



Research Brief: Retention

This brief summarizes best practices when considering retention for students who have not demonstrated grade-level standards in academics and/or social-emotional learning. This brief is intended for school and district leaders, who can use this information to provide guidance to those in charge of decision-making and policies around retention at their school(s).

What is Retention?

Retention is the practice of requiring students to repeat or remain in a given grade level for an additional subsequent school year or waiting to enroll students into kindergarten past the time when they are age-eligible (e.g., “repeating a grade,” “being held back,” “flunking”). Families and school teams tend to retain students based on the belief that children will learn more academically or social-emotionally by repeating a grade (Krier, 2012). Retention may also be proposed due to difficulty keeping up with grade level academics, immaturity or late birthdays, missing a lot of school due to absences, and/or limited English skills. The most common reasons for student retention are academic failure due to reading problems in the primary grades and failure to earn course credit during the high school years (Smirk, 2001). Retention continues to be a controversial instructional decision that is considered and debated for students across all grade levels despite decades of research indicating negative outcomes for students.

What Does the Research Say About Retention?

The majority of studies from the past five decades indicate that the practice of using retention as a remedial intervention has resulted in limited to no evidence of improving academic and life outcomes for students (Hattie, 2009; Jimerson, 2001).

In fact, recent research indicates that retention has a negative effect size, averaging -0.16 across 207 studies (Hattie, 2009). This means that not only did retention not improve outcomes, it actually made outcomes **worse**.

Negative outcomes of retention include school dropout, negative peer relationships, lower self-esteem, and increased engagement in high risk behaviors (e.g., cigarette smoking, alcohol/drug abuse, early sexual activity, and violent behaviors; Canter, Carey, & Dawson, 1998; Jimerson, Pletcher, & Kerr, 2005). From a student’s perspective, when rating the perceived trauma of stressful life

“It would be difficult to find another educational practice on which the evidence is so unequivocally negative.”
- House, 1989, p. 209

events, sixth grade students rated grade retention as eliciting the same level of stress as losing a parent or going blind (Anderson, Jimerson, & Whipple, 2002; Jimerson et al., 2005). Retention is also a significant predictor of school dropout: students are 5-11 times more likely to drop out of school when they are retained (Jimerson, 2001; Jimerson, Anderson, & Whipple, 2002). Furthermore, although educators and families sometimes advocate for retention because a student is “immature,” no evidence exists to support retaining a student due to perceived levels of maturity compared to peers. In fact, many retained students experience high levels of mental health concerns as they get older (Canter et al., 1998), which suggests that retention does not support students’ social-emotional development in the long term.

A few studies have found short-term positive effects of retention; however, research has consistently demonstrated that these initial positive effects tend to diminish over time and do not outweigh the long-term negative repercussions of retention (Hughes et al., 2010; Tingle et al., 2012; Wu et al., 2008). These temporary benefits can be especially deceptive, as teachers do not usually follow student progress beyond a few years (Anderson et al., 2002).

When considering the above research, note that these results reflect averages across groups of students rather than individuals. However, although there may be a few individual stories of success, there is no way to determine for which students retention may be an effective intervention. In contrast, there is a substantial body of evidence that suggests the high likelihood that students will experience negative effects if retained.

What are Alternatives to Retention?

The research is clear that retention has not been shown to be an effective practice in promoting student success (Jimerson, 2001); retention has instead had the opposite effect on students’ academic achievement and life outcomes. As an alternative to retention or “social

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promotion” to the next grade without effectively addressing student needs, schools should consider “promotion plus” strategies (NASP, 2003). The philosophy behind promotion plus is to develop an intentional support plan that consists of evidence-based interventions with consideration of the student’s history and background to ensure school success (Jimerson et al., 2005). There are multiple factors that contribute to students’ difficulties in school, therefore, support plans

must reflect the multi-factor dynamics of students’ strengths and challenges.

Promotion plus strategies are recommended to operate within a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) framework. An MTSS framework allows schools to proactively identify students at risk of low performance and provide a continuum of supports (i.e., Tier 1, 2, 3) to meet the needs of all students.

Below are strategies school leaders should consider when implementing an effective MTSS framework that can prevent the need for grade retention:

- It is essential to **establish comprehensive supports** that develop not only academic skills, but also social-emotional competencies. In fact, an integrated model that weaves together academic and social-emotional learning has shown to have greater positive impacts on student outcomes compared to isolated systems or standard school practices (Cook et al., 2015).
- Implement **early identification practices** that consist of utilizing universal screeners, applying clear data-based decision-making rules, and employing effective teaming structures that facilitate early interventions. This will prevent problems before they become severe and avoid the need to retain individual students.
 - Effective teaming requires teachers, administrators, and support staff (e.g., school psychologists, social workers, guidance counselors) to work collaboratively. Teaming also means partnering with families to understand a students' strengths and needs from the family's perspective and actively engaging families in the student's school experience.
- To support effective data-based decision-making, use **assessments that are valid and reliable** for their use (e.g., screening, progress monitoring), and for the student population of focus (e.g., high schoolers, English Learners). Moreover, students with significant needs who are receiving interventions should be **progress monitored frequently** and the data should be used to continuously inform the student's instructional programming. See the [National Center on Intensive Intervention](#) for a list of valid and reliable assessments.
- To effectively promote positive outcomes, **Tier 1 or core instruction must consist of high quality evidence-based instruction** and target essential skills for success.
 - In the area of reading, effective core instruction includes systematic, explicit instruction in phonics and comprehension strategies (NRP & NICHD, 2000). In the area of math, this may include systematic, explicit instruction on properties of whole numbers and solving word problems (Gersten et al., 2009; NASP, 2020). In the area of social-emotional learning, this includes systematic, explicit instruction on mental health promotion (Splett et al., 2017).
 - Effective communication between grade level teams and opportunities for teachers to work with colleagues from preceding and subsequent grades (e.g., vertical PLCs) is essential to closing the gap for struggling students.
- Provide a **positive school climate** where students feel valued (NYASP, 2021). This may consist of integrating student voice (e.g., surveys) and promoting student agency (e.g., student advisory board) in school practices and policies. This may also include

implementing culturally and linguistically responsive practices that are reflective of the student community.

- Students should have **opportunities to learn outside of the school day or school year** to continue supporting their growth. Schools may consider extending their school day or offering summer learning programs (Protheroe, 2007). Schools should also consider collaborating with community programs to provide enrichment, tutoring, or mentoring opportunities. Most importantly, **schools should collaborate and work closely with community agencies** to ensure that students and families can easily access social services when needed (Jimerson et al., 2005).

What About Retaining Students With Disabilities?

If retention is considered for a student receiving special education services, the team should inform families about the research on the outcomes of retention at the Individual Education Program (IEP) meeting. As with all major decisions involving students with disabilities, the decision to retain is made by the student's IEP team and on a case-by-case basis. An explicit discussion should occur regarding supports and interventions to meet the student's needs. Teams must also evaluate the extent to which the student's current IEP (including a behavior intervention plan, when relevant) has been implemented with fidelity.

Oftentimes educators will recommend a delay to the entrance of kindergartners, a practice called redshirting. This decision can actually delay access to a wider range of services and access to daily support. Additionally, special education students are entitled to transition services until they reach the age of 21. If a student is retained or redshirted, the student loses a year of these services. No matter the age of the student, the loss of that year of transition services should be explained to the family and considered at the IEP meeting. In the rare case that an IEP team decides to retain a student, the decision needs to be documented on the Prior Written Notice, including the potential effects that were shared with the family, other options considered, and why the team came to that decision.

What Information Should be Shared with Families?

The information outlined above can and should be summarized and shared with parents and caregivers who are considering retention. Given the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, it may be efficient/effective to share this information with all families, as this is likely a topic on the minds of many. The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) has also produced [this grade retention information sheet for parents](#), which can be shared when appropriate. Additionally, remind families that they have many insights that will be informative regarding their student's individual needs. They can help their student(s) avoid retention by:

- **Advocating for their student's needs, while also sharing and emphasizing their student's strengths** when talking to school staff. Remind families that they have access to advocacy support through organizations such as [PACER](#).

- To the extent possible, **providing a time and place within the home** for the student to complete homework.
- **Collaborating with teachers and other school staff** to develop interventions and supports to meet their student's needs and identify opportunities to enhance learning across all school environments.
- **Frequently communicating** with the school regarding concerns (e.g., academic, behavioral, social) as they arise.
- **Being informed of their student's assignments and homework** as well as providing monitoring and assistance to support work completion. Note that it is the school/district's responsibility to ensure that families have access to information regarding their child's grades/assignments as well as guidance on how to navigate accessing such information.
- Assisting in **supporting their student's overall health** (e.g., sleeping habits, nutrition, school attendance, appropriate medical care).

Resources on Retention

- [National Association of School Psychologists Resources, Strategies, and Research](#)
- [Center for Mental Health in Schools, UCLA Research Clearinghouse on Topic of Retention](#)
- [Five Factors to Consider When Parents Request Grade Retention for Their Child](#)
- [Article from the School Superintendents Association \(AASA\): Alternatives to Grade Retention](#)
- [The New York Association of School Psychologists \(NYASP\) School Re-Entry and Recovery in Response to the COVID-19 Health Crisis](#)

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