

# RESEARCH BRIEFS

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## Grade Retention

### The Rationale

Proponents of grade retention believe that requiring students to repeat a grade will motivate them to work harder in school. They maintain that the threat of flunking sends a message to students that there are consequences for lack of effort and poor performance. And, should a student fail a grade, he or she now has the “opportunity” to devote an additional year of study to master the material that should have been learned. Unfortunately, research shows that for the vast majority of students this policy doesn’t work, especially when done in the early elementary grades.

### Position of the National Association of School Psychologists

One of the best statements about the effectiveness of grade retention is on the website of the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP). This organization estimates that as many as 15 percent of U.S. students are held back on an annual basis and that between 30 percent and 50 percent of U.S. students are held back at least once prior to grade nine. NASP points out that students most likely to be retained are African American or Hispanic (predominantly males), who “. . . have a late birthday, delayed development and/or attention problems; live in poverty or in a single-parent household; have parents with low educational attainment; have parents that are less involved in their education; or have changed schools frequently. Students who have behavior problems and display aggression or immaturity are more likely to be retained. Students with reading problems, including English Language Learners, are also more likely to be retained.”<sup>1</sup>

The NASP also reports the following:

- “. . . there is no evidence of a positive effect on either long-term school achievement or adjustment. Furthermore, by adolescence, these early retention practices are predictive of numerous health and emotional risk factors, and associated deleterious outcomes.”

# RESEARCH BRIEFS

- “Initial achievement gains may occur during the year the student is retained. However, the consistent trend across many research studies is that achievement gains decline within 2-3 years of retention, such that retained children either do no better or perform more poorly than similar groups of promoted children.”
- “Children with the greatest number of academic, emotional, and behavioral problems are most likely to experience negative consequences of retention. . . . [Furthermore] retention is associated with significant increases in behavior problems as measured by behavior rating scales completed by teachers and parents, with problems becoming more pronounced as the child reaches adolescence.”
- “Students who were retained or had delayed kindergarten entry are more likely to drop out of school compared to students who were never retained, even when controlling for achievement levels. The probability of dropping out increases with multiple retentions. Even for single retentions, the most consistent finding from decades of research is the high correlation between retention and dropping out. A recent systematic review of research exploring dropping out of high school indicates that grade retention is one of the most powerful predictors of high school dropout.”
- “Grade repeaters as adults are more likely to be unemployed, living on public assistance or in prison than adults who did not repeat a grade.”

## **Alternatives to Retention and “Social Promotion”**

The alternative to grade retention is not “social promotion.” A meta-analysis of research done prior to 1999 showed that neither grade retention nor social promotion are effective strategies for helping struggling students. Instead, the author, Shane Jimerson, suggested that schools need to implement remedial programs that address the socio-emotional adjustment and educational achievement of students.<sup>2</sup>

# RESEARCH BRIEFS

In an article written for Educational Leadership in 2008, Jane David summarizes the research on the effectiveness of grade retention.<sup>3</sup> She reminds the reader that school systems cannot afford to hold back every student who falls behind because of the costs involved. In other words, even if retention worked, it would be cost-prohibitive.

Most importantly, David also rejects both retention and social promotion as effective strategies for students who are not doing well in school.<sup>4</sup> Instead, she calls for intensive and targeted interventions based on the specific needs of the child. For a list of specific intervention recommendations see the NASP website, which also has links to other sites that offer research-based alternatives to retention or social promotion.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> See: [http://www.nasponline.org/about\\_nasp/pospaper\\_graderetent.aspx](http://www.nasponline.org/about_nasp/pospaper_graderetent.aspx)

<sup>2</sup> [http://education.ucsb.edu/jimerson/retention/SPR\\_MetaAnalysis2001.pdf](http://education.ucsb.edu/jimerson/retention/SPR_MetaAnalysis2001.pdf). Meta analysis is a sophisticated statistical procedure in which numerous different studies are “combined” into a single larger study in order to reach some overall conclusions.

<sup>3</sup> See: : <http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/mar08/vol65/num06/Grade-Retention.aspx>.

<sup>4</sup> The state of Florida uses test results to make decisions about retention. For a summary of this law and its effects, see: <http://www.mmdnewswire.com/state-education-data-indicate-floridas-fcat-based-grade-retention-policy-is-a-failure-628.html>