

Other Topics

Synthesis of Research on Grade Retention

Although grade retention is widely practiced, it does not help children to "catch up." Retained children may appear to do better in the short term, but they are at much greater risk for future failure than their equally achieving, non-retained peers.

Retaining students in grade is often used as a means to raise educational standards. The assumption is that by catching up on prerequisite skills, students should be less at risk for failure when they go on to the next grade. Strict enforcement of promotion standards at every grade is expected both to ensure the competence of high school graduates and lower the dropout rate because learning deficiencies would never be allowed to accumulate. Despite the popular belief that repeating a grade is an effective remedy for students who have failed to master basic skills, however, the large body of research on grade retention is almost uniformly negative.

Research Evidence

The purpose of this article is to summarize research-based conclusions regarding the effects of grade retention. We then address the discrepancy between research and practice and consider alternatives to retention.

How many students repeat a grade in school? Although no national statistics have been collected on grade retention, we recently (1989a) analyzed data from 13 states and the District of Columbia. Our estimate is that 5 to 7 percent of public school children

(about 2 children in every classroom of 30) are retained in the U.S. annually. However, annual statistics are not the whole story. A 6 percent annual rate year after year produces a cumulative rate of nonpromotion greater than 50 percent. Even allowing for students who repeat more than one grade, we estimate that by 9th grade approximately half of all students in the U.S. have flunked at least one grade (or are no longer in school). This means that, contrary to public perceptions, current grade failure rates are as high as they were in the 19th century, before the days of social promotion.

Does repeating a grade improve student achievement? In a recent meta-analysis of research, Holmes (1989) located 63 controlled studies where retained students were followed up and compared to equally poor-achieving students who went directly on to the next grade. Fifty-four studies showed overall negative effects from retention, even on measures of academic achievement. This means that when retained children went on to the next grade they actually performed more poorly on average than if they had gone on without repeating. Suppose, for example, that retained and control groups both started out at the 10th percentile on standardized achievement tests at the end of 1st grade. The retained group was made to repeat 1st grade while the control group was promoted to 2nd grade. Two years later when the retained children completed 2nd grade, they might be (on average) at the 20th percentile. However, the control children, who started out equally deficient, would finish 2nd grade achieving ahead of their retained counterparts by 0.31 standard deviation units, or at roughly the 30th percentile on average.

When Holmes selected only the 25 studies with the greatest degree of statistical control, the negative effect of



retention was again confirmed. In the 9 positive studies (out of 63), the apparent benefit of retention tended to diminish over time so that differences in performance between retained and control children disappeared in later grades.

Does nonpromotion prevent school dropouts? In a typical end-of-year news story, *USA Today* (Johnson 1988) reported that one-quarter of the 1st graders in a Mississippi community would be held back because they "can't read at a 1st-grade level." Consistent with the view that retention will repair deficient skills and improve students' life chances, the principal explained her decision: "In years past, those students would have been promoted to 2nd grade. Then they might have dropped out in five, six, or seven years."

Researchers of the dropout phenomenon have consistently found a significant relationship between grade retention and dropping out—in the opposite direction, however, from the one imagined by the Mississippi principal. Dropouts are five times more likely to have repeated a grade than are high school graduates. Students who repeat two grades have a probability of dropping out of nearly 100 percent (Association of California Urban School Districts 1985). In the past, these findings were ignored because poor achievement could be the explanation for both grade retention and dropping out. More recently, Grissom and Shepard (1989) conducted three large-scale studies, involving from 20,000 to 80,000 students each. They examined the retention-dropout relation after controlling for achievement and found that with equally poor achievement (and controlling for other background characteristics associated with dropping out), students who repeated a year were 20 to 30 percent more likely to drop out of school. For example, in Austin, Texas, African-American males with below average achievement have a 45 percent chance of dropping out of school; but African-American males with identical achievement scores who have repeated a year of school have a 75 percent chance of leaving school before graduation. A substantially in-

creased risk for dropping out after repeating a grade was found even in a large affluent suburban school district with only a 4 percent dropout rate.

What are the emotional effects of retention? In a much-quoted study of childhood stressors by Yamamoto (1980), children rated the prospect of repeating a grade as more stressful than "wetting in class" or being caught stealing. Going blind or losing a parent were the only two life events that children said would be more stressful than being retained. The negative connotations of being held back pervade the American school culture. When Byrnes (1989) interviewed children and used euphemisms to refer to spending two years in the same grade, even 1st graders said, "Oh, you mean flunking." Eighty-seven percent of the children interviewed said that being retained made them feel "sad," "bad," "upset," or "embarrassed." Only 6 percent of retained children gave positive answers about how retention made them feel, like, "you learn more," or "it lets you catch up." Interview transcripts from both high-achieving students and retained students revealed a widely shared perception that retention is a necessary punishment for being bad in class or failing to learn.

Holmes' (1989) synthesis of controlled studies included nearly 50 studies with some social or emotional outcome measures. On average, Holmes found that retained students do more poorly than matched controls on follow-up measures of social adjustment, attitudes toward school, behavioral outcomes, and attendance.

The above research findings indicate, then, that contrary to popular belief, repeating a grade actually worsens achievement levels in subsequent years. The evidence contradicts commonsense reasoning that retention will reduce school dropout rates; it seems more likely that school policies meant to increase the number of grade retentions will exacerbate dropout rates. The negative social-emotional consequences of repeating represents the only area where conventional wisdom is consistent with research findings: kids have always hated being retained, and the studies bear that out.

Reconciling Research and Practice

Policies of grade retention persist in the face of negative evidence because teachers and parents cannot conduct controlled experiments. Without controlled comparisons, retention looks as if it works, especially if you believe that it does. Consider how the performance of individual retained and control children is interpreted by teachers. A control child does very poorly academically, is considered for retention, but is socially promoted. Consistent with the 30th percentile figure quoted from the Holmes (1989) study above, the control child ends up in the bottom half of the class, still struggling. Teachers then say, "If only we had retained him, his performance would have improved." Meanwhile, a comparable child does repeat, shows improvement during the repeat year on some skills, but in the next grade does even more poorly than the control child. Believing that retention helps, however, and without being able to see the controlled comparison, teachers accept any improvement during the repeat year itself as proof that retention works; and about poor performance in the next grade they say, "He would have done even more poorly without the extra year," or "At least we tried."

Schools are also under considerable political pressure to maintain acceptably high levels of grade retention as proof of high standards. Public belief in the efficacy of retention creates a powerful mandate: Flunk poor-achieving students for their own good as well as society's good. Without a simple way to explain to the public that at-risk students are more likely to learn and stay in school if not retained, schools may sacrifice the best interests of individual children to appease popular demands.

What alternatives are there to retention? There are numerous ways to provide extra instructional help focused on a student's specific learning needs within the context of normal-grade promotion. Remedial help, before- and after-school programs, summer school, instructional aides to work with target children in the regular classroom, and no-cost peer tutoring are all more effective than reten-

tion. Unlike retention, each of these solutions has a research base showing positive achievement gains for participating children over controls. Cross-age peer tutoring, for example, where an average 5th grade student might tutor a 2nd grader who is behind in math, shows learning gains for both the target students and the tutors (Hartley 1977).

One of the fears about social promotion is that teachers will pass on deficient students endlessly as if no one had noticed their problem. Rather than ban retention but do nothing else, creative groups of teachers in a few schools have developed staffing teams (of regular teachers) to work out plans with the next-grade receiving teachers about how to address the learning difficulties for students who otherwise would have been retention candidates. Similarly, some schools "place" poorly performing students in the next grade with a formally agreed

upon Individualized Educational Plan (IEP), akin to the special education model of intervention. The decision to allow a deficient student to advance to the next grade with a plan for special help is analogous to prevalent school policies for gifted students. Instead of double promoting academically gifted students, schools keep them in their normal grade and provide them with enriched instruction. There are two reasons enrichment is preferred over skipping grades. First, normal grade placement is better socially for academically able students. Second, these able children are not equally advanced in every subject, and the amount they are ahead does not come in convenient nine-month units. Parallel arguments can be used to explain why retention does not improve achievement but promotion plus remediation does. Finally, there is reason to believe that struggling students need a more inspired and engaging curriculum, one

that involves them in solving meaningful problems, rather than repetitive, by rote drills on basic skills. Outmoded learning theories (e.g., Thorndike's [1972] S-R bonds and behaviorism's programmed instruction [Mager 1962]) require children to master component skills before they are allowed to go on to comprehension and problem solving; this theory consigns slow learners to school work that is not only boring but devoid of any connection to the kinds of problems they encounter in the real world.

The second wave of educational reform, exemplified by curricular changes in California and the new standards of the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, is based on more current learning theory from cognitive and constructivist psychology (Resnick 1987, Wertsch 1985), which holds that skills cannot be learned effectively nor applied to new problems unless the skills are learned in context. For example, students who are given lots and lots of problems to solve about how much tile to buy to floor a room with irregular dimensions and how much paint to buy are more likely to be better at both multiplication facts and problem solving than students who must memorize all

Highlights of Research on Grade Retention

A synthesis of the research on grade retention shows that:

- Grade failure rates are as high as they were in the 19th century, before the days of social promotion: Although annual statistics show only about a 6 percent annual rate for retention, year after year that produces a cumulative rate of nonpromotion greater than 50 percent. By 9th grade approximately half of all students in the U.S. have flunked at least one grade (or are no longer in school).
- Retained children actually perform more poorly on average when they go on to the next grade than if they had been promoted without repeating a grade.
- Dropouts are five times more likely to have repeated a grade than are high school graduates. Students who repeat two grades have a probability of dropping out of nearly 100 percent.
- Children in Yamamoto's (1980) study of childhood stressors rated the prospect of repeating a grade as more stressful than "wetting in class" or being caught stealing. The only two life events they felt would be more stressful than being retained were going blind or losing a parent. Both high-achieving and retained students interviewed by Byrnes (1989) viewed retention as a necessary punishment for being bad in class or failing to learn.
- There are many alternatives to retention that are more effective in helping low achievers. These include remedial help, before- and after-school programs, summer school, instructional aides to work with target children in the regular classroom, and no-cost peer tutoring. Groups of teachers in some schools have developed staffing teams to work out plans with the next-grade receiving teachers about how to address the learning difficulties for students who otherwise would have been retention candidates. Some schools "place" poor performing students in the next grade with a formally agreed upon Individualized Educational Plan (IEP), akin to the special education model of intervention.
- The annual cost to school districts of retaining 2.4 million students per year is nearly \$10 billion. Summer school costs only approximately \$1,300 per student compared to \$4,051 for a repeated grade. At a wage of \$6 an hour for an aide, it would take the savings from only 1.6 retained students to have an extra adult in every classroom full time to give extra attention to low achieving students.

Remedial help, before- and after-school programs, summer school, instructional aides to work with target children in the regular classroom, and no-cost peer tutoring are all more effective than retention.

Children rated the prospect of repeating a grade as more stressful than "wetting in class" or being caught stealing.

their multiplication tables before confronting even one such problem.

How much does retention cost? Can the dollars saved by not retaining students be reallocated to more effective alternatives? Based on an annual retention rate of 6 percent and a per pupil cost of \$4,051 (U.S. Department of Education, Center for Education Statistics), we estimated that U.S. school districts spend nearly \$10 billion a year to pay for the extra year of schooling necessitated by retaining 2.4 million students (see study cited in author's note at end of article).

Ten billion dollars would go a long way to pay for remedial programs, summer school, classroom aides, or reduced class size to help at-risk students learn. For example, summer school costs only approximately \$1,300 per student compared to \$4,051 for a repeated grade. Even special education help for a learning disabled child costs on average only \$1,600 (half of which is spent on testing and staffing instead of instruction). At a wage of \$6 an hour for an aide, it would take the savings from only 1.6 retained students to have an extra adult in every classroom full time.

Ironically, however, retention does not appear as a line item in any educational budget. No jurisdiction appears to bear the cost of the extra year. Because most students do not stay in

the same district for 13 years of school, it does not matter to local districts that some students take 14 years. If a student stays in a district only 4 years, then the cost of grades 1-2-3-4 is the same as grades 1-2-3-3. Even states are not aware that they are paying for an extra year. Because the real cost of retention is never explicitly acknowledged, local educators find it difficult to redirect savings from students not

retained to more effective instructional programs.

The Futility of Flunking

Researchers have not been able to tell why retention doesn't work as intended. Some speculate that the negative emotional effects of repeating harm subsequent learning. Others suggest that going through the same material again is a crude and ineffec-

No Benefits from Kindergarten Retention

The decade of the 1980s saw a dramatic rise in the number of children asked to repeat kindergarten. In districts with special programs for "unready" kindergartners, as many as 50 percent were held back (California Department of Education 1988). An extra year before 1st grade is now offered in a variety of different forms: transition classrooms before 1st grade, developmental kindergarten before kindergarten, and straight repeating of kindergarten. According to its advocates, kindergarten retention, because it is intended to prevent school failure caused by immaturity, is different from retention in later grades.

Controlled studies do not support the benefits claimed for extra-year programs, however, and negative side effects occur just as they do for retention in later grades. In a review of 16 controlled studies on the effects of extra-year programs, the predominant finding is one of no difference (Shepard 1989). For example, when researchers followed extra-year children to the end of 1st grade or as far as 5th grade and compared their performance to unready children whose parents refused the extra year, the extra-year children performed no better academically despite being a year older for their grade. The conclusion of "no benefit" holds true even for studies where children were selected on the basis of immaturity rather than for academic risk, and even where a special transition curriculum was offered rather than repeating regular kindergarten.

Although the majority of teachers believe that retention in kindergarten does not carry a social stigma "if handled properly," extra-year children are more likely to have lower self-concepts and poorer attitudes toward school compared to controls (Shepard 1989). Parent interviews reveal both short-term and long-term distress associated with the retention decision such as teasing by peers, tears because friends are going on, and references years later like, "If I had only been able . . . , I would be in 3rd grade now." (Shepard and Smith 1989b).

Various analysts have suggested that kindergarten retention is an educational fad, gaining popularity because of the apparent need to remove unready children from increasingly narrow academic demands in kindergarten and 1st grade. Long periods of seat work, worksheets, and "staying in the lines" are required of children, inconsistent with the normal development of 5- and 6-year-olds. Ironically, retention and holding children out of school, intended to protect them from inappropriate expectations, actually contribute to the escalation of demands, thereby placing more and more children at risk. As kindergartens become populated with 6-year-olds who have had 3 years of preschool, teachers find it difficult to teach to the normal 5-year-olds in the class. The problem can only be solved with more developmentally appropriate curriculum in the early grades and reform of harmful instructional practices, something that many national associations have called for, including the National Association for the Education of Young Children, the National Association of State Boards of Education, the Association for Childhood Education International, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, the International Reading Association, the National Association of Elementary School Principals, and the National Council of Teachers of English. Until this problem of kindergarten retention is addressed on a national scale, educators must deal with its consequences—which will negatively affect the quality of education at every level of schooling.

—Lorrie A. Shepard and Mary Lee Smith

tive way to individualize instruction since a child may be more than one year behind in some subjects and only a few months behind in others. Because retention itself is considered to be the treatment, there is usually no additional effort to correct the poor quality of teaching and learning that occurred the first time through. In other words, the child may have failed to achieve grade-level standards because the programs or teachers he had were ineffective. Merely repeating the same curriculum or instruction is not likely to fix the problem. If extra money exists to support remediation along with retention, then educators should ask why students can't receive the extra help in the context of their normal grade placement.

The public and many educators find it difficult to give up on retention. To do so seems to mean accepting or condoning shamefully deficient skills for many high school graduates. It is easier for the public to credit research findings that retention harms self-esteem and increases the likelihood of dropping out than to believe the most critical finding—that retention worsens rather than improves the level of student achievement in years following the repeat year. Only with this fact firmly in mind, verified in over 50 controlled studies, does it make sense to subscribe to remediation and other within-grade instructional efforts which have modest but positive evidence of success. Perhaps the futility of flunking students to make them learn would be more obvious if it were recognized that statistically, social promotion has been dead for at least 10 years (i.e., cumulative retention rates are very high). Today's graduates and dropouts are emerging from a system that has imposed fierce non-promotion rates, flunking between 30 and 50 percent of all entering students at least once in their school careers. Strict promotion standards have been enforced for a decade and, as would have been predictable from the retention research findings on achievement, have not appreciably improved the performance of current graduates. Ultimately, hopes for more dramatic improvements in student learning

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(than can be expected from promotion plus remediation) will only come from thoroughgoing school changes—more support and opportunities for teachers to work together in addressing the problems of hard-to-teach children (Martin 1988), and curricular reforms designed to engage all children in meaningful learning tasks that provide both the context and the purpose for acquiring basic skills (Resnick 1987). □

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Lorrie A. Shepard is Professor of Research and Evaluation Methodology, University of Colorado School of Education, Campus Box 249, Boulder, CO 80309.

Mary Lee Smith is Professor of Educational Psychology, Arizona State University College of Education, Tempe, AZ 85287. They are the authors of the 1989 book, *Flunking Grades: Research and Policies on Retention*, published by the Falmer Press in London.

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