics of retention share the common belief that every student will be well served by possessing necessary skills to learn and apply new information. Despite this shared belief, debate persists between the merits of retention and social promotion, the practice of advancing children into the next grade regardless of academic performance or social/emotional maturity. Proponents point to one school of thought in developmental psychology supporting the "gift of time," enabling an additional year for students lagging behind for reasons of cognitive or social immaturity to catch up and master important skills. Other proponents suggest that educational performance is negatively influenced by a lack of student interest, and fear of being retained will enhance students' motivation. Most important, proponents believe that once students acquire knowledge and skills, they will become more confident, motivated to remain

Context

As state and local policies increasingly require retention for young students, questions have been raised regarding the research to support these policies. Educators, policymakers, and researchers frequently find it difficult to reach consensus, particularly insofar as young children are concerned.

Methodology

A review of literature examined individual studies, commissioned reports, several meta-analyses, and critiques of research methods dating back to the 1980s when seminal research was conducted. Not all of the literature examined in this FastFact was peer reviewed; however, several exhaustive peer-reviewed meta-analyses and critiques of these studies shed light on retention. This Fast Fact reports on findings highlighting common and contradictory themes.

in school and better equipped to participate in a competitive workforce whereas lacking such knowledge and skills will increase the likelihood of dropping out of school. Critics of retention cite a divergent perspective of developmental psychology and educational research unsupportive of the practice, including the unsubstantiated assumption that students typically will acquire information and skills during a second exposure to the same material the following year and sustain these gains, short- and long-term negative impact on student emotional health, significantly differential retention rates of subgroups of students, and increased probability of dropping out of school with its associated problems.

It is important to recognize the socio-political context of retention as educational policy and practice. High-stakes policies such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) with penalties for schools failing to demonstrate adequate yearly progress (AYP) have resulted in increased pressure for communities and schools to improve student performance and reduce disparities in performance across subpopulations. NCLB's test-based accountability provisions have coincided with increasing numbers of grade retentions, the redirection of low-scorers into special education, increasing numbers of expulsions, dropouts, and students unable to graduate from high school, and more.[1]

States have also enacted policies requiring students to pass achievement tests before being promoted to the next grade, evident in the 1990s in southern states Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, North Carolina, and Texas[2] and escalating in recent years. The number increased to 15 states by 2011[3] and by 2014 15 states and the District of Columbia enacted reading policies for students in third grade or below that include retention as one component. Impact of the retention versus social promotion debate is also seen on the community level as districts point to low retention rates as a key indicator of the communities' strong schools and avoidance of federally-imposed sanctions.

What We Learned

Retention remains an emotionally charged issue for policymakers, school leaders, educators, parents, and students. Research has produced evidence to both support and refute the effectiveness of retention providing evidence for both proponents and critics to support their position. Close examination of literature on research and current practice indicates that retention as an effective educational strategy for young children is nuanced rather than definitive, often framed by the criteria established to determine effective outcomes. Further, limited research on the impact of retention on early learners may result in the misapplication of retention research findings conducted on older students.

Following are several key questions and responses based on a more comprehensive review of retention in the early years:

How prevalent is retention in the primary grades?

- In 1993, approximately 6 percent of kindergarteners were retained.[4]
- More than 450,000 elementary school students were held back a year in 2011–12, representing about 2% of all elementary school students.[5]

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[1] e.g., Allensworth, 2004; Amrein & Berliner, 2002; Bryk, 2003; Darling-Hammond, 2004; Denton, 2001; Haney, 2000; Nagaoka & Roderick, 2004; Neill, Guisbond, Schaeffer, et al., 2004
[2] Marsh et al., 2009
[3] Education Commission of the States, 2011
[4] Zill et al., 1997
[5] OCR, 2014

  - More than 140,000 kindergarten students nationwide were held back a year in 2011–12, representing about 4% of all kindergarten students in public schools.
  - Arkansas and Hawaii had the highest rate of kindergarten retention during this period (12%).
- 15 states plus DC 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.[6] Of the 15 states plus DC that retain students:
  - 15 states plus DC provide good cause exemptions for at least one of the following reasons:
    - Students receiving special education services (12 states plus DC)
    - Students previously retained either once or twice on the basis of a reading deficiency (10 states plus DC)
    - English language learners (9 states plus DC)
    - Recommendation from a principal or teacher (2 states)
    - Parental appeal (1 state)
  - 12 states plus DC will promote students if they participate in an intervention

Is research design a consideration for understanding retention?

- "While the weight of evidence seems to suggest that the impact of retention on those retained is harmful, methodological disagreements have fostered continued uncertainty."[7]
- Literature can be categorized into individual studies, reports, literature reviews, and meta-analyses. Huddleston (2014) provides a comprehensive review of meta-analyses and policy reviews with recommendations for ending social promotion policies.
- Various commissioned reports and policy reviews may not have been subject to external or peer-review review processes.
- Research design is typically categorized as same-grade or same-age. Same-grade studies comparing students repeating a grade with those experiencing the grade for the first time constitute the majority of studies. Same-age studies compare retained students with those of similar age who were promoted.
  - Results of same-grade studies are mixed; same-age studies are more consistent in findings.[8]
- Limited current research is available on the impact of retention on young children.
  - Retention frequently examined for older students; developmental assumptions applied to children as young as kindergarten may be inappropriate.

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[6] ECS, 2014; While Delaware law states that students not reading at grade level should be retained, the epilogue of a budget bill nullifies that by stating that all consequences related to the Statewide Assessment System for individual students including retention are eliminated until the Statewide Assessment System is fully implemented.
[7] Hong, 2007
[8] Hong & Raudenbush, 2005

What criteria are used to determine a student's retention?

- Retention decisions may be categorized as "teacher-based" or "test-based."
- Test-based retention policies, often mandated by state legislatures in accordance with federal accountability efforts, have increased during recent years.
    - 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 or school-based retention criteria vary.
    - Subjective, inconsistent criteria across teachers and schools.
    - Decision based on more comprehensive data about academic performance and social-emotional maturity.
- Results of test-based and teacher-based retention vary.
    - Test-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.
    - Teacher-based results indicate short-term academic gains; may motivate older at-risk students who believe academic success is within their reach to work harder toward proficiency.
    - Both teacher- and test-based retention policies associated with short-term academic gains that fade over time and confirm retention as being correlated to increased high school dropout decisions by students.
- Several professional organizations (AERA, APA, NCME, NASP) argue against retention policies based on a single, high-stakes test score.

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

- Conventional thought is that retention, if enacted, is better done at the earliest time possible to formatively improve academic performance and minimize emotional or social distress.
- Students retained in sixth grade are more likely to complete high school than students who are retained in eighth grade.
- 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 retention experiences directly correlate with increased probability that students will drop out of school.

Are characteristics of schools or communities 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. Some studies focus on short-term or long-term impact while others explore academic performance versus social/emotional/behavioral consequences. Academic performance generally examines literacy and high school completion.

Controversy persists among researchers regarding the efficacy of retention as an effective educational strategy in the literature. A large number of analyses show negative results of retention on children's academic achievement and social-emotional development. A similarly large number of studies report no statistically significant differences in the outcomes between the retained and the promoted groups. Results of a much smaller number of studies favored retention.[9]

Meta-analyses of teacher-based retention provide more comprehensive analysis than individual studies; generally concluding there is little compelling justification for the claim that there are benefits of retention.[10] The bulk of evidence suggests that children who are retained learn less than they would have had they instead been promoted.[11]

Academic performance

Short-term

- Retaining students in kindergarten does not boost academic achievement.[12] Conversely, several large city and state studies focusing on academic achievement initially reported positive effects of retention on the initial cohorts.
    - Florida students retained in third grade on test-based criteria demonstrated substantial short-term gains in reading and math.[13]
- Academic benefits resulting from retention are short-term and are statistically insignificant after 5 years.[14]
- Many retained children continue to struggle during retention year[15] and many placed in special education.[16]
- In Chicago, by third grade, little evidence was found that students who were retained did better than their low-achieving counterparts who were promoted.[17]

[9] Hong & Yu, 2007
[10] Allen et al., 2009; Huddleston 2014: Xia & Kirby, 2009
[11] Holmes, 1984; Hong, 2007; Huddleston, 2014
[12] Shepard & Smith, 1989
[13] West, 2012
[14] Hong & Yu, 2007; Jimerson, 2001; Jimerson et al., 2002
[15] Hong & Yu, 2007
[16] Nagoka & Roderick, 2004; OCR, 2014
[17] Nagoka & Roderick, 2004

Long-term

- Short-term academic gains dissipate within several years following retention.[18]
- Retained children are 20 – 30% more likely to drop out of school.[19]
- Retained students had lower achievement in language arts, reading, math, and social studies than promoted students.[20]

Social/emotional/behavioral

Short-term

- Social, emotional, attitudinal, and behavioral effects on retained students were mixed and not solely negative.[21]
- Retention is harmful from the student's perspective.[22]
- The relative standing of kindergarten retainees was generally favorable when compared with children from a younger cohort.[23]
- 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.[24]

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.[25]
- Retention is a powerful predictor of failure to complete high school.[26]
  - Students who are retained more than once are at a considerably greater risk of dropping out.[27]
- Retention is associated with persons working in low-paying jobs and lower likelihood of pursuing postsecondary education.[28]

[18] Greene & Winters, 2007; Huddleston, 2014; Winters & Greene, 2012; Xia & Kirby, 2009
[19] Hong, 2007; Shepard & Smith, 1989
[20] Huddleston, 2014; Holmes, 1989; Holmes & Matthews ,1984
[21] Xia & Kirby, 2009
[22] Shepard & Smith, 1989; Jimerson, 2001; Jimerson et al., 2002
[23] Hong, 2007
[24] McCombs, 2009
[25] Huddleston, 2014
[26] Grissom & Shepard, 1989; Jacob & Lefgren, 2007, 2009; Jimerson, 1999; Rumberger & Larson, 1998
[27] Jimerson, 2002
[28] Xia & Kirby, 2009

Does retention affect certain groups of students differently?

- Studies indicate that students who are African-American, Latino-American, eligible for special education, or low-income are more likely to fail standardized tests and consequently be retained.[29]
    - Students with disabilities served by IDEA represent 14% of students enrolled and 17% of students retained in elementary schools.[30]
    - English learners represent 14% of students enrolled and 18% of students retained in elementary schools.[31]
    - Native-Hawaiian, other Pacific Islander, American Indian, and Native-Alaskan kindergarten students are held back a year at nearly twice the rate of white kindergarten students.[32]
- Special allowances and exemptions to retention policies are given to students receiving special education and English language learners, and parental appeal is also considered.[33]
- Boys represent 61% of kindergarteners retained.[34]
- Studies examine sub-groups most frequently retained, not the short- and long-term effectiveness of retention on sub-groups.

Are there 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.[35]
- Districts and states have considered alternative strategies, including:
    - 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[36]

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 (e.g., literacy) while ignoring individual and contextual characteristics is not fully supported by research to ensure intended short- and long-term outcomes for all students.

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[29] Livingston & Livingston, 2002; Shepard & Smith, 1989; US Dept. of Education Office of Civil Rights, 2014
[30] OCR, 2014
[31] OCR, 2014
[32] OCR, 2014
[33] Workman, 2014
[34] OCR, 2014
[35] Darling-Hammond, 1998
[36] Huddleston, 2014

The preponderance of research indicates that academic gains associated with retention were short-term and not evident several years following the retention while the likelihood of dropping out of school increased significantly. Also, concerns that retention disproportionately impacts minority groups of children suggest the contributing causes of school difficulties must be addressed to reduce the need for retention.

In and of itself, retention is not uniformly supported by research as a remedy to most children's learning difficulties. Receiving the same information using similar instructional strategies a second year is unlikely to yield significant results for many children. Alternatives to, or strategies in conjunction with, retention have proven to be effective. When enacted, retention must be accompanied by intensive, differentiated remediation and related supports to achieved intended short- and long-term results.

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; actions included in many states' third-grade reading policies. 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.

Resources and Links

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