

RESEARCH BRIEF

Department of Research Services

Vol. 0301
October 2003

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FCAT and Retention

A Closer Look at Third-Grade Retainees

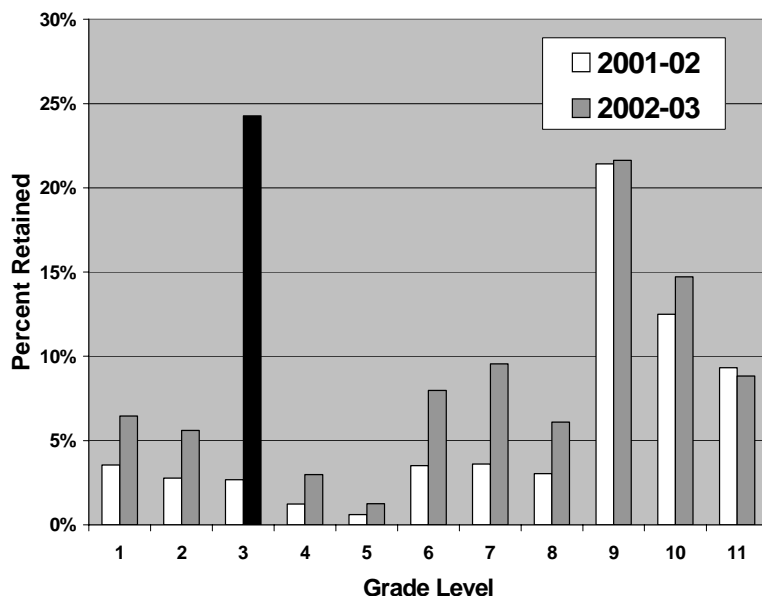
The Florida Legislature recently revised the Florida School Code changing the requirements for student progression. A major component of the revisions in the student progression plan for the 2002-2003 school year focuses on proficiency in reading. Any student identified as having a reading deficiency, based on teacher observations or local or state assessments, must be provided with an improvement plan by the district specifying areas of deficiency, desired levels of performance, and instructional and support services.

Of special importance, beginning in the 2002-2003 school year, grade 3 students must demonstrate reading proficiency by scoring at level 2 or higher on the reading portion of the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT). If not, the student *must* be retained, unless exempted from mandatory retention for special circumstances referred to as “good cause.”

These new requirements caused considerable impact on the retention rates in M-DCPS. This paper presents a brief look at the retention rates for 2002-2003, comparing previous year’s rates and breaking down the group of 3rd grade retainees by ethnicity, free/reduced lunch status, and English proficiency.

Comparison Across Years

This graph shows the number and percentage of students retained in each grade level for both the 2001-02 and 2002-03 school years. The percentages by grade level between the two years are comparable except for one glaring difference. The increase in percentage for grade 3 is vastly larger — from 3 percent to 24 percent. In terms of real numbers, instead of retaining 757 3rd grade students in 2001-02, 6622 were retained in 2002-03. In 12 of our elementary schools, more than 50% of the 3rd grade class was retained in 2002-03.



The apparent jump in 9th grade retention rate for both years is somewhat misleading. Starting in high school, students have multiple requirements for promotion, including an English requirement, a mathematics requirement, etc. Students who fail to satisfy any one of those requirements are considered retained. The number of retained students gradually tapers off through the high school grades bringing the overall rate for grade 1 through 11 to approximately 6% for 2001-02 and 10% for 2002-03.

Race/Ethnicity Breakdown

A table showing the distribution of 3rd grade students from the 2002-03 school year is shown below. Although the percentages of racial/ethnic groups among retained students differs from the percentages for promoted students, similar patterns have been observed in previous years.

	White	Black	Hispanic	Other	Total	
Promoted	11%	24%	62%	3%	100%	n=20463
Retained	4%	40%	55%	1%	100%	n=6622
	10%	28%	60%	2%	100%	n=27085

Another way of looking at this same data is to consider the percentages of retained students within each racial/ethnic group. This table makes evident the disproportional over-representation of retained students among the Black student population.

	White	Black	Hispanic	Other	Total
Promoted	89%	65%	78%	90%	76%
Retained	11%	35%	22%	10%	24%
	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
	n=2647	n=7534	n=16231	n=673	n=27085

In actual numbers, these differences for racial/ethnic groups are perhaps even more impressive. Approximately nine times as many 3rd graders were retained in 2002-03 as compared to previous years. Instead of hundreds of students, thousands were retained in 2002-03. In fact, in twelve of our elementary schools, the retention rate for third graders is over fifty percent.

Number of 3rd Grade Students Retained

	White	Black	Hispanic	Other	Total
2001-02	32	305	409	11	757
2002-03	294	2621	3637	70	6622

Limited English Proficiency Breakdown

Among the 3rd graders for the 2002-03 school year, the percentage of Limited English Proficient (LEP) students (who have been in ESOL for 2 or more years) remains proportional across promoted and retained students.

	Non-LEP	Former LEP	Current LEP	Total	
Promoted	48%	44%	8%	100%	n=20463
Retained	43%	43%	14%	100%	n=6622
	47%	44%	10%	100%	n=27085

Free/Reduced Lunch and Exceptional Student Education Breakdowns

However, for free/reduced lunch status (F/R Lunch) and for Exceptional Student Education status (ESE), the promoted 3rd graders have a different composition than the retained students.

	Non-F/R Lunch	F/R Lunch	Total	
Promoted	35%	65%	100%	n=20463
Retained	11%	89%	100%	n=6622
	29%	71%	100%	n=27085

The proportions of Free/Reduced Lunch and ESE among retained students are higher than their respective proportions in the population. The 3rd grade retainees are almost 90% F/R Lunch students, and it is over three times more likely that the retainees are ESE than are the promoted students ESE.

	Non-ESE	ESE	Total	
Promoted	92%	8%	100%	n=20463
Retained	74%	26%	100%	n=6622
	88%	12%	100%	n=27085

Good Cause Exemptions

Students in 3rd grade who score below level 2 on the FCAT reading may be exempt from mandatory retention under special "good cause" conditions. A summary of the exemption conditions and the number of students *not retained* for good cause in 2002-03 are presented in the following table.

Most of the good cause conditions are circumstances justifying the exemption of the student from FCAT testing requirements. However, two conditions -- alternative assessment and student portfolio --

Limited English Proficiency for Less Than Two Years	897
Students with Disabilities Where Statewide Assessment Is Not Appropriate	73
Students with Acceptable Level of Performance on Alternative Standardized Reading Assessment	285
Students with Portfolio Reading on Grade Level	207
Students with Disabilities Who Received Intensive Remediation for More Than Two Years and Were Previously Retained	165
Students Who Received Intensive Remediation for Two or More Years and Were Previously Retained for a Total of Two Years	20
Total	1647

are designed to accommodate students who appear to be making adequate progress through-out the school year but unexpectedly score low on the FCAT. Of the 8269 third-grade students scheduled for retention on the basis of their FCAT reading performance, 285 + 207 = 492 (or 6%) were promoted by demonstrating proficiency by other means.

[Note: At press time for this report, an additional 321 students scheduled for

retention were promoted based on alternative assessments administered in September and are not factored into the promotion statistics reported here.]

This paper is just a first step in describing the students retained as a result of FCAT. The difference in 3rd grade retention rate is bound to have enormous consequences for administrators, teachers, students and their families. The exact nature of the impact of this change in retention policy is impossible to predict. A more detailed investigation of the long-range effects of the retention policies will have to await the passage of time.