

Grade Retention After COVID-19: Evidence-Based Guidance

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The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way school districts reach, educate, evaluate, and support students. Remote schooling provided opportunities for reflection and reevaluation of curriculum, but also limited the content teachers were able to deliver in 2020 and 2021 and the skills students were able to develop, and increased chronic absenteeism for at risk students (Southall et al., 2021). In the past, grade retention, or repetition, has been a common way for school districts to address low achievement and high absenteeism.

As parents, schools, and districts assess student learning progress at the end of the '20-'21 school year, some stakeholders may propose grade retention as a mechanism to support students. As this brief will explain, **the research is clear that grade retention has no long term benefits for student achievement or long term outcomes and may in fact have negative consequences for both students and districts.** While there is some evidence of short term positive effects, these are to be expected as students are completing work they have already been exposed to. As students move into later grades, these effects disappear, indicating that while students may improve on work they have already completed, grade retention does not provide a scaffold for learning new skills or approaching new challenges in future grades.

While the specific conditions of remote learning during a global pandemic are unprecedented, the retention of students for low achievement and high absenteeism is not. Here, we review existing literature on two forms of grade retention: involuntary, otherwise known as "holding students

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back,” and voluntary, often referred to as “redshirting.” We conclude that grade retention is not an educationally advantageous or cost effective solution for supporting struggling students, and may in fact cause more harm in the long run both to individual students and to their districts. In lieu of grade retention, we recommend using district funds towards research-supported interventions for students such as tutoring programs, increased socio-emotional support, culturally-responsive pedagogy, and teacher training on differentiation and effective use of data to support student growth.

Involuntary Grade Retention – Impact on Retained Students

Most research on grade retention examines the involuntary form of the practice, often labeled as “leaving a student behind.” There are a number of potential reasons why a school may recommend or require a student be retained, including low exam scores, attendance, or other performance metrics. In general, students who are retained repeat their current grade the following year as their classmates move on to the next grade. As this unique school year comes to a close, schools and districts will need to examine the best solution for a potentially increased number of students labeled as “underperforming.”

The research on the efficacy of grade retention suggests that it is not a particularly effective intervention, although there is evidence of some short-term gains. For example, a number of studies find students typically improve during the year they repeat (Frey, 2005). Other research suggests positive impacts on self-concept as well (Lamote et al., 2014). This may be expected, however, given that the content the students are receiving is similar if not identical to the year prior; these gains may simply be limited to the “head start” repeating students have in comparison to peers learning content for the first time.

When examining results beyond the repeated year, research suggests that any gains experienced by retaining students fade away, if not outright switch to a negative impact. Both Jimmerson et al. (1997) and Karweit (1999), for example, find that short-term positive effects are not sustained, and within a few years retained students see no benefit from the intervention. Further, other work finds negative long-term impacts on student achievement; Lamote et al. (2014) finds little short-term impact, but a strong decline in language achievement for students who were retained in eighth grade when examining students’ performance later in high school.

There are other serious potential negative academic implications of grade retention as well, particularly when considering the potential impact on high school dropout rates. Jacob and Lefgren (2007), for example, find that retention among low-achieving eighth grade students increases the likelihood that these students will drop out of high school. Similarly, Hughes et al. (2018) finds that students who were retained in grades 1-5 are also more likely to drop out of high school, with effects strongest for Hispanic and African American girls, even though academic achievement was not significantly lower for these students.

Other, non-academic negative effects are associated with grade retention as well. Jimerson (1997) finds that grade retention is associated with increased absences, behavioral difficulties, and lower peer acceptance when compared to a similarly performing control group who were not retained. A follow-up study (Jimerson, 1999) also found retained students had notably lower employment and postsecondary outcomes, including lower wages and less likelihood to be enrolled in college.

In sum, the research is clear that retaining students is not associated with positive outcomes

and may lead to negative academic and non-academic outcomes in the long run. The salient question, then, is what might be an alternative? A typical response might be “social promotion” or automatic promotion, in which a student is moved on to the next grade despite not mastering the content of the prior year. While popular in the past, additional attention paid to benchmarking and competency as far back as 1983’s *A Nation at Risk* has led to significant arguments against the practice (Frey, 2005). Still, research suggests that socially promoted students may actually outperform their retained peers, despite not receiving any additional interventions (Holmes & Matthews, 1984). It may be helpful, then, to consider involuntary grade retention and social promotion as two of a number of options; other interventions could buoy struggling students as they move from grade to grade, which we examine in the concluding section of this brief.

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Voluntary and Involuntary Grade Retention – Impact on “Redshirted” Students

A second implementation of grade retention occurs when parents or caregivers, rather than teachers, request that a student be “held back.” Generally, voluntary grade retention happens either when parents or caregivers request that their child repeat a year, or (much more commonly) when they wait to enroll their child in school for the first time, a practice typically called “redshirting.” Research on this type of grade retention is far less prevalent, especially when considering impacts for older students as the practice is comparatively uncommon. Still, there are lessons we can learn from redshirting that may help guide decisions for districts, schools, and parents.

The research is not nearly as clear in comparison to existing work on involuntary grade retention, and there are a small handful of studies that uncover short-term benefits. For example, Datar (2006) finds that within the first two years of schooling, students who enter Kindergarten at an older age relative to their same-grade peers do have higher test scores, especially for students who are labeled as at-risk, and other work finds that older students outperform younger students more generally, including through high school (Bedard & Duhey, 2006).

Despite the studies cited above, more substantial and broad evidence suggests that redshirting has no long-term benefit to the students who are retained (Huang, 2015). For example, Lincove and Painter (2006) find that while students entering Kindergarten at a younger age than their same-grade peers are more likely to repeat a grade later on, they are actually less likely to see any negative effects of retention. Moreover, they are more likely to attend college, earn higher wages, and even achieve higher test scores in high school when compared to students who were redshirted.

Additionally, a variety of studies (see Huang, 2015 for a summary) have found redshirted students are more likely to be placed in a special education program, have higher prevalence of behavioral issues, and are more likely to be disengaged. Finally, boys' increased likelihood to redshirt can at least partially explain the boy-girl gender gap in high school and college completion (Deming & Dynarski, 2006).

Impacts on Larger Community

While the impacts of both voluntary and involuntary grade retention are certainly felt by individual students, it is also important to note the impact both practices have on the larger schooling community. First, districts do not generally budget for students to be involuntarily retained, meaning that an individual student being asked to repeat a grade will cost a district anywhere from \$13,000 to \$35,000, depending on the district (CT School Finance, 2021). These funds could otherwise be spent on other, more useful interventions.

While pre-Kindergarten redshirting doesn't typically have the same costs associated with later grade retention (parents are still typically paying for some version of pre-school instead), there are other, non-financial costs associated with the practice, specifically when considering equity. Given the increased cost of redshirting placed on parents, it is perhaps unsurprising that caregivers with high socioeconomic status are more likely to use this practice, and academically redshirted students are more likely to be White than their non-redshirted peers, even as poorer families are more likely to be concerned about their child's readiness for Kindergarten (Bassok & Reardon, 2013). As a result, the practice may actually exacerbate existing achievement gaps, in the short-term, between White and BIPOC students (Lenard & Pena, 2018).

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Alternatives to Grade Retention

The evidence is clear: grade retention is not an effective or fiscally prudent intervention for students performing below grade level, nor can it be recommended as an elective practice for younger students. However, some stakeholders may suggest this option because they experienced the potential short term positive effects discussed above as students, as parents, or as teachers. It is imperative that districts acknowledge these effects and then engage in research-oriented dialogue about the short and long term costs and negative effects of grade retention and offer other interventions to families and schools to support struggling students. Of course, automatically promoting students to the next grade despite poor performance or attendance does not mean that

a district's responsibilities and opportunities for support and intervention end. Rather, funds that might have been used in retaining students could be used to provide interventions that are proven to improve student outcomes.

One such intervention could be a “high-dosage” tutoring program, an intervention supported by significant research (Kraft & Goldstein, 2020), in which individual tutors work with students throughout the year to support academic growth. Another potential intervention involves “wraparound” services in which schools use comprehensive support models to address out-of-school factors that may be inhibiting learning; these services have been demonstrated to improve not only learning outcomes but also socio-emotional development (Bowden & Wasser Gish, 2021). There is also evidence that providing additional socio-emotional support and family engagement through strengthened guidance programs (Lapan et al., 2007), community events and partnerships (Sheldon, 2003), and culturally-responsive pedagogy are each helpful for improving student outcomes (Dee & Penner, 2017). Lastly, any intervention must come with in-depth and sustained teacher training (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009), providing teachers with the skills and dispositions necessary for individualizing and differentiating instruction for students. This includes developing more robust and nuanced skills around student data collection and assessment that inspires changes to curriculum and pedagogy (Filderman et al., 2020). These suggestions are not new, and may already be part of many school district improvement plans for Alliance Districts in Connecticut. However, in conversations about supporting students during and after the COVID-19 crisis these efforts should be redoubled, especially if grade retention is suggested by parents, teachers, or school administrators. Resources are limited and precious for school districts, and thus using them on research-based interventions and not on grade retention is vital to serving students equitably and responsibly.

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