

Examining the Impact of Grade Retention

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In the following report, Hanover Research examines the research on grade retention, including its effects on academic performance, high school completion, and socio-emotional outcomes. This information is intended to aid school districts in assessing their own elementary grade retention policies.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION AND REPORT CONTENTS

When educators are faced with a choice between retaining a student and promoting a student to a grade he or she is not prepared for, there is no easy solution. Retaining students gives them an additional year to learn the needed material, but can damage self-esteem and increase the risk of dropout in later years. Promoting underprepared students allows them to remain with their peers; however, these students may fall farther and farther behind – both academically and socio-emotionally – as the years pass.¹

Recent research suggests that roughly 10 percent of U.S. students are retained at least once between kindergarten and eighth grade. The likelihood of retention is highest among low-income and disadvantaged minority students. Retaining students is expensive for schools, which must pay for an additional year of schooling. In spite of research that indicates harmful long-term effects – particularly as related to high school dropout rates and student self-esteem – grade retention continues to be one of the few viable options for students who fail to reach achievement targets to progress to the next grade.²

In this report, Hanover Research examines the extant body of research on grade retention, with a focus on both short- and long-term academic and socio-emotional effects.

- **Section I** provides a brief summary of the research on grade retention, drawing primarily on meta-analyses to highlight key trends in the literature.
- **Section II** offers a detailed discussion of the effect of retention on academic achievement. The section separately evaluates retention in kindergarten, elementary school, and later years, and discusses long-term effects.
- **Section III** provides a discussion of the socio-emotional effects of retention. As research is mixed, the discussion is organized according to positive or negative results tied to socio-emotional outcomes.

¹ "New York City's School Promotion and Retention Policy Shows Positive Results for Students." RAND Corporation, 2009. <http://www.rand.org/news/press/2009/10/15.html>

² Schwerdt, G. and West, M. "The Effects of Test-Based Retention on Student Outcomes over Time: Regression Discontinuity Evidence from Florida," p. 1. Harvard Kennedy School, February 2013. http://www.hks.harvard.edu/pepg/PDF/Papers/PEPG12-09_West.pdf

KEY FINDINGS

- **In general, research has failed to support the idea that retention benefits academic performance in the long-term.** The majority of grade retention research suggests that academic achievement, specifically as measured by standardized test scores, may be bolstered in the short-term during the year immediately following retention, but that these positive effects diminish significantly over time. Some studies have suggested that the positive effects of retention disappear within just two years of retention.
- **Researchers have cautioned that educators and policymakers should avoid the use of a “retention-promotion” dichotomy, in favor of more comprehensive measures.** Recent research suggests that retention policies in New York and Florida have had a positive impact on student achievement, and that this may be due, at least in part, to supplementing retention with rigorous, multidimensional intervention efforts designed to bolster student achievement. These strategies include parental engagement and remedial instruction.
- **There is a fairly substantial body of literature that suggests retention in the early grades – particularly in kindergarten – is preferable to retention in later years.** While several meta-analyses have concluded that post-kindergarten elementary retention negatively affects academic proficiency in the *long term*, some researchers have found elementary retention has an overall neutral or positive short-term effect on student achievement.
 - By contrast, studies suggest that students retained in grades 6 and above typically experience more significant negative academic and socio-emotional impacts. Such students are often outperformed by their low-achieving, promoted peers in both the short and long term.
- **Overall, the research on grade retention suggests that its positive effects are primarily limited to the short term.** There is little dispute that retained students have a higher likelihood to drop out of high school later in their academic careers; several large-scale statistical analyses have likewise established retention as a strong predictor of student dropout. Regardless of the time at which a student is retained, there is a general consensus that any associated positive effects diminish over time.
- **Effects on socio-emotional outcomes are less clear.** Research suggests that students who are retained may experience a lack of belongingness and negative perceptions of self-efficacy; some studies have linked retention to an increased likelihood of violent behavior or depression. However, other studies have suggested that long-term socio-emotional development is not drastically different for retained students than promoted students.

SECTION I: SUMMARY OF GRADE RETENTION EFFECTS

Grade retention has been the subject of educational research since 1911, but has garnered renewed attention in recent years as a result of mandates associated with No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and state-level initiatives to establish clearer proficiency targets for promotion.³ While studies demonstrate some level of consensus on the long-term academic effects of retention, there is still contention over its impact in the short term. In general, the extant body of research does not strongly support the idea that retention benefits academic performance, particularly in the long-term.

The majority of grade retention research suggests that academic achievement, specifically as measured by test scores, may be bolstered in the short term during the year immediately following retention. However, the trend across many research studies is that this effect diminishes by two or three years later and, ultimately, that students who are retained suffer negative effects on academic achievement and socio-emotional adjustment.⁴

The extant body of research does not suggest that retention has a clear, positive impact on academic achievement in the long term.

While promoting failing students may not assist them in catching up to their peers academically without additional intervention, it does spare students the negative socio-emotional effects of retention, which have been shown to lead to higher dropout rates at the high school level.⁵ However, considerations of retention's effectiveness are rarely founded on an "either-or" proposition; indeed, in a 2006 literature review sponsored by the International Academy of Education, educational psychology researcher Jere Brophy cautioned policymakers against using "a simplistic 'grade retention versus social promotion' dichotomy."⁶ Instead, Brophy noted that the research suggests that **automatic promotion is a preferable option, provided it is supplemented by additional intervention strategies** –

³ Range, et al. "Rethinking Grade Retention and Academic Redshirting: Helping School Administrators Make Sense of What Works." (Piece peer-reviewed, accepted, and endorsed by the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration). *International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation*, Volume 6, Number 1 (January - March, 2011), <http://cnx.org/content/m37212/1.1/>; see also Burkam, D. T., et al. 2007. "The Differential Effects of Repeating Kindergarten." *Journal of Education for Students Placed At Risk*, 12(2), pp. 103-136 & Jimerson, S. et al. 2006. "Beyond Grade Retention and Social Promotion: Promoting the Social and Academic Competence of Students." *Psychology in the Schools*, 43(1), pp. 85-97.

⁴ "Student Grade Retention and Social Promotion," p. 2. National Association of School Psychologists. http://www.nasponline.org/about_nasp/positionpapers/StudentGradeRetention.pdf

⁵ Jimerson, S. 2001. "A Synthesis of Grade Retention Research: Looking Backward and Moving Forward," p. 52. *The California School Psychologist*, Vol. 6. , pp. 47-59. http://education.ucsb.edu/jimerson/retention/CSP_RetentionSynthesis2001.pdf

⁶ Brophy, Jere. 2006. "Grade Repetition," p. 7. Education Policy Series. International Academy of Education. <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0015/001520/152038e.pdf>

“early intervention, remedial instruction, parent involvement” – designed to facilitate student success.⁷

In a 2011 study peer-reviewed by the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA), Bret Range et al. note that most studies reporting positive effects of grade retention measure impact in terms of standardized test performance *alone*, and that few studies address impact across three central dimensions: academic outcomes, social outcomes, and dropout rates.⁸ Other researchers have likewise noted that retention is a powerful predictor of student dropout in high school. In a 2002 meta-analysis of 17 studies examining factors associated with dropout, Jimerson et al. found that in all 17, “grade retention was associated with subsequent school withdrawal” – even in analyses controlling for factors historically associated with dropout (e.g., demographics and socioeconomic status).⁹

Several meta-analyses have synthesized the research on grade retention. Jimerson’s widely-cited 2001 study, “A Synthesis of Grade Retention Research: Looking Backward and Moving Forward,” highlighted the results of three seminal meta-analyses, conducted in 1984, 1989, and 2001 and examining research collectively spanning the period 1929-1999. Figure 1.1 shows an overview of general results.¹⁰

Figure 1.1: Mean Effect Sizes - Three Meta-Analyses Examining Grade Retention

	HOLMES & MATTHEWS (1984)	HOLMES (1989)	JIMERSON (2001)
<i>Number of Studies Reviewed</i>	44 (1929-1981)	63 (1929-1989)*	20 (1990-1999)
Overall Effect Size	-0.37 [575]	-0.15 [861]	-0.31 [246]
Academic Achievement	-0.44 [367]	-0.19 [536]	-0.39 [169]
Socio-Emotional Adjustment	-0.27 [142]	-0.09 [234]	-0.22 [77]

Source: Jimerson (2001)¹¹

Note: Numbers in brackets indicate the number of effect sizes used in calculating the mean effect size. Negative numbers indicate that results of analyses favored the matched comparison group of students relative to the retained students.

*Holmes examined the same pool of studies reviewed in the 1984 analysis, adding 19 additional studies published between 1981 and 1989.

Jimerson notes that “In general, the confluence of research results fails to demonstrate academic achievement advantages for retained students relative to comparison groups of lower-achieving promoted peers.”¹² Though achievement gains in the academic year immediately following retention are often evident, in all cases these impacts diminish over

⁷ Ibid., p. 22.

⁸ Range, et al., Op. cit.

⁹ See: Jimerson et. al. 2002. “Exploring the Association Between Grade Retention and Dropout: A Longitudinal Study Examining Socio-Emotional, Behavioral, and Achievement Characteristics of Retained Students.” *The California School Psychologist*, Vol. 7, pp.51-62. Cited in Range et al. (Ibid.).

http://www.education.ucsb.edu/jimerson/retention/CSP_RetentionDropout2002.pdf

¹⁰ Jimerson (2001), Op. cit., p. 49.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., p. 50.

time. Overall, Jimerson found that studies reviewed in the meta-analyses “demonstrate consistent negative effects of grade retention on subsequent academic achievement.”¹³ However, it is important to note that methodological variations among the studies examined should be considered – for instance, some studies analyzed academic achievement but not socio-emotional adjustment; some did not include a comparison group; and some did not analyze long-term effects. Such considerations should be taken into account when interpreting the results of the meta-analyses; however, Jimerson notes that studies published between 1990 and 1999 have largely addressed these issues,¹⁴ rendering the impact of methodological variation somewhat less significant in reviews of more recent research.¹⁵

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 50-51.

¹⁴ Jimerson notes that all studies reviewed in the 2001 meta-analysis included a comparison group.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

SECTION II: GRADE RETENTION AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

This section discusses research related to grade retention and academic achievement. The discussion addresses short- and long-term effects for students at various grade levels.

KINDERGARTEN RETENTION

In a 2009 study, RAND Corporation researchers Nailing Xia and Sheila Nataraj Kirby note that “Conventional wisdom holds that students retained at a younger age tend to benefit from an additional year in the same grade.”¹⁶ In general, researchers tend to agree that kindergarten retention differs from retention in later grades in two ways. First, retaining students at this age identifies children who are emotionally immature or have demonstrated difficulty in developing basic age-appropriate skills, while later retention focuses predominately or entirely on academic performance. Second, kindergarten retention occurs early in a student’s educational career, or “before any real failure occurs,” which some scholars have argued exerts a less negative effect on retained students in the long term.¹⁷

“Conventional wisdom holds that students retained at a younger age tend to benefit from an additional year in the same grade.”

The RAND study explains that “children in early grades (typically, kindergarten or 1st grade) are often retained on the grounds of behavioral problems stemming from socio-emotional immaturity,” and that an additional year of school is considered “a gift of time” to allow young students to reach the maturity level required for academic success.¹⁸

The ASCD (formerly the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development) has echoed the sentiment that kindergarten retention should be considered in a different light than retention at higher grade levels. In a 2005 ASCD research brief, Dan Laitsch notes that **in kindergarten, retention “focuses more on the developmental readiness of the learner than on using retention as a behaviorist motivation mechanism.”** Because students are retained for developmental readiness, the majority of young children retained in kindergarten are boys, have later birthdays, have disabilities, or do not demonstrate age-appropriate standards such as recognizing enough letters.¹⁹

¹⁶ Xia, N. and Sheila Nataraj Kirby. 2009. “Technical Paper: Retaining Students in Grade,” p. 12. RAND Corporation. http://www.rand.org/pubs/technical_reports/2009/RAND_TR678.pdf

¹⁷ Dong, Yingying. 2009. “Kept Back to Get Ahead? Kindergarten Retention and Academic Performance,” p. 5. California State University – Fullerton: Department of Economics. http://www.yingyingdong.com/Research/K_Retention_YDong.pdf

¹⁸ Xia and Kirby, Op. cit.

¹⁹ Laitsch, Dan. “The Effect of Retaining Kindergarten Students on Reading and Mathematics.” *ASCD Research Brief*, Vol. 3, No. 18. Nov. 28, 2005. <http://www.ascd.org/publications/researchbrief/v3n18/toc.aspx>

Despite a trend in favorable views toward kindergarten retention, **research has produced mixed results with regard to its effectiveness.** In a 2009 study, researcher Yingying Dong found that kindergarten retention had “positive but diminishing effects” on retained students’ academic performance up until the third grade, with a statistically significant difference exhibited in third grade math scores (though not in reading). The study, which drew on a nationally representative U.S. dataset, sought to assess the causal effect of kindergarten retention on academic performance.²⁰ Based on these findings, Dong recommended that researchers, educators, and policymakers “take a more optimistic attitude regarding kindergarten retention,” noting that while the academic “boost” provided by holding children back diminishes over time, it nonetheless “may give lagging children a chance to make up, if not catch up.”²¹

By contrast, previous research has found kindergarten retention to be ineffective. In a review of 16 controlled studies, researcher Lorrie A. Shepard found that extra-year programs at the kindergarten level resulted in “no difference” in student achievement, and that “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.”²²

Findings on the effectiveness of kindergarten retention have been mixed.

²⁰ Dong, Op. cit., pp. 1-2.

²¹ Ibid., pp. 28-29.

²² Shepard, L. A. 1989. “A Review of Research on Kindergarten Retention.” In *Flunking Grades: Research and Policies on Retention*, edited by L.A. Shepard and M.L. Smith. London: The Falmer Press. Cited in Shepard, L.A. and Mary Lee Smith. “Synthesis of Research on Grade Retention.” *Educational Leadership*, May 1990. http://www.ascd.org/ASCD/pdf/journals/ed_lead/el_199005_shepard.pdf

ELEMENTARY RETENTION

Research indicates that the retention of students in elementary grades may sometimes benefit academic performance. A position paper published by the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) – an organization which is against the use of grade retention – highlights various key points of the literature suggesting a *negative* impact of retention (see Figure 2.1);²³ however, recent state-level initiatives have indicated some positive results of retention at the elementary level, as we discuss in greater detail below.

Figure 2.1: Negative Impacts of Retention at the Elementary School Level (NASP)²⁴

- *While delayed entry and readiness classes may not hurt children in the short run, 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.*
- *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. This is true whether children are compared to same-grade peers or comparable students who were promoted.*
- *The most notable academic deficit for retained students is in reading.*
- *Children with the greatest number of academic, emotional, and behavioral problems are most likely to experience negative consequences of retention. Subsequent academic and behavioral problems may result in the child being retained again.*
- *Retention does not appear to have a positive impact on self-esteem or overall school adjustment; however, 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.*
- *Research examining the overall effects of 19 empirical studies conducted during the 1990s compared outcomes for students who were retained and matched comparison students who were promoted. Results indicate that grade retention had a negative impact on all areas of achievement (reading, math, and language) and socioemotional adjustment (peer relationships, self-esteem, problem behaviors, and attendance).*

Source: National Association of School Psychologists

Note: Impacts listed above are synthesized from a variety of sources. For a full list, see pp. 5-6 of the NASP position paper “Student Grade Retention and Social Promotion” (footnote 4).

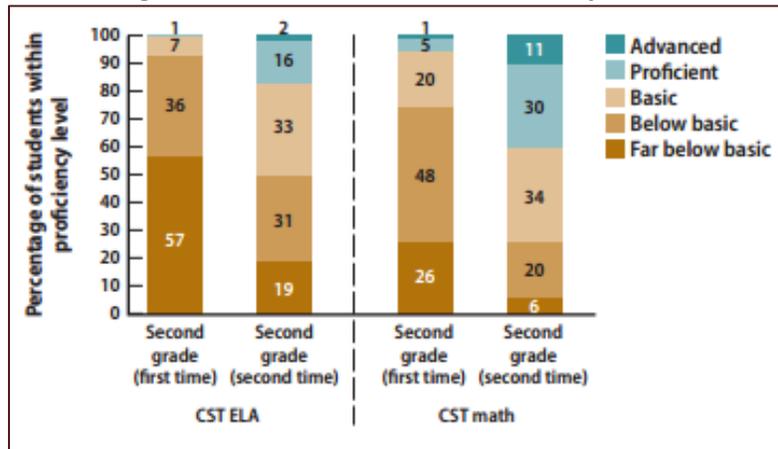
Despite the points outlined above, recent studies of retention’s effects in individual school systems have suggested some positive outcomes. For instance, a review of retention in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), which serves nearly 11 percent of public school students in the State of California, found some positive results related to retaining students in grades 1 and 2. The study, conducted by the Public Policy Institute of California, found

²³ “Student Grade Retention and Social Promotion,” Op. cit., p. 2.

²⁴ Ibid. Figure contents quoted from source.

that retained first grade students demonstrated “significant and widely-experienced” gains in reading skills, while retained second grade students showed improvement in English language arts (ELA) and math.²⁵ Further, of the principals who supported student retention, researchers identified a general consensus that earlier retention is preferable to later retention. The authors note that this is consistent with retention trends throughout the district, as there are higher rates of students being retained in kindergarten and grade 1 as opposed to grades 2 and 3. In general, however, principals commented that they were hesitant to recommend retention at any grade level and that it is considered a last resort.²⁶

Figure 2.2: LAUSD – Second-Grade Repeaters



Source: Public Policy Institute of California

Note: Data for students who entered kindergarten in the 2004 school year.

Studies specifically designed to evaluate the effects of retention at different grade levels on student achievement have produced varied findings. In its review of 11 empirical studies on the effects of retention, the RAND Corporation found that “In general, the majority of research shows that, contrary to popular belief, retention during kindergarten or first grade usually fails to improve academic performance and often has negative effects on student achievement in the long run.”²⁷ Findings of selected studies reviewed are listed below.

- An eight-year longitudinal study of 790 first-graders in the Baltimore County Public School system found that students retained in grades 2 and 3 “caught up with promoted students in terms of achievement test scores during their repeated year, and at least part of these gains were sustained through grade 7.” The authors note, however, that “in no instance did these students actually reach the performance

²⁵ Cannon, J.S. and Stephen Lipscomb. “Early Grade Retention and Student Success,” p. 2. Public Policy Institute of California. http://www.ppic.org/content/pubs/report/R_311JCR.pdf

²⁶ Ibid., p. 15.

²⁷ Xia and Kirby, Op. cit., p. 12.

level of promoted ones, but the retainees often were close in comparisons with low-achieving but promoted students.”²⁸

- Nancy Baenen’s 1988 study of 243 students repeating first year in 1981-82 in the Austin Independent School district (and a comparison group of matching low achievers) found that four years after retention, low-achieving *promoted* students had significantly higher reading and math scores than students retained in the first grade, and that “the difference between the two groups broadened across the years.”²⁹

In terms of the timing of retention, RAND researchers noted that of the four reviewed studies examining the comparative impact on early versus later grade retention, two reported no statistically significant difference (Baenen, 1988, and Silbergliitt, et al.’s 2006 study of 147 Minnesota students in grades 1-8), and two found that retention in later grades produced more negative outcomes than retention in early grades. These included Hagborg’s 1991 study of 76 high school students (38 with a history of grade retention pre-grade 8 and 38 matched comparators), which gathered student-reported data measuring self-esteem and “locus of control,” and Meisels and Liaw’s 1993 study, which examined comparative impacts of retention in grades K-3 versus grades 4-8 among a large sample (16,000+) of students and found that early retention was associated with higher grades and fewer behavior problems as compared with later retention.³⁰

Newer retention policies in Florida and New York have garnered attention for positive effects, which may be due to the remedial measures that are implemented in combination with retaining students. In Florida, students are required to have a **progress monitoring plan** (PMP) that parents may participate in creating. Key objectives include mastering independent reading by the end of third grade. In order to assess reading ability, students take the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) and those who fail must be retained unless they demonstrate good cause for an exemption.³¹ Research by Nagoaka and Roderick (2004) found that one year after retention, students retained in third grade scored

²⁸ Ibid., p. 32. Citing Alexander, Karl L., Doris R. Entwisle, and Susan L. Dauber. 2003. *On the Success of Failure: A Reassessment of the Effects of Retention in the Primary School Grades*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2nd edition.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 36. Citing Baenen, Nancy R. (1988). Perspectives After Five Years—Has Grade Retention Passed or Failed? Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, LA, April 1988.

³⁰ Ibid. Citing Silbergliitt, Benjamin, James J. Appleton, Matthew K. Burns, and Shane R. Jimerson. (2006). “Examining the Effects of Grade Retention on Student Reading Performance: A Longitudinal Study.” *Journal of School Psychology*, 44(4), 255–270; Hagborg, Winston J., Gaetano Masella, Phillip Palladino, and Jerry Shepardson. (1991). “A Follow Up Study of High School Students with a History of Grade Retention.” *Psychology in the Schools*, 28(4), 310–317; Meisels, Samuel J., and Fong-Ruey Liaw. (1993). “Failure in Grade: Do Retained Students Catch Up?” *Journal of Educational Research*, 87(2), 69–77.

³¹ “Read to Learn,” pp. 1-2. Florida Department of Education. http://www.justreadflorida.com/docs/read_to_learn.pdf

slightly higher than their promoted peers. While this difference was statistically significant for the first year after retention, it was no longer significant in the second year.³²

Similarly, beginning in 2003, New York City implemented retention policies for third grade, which were extended to fifth, seventh, and eighth grades by 2008.³³ Evaluation is test-based, but intervention for failing students is coupled with remedial measures such as “small-group instruction, after-school programs, assessments, individual education plans (IEPs), and summer school.”³⁴ According to a RAND study led by McCombs et. al., the program has demonstrated positive effects for student achievement in fifth grade that continue into seventh grade.³⁵

RETENTION IN THE LATER GRADES

Research specifically examining the impact of retention in middle school and beyond has also demonstrated mixed results. A 2007 study by Brian A. Jacob and Lars Lefgren of retention in Chicago Public Schools, for instance, found that retaining students in sixth grade did not have a significant impact on the likelihood that the student would eventually drop out of school. However, “retention in eighth grade increase[d] the likelihood that a student will drop out by roughly 8 percentage points, or 14 percent.”³⁶

Similarly, a 2012 Brookings Institute summarizing the impacts of retention policies in both Florida and Chicago Public Schools (both of which utilize test-based promotion) identified short-term gains in academic achievement for students retained in third grade, but no gains for students retained in sixth grade.³⁷ This conclusion, along with the dropout data discussed above, “suggest that early grade retention may be more beneficial for students than retention in later grades.”³⁸

LONG-TERM EFFECTS

Research on the long-term effects of retention tends to be more unified in its conclusions. **There is a general consensus that retention increases the likelihood of high school dropout;** research focused on other indicators of long-term success also generally reports negative impacts. In a 2007 analysis of early grade retention on math and reading proficiency, for instance, Hong and Yu found that first grade retainees remained behind

³² Laitsch, Dan. “Retention and Student Achievement.” *ASCD ResearchBrief*, Vol. 2, No. 11. May 25, 2004.
<http://www.ascd.org/publications/researchbrief/v2n11/toc.aspx>

³³ Xia and Kirby, S., Op. cit., p. iii.

³⁴ “Staying Back a Grade.” Great Schools. <http://www.greatschools.org/students/4150-repeating-a-grade.gs>

³⁵ McCombs, J., et. al. 2009. “Ending Social Promotion without Leaving Children Behind,” p. 125. RAND Corporation.
http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2009/RAND_MG894.pdf

³⁶ Jacob, B.A. and Lars Lefgren. 2007. “The Effect of Grade Retention on High School Completion,” p. 3. NBER.
http://sitemaker.umich.edu/bajacob/files/ret_nber_10_2_2007.pdf

³⁷ Laitsch, Op. cit.

³⁸ West, Martin R. 2012. “Is Retaining Students in the Early Grades Self-Defeating?” p. 5. Center on Children and Families at Brookings.
<http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2012/8/16%20student%20retention%20west/16%20student%20retention%20west.pdf>

academically, even three years post-retention.³⁹ Martin (2009) has similarly noted that retention exerts a persistent negative impact on “academic motivation, academic engagement, homework completion, and absenteeism” among high school students.⁴⁰

Other research has found positive academic increases in student achievement the year after retention and beyond. For example, McCombs et. al., studied the retention policy in New York City public schools and found that retained students’ performance continued to increase for several grades after retention.⁴¹ However, there is no evidence demonstrating positive long-term impacts into adulthood and, in fact, research has shown that students who are retained are less likely to receive a diploma by age 20. NASP research has noted that as adults, retained individuals are more likely to be unemployed, in prison, or on public assistance.⁴² Specifically, NASP cites longitudinal research indicating that:⁴³

... retained students have a greater probability of poorer educational and employment outcomes during late adolescence and early adulthood ... Retained students are ... less likely to be enrolled in a post-secondary education program and more likely to receive lower education/employment status ratings, be paid less per hour, and receive poorer employment competence ratings at age 20 in comparison to a group of low-achieving, promoted students.

³⁸ Range, et al., Op. cit. Citing Hong, G., & Yu, B. 2007. Early-grade retention and children’s reading and math learning in elementary years. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 29(4), 239–261.

⁴⁰ Ibid. Citing Martin, A. J. 2009. “Age Appropriateness and Motivation, Engagement, and Performance, in High School: Effects of Age within Cohort, Grade Retention, and Delayed School Entry.” *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 101(1), pp. 101-114.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Jimerson, S. Pletcher, S. and Kerr, M. 2003. “Alternatives to Grade Retention.” National Association of School Psychologists. <http://www.nasponline.org/resources/principals/Retention%20WEB.pdf>

⁴³ “Position Statement on Student Grade Retention and Social Promotion.” Center for Development and Learning, adopted by the National Association of School Psychologists. http://www.cdl.org/resource-library/articles/nasp_position_stmt.php

SECTION III: GRADE RETENTION AND SOCIO-EMOTIONAL OUTCOMES

In this section, Hanover Research discusses research related to socio-emotional outcomes for retained students. As literature on this subject is quite mixed, results are discussed according to whether they demonstrate negative or positive socio-emotional impacts.

EVIDENCE OF NEGATIVE SOCIO-EMOTIONAL OUTCOMES

Of the three seminal meta-analyses discussed in Section I (Holmes and Matthews, 1984; Holmes 1989; and Jimerson, 2001), two included socio-emotional outcomes in their synthesis (Holmes and Matthews, 1984 and Jimerson, 2001). Notably, both concluded that retained students experienced negative social outcomes in comparison to their promoted peers. The third meta-analysis (Holmes, 1989) reported negative impacts on measures of personal adjustment but no statistically significant impacts to the subcategories of personal adjustment, which included both socio-emotional and behavioral factors.⁴⁴

Other research has found evidence of similarly negative impacts. In a 2010 study, researchers Wei Wu, Stephen G. West, and Jan N. Hughes presented the results of a four-year longitudinal study examining the impacts of first grade retention on several “externalizing and internalizing behaviors” – namely, social acceptance and behavioral, affective, and cognitive engagement. The study drew on a multiethnic sample of 784 children with below-median literacy scores at the time of school entrance. Using propensity matching, researchers matched 124 retained children with 251 promoted children exhibiting a similar likelihood of retention (based on 72 baseline variables). Ultimately, the study concluded that while retained students experienced a short-term increase in belongingness, this effect was short-lived, and retained students eventually exhibited feelings of *decreased* belongingness and self-efficacy. Ultimately, the study concluded that retention “may bestow [psychosocial] advantages in the short-term, but longer term detrimental effects on social acceptance may lead to the documented longer term negative effects of retention.”⁴⁵

Jere Brophy’s research (2006) has found that, when compared to low-performing but promoted peers, retained students exhibit increased aggression, lower general self-esteem, and decreased academic self-concept.⁴⁶ NASP cites similar research indicating that students are also more likely to have low self-esteem; poor peer relations; increased alcohol, tobacco, and drug use; earlier sexual activities; and violent behaviors.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Xia and Kirby, Op. cit., p. 21.

⁴⁵ Wu, W. West, S. and Hughes, J. “Effect of Grade Retention in First Grade on Psychosocial Outcomes.” National Center for Biotechnology Information. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2864494/>

⁴⁶ Brophy, J. Op. cit.

⁴⁷ “Position Statement on Student Grade Retention and Social Promotion,” Op. cit.

EVIDENCE OF POSITIVE OR NEUTRAL SOCIO-EMOTIONAL OUTCOMES

Some research has shown positive or neutral socio-emotional outcomes for retained students. In the aforementioned 2009 RAND analysis, which analyzed the impact of retention through a review of 11 empirical studies, researchers found that the majority (86 percent) of analyses examining socio-emotional outcomes found no statistically significant differences between retained students and their low-achieving, promoted peers.⁴⁸

McCombs et al. (2009), in a study of New York City’s promotion policies, found that “retention, even three years later, did not negatively affect students’ feelings of school belongingness or academic self-confidence.”⁴⁹ As noted above, Wu et al. found *short-term* positive impacts of retention of students’ feelings of belonging; despite the fact that these impacts diminished over time, this study nonetheless found that in the years following retention, students exhibited decreased hyperactivity, decreased peer-related sadness and withdrawal, and increased behavioral engagement, as rated by teachers. These effects, while positive, were short-lived – Wu et al. note that they were “not present two to four years after retention.”⁵⁰

In her aforementioned review of 16 controlled studies, Lorrie A. Shepard found that teachers feel that retention *in kindergarten specifically* does not carry a social stigma “if handled properly,” but that students who are held back in kindergarten “are more likely to have lower self-concepts and poorer attitudes toward school compared to [the control group of students].”⁵¹ Interestingly, while Hong and Yu have found that retention in the earlier grades has a negative impact on academic achievement in later years, their study on kindergarten retention specifically found “no evidence suggesting a negative effect ... on children’s social-emotional development.” Hong and Yu note that their findings suggest that if the retained kindergarteners in the sample had been promoted instead of retained, “they would possibly have developed a lower level of self-confidence ... and would have displayed a higher level of internalizing problem behaviors” in subsequent years.⁵² Such research tends to reinforce the notion that earlier-grade retention is preferable, in terms of demonstrated impact, than later-grade retention.

⁴⁸ Xia and Kirby, Op. cit., p. 24.

⁴⁹ Range, et al., Op. cit. Citing McCombs, Op cit.

⁵⁰ Wu et al., Op. cit.

⁵¹ Shepard and Smith, Op. cit.

⁵² Hong, G. and B. Yu. 2008. “Effects of Kindergarten Retention on Children’s Social-Emotional Development: An Application of Propensity Score Method to Multivariate, Multilevel Data.” *Developmental Psychology*, 44(2): pp. 407-21. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/18331132>

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