

Arm yourself with the facts about the early childhood initiative or policy important to you.

DOES RETENTION (REPEATING A GRADE) HELP STRUGGLING LEARNERS?

CONCLUSION: No. Evidence showing a benefit of retention is virtually non-existent whereas evidence showing no effect or harm is plentiful.

SUMMARY POINTS

- Studies we reviewed used accepted methodologies for making fair comparisons between retained and promoted students. Retained students were always compared with a similarly low-achieving group that met or just barely exceeded retention criteria.
- 18 of 21 reports we reviewed showed neutral or negative effects of retention on academic outcomes.
- Early retention has caused disadvantages for children including lower achievement, aggression, high school drop-out, and dramatically reduced college attendance. These differences remained statistically significant after controlling for later achievement as well as demographic factors that may have influenced the initial decision to retain.
- Of the three studies showing a benefit, one showed the benefit in only one of two score types – the one believed to be the less fair comparison because it does not control for the fact that retained students had another year of exposure to the same material.
- The other two studies, regarding the retention policies in Florida and New York City, are discussed in detail below. In short, these studies do not show that retention per se is effective since the retained students received substantial additional services *after* the decision to retain or promote, whereas the promoted group's subsequent receipt of services was not guaranteed and more inconsistent. The authors of these studies readily admit that a substantial portion of any positive effects seen (which were one to three year test score outcomes) could have been due to the extra academic tutoring received by retained children and not the fact that they were retained.
- There *are* sufficient data to conclude that retention in the absence of well-funded, guaranteed, and high-dosage interventions is ineffective or harmful. This includes the most recent research using the most rigorous methods to control for pre-retention differences.
- Although post-third grade retention is found to be more harmful than early grades retention overall, research has shown that even as early as first grade, retention has negative effects on achievement that last throughout elementary and high school.
- Despite a common perception that retention allows for academic catch-up but causes social-emotional problems (e.g., loss of self-esteem, sense of school belonging), we found two studies showing the opposite: a modest benefit of retention on behavior, teacher- and peer-liking, but no benefit on academic achievement.

Has Florida defied the odds and proven that retention works?

In 2003, as part of its effort to meet the expectations of No Child Left Behind, Florida began implementing legislation mandating retention for third graders who reached only the lowest of 5 levels on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT). Prior to that time and since, Florida has been implementing a host of other education reforms. In addition to accountability-focused reforms such as grading schools on an A-F system and incentivizing student learning gains, Florida has also guaranteed via statute intervention-based reforms such as professional development in research-based techniques, limiting early grades class size to 18 or fewer students, and universal voluntary preschool. Moreover, Florida's education reforms are well-financed. For example, since 2006 Florida has legislated a separate education fund guaranteed to be spent on literacy. This year that fund has \$130M to distribute across its districts to be spent on highly qualified literacy coaches, intensive summer reading camps for lagging readers, among others. Although Florida's unique combination of reforms and financial backing is likely largely responsible for some test score gains seen there, the effects of retention itself are not possible to isolate.

Although some test score gains in Florida are held up as a model, any such gains were achieved by much more than just accountability reforms. Florida also has universal preschool, class size limits, and guaranteed high-quality literacy coaches, among other well-financed innovations.

We are aware of only one peer-reviewed study evaluating the effects of Florida's retention policy on *individual children* (Greene & Winters, 2007), that is, comparing retained children to a comparable group of low-achieving promoted children. Other available sources were a dissertation¹ (Powell, 2007), a review of an earlier version of Greene and Winters (Briggs, 2006), and a report by Colorado Succeeds, which describes itself as "a non-profit, non-partisan coalition of business leaders committed to improving the state's education system for workforce development and economic growth" and as taking "a leadership role in aggressively pursuing reforms." The Colorado Succeeds report was advocating a profile of education reforms similar to Florida's for Colorado, and did not claim to be about retention only. Furthermore, that report provided achievement data overall (with some group breakdown) but did not provide data on

There is no published research testing the effectiveness of retention in Florida. There is one study finding that retention *plus* being assigned to a highly effective teacher and receiving 90 minutes of additional literacy instruction per day is more effective than being promoted with no such guaranteed, high-dosage interventions.

the effect of specific reforms or interventions, such as retention, on individual children. For these reasons, we do not consider that report further in the quest to surmise whether Florida has shown that *retention* is a beneficial or harmful practice².

Greene and Winters (2007) used two field-accepted methods of comparing retained and non-retained students in Florida, and concluded that retention had "robust" positive effects (no difference after one year; .46 of a standard deviation advantage for retained students after two years). However, as the authors readily admit, the Florida policy is not pure with

respect to retention, because it guarantees important interventions for retained students, such as being assigned to a high-performing teacher and receiving 90 minutes of additional reading instruction a day, whereas no such interventions are guaranteed for the barely promoted

students. Indeed, the law in Florida does not specify any kind of help or even tracking of the barely promoted fourth or fifth graders beyond what is in place generally for addressing lower achievers. Thus, there is no way of determining whether the retained students may have experienced the same or greater advantage had they consistently received those additional interventions and also been promoted.

The case of Chicago is almost the exact converse of Florida. Chicago provided intensive summer school services to retention-eligible children, as well as another opportunity to test out of retention at the end of the summer, and therefore the effects of extra services could be disentangled from the effects of retention alone. Furthermore, whereas the summer services were intensive and highly prescribed, “the district gave little structure to the retained year. Decisions about how to group retained students for instruction, whether they would have the same teacher, and whether they would be given extra supports were left to the principal.” (Roderick & Nagoka, 2005; p. 314). The retained children in Chicago, therefore, were similar to the promoted children in Florida in that both groups received only “case by case” additional services using whatever unmeasured, discretionary processes were already in place. It is no wonder, then, that the peer-reviewed studies evaluating Chicago’s retention policy (Jacobs & Lefgren, 2004; Roderick & Nagoka, 2005), after accounting for the effect of the intensive summer intervention, concluded that retention

It is no wonder that both the promoted children in Florida and retained children in Chicago did poorly compared to their peers. Both groups of struggling students did not receive any guaranteed special help during the studied year.

Although proponents of retention might take the Florida case in isolation as suggesting that “retention done well” benefits the most struggling students, the existing evidence suggests instead that “promotion done well” may provide equal or greater benefits in the short-term, and is very likely to be a less harmful strategy in the long-run.

alone provided either neutral or negative effects. In short, the case studies of both Florida and Chicago have shown that struggling learners who receive guaranteed, structured, and intensive extra help improve their achievement to a non-retention eligible level or higher.

Some stakeholders in Florida believe that the “hard line in the sand” created by mandatory, test-based retention created a motivational difference in teachers and parents (e.g., see [here](#)), since it is thought that many of the same learning supports were being provided to struggling students prior to the policy.

This may be the case for test score gains close to the retention year, but given the well-known longer-term negative effect of retention on drop-out rates (e.g., Allensworth, 2005) as well as the assured delayed entry into the workforce, Florida’s evidence falls far short of even suggesting that retention is the only or best way to motivate a real positive difference for struggling students, nor has it contradicted the overwhelming evidence against retention prior and since.

The Case of New York City: Do the RAND studies cast doubt on the ineffectiveness or harmfulness of retention?

RAND published an extensive report in 2009 and a working paper in 2011, both concluding that grade retention in the fifth grade showed positive effects in New York City. However, New York has a similar problem to Florida: We don't know the differences in extra services received by the retained and barely promoted students. Although RAND did a thorough job of comparing the effects of various interventions (e.g., summer school, Saturday classes, retention), BEFORE AND INCLUDING the decision to retain, there is no comparison of the *services* that retained and barely promoted students received DURING AND AFTER the retained or barely promoted year. Although statistical adjustments were made to try and isolate the effects of retention vs. promotion after they occurred, these were made based on prior year test scores (and these were not available in all cohorts)³, not subsequent services received.

Similar to our conclusion above about Florida, the 2009 RAND report states that in New York "It is not surprising that we see larger positive effects for retained students than for the at-risk promoted group....the real difference was in the treatments and additional services that retained students received under the policy in the retention year..." (p. 153). As in Florida, local stakeholders in New York would likely respond that there are services in place for low achieving students whether promoted or retained, and that promotion plus extra help has "already been tried" with ultimately retained students. Indeed, in New York it seems to be especially true that at-risk students have multiple opportunities for additional help and to demonstrate that they have met promotion criteria. Nevertheless, it is fully disclosed in the RAND reports that Academic Intervention Services (AIS) in New York are delivered inconsistently across and within schools, the highest need schools are able to serve the smallest proportion of at-risk students, and teachers and principals consistently reported real-world challenges with delivering the expected

dosage and quality of AIS. Although a lower level of services for barely promoted students is guaranteed by statute in Florida but not in New York⁴, it is still likely safe to conclude in New York that, especially for high need schools, existing AIS capacity is likely "rationed" first to the already retained students, and the barely promoted students receive what is left over on an as-possible basis. Once again, although the infrastructure in New York seems to be especially

No studies we have found, including the RAND studies on New York City's retention policy, have been able to track differences in additional support services received in the years after the retention or promotion decision. Thus, any positive effects found in test score gains could be mostly the result of retained students receiving a higher average level of extra support, and not the fact that they were retained.

In short, neither the results in Florida nor New York make it logical to conclude that the results on retention are "mixed." RAND's own reports as well as all reasonable stakeholders have concluded that retention alone does not solve achievement problems and that it creates some new ones.

appropriate in terms of recommending intensive additional services for all low-achieving students regardless of retention or promotion status, the fact remains that the *research* done on the NYC policy should not be used to support the case that retention is effective since the actual

interventions received by these students after the retention or promotion decision were not tracked and since it is logical to conclude that the barely promoted students received a lower average level of extra help after that point.

Also worth noting is that generally, as well as in case studies, test preparation was found to be the major focus of AIS, and this difference was present more strongly in high need schools. A tight connection between test preparation and test score gains that put students slightly above the retention risk cutoff (i.e., from a 1 to a 2 on the New York test) is unsurprising. Given the fact that the greatest harms of retention are its long-term negative effects on high school drop-out and college attendance, short-term (one to three years) test score gains that may be a result of “teaching to the test” do not reverse previous conclusions about retention being ineffective or harmful.

Grade retention is one of very few education issues where there exists both extensive research and a clear answer. While education reform may require taking some bold risks, overwhelming evidence suggests retention is not a risk worth taking with young children’s lives. It would be far bolder to take a stand against retention and heed the definitive conclusion of the science: Intensive, evidence-based, well-financed, and guaranteed additional interventions improve the achievement of struggling students.

HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE LITERATURE REVIEW

Research Findings: Retention Across K-8

Jimerson, S. R. (2001). Meta-analysis of grade retention research: Implications for practice in the 21st century. *School Psychology Review, 30*(3), 420-437.

- Academic outcomes: 47% of analyses found that the promoted group did significantly better, 48% showed no difference, 5% favored the retained group.
- Social-emotional outcomes: 9% of analyses found that the promoted group did significantly better, 86% showed no difference, 5% favored the retained group.
- Thus, for both types of outcomes, **95% of analyses from 20 studies showed that retention worsens outcomes or makes no difference.**

Griffith, C.A., Lloyd, J.W., Lane, K.L., & Tankersley, M. (2010). Grade Retention of Students K-8 Predicts Reading Achievement and Progress During Secondary Schooling. *Reading & Writing Quarterly, 26*, 51-66.

- **Slightly but statistically significantly poorer 8th grade reading growth was found for students retained** at some point in kindergarten or after vs. never-retained students.
- **This was irrespective of demographic factors** that may have led to the decision to promote.

Ou, S. & Reynolds, A.J. (2010). Grade Retention, Postsecondary Education, and Public Aid Receipt. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 32*, 118-139.

- **Retention had a dramatic negative effect on 2- or 4-year college attendance – a 26% advantage for promoted students.** The differences decreased, but remained significant, after taking into account achievement after age 14. Thus, “selection bias” did not remove the negative impact of retention.
- Consistent with other research, early retention (grades 1-3) was not as harmful for college attendance as late retention (grades 4-8).

Research Findings: Retention in the Early Grades

Hong, G., & Yu, B. (2007). Early-grade retention and children's reading and math learning in elementary school. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 29(4), 239-261.

- **Kindergarten** retainees continued to achieve lower scores than comparable promoted students both three and five years after retention, though the gap between retained and comparable promoted children became minimal after five years.
- **First grade** retainees continued to widen their achievement gap relative to comparable promoted students, and this negative effect lasted throughout the elementary years, suggesting that being even one year older may be enough to solidify retention's disadvantages.

Hong, G., & Raudenbush, S. W. (2006). Evaluating kindergarten retention policy: A case study of causal inference for multilevel observational data. *Journal of the American Statistical Association*, 101(475), 901-910.

- This study looked at the differences between schools that retain many children vs. schools that retain few.
- Proponents of retention sometimes argue that retention can have more success when it is common (e.g., less problems with peer comparison), however, this study undermined that argument, because it **found negative effects of retention in both low and high retention schools.**

Jimerson, S. R., & Ferguson, P. (2007). A longitudinal study of grade retention: Academic and behavioral outcomes of retained students through adolescence. *School Psychology Quarterly*, 22(3), 314-339.

- Here, the effects of early (kindergarten, 1st, or 2nd grade) retention are assessed through the high school years.
 - **Promoted students consistently (through 11th grade) demonstrated higher achievement than retained students.**
 - **Retained students were also 5-9 times more likely to drop out of school, and to display aggression in late adolescence.**

Goos, M., Van Damme, J., Onghena, P., & Petry, K. (2010, March). First-grade retention: Effects on children's actual and perceived performance throughout elementary school. In A. Gamoran (Chair), *Education policy: Effects of accountability on practice and student outcomes*. Symposium conducted at the meeting of the Society for Research on Educational Effectiveness, Washington, D. C.

- Here the authors compare retained students to their younger grade-mates as well as to same-age promoted peers.
 - Although retained students started their repeat 1st grade year with an advantage in math and reading relative to their grade-mates, this **advantage was lost by the end of elementary school.**
 - Same-age comparisons found that **promoted students consistently outperformed retained students.** Teacher-rated math and language skills were also higher for promoted than retained students.

Wu, W., West, S. G., & Hughes, J. N. (2010) Effect of grade retention in first grade on psychosocial outcomes. *J Educ Psychol*, 102(1), 135-152.

- This study found that 1st grade retention is associated with **decreased teacher-rated hyperactivity, decreased peer-rated sad-withdrawn behaviors, and increased teacher-rated behavioral engagement. These gains were retained three years later.**
 - Gains in *peer-liking* were not maintained in the longer term.
 - Self-rated sense of school belonging decreased significantly for retained students.

Gleason, K. A., Kwok, O., & Hughes, J. N. (2007). The short-term effect of grade retention on peer relations and academic performance of at-risk first graders. *The Elementary School Journal*, 107(4), 327-340.

- **Children who repeated first grade improved more in peer acceptance during the retention year than children who were promoted.**
- Although this study was designed to assess the effect of retention on peer acceptance, Time 2 comparisons revealed that **retained students had poorer *age*-based scores in math and reading than promoted students, but superior *grade*-based scores** (≈3 points in reading, ≈6 points in math.) This is the single study we found that showed any benefit of early retention.

No studies that found positive effects of retention are withheld from the highlighted group, with the exception of studies on the Florida and New York City retention policies, already discussed in detail. Full reference list available upon request.

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¹ This study concluded that retention in Florida had a negative effect on males and a neutral effect on females.

² Although the Colorado Succeeds report was about many more reforms than just retention, we find it interesting to note that several educational innovations in Florida that are also part of the picture of some of Florida's success, such as the ones we highlight here, were *not* offered as recommendations for Colorado to mimic.

³ The body of the 2009 RAND report studies the effects of the 5th grade promotion policy. An appendix to the report summarizes similar findings for the 3rd grade policy. Because their adjustment for differences in services received was an estimate based on prior year test scores, and because second graders did not have an available standardized test on which to base this adjustment, the 3rd grade results, in their entirety, could be the result of additional services and not retention. The report states, "...the estimates...are an accurate reflection of how much better students just below the Level 2 threshold in the summer performed in later grades relative to their peers just above the threshold, but these differences cannot necessarily be attributed to the effect of retention alone." (p.253)

⁴ Note that the law being considered in Colorado, HB1238, contains the same "legislated unevenness" error that Florida's does. Students retained in third grade are mandated to receive intensive additional supports whereas the fate of the barely promoted fourth graders is not mentioned, and is therefore subject only to the already existing discretionary services for at-risk students generally. This guarantees a lower average level of extra help for the barely promoted fourth graders and will make it nearly impossible to study the effects of retention under this new policy, if passed, in Colorado.