Student Grade Retention

Does retaining low-performing students help them achieve greater academic success? Retention is relatively common across the country, with approximately 2 to 4 percent of students of all grades being retained annually (Misu-Gillette, et al., 2017). However, there is a lack of consensus of its effects on student achievement. Although student retention is used as an education intervention to help low-performing students, it is commonly coupled with other programs such as summer school, extended instructional time during the school year, and other academic assistance programs. This brief will present a summary and comparison of student retention rates, a review of the literature on the short and long term effects of retention, as well as the efficacy of auxiliary support programs.

1. Prevalence of Student Grade Retention

The overall student retention rate has decreased over the past two decades from 2.9 to 2.2 percent (Misu-Gillette, et al., 2017). However, there are considerable differences in retention rates across States, student groups, and grades. Consistently, Black and Hispanic students are more likely to repeat a grade, as well as language learners and students with disabilities (Tingle, Schoeneberger, & Algozzine, 2012). Based on 2012 data from the National Center of Education Statistics, Black and Hispanic students are retained at higher rates across all grade levels, with the highest rate among Black students (3.2 percent) in grades K-8, while the highest rate among Hispanic students (3.1 percent) in grades 9-12.¹

In the State of Georgia, retention rates are comparable to the national average; with rates ranging from 2.6 – 3.2 percent annually, and an overall decrease in the share of students who repeat a grade in recent years.² For Clayton County Public Schools (CCPS), the student retention rate is on average 24 percent higher than the retention rate for students throughout Georgia. Based on records from the Governor’s Office of Student Achievement (GOSA), over 1,800 CCPS students are retained annually across all grades levels.³ In accord with national trends, Black and Hispanic students are retained at higher rates than White students. Among students who are retained in CCPS schools, approximately 70 percent and 20 percent are Black or Hispanic, respectively. CCPS ranks 3rd among other Metro-Atlanta districts in terms of share of minority students who are retained.⁴

2. Summary of Retention Policies in Georgia and CCPS

Following the implementation of school accountability policies and the introduction of high-stakes testing, Georgia linked student grade promotion/retention to performance in state standardized tests.

Promotion eligibility out of grades 3, 5, and 8 is restricted to students who achieve minimum grade-level proficiency in reading. Minimum grade proficiency in math is an additional requirement for promotion in grades 5 and 8. All standards are tied to performance in the reading and math portions of statewide end-of-grade exams or end-of-course exams for math and language arts classes. Current minimum promotion standards have been adapted to the new

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¹ Figures 1 and 2 show data from NCES outlining the trend in retention rates from 1994 to 2014 across student groups and grades.
² Figure 3 shows the trend in retention rates for Georgia and CCPS from 2010 – 2015.
³ For reference, Figure 4 depicts the student retention rate for other large Metro-Atlanta school districts. All of these are districts that are also participating in the MAPLE data project.
⁴ Figures 5 and 6 show average retention rates across gender and race/ethnic groups, respectively; for comparison other Metro-Atlanta school districts are also included in these charts.
Milestones exams which replaced the former tests starting with the 2014-15 school year.\(^5\)

Reading grade proficiency is determined by scoring within the “stretch band” appropriate for each grade. Therefore, students who are likely to be retained are those who fail to score within the “stretch band”.

Similarly, retention criteria for grades 5 and 8 include proficiency in math tests determined by a minimum score of 475 points, which corresponds to the “developer learner” level, a step below the “proficient learner” level as determined by the Georgia Milestones score categories.\(^6\)

With regards to grade promotion for High School students, the criteria are determined at the district level. CCPS employs a minimum number of Carnegie units earned. For example, to be classified as a 10th grader in CCPS, a student must have earned a minimum of 5 Carnegie units by the end of their 9th grade. The minimum units for grades 11 and 12 are 11 and 17 units, respectively.\(^7\)

### 3. The Impact of Retention Policies on Student Achievement

There is extensive evidence of a negative correlation between student retention and test performance, attendance, high school graduation, and even emotional wellbeing. This may not be surprising given that students who are retained are those who tend to be falling behind academically. Therefore, it is challenging to draw inference from studies that fail to recognize that retention applies to a subset of students who on average perform lower than non-retained students. For this reason, one must step beyond correlational results and examine the causal effect of retention. With that in mind, a closer look at recent and statistically more rigorous evidence presents a nuanced relationship that reveals some positive outcomes related to student retention (Allen, Chen, Willson, & Hughes, 2009).

Below we summarize evidence on the short and long term effects of retention policies with a focus on student performance in subsequent reading and math standardized exams, and high school graduation. We also briefly present evidence on the effects of retention on other factors such as student discipline and social-emotional behaviors.

#### 3.1 Short-term effects of retention on student test scores

Jacob and Lefgren (2004) study the impact of retention policies in Chicago Public Schools. The study compares the outcomes of students who barely missed the promotion threshold to those who scored just above and were promoted to the next grade. Their findings show no negative effect on future achievement of students who were retained in 3rd grade. In fact, there is some evidence that retention can increase performance in the short-term. The treatment effect for 3rd graders suggests that retention improves student performance by 33-41 percent in math and reading, respectively. However, these gains did not persist two years after retention. Results on the effect of retention among 6th graders show no impact on math scores and a negative effect on reading.

In a similar evaluation of Florida’s student retention policies, Greene and Winters (2007) find that students subjected to the treatment of Florida’s test-based retention policy made significant gains in reading test scores and results were sustained even two years after retention. In a follow-up study, Winters and Greene (2012) confirm the

\(^5\) Until 2014-15 the statewide exams were known as the Criterion-Referenced Competency Test (CRCT). They were replaced by the Milestones exams in 2014-15.

\(^6\) Table 1 outlines the specific thresholds for each grade. The score reported for reading is the Lexile score.

\(^7\) Table 2 outlines the promotion rules applicable for CCPS high schools.
positive effect on student test scores in reading, math, and science on the year immediately following retention.

Mariano and Martorell (2013) present an evaluation of New York City schools’ retention policy. Their results align with previous studies showing significant positive gains in ELA and math test scores among 5th graders who just missed the minimum passing score for promotion.

There are mixed results on the impact of retention in Kindergarten. Dong (2010) finds that students who are retained in KG outperform promoted students in reading and math for up to 3rd grade. On the other hand, Fruehwirth, Navarro, and Takahashi (2016) present evidence that students retained in KG would have performed up to 27 percent higher in reading and math if they had been promoted.

3.2 Longer-term effects of retention on high school achievement and graduation

Jacob and Lefgren (2009) investigate the effect of Chicago Public School’s retention policy on high school graduation. Their findings show that retention among low-performing 6th graders does not affect the likelihood to complete high school. However, retention in later grades (8th grade, specifically) substantially increases the probability of dropping out. Further analysis shows this finding is highly concentrated among Black female students. Similarly, a study by Eren et al. (2017) on Louisiana’s retention policies shows no net effect on the propensity to drop out of high school among students who were retained in 4th grade. However, strong positive net effects are found among students who were retained in 8th grade. Schwerdt, West, and Winters (2017) also find that students retained in 3rd grade have a higher probability of delayed graduation and earning fewer course credits in HS. However, they find no significant effect on the probability of graduating.

Not all long-term effects are negative. In an evaluation of the long-term effects of 3rd grade retention among students in Florida, Schwerdt, West, and Winters (2017) find that retained students tend to have higher high school GPAs and take fewer remedial courses. Similarly, Winters and Greene (2012) find that test score gains among retained students in Florida persist for several years after the intervention.

Ultimately, an important goal of schooling is to enhance the labor prospects of students; therefore, investigating whether grade retention has an effect on wages allows for an examination of potentially permanent effects of these policies. Babcock and Bedard (2011) study the effect of retention on wages from a nationally representative sample. Results show that male students who lived in states with higher student retention rates tend to earn higher hourly wages. This increase was present not only among high earners, but across the income distribution.

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8 The net effect in Eren et al. (2017) refers to the combine effect of potential retention and eligibility to attend summer school.
3.3 The effect of grade retention on student discipline, parents’ school perception, and students’ social-emotional behaviors

In terms of student behavior, results show immediate effects that tend to dissipate over time. In particular, Ozek (2015) studies the effects of Florida’s retention policy on student discipline and finds that students who just missed promotion out of 3rd grade have a higher probability of incurring a disciplinary incident or suspension. These impacts are pronounced in the short-term, effects are found to dissipate over time.

Relatedly, Eren, et al. (2017) investigate the impact of Louisiana’s retention policy on engagement in criminal activity. Results show that students who barely miss the promotion threshold out of 8th grade are less likely to be convicted of a juvenile crime compared to students who score just high enough to be promoted.

In terms of parental engagement and perceptions, there is evidence that parents of marginally retained students experience an increase in satisfaction in school quality in the years following their child being retained (Geng & Rockoff, 2017). Students who score just below the promotion threshold also report feeling safer in school.

Grade retention has long been considered as a high stressor or cause of anxiety and social-emotion concerns among students (Jackson, 1975; Jimerson, 2001b; Jimerson, 2001a; Pagani, Tremblay, Vitaro, Boulerice, & McDuff, 2001). It has been shown that students rank retention among the top three stressors in a list of school and home related experiences (Anderson, Jimerson, & Whipple, 2005). Retention ranks just below losing a parents and going blind.

However, potential negative associations between retention and social-emotional outcomes are contested by a study which finds that, compared to observably similar students, those who are retained in 1st grade experienced a short-term decrease in teacher-rated classroom hyperactivity and peer-rated sadness and withdrawal (Wu, West, & Hughes, 2010). Overall, this study finds positive short-term effects of early grade retention.

4. Review of literature on the efficacy of summer school and other remedial programs

Although grade retention is viewed as an intervention intended to help low-achieving students gain grade-level proficiency, it is commonly more effective when used in conjunction with other policies (Huddleston, 2014; Reschly & Christenson, 2013). Below we present a brief overview of some of the policies coupled with grade retention and their efficacy.

4.1 The impact of summer school on student achievement

In an evaluation of Chicago Public Schools’ retention policy and summer school attendance, Jacob and Lefgren (2004) find that students who missed the minimum promotion requirements and were mandated to attend summer school increased test scores in math and reading in the year following summer school. In a similar study, Matsudaira (2008) finds small, yet positive effects of mandatory summer school attendance on math and reading test scores. Results also show that students in later grades benefit more from summer school compared to students in early grades.

Mariano and Martorell (2013) assess the efficacy of summer school among students who face potential retention in New York City public schools. Results show modest, positive effects of summer school on ELA and math test scores.
Evidence suggests positive, albeit small effects of summer school on reading and math test scores. Summer school can be an effective program especially among older students.

4.2 Efficacy of alternative support programs

In a review of the cost effectiveness of 22 alternative support programs, Yeh (2010) finds that summer school ranks 10 and can be implemented in ways that make it cost ineffective. Further, other criticisms of summer school include a narrow curriculum and resource diffusion away from other subjects (Buchanan, 2007). In light of this we review other alternatives that have been implemented in conjunction with retention policies.

Studies of the impact of retention policies in Florida public schools find that the implementation of the full policy led to gains in test scores in both the short and longer term (Greene & Winters, 2007; Winters & Greene, 2012). The retention policy in Florida includes key features such as an additional 90 minutes of daily reading instruction, assignment to high performing teachers, and a personalized academic improvement plan. These, in addition to summer school attendance, led to gains in performance for retained students.

Another innovative alternative is the early identification and provision of support to students who are underperforming during the year leading up to promotion or even prior to it. Rodriguez, Amador, and Tarango, (2016) highlight the importance of access to early childhood education and highly qualified teachers as key inputs to achieve 3rd grade reading proficiency; a common metric used to determine student retention in that grade. Moreover, Mariano and Martorell (2013) find positive test scores gains for retained students who received support such as attending Summer Success Academy (SSA) or Saturday Preparatory Academy (SPA). Both are alternative support programs intended to help underperforming students achieve grade-level proficiency.

There is evidence that alternative programs such as placement with high performing teachers, additional daily instructional time, and Saturday school, can help retained students achieve grade-level proficiency.

Summary

Student retention policies are found to have positive immediate effects although these tend to dissipate over time. There is still no consensus on the impact of retention on high school student achievement and graduation; though there is suggestive evidence that early-grade retention can be more effective than later-grade retention. Summer school can be an effective short-term tool to increase test scores among low-performing students, especially those in later-grades. Alternative policies such as placement with highly qualified teachers, additional daily instruction, and individualized plans can also be used to increase the effectiveness of overall retention policies and help underperforming students achieve grade-level proficiency.

References


Figures and Tables

Figure 1: U.S. Retention Rates across Student Racial Groups and for All Grades (1994-2015)


Figure 2: U.S. Retention Rates across Student Racial Groups and Grades (2015)

Figure 3: Percent of Retained Students in Georgia and CCPS for All Grades (2010-2015)

Source: Governor's Office of Student Achievement (GOSA)

Figure 4: Percent of Retained Students across Metro-Atlanta School Districts for All Grades (2010-2015)

Source: Governor's Office of Student Achievement (GOSA)
Figure 5: Average Percent of Retained Students by Gender (2010-2015)

Source: Governor’s Office of Student Achievement (GOSA)

Figure 6: Average Percent of Retained Students by Race/Ethnic Groups (2010-2015)

Source: Governor’s Office of Student Achievement (GOSA)
Table 1: Summary of Georgia Student Retention Policies up to Middle School Grades

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>3rd grade</th>
<th>5th grade</th>
<th>8th grade</th>
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<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>Retained if: Lexile score &lt; 520L Grade level “stretch” 520L – 820L</td>
<td>Retained if: Lexile score &lt; 830L Grade level “stretch” 830L – 1010L</td>
<td>Retained if: Lexile score &lt; 1010L Grade level “stretch” 1010L – 1185L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Math</td>
<td>Does not apply</td>
<td>Retained if: Milestones &lt; 475</td>
<td>Retained if: Milestones &lt; 475</td>
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Source: Georgia Department of Education

Table 2: Summary of CCPS Student Promotion Policies for High School

Promotion policy for students enrolled in 9th grade before 2009-10

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<th>To be classified:</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Earned 5 Carnegie units</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As an 11th grader</td>
<td>Earned 10 Carnegie units</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As a 12th grader</td>
<td>Earned 16 Carnegie units</td>
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