

Research Brief

The Effects of Retention on Drop-out and Graduation Rates

Question: What is the relationship between retention, drop-out and graduation rates?

Summary of Findings:

Retention of low-achieving students is one of the most controversial and complex issues educational leaders face, despite a half century of research that has shown consistently that any gains in achievement are short-lived, and the long-term effects for retained students more often than not are devastating (Allensworth, 2004; Jimerson, 2001b; House, 1998; Roderick, M. & Nagaoka, 2005). The practice of grade retention (also referred to as non-promotion, being held back, or “flunking”) requires that a student who has not performed well in a particular grade remains at that grade level for an additional year. Typically, “30% to 50% of students will be retained at least once by 9th grade . . . [and] 5 – 10% of students are retained annually” (Jimerson, 2001b).

Despite overwhelming evidence that the practice does not benefit students academically and, indeed, does great harm, it continues to be popular among both educators and politicians who decry “social promotion” and believe that “the threat of retention as much as retention itself will lead to higher performance” (Roderick & Nagaoka, p. 310). Those who promote retention from this underlying assumption believe expectations for high performance must be coupled with negative consequences for those who fail to perform. Other educators advocate for retention of low-performing students because of the promise of an extra year of instruction and time some students need to “catch up” with their age-mates academically or socially. Although these assumptions may seem logical, they cannot be supported by the body of research on retention (House; Jimerson 2001a, 2001b). The threat of retention simply does not serve to motivate those students most likely to drop out, and achievement gains are not large enough or long-term enough to mitigate the negative effect of retention on the very students most likely to be retained (Roderick & Nagaoka).

What We Know about the Effects of Teacher-initiated Retention

Until fairly recently, most students who were retained were recommended for retention by their teachers, and were dealt with on a case-by-case basis. The impact of these teacher-initiated retentions on retained students has been documented for decades with consistently negative results (see especially synthesis of retention research and meta-analysis by Jimerson, 2001a,b). A summary of some key research findings on long-term effects of retention follows.

- Retained students are more likely to drop out of school than those students who have not been retained; findings vary from 7% more likely in the landmark NELS study (Scott, L. A., Rock, D. A., Pollack, J. M., Ingels, S. J., 1995), to 11% more likely in studies examined by Jimerson (2001a) for his meta-analysis.
- “Retention increases the risk of dropping out between 20% and 50%” (Jimerson, 2001b, p. 53).
- Up to 78% of students who dropout before graduation have been retained at least once (Jimerson, 2001b, p. 53)

- Retained students who were two or more years older than their grade cohort were 34% more likely to drop out of school (Scott, et al., 1995).
- “Racial minority students and students living in poverty constitute the majority of those who are retained,” evidence that “retention disproportionately affects the most disadvantaged students” (Bali, Anagnostopoulos, Roberts, 2005, p. 134)
- Retained students were less well-adjusted academically by the end of 11th grade and were less likely to earn a high school diploma than a comparison group of low-achieving students who had not been retained (Jimerson, 2001b, p. 51).
- Retained students were less likely to be enrolled in post-secondary education, earned less, and were rated lower by employers than comparable low-achieving students who had not been retained (Jimerson, 2001b, p. 51).
- Gains in achievement for retained students were either non-existent or were not maintained in subsequent years after retention (Jimerson, 2001b, p. 50).

In his synthesis of research on the relationships between retention and dropping out of high school before graduation, Jimerson (2001b) concluded that retention is “one of the most powerful predictors of” which students will drop out; in fact, all 17 studies he examined “found grade retention to be associated with subsequent dropout” (p. 52). One study (Rumberger, 1995 in Jimerson, 2001b) identified retention as the single “most powerful predictor of dropping out” (p. 53).

The New Era of System-Mandated Retention: Findings

Although teacher-initiated retentions continue despite consistent evidence of the harm it does to students, the current era of standards-based education and high stakes accountability for schools has expanded the use of retention to a systems-wide level in many places. During the 1980’s New York City was one of the first systems to develop “promotion gates” and to retain large numbers of students at specific grade levels for failure to perform on standardized tests (House, 1998). A call for an end to “social promotion” became part of the political dialogue especially during the late 1990’s when President Bill Clinton actually called for an end to social promotion in three consecutive State of the Union addresses (1997 – 1999). By the late 1990’s, many states and local school districts, including Chicago, began to develop and implement policies to end social promotion by retaining students who failed to pass some kind of standardized test at identified promotion “gates” (Jimerson, 2001b). The mandated retention of large numbers of students across the country has been the focus of several subsequent studies.

Given the consistent and overwhelming evidence that grade retention is harmful rather than beneficial to already at-risk students, one might wonder how such a practice could become the centerpiece of state or district policies. Educators and policy makers appear to believe that the additional interventions that are also integral to these policies (e.g., intensive summer programs, “transitions centers,” smaller class sizes for retained students, etc.) will counterbalance the negative effects of retention documented by decades of research. What do the findings show? Research from both New York City and Chicago are consistent with findings elsewhere and serve as examples.

- In New York City, retained students did not improve academically, despite intensive interventions and retained students “dropped out at substantially higher rates” than non-retained students (House, 1998, cover page).

- In Chicago, students retained at the 8th grade gate who were already older than their age cohort, often because of previous retentions, did not complete high school by age 19 at a rate of 78% (Allensworth, 2004, p. 23).
- In Chicago, racial gaps in the dropout rate grew, with African American students most negatively impacted (Allensworth, 2004).
- In Chicago, dropout rates for non-retained students decreased slightly, though dropout rates for students retained at grade 8 as a result of this policy increased 26% from pre-policy levels; i.e., low achieving students were “even less likely to graduate” from high school as a result of the policy (p. 29). Intensive interventions for retained students did not ultimately increase achievement or counterbalance the negative impact of retention (Allensworth, 2004).

In her longitudinal study of Chicago results, where more than 12,000 8th graders were retained in four years, Allensworth concluded the policy “could not be viewed as an effective tool for reducing dropout rates among the group of students most likely to drop out” (p. 29) and that “the net effect of high stakes testing on dropout rates was adverse” (p. 28). It should be noted that the test used at the promotion gates in Chicago was the Iowa Achievement Test, despite the publisher’s objections that using the test for promotion or retention is not appropriate (House, 1998).

A Recommendation: Change the Debate

The cost of retaining students, whether those retentions are teacher-initiated or system-mandated, is high both in terms of devastating effects on students and financial burdens to the district (House, 1998). Given the clarity of research findings around this issue, debating “the merits and limitations of ‘social promotion’ versus ‘grade retention’” represents a missed opportunity for much more productive discussion.

A more constructive discussion would focus on specific educational strategies to facilitate the education of children at-risk of academic failure. As such, the recent emphasis on empirically supported interventions will hopefully provide valuable insights regarding appropriate academic interventions (Jimerson, 2001b, p. 54).

Clearly, “grade retention is not an empirically supported intervention” for helping all students find success in schools (Jimerson, p. 57).

References and Online Resources

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