

Repeating a Grade: How Well Does It Work?



Research Snapshot

The importance of reading skills and the predictive power of reaching reading proficiency by fourth grade have led many SREB states to tie third grade promotion policies to state reading assessment results. In the 2017-18 school year, nine SREB states required their third graders to demonstrate reading proficiency before being promoted to fourth grade. By ending age-based promotion at third grade, states seek to ensure that students enter fourth grade with the reading skills they need to be successful. How well does this work?

Research on the effects of retaining young students — requiring them to repeat a grade — is mixed. Older studies often found significant negative effects for retained students, compared with their promoted peers. More recent studies using advanced statistical methods, however, increasingly point to short-term academic benefits for retained students that fade over time. The research snapshot that follows summarizes current studies on retention in grade for early elementary students.

- **Retention can provide short-term benefits for retained students, with positive effects in reading lasting up to six years.**

Methodology Note: The conclusions of research that studies the outcomes of students whose reading assessment scores fall within a small, specific range near a cutoff for promotion may not be applicable to students whose scores fall further above or below the promotion cutoff.

Schwerdt, G. & West, M.R. (2015). The Effects of Test-Based Retention on Student Outcomes over Time: Regression Discontinuity Evidence from Florida (NBER Working Paper No. 21509). Retrieved from National Bureau for Economic Research website: <http://www.nber.org/papers/w21509.pdf>

The authors compared the outcomes of third grade students just above and just below the score cutoff for promotion to fourth grade in Florida — children with a very similar level of academic performance in reading. Students who were retained and had to repeat third grade performed better in reading for six years following retention, compared with their peers who were promoted to fourth grade on time. This advantage then disappeared. Retained third graders also performed better than their promoted peers on the state math assessment for several years following retention, but after six years this advantage disappeared as well. Researchers found that students retained in third grade were less likely to be retained later in elementary or middle school than students with similar performance who were promoted to fourth grade. This study did not find that retention in third grade had a significant impact on students' likelihood of graduating from high school or enrolling in post-secondary education. On the other hand, third grade retainees took fewer remedial courses in high school, on average, and had slightly higher GPAs than their promoted peers.

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Winters, M.A. & Greene, J.P. (2012). The Medium-Run Effects of Florida's Test-Based Promotion Policy. *Education Finance and Policy*, 7(3), 305-330.

Winters and Greene also compared outcomes for Florida students with very similar scores on the state reading assessment in third grade. The authors were careful to note that Florida law requires specific interventions for retained students. The effects of retention itself cannot be fully separated from the effects of these additional interventions. However, the researchers did use variables to control for certain characteristics of students' schools and for students' assignment to high-performing teachers in their retention year. The results of the study show that retained third graders outperformed their peers in both reading and math for several years following retention, though this advantage faded over time and disappeared after seventh grade. Being assigned to a high-performing teacher in a student's retention year did not appear to be a significant factor in the short-term academic advantages seen in the years following retention.

■ **Studies with better research design generally find that the effects of retention in grade are neutral.**

Im, M.H., Hughes, J.H, Kwok, O., Puckett, S., & Cerdia, C.A. (2013). Effect of retention in elementary grades on transition to middle school. Manuscript submitted for publication. Retrieved from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3701161/pdf/nihms438009.pdf>

The authors identified first graders who struggled with reading and followed them through middle school. Using a sophisticated statistical technique, they closely matched any child who was retained once at some point in elementary school with a similar child who was continuously promoted. The results of the study showed that retention had no significant effect on students' academic growth in reading or math, overall reading and math achievement levels at the end of elementary school, or behavioral engagement after transitioning to middle school.

Moser, S.E., West, S. G., & Hughes, J.N. (2012). Trajectories of Math and Reading Achievement in Low Achieving Children in Elementary School: Effects of Early and Later Retention in Grade. Manuscript submitted for publication. Retrieved from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2329586/pdf/nihms37588.pdf>

Researchers matched two groups of children on dozens of variables to compare the outcomes of students who were retained in first grade with those of students who were never retained. Retained first graders performed better in their retention year than their promoted peers had in their own first grade year. However, this advantage faded over time. By fifth grade, the students who were retained in first grade had slightly lower math performance than their promoted peers and performed about the same as their peers in reading. The study authors concluded that if the retained students had been promoted instead, they would have performed about as well as their peers on standardized measures of math and reading achievement in fifth grade. However, researchers also found that retention in first grade made students much less likely to be retained in grades two through four than similar peers who were promoted from first grade. Students retained sometime during grades one through four were as likely to receive special education services by grade five as their peers who were never retained.

National Association of School Psychologists. (2011). *White Paper: Grade Retention and Social Promotion*. Bethesda, MD: NASP. Retrieved from <https://www.nasponline.org/x32088.xml>

The National Association of School Psychologists summarized the state of knowledge about the effects of grade retention in 2011. Like other recent publications, this report concluded that three decades of research on grade retention fails to show that it provides many benefits to students. However, NASP noted that recent, more sophisticated studies also contradict earlier research findings that retention is particularly detrimental to students. The NASP white paper concluded that retention and social promotion are both inadequate ways to help students improve in school. To support children at risk of academic failure, NASP advocates for high-quality preschool programs, effective classroom instruction, universal screening to identify struggling students, and multi-tiered systems of academic and behavioral intervention, as well as increased learning opportunities like after-school and summer school programs.

■ **Retaining a student means paying for an additional year of schooling. Multiplied by thousands of students in a state, retention is an expensive solution.**

While few states report data on the number of students retained in third grade, the approximate cost of educating retained students for an extra year can be calculated for those that do. Per-pupil costs for the following calculations are based on FY 2015 data from the U.S. Census Bureau.

Florida: A total of 20,665 third graders were retained in Florida in 2015-16. Total spending per pupil that year was \$8,881. At that spending level, a second year of third grade for these students cost the state about \$183.5 million.

Mississippi: A total of 2,307 third graders were retained in Mississippi in 2015-16. Total spending per pupil that year was \$8,456. At that spending level, a second year of third grade for these students cost the state about \$19.5 million.

North Carolina: A total of 17,630 third graders were retained in North Carolina in 2015-16. Total spending per pupil that year was \$8,687. At that spending level, a second year of third grade for these students cost the state about \$153.2 million.

■ **Simply having a poor reader repeat the same content is not likely to produce results significantly different from the previous year.**

Another year in third grade with the same content and instruction will do little to help struggling readers gain the literacy skills they did not master the first time around. Struggling third graders who are promoted to fourth grade without demonstrating reading proficiency — either by parent request, school committee, or under an exemption — may have continuing difficulties, too.

Some states with test-based third grade promotion policies explicitly require interventions or the opportunity to attend a summer reading camp for these students to help ensure that their reading skills improve. Some retain students but require specialized instruction for them during the second year of third grade. Some promote students but require that they receive specific interventions. A few states permit mid-year promotion to fourth grade for students retained in third who can demonstrate reading proficiency during their retention year.

Intervention and Support Policies in SREB States With Reading-Based Promotion Policies for Third Grade

	AR	DE	FL	GA	MS	NC	OK	SC	TN
Retained third graders must receive specialized instruction			✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Retained third graders must be assigned to a teacher with specific qualifications or qualities			✓		✓	✓	✓		
Third graders eligible for retention must be offered a summer reading camp and opportunity to retest			✓			✓		✓	
Students promoted under an exemption must receive specialized instruction or intervention		✓ ¹	✓	✓ ²	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Allows mid-year promotion to fourth grade for retained third graders who demonstrate reading proficiency			✓			✓	✓		
¹ If student is promoted without attending summer school ² If student is promoted by a school placement committee composed of the student's parent or guardian, teacher, and principal or designee <i>Source: SREB analysis of state documents</i>									

■ **In summary: While retention may help students in the short term, it is costly, ineffective in the long term and insufficient on its own.**

States could justify the cost of an additional year of schooling if repeating a grade gave students a permanent academic boost and other lasting advantages. The current body of research, however, does not indicate that this is the case. The funds spent on retention may be better spent on quality interventions for struggling readers, especially in the earliest grades. States with promotion policies based on reading proficiency should consider whether the policies are improving outcomes for students — and if so, whether the benefits are large enough to justify the costs. These states should also ensure that retained third graders and students promoted to fourth grade under an exemption receive screenings to identify deeper reading problems and intensive, evidence-based support in reading.