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Christie Blazer, Supervisor

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL GRADE RETENTION

At a Glance

This Information Capsule reviews the research conducted on elementary level grade retention. Research findings on the effect of retention on elementary students' outcomes are inconsistent. One widely accepted conclusion is that when retention occurs, it should be accompanied by additional interventions designed to increase students' academic achievement and foster their social-emotional development. Other key research findings include:

- Retained students are more likely to be from minority backgrounds and low-income households.
- Retention has a temporary positive impact on student achievement.
- No definitive conclusions have been reached on how retention affects students' academic achievement in the long-term. Most older studies found that retention had a negative impact on student's long-term achievement, but several recent studies that used more sophisticated methodologies concluded that retention had no effect, and may actually have had a positive effect, on students' future achievement.
- Studies conducted on the impact of elementary school retention on students' high school dropout rates have reported mixed findings.
- Research on the impact of retention on students' social and emotional adjustment has produced conflicting results.
- Studies suggest that elementary students with the lowest levels of academic achievement and the poorest learning-related (self-regulatory) skills may have the most to gain by repeating a grade, both academically and socially.
- Some researchers have concluded that retention is more effective at the earliest grade levels, but others maintain that retention is harmful at all grade levels.
- When retention is being considered for struggling elementary school students, researchers recommend that school staff implement several strategies, such as basing retention decisions on multiple criteria, using new instructional strategies and materials during the retention year, and providing students with supplemental academic and social-emotional interventions.

The goal of retaining students is to provide them with an extra year of instruction so they are better prepared before entering the next grade level. Grade retention is considered a last resort option, after other efforts have failed to adequately prepare a student to advance to the next grade level. Retention of a student usually occurs for one of the following reasons: poor performance on standardized achievement tests; emotional immaturity that results in disruptive behavior; developmental immaturity that results in learning difficulties; or poor attendance

patterns that preclude the acquisition of essential knowledge and skills (Intercultural Development Research Association, 2018; Bayer, 2017; Peixoto et al., 2016; Child Trends, 2015; Duggan, 2014; Hipkins, 2014; Özek, 2014; Warren et al., 2014; Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012; Cannon & Lipscomb, 2011; Wu et al., 2010).

Proponents of grade retention believe that it provides struggling students with extra time to acquire the necessary academic, social, and behavioral skills before starting the next grade level. They argue that it is unreasonable to expect every student to develop at the same pace and that some students need an extra year to catch up with their peers (Mariano et al., 2018; Meador, 2018; Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012; Cannon & Lipscomb, 2011; Hanover Research, 2011a).

Critics, on the other hand, contend that retention leads to lower levels of student self-esteem, more negative attitudes toward school, and difficulties adjusting to new peer groups. They note that some children report feeling embarrassed about being separated from their same-age peers and are often stigmatized by teachers and parents as failing (Intercultural Development Research Association, 2018; Mariano et al. 2018; Lynch, 2017; Özek, 2014; Rose & Schimke, 2012; West, 2012; Cannon & Lipscomb, 2011).

In 2015, approximately 2.2% of U.S. students in kindergarten through grade 12 were retained in the same grade in which they had been enrolled in the prior school year (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). In the past, the retention rate was highest in first grade. However, an increasing number of states have adopted laws that require students to repeat the third grade if they do not score at or above the proficient level on the reading portion of state-mandated achievement tests, so the percentage of retained third graders has increased steadily (Intercultural Development Research Association, 2018; National Conference of State Legislatures, 2018; Álvarez, 2017; Warren et al., 2014; Krier, n.d.). Child Trends' (2015) analysis of data from the 2012 National Household Education Survey found that the percentage of students retained in first grade decreased from 4.5% in 1993 to 2.6% in 2012, while the percentage of students retained in third grade increased from 3.4% to 5.9% over the same time period.

Characteristics of Students Most Likely to be Retained

Researchers have found that retained students are more likely to be from minority backgrounds and low-income households (Kamenetz, 2017; Schwerdt et al., 2017; Hanover Research, 2016; Knoff, 2016; Porter, 2016; Tolen & Quinlen, 2016; Squires, 2015; Hipkins, 2014; Rose & Schimke, 2012; Cannon & Lipscomb, 2011). The National Center for Education Statistics (2017) reported that in 2015, 1.8% of White students were retained in kindergarten through grade 8, compared to 3.2% of Black students and 2.8% of Hispanic students. According to Child Trends' (2015) analysis of data from the 2012 National Household Education Survey, 3.3% of children in grades 1-3 who had a household income above the poverty line were retained, compared to 9.7% of children whose household income was at or below the poverty line.

Some researchers believe that disadvantaged students are retained more often because they are less likely to have access to schools with adequate resources and qualified teachers (Hanover Research, 2016; Squires, 2015; Hipkins, 2014). Rose and Schimke (2012) stated that some experts “view grade retention as punishing disadvantaged students who . . . may not have received the same quality of instruction as their more advantaged peers.”

In addition to being from a racial/ethnic minority and a low-income household, other student

factors associated with higher rates of retention include:

- Male;
- Younger than same-grade peers;
- Immigrant/English language learner;
- Parents with low educational attainment;
- Parents not involved with child's school;
- Single-parent household;
- Frequent school changes;
- Chronic school absences;
- Developmental delays or attention problems;
- Behavior problems or aggression;
- Difficulty with peer relationships;
- Reading problems; and
- High-conflict relationships with teachers (Intercultural Development Research Association, 2018; Peixoto et al., 2016; Duggan, 2014; Hipkins, 2014; Warren et al., 2014; Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012; Hanover Research, 2011b; National Association of School Psychologists, 2011; Krier, n.d.).

According to Cannon and Lipscomb (2011), students with several risk factors may face up to a one-in-nine chance of being retained.

Research on the Impact of Elementary School Retention on Students' Academic Achievement

Many researchers agree that retention in the elementary grades has a temporary positive impact on student achievement. A large number of studies have reported that elementary students post gains in academic achievement immediately after completing a retention year, but that performance gains dissipate within approximately two to three years subsequent to retention (Hanover Research, 2016; Jacob, 2016; Knoff, 2016; Tolen & Quinlin, 2016; Depew & Eren, 2015; Squires, 2015; Duggan, 2014; Hipkins, 2014; Stipek & Lombardo, 2014; Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012; West, 2012; Bright, 2011; National Association of School Psychologists, 2011; Krier, n.d.).

However, there is disagreement on the effect of retention on students' long-term academic achievement (Peixoto et al., 2016; Warren et al., 2014; Rose & Schimke, 2012; Wu et al., 2010). Earlier studies consistently found that over a longer period of time, retained elementary students demonstrated lower levels of academic performance than promoted low-achieving elementary students (Intercultural Development Research Association, 2018; Hanover Research, 2016; Duggan, 2014; Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012; Marsico Institute for Early Learning and Literacy, 2012; Bright, 2011; Jacob & Lefgren, 2009; Krier, n.d.). But researchers have begun to question these findings because they believe the earlier studies failed to adequately control for pre-existing differences between students who were retained and those who were promoted (Hughes et al., 2018; Cham et al., 2015; Winters, 2012).

Recent studies have used more sophisticated statistical techniques, such as regression discontinuity, that employ rigorous controls for pre-existing differences between promoted and retained students. These more methodologically robust studies have reported that retention has no effect, and sometimes even a positive effect, on elementary students' future achievement (Winters, 2018; Schwerdt et al., 2017; Im et al., 2013; Rose & Schimke, 2012; West, 2012;

Cannon & Lipscomb, 2011; National Association of School Psychologists, 2011; Allen et al., 2009).

Research on the Impact of Elementary School Retention on Students' High School Dropout Rates

Studies on the impact of elementary school retention on students' high school dropout rates have reported mixed findings. Some studies have found that students retained in the elementary grades have higher dropout rates in high school than those who were not retained. For example, Hughes and colleagues (2018) found that Texas students who were held back in grades 1-5 were almost three times more likely than their peers to drop out of high school. Andrew (cited in Barshay, 2014) concluded that retaining students in early elementary school reduced their odds of completing high school by approximately 60%, compared to their matched peers who stayed on grade level.

In contrast, other studies have found that elementary retention does not affect the likelihood that students will drop out of school (although researchers have linked retention at the middle school level to higher dropout rates in high school). Jacob and Lefgren (2009) reported that retention among sixth grade students had no significant effect on high school dropout rates, although retaining eighth grade students increased the probability that they would drop out of high school. Similarly, Depew and Eren (2015) found that retention in the fourth grade had no impact on students' likelihood of dropping out of high school, but retention in the eighth grade had a strong effect on increasing the probability that students would drop out of high school.

Research on the Impact of Elementary School Retention on Students' Social-Emotional Adjustment

Research on the impact of elementary school retention on students' social and emotional adjustment has produced conflicting results. Most studies have found that retention in the elementary grades is associated with lower academic self-concept, lower levels of self-esteem, lower-quality peer relationships, and more negative attitudes towards school (Meador, 2018; Lynch, 2017; Schwerdt et al., 2017; Knoff, 2016; Peixoto et al., 2016; Child Trends, 2015; Duggan, 2014; Hipkins, 2014; Stipek & Lombardo, 2014; Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012; Hanover Research, 2011b; Krier, n.d.). Andrew (cited in Intercultural Development Research Association, 2018) concluded that elementary students who are retained suffer lower self-esteem and view retention as a punishment and a stigma, not a positive event designed to help them improve their academic performance.

However, a few studies have reported less negative results. Some studies have concluded that retention does not have a lasting negative impact on elementary students' social and emotional outcomes, while others have found that retention may even have a positive impact on self-concept, sense of school belonging, academic self-efficacy, motivation, and classroom engagement. For example:

- Cham and colleagues' (2015) study of Texas students found no evidence that retention in grades 1-5 reduced their general motivation for educational attainment in grade 9. In fact, retained students were somewhat more likely to believe that their teachers expected them to succeed academically and that their peers valued achievement and had high educational expectations.

- Im and associates (2013) reported that when Texas students who had been retained in grades 1-5 reached middle school, they exhibited the same levels of teacher-rated behavioral engagement and self-reported school belonging as their continuously promoted peers.
- Özek (2014) tracked seven cohorts of Florida students who were retained in the third grade. Results indicated that students were significantly more likely to have disciplinary problems and receive a suspension in the two years immediately following retention, but that these effects dissipated entirely after two years.
- Wu and colleagues (2010) investigated the behavioral and social effects of first grade retention on fourth grade Texas students. The researchers reported that retained students benefited from retention in both the short-term (during the retention year) and longer-term (through grade 4) with respect to decreased teacher-rated hyperactivity, higher teacher ratings of behavioral engagement, fewer peer reports of sadness and withdrawal, and improved perceptions of academic self-efficacy. Other benefits were more temporary: retained students had an increase in mean peer-rated liking and self-rated school belonging relative to promoted students during the retention year, but this advantage decreased substantially by grade 4. The researchers concluded, “Retention may bestow social advantages in the short term but have detrimental effects on social acceptance in the longer term, as students become more sensitive to being over-age for grade.”
- Ellsworth and Lagacé-Séguin (2009) conducted a study to determine if early grade retention was associated with a diminished sense of self-esteem or academic self-efficacy in post-secondary Canadian students. The researchers compared university students who had been retained between kindergarten and grade 9 with students who had never been retained. Students were matched on age, gender, grade 12 grade point average, and family variables. Results of the study indicated that grade retention did not have a long-term negative impact on university students’ self-reported self-esteem or academic self-efficacy – the retained group’s responses on measures of self-esteem and self-efficacy did not differ significantly from those of students who had not been retained.

Research on Which Students Are Most Likely to Benefit from Grade Retention

Although most researchers agree that grade retention is not appropriate for certain students, few studies have been conducted to determine which students benefit most from the practice (Intercultural Development Research Association, 2018; Meador, 2018; Tolen & Quinlin, 2016; Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012).

A study conducted by Chen and colleagues (2014) at three Texas school districts concluded that retention in the first grade was most beneficial both academically and socially to students who demonstrated the lowest levels of academic achievement and the poorest learning-related skills (a cluster of self-regulatory skills). The researchers found that retained students with the poorest academic and learning-related skills posted greater gains on reading and math tests over the next five years than students who had also been retained but whose academic and learning-related skill deficits were less severe. Specifically, retained students who progressed the most after retention were those who had been rated as having poorer effortful control, less

task persistence in the face of challenges, less ability to focus their attention, and less ability to delay gratification.

Research on the Grade Level at Which Retention is Most Effective

Researchers disagree about the grade level at which retention is most effective. Many believe that retention can produce positive student outcomes at the earliest grade levels, but some contend that it is harmful at all grade levels.

Those who believe retention is best done at the earliest grade levels maintain that it is most effective when students' academic abilities are still developing, when their emotional and social distress can be minimized, and before they settle into negative academic routines. They argue that students are much more likely to experience the negative academic and social-emotional effects associated with retention once they reach fourth grade (Barnum, 2018; Meador, 2018; Lynch, 2017; Schwerdt et al., 2017; Squires, 2015; Hipkins, 2014; Hanover Research, 2013).

Researchers who advocate for retention only in the early elementary grades point to studies conducted on the impact of retention on high school dropout rates. As mentioned earlier in this paper, several studies have found that retention in the elementary grades has little if any effect on high school dropout, but retention in the middle school grades is linked to a greater likelihood of dropping out in high school (Depew & Eren, 2015; Jacob & Lefgren, 2009).

Other researchers argue that retention is harmful at all grade levels. They have found that even as early as first grade, retention has negative effects on achievement and on students' confidence and social status that last throughout elementary, middle, and high school (Andrew, cited in Barshay, 2014; Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012; Marsico Institute for Early Learning and Literacy, 2012).

Limitations of the Research Conducted on Grade Retention

There are several limitations associated with the research conducted on the effects of grade retention. One issue is that the factors that increase a student's risk of being retained also increase his/her risk of subsequent negative outcomes. In other words, some studies have conflated the negative effects of retention with the negative effects of the underlying issue that led the school to retain the student in the first place (Hughes et al., 2018; Mariano et al., 2018; Child Trends, 2015; West, 2012). For example, Barshay (2014) stated: "Consider a child who has trouble paying attention, can't read by the end of fourth grade and is held back . . . Did the stigma of repeating fourth grade cause the child to . . . perform worse at school? Or was it his ongoing struggle with attention deficit disorder?"

Another difficulty associated with studies analyzing the effects of grade retention is that additional interventions are often introduced along with retention, such as reading camp, peer tutoring, extended learning time, and student support teams. This makes it impossible for researchers to separate the effect of retention on student outcomes from that of other interventions that are implemented simultaneously (Winters, 2012).

Early studies failed to adequately control for pre-existing differences between students who were retained and those who were promoted. In general, retained students tend to differ from promoted students on a number of variables that predict student outcomes, such as previous levels of academic achievement, conduct problems, poor relationships with teachers, less parental involvement in school, and poverty. Failure to remove the effect of these pre-existing

differences between students who were subsequently retained or promoted led to overly large, biased estimates of retention effects. Recent studies have addressed this issue by using more sophisticated statistical techniques, such as regression discontinuity (Hughes et al., 2018; Cham et al., 2015; National Association of School Psychologists, 2011; Wu et al., 2010; Allen et al., 2009).

Strategies that Increase the Effectiveness of Retention

When retention is being considered for struggling elementary school students, researchers recommend that school staff implement several strategies, including:

- Retention decisions should be based on multiple criteria rather than only a single test score or individual teacher's recommendation. Factors should include the amount of progress a student makes during the school year; input from teachers, parents, counselors, and other specialized staff; and results from multiple assessments and observations (Intercultural Development Research Association, 2018; Meador, 2018; Álvarez, 2017; Squires, 2015; Duggan, 2014; Robelen, 2012; Rose & Schimke, 2012; Range, 2011).
- Instruction during the retention year should not be a repeat of the prior year's experience. Experts suggest that the retention year should incorporate new instructional strategies and materials instead of exposing students to the same conditions that did not work for them the first time (Intercultural Development Research Association, 2018; Porter, 2016; Squires, 2015; Hipkins, 2014; Stipek & Lombardo, 2014; West, 2012; Hanover Research, 2011a; National Association of School Psychologists, 2011; Allen et al., 2009).
- Performance data should be used to continuously monitor students' progress and evaluate the effectiveness of instructional strategies during the retention year (Knoff, 2016; Hanover Research, 2011b; National Association of School Psychologists, 2011).
- Retention should be accompanied by supplemental interventions designed to increase students' academic achievement and foster their social-emotional development (Hipkins, 2014; Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012; Marsico Institute for Early Learning and Literacy, 2012; Robelen, 2012; West, 2012; Krier, n.d.). Examples of supplemental interventions include:
 - Personalized learning that targets instruction to students' individual needs, enhances the range of available learning options, and provides students with extra attention, including special assistance and accommodations as needed (Hanover Research, 2016; Rose & Schimke, 2012; Krier, n.d.).
 - Increased instructional time to promote the development of academic skills, including after-school programs, before-school programs, summer school programs, and Saturday classes (Barnum, 2018; Intercultural Development Research Association, 2018; Hanover Research, 2016; Squires, 2015; Hipkins, 2014; Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012; Rose & Schimke, 2012; West, 2012; Cannon & Lipscomb, 2011). Block scheduling (even at the elementary level) can also provide students with large periods of uninterrupted instructional time (Intercultural Development Research Association, 2018; Meador, 2018).

- Tutoring programs with peer, cross-age, or adult tutors to promote academic and social skills (Intercultural Development Research Association, 2018; Porter, 2016; Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012; Cannon & Lipscomb, 2011; Hanover Research, 2011b).
- Student support teams that include school psychologists, social workers, and other school staff to monitor students' progress, provide emotional support to retained students, and address any unique academic needs students may have (Intercultural Development Research Association, 2018; Meador, 2018; Hipkins, 2014; Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012).

Summary

This Information Capsule reviewed the research conducted on elementary level grade retention. Studies have found that retained students are more likely to be from minority backgrounds and low-income households. Some researchers believe that disadvantaged students are retained more often because they are less likely to have access to schools with adequate resources and qualified teachers.

Research findings on the impact of retention on elementary students' outcomes are inconsistent. One widely accepted conclusion is that when retention does occur, it should be accompanied by additional interventions designed to increase students' academic achievement and foster their social-emotional development. Other key research findings include:

- Retention has a temporary positive impact on elementary students' academic achievement. A large number of studies have reported that elementary students post performance gains immediately after completing a retention year, but the gains dissipate within approximately two to three years.
- No definitive conclusions have been reached on how retention affects elementary students' academic achievement in the long-term. Early, less methodologically sound studies reported that retained students demonstrated lower levels of academic performance than low-achieving promoted students. However, more recent studies using increasingly sophisticated statistical techniques have been more likely to report that retention has no effect, and sometimes even a positive effect, on students' future achievement.
- Studies conducted on the impact of elementary school retention on students' dropout rates have reported mixed findings. Some studies have found that students retained in the elementary grades have higher dropout rates than low-achieving students who were not retained. Other studies have found that elementary retention has no effect on the likelihood that students will drop out of high school.
- Research on the impact of retention on elementary students' social and emotional adjustment has produced conflicting results. Most studies have found that retention is associated with lower academic self-concept, lower levels of self-esteem, lower-quality peer relationships, and more negative attitudes towards school. However, a few studies

have concluded that retention does not have a lasting negative impact on elementary students' social and emotional outcomes and may even have a positive impact on students' self-concept, sense of school belonging, academic self-efficacy, motivation, and classroom engagement.

- Studies suggest that elementary students with the lowest levels of academic achievement and the poorest learning-related (self-regulatory) skills may have the most to gain by repeating a grade, both academically and socially.
- Researchers disagree about the grade level at which retention is most effective. Many believe that retention can produce positive student outcomes at the earliest grade levels, but some contend that it is harmful at all grade levels.
- When retention is being considered for struggling elementary school students, researchers recommend that school staff implement several strategies, such as basing retention decisions on multiple criteria, using new instructional strategies and materials during the retention year, and providing students with supplemental interventions, such as intensive reading programs and peer tutoring.

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