



RESEARCH BRIEF

Research Services

Vol. 0506
December 2005

Dr. Terry Froman, Supervisor
Dale Romanik, Director
Angela Luzon-Canasi, Assessment & Data Analysis
Joseph Bayne, Assessment & Data Analysis

TRACKING 3RD GRADE CLASSES: PROMOTION AND RETENTION PATTERNS

Results in a Nutshell

- √ The percentage of first-time 3rd grade students scoring at Level 1 on the FCAT Reading test has **declined** from approximately **31%** to **23%** from 2002-03 to 2004-05.
- √ The percentage of 3rd grade Level 1 students being promoted for good cause has **increased** from approximately **23%** to **36%** from 2002-03 to 2004-05.
- √ Because of the combined effect of the above two trends, and taking into consideration the students that normally leave the district, the percentage of first-time 3rd graders actually repeating 3rd grade in M-DCPS has **decreased** from approximately **22%** to **13%** from 2002-03 to 2004-05.

Beginning in the 2002-03 school year, the revised Florida School Code required 3rd grade students to demonstrate reading proficiency by scoring at Level 2 or higher on the reading portion of the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT). Students scoring at Level 1 must be retained in 3rd grade for another year, unless exempted from mandatory retention for special circumstances.

These new requirements have had considerable impact on the retention rates in M-DCPS over the past few years. The number of students retained in 3rd grade went from several hundred to several thousand. Previous investigations of 3rd grade retention have focused on end-of-year status and the percentages of students scheduled for promotion or retention in the following year. This paper takes a longer perspective over time, tracking intact 3rd grade cohort groups through subsequent calendar years. This longitudinal approach should provide a more realistic depiction of observed patterns of retention and a clearer picture of changes in promotion trends.

Scheduled vs. Actual Retention

According to the State guidelines, all 3rd grade students scoring at Level 1 on the Reading FCAT are slated for retention. However, not all Level 1 students end up being retained. Students can be excused from retention for several possible reasons referred to as “good cause promotions.” Primary among the exceptions are students classified as limited English proficient for less than two years, students performing at grade level on the Reading portfolio, and students with an acceptable level of performance on the Alternative Standardized Reading Assessment. Additionally, students with disabilities can be promoted if statewide assessment is not appropriate or if they have received intensive remediation for more than two years and were previously retained. Finally, any students who received intensive remediation for two or more years and were previously retained for a total of two years will be promoted irrespective of their FCAT performance level.

Trying to estimate the retention percentages for a given 3rd grade class is complicated by the need to account for all of these possible exceptions. Analyses conducted at different times of the school year would result in different estimates of retention rates. Moreover, many students naturally leave the district for private schools or other locations, resulting in greater distortions of actual retention patterns.

Operational Definitions of Promotion and Retention

Now that we have a few years worth of data to track, we can sidestep many of these problems of definition. For the purposes of this study, a student will simply be defined as retained if he is observed to have attended the same grade level in our district for two consecutive years. Likewise, those students moving up in grade level over the years will be considered promoted. These operational definitions, while perhaps leading to inconsistencies with earlier estimates of retention, will lead to a much clearer picture of the actual experience of students in our district.

The Cohort Groups

Three different student groups will be tracked in this study over varying periods of time;

- the **2002-03 Cohort:** a group of 26,864 students who were 3rd graders for the first time in the 2002-03 school year and, by normal

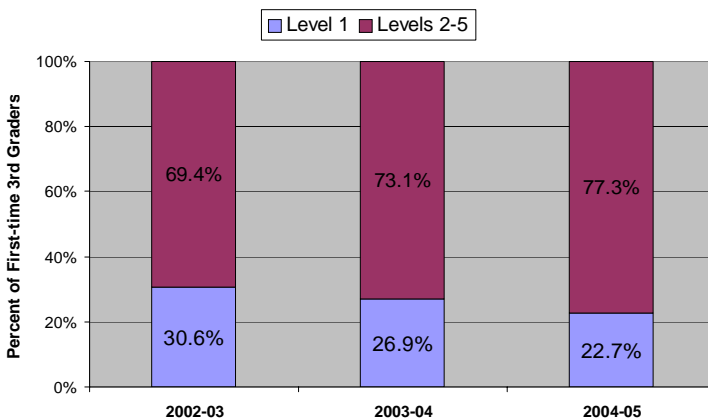
progression, would be **6th** graders in 2005-06,

- the **2003-04 Cohort:** the 25,688 first-time 3rd graders in 2003-04 who, by normal progression, would be **5th** graders in 2005-06, and
- the **2004-05 Cohort:** the 25,502 first-time 3rd graders in 2004-05 who, by normal progression, would be **4th** graders in 2005-06.

Improvement in FCAT Performance

Over the past three school years, the number of first-time 3rd graders scoring in Level 1 of the FCAT Reading has declined. The percentages of Level 1 students went from 30.6% in 2002-03, to 26.9% in 2003-04, to 22.7% in 2004-05.

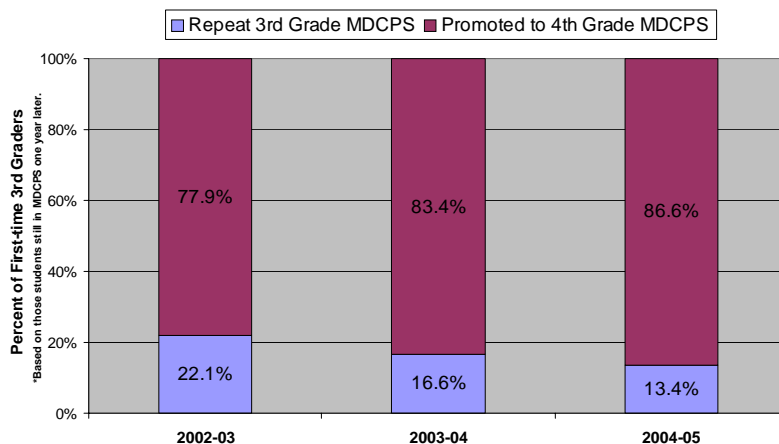
Improvement in Level 1 Percentages



Improvement in Promotion for Good Cause

Of course, not all of the students scoring in Level 1 of the FCAT Reading test were retained. The proportion of Level 1 students promoted for “good cause” increased from 23.2% in 2002-03, to 32.3% in 2003-04, to 35.7% in 2004-05.

Improvement in Retention of 3rd Graders



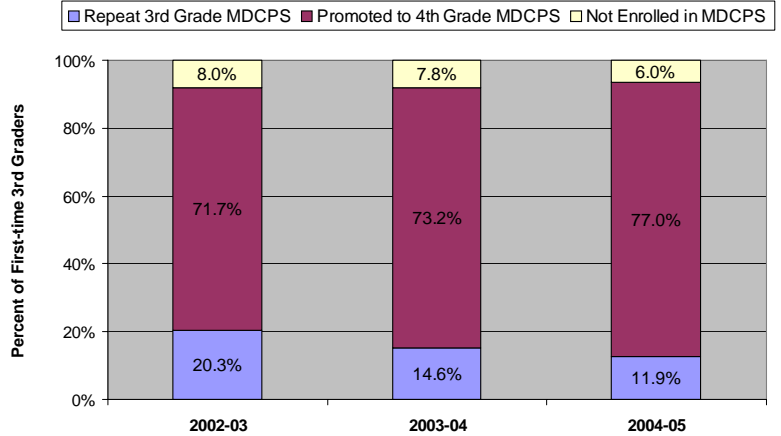
Overall Retention Rates

Because the Level 1 scoring has decreased and the good cause promotions have increased, the overall proportion of first-time 3rd graders being retained has improved greatly over the last three years. The percentage of students repeating 3rd grade in M-DCPS has dropped from 22.1% in 2002-03, to 16.6% in 2003-04, to 13.4% in 2004-05.

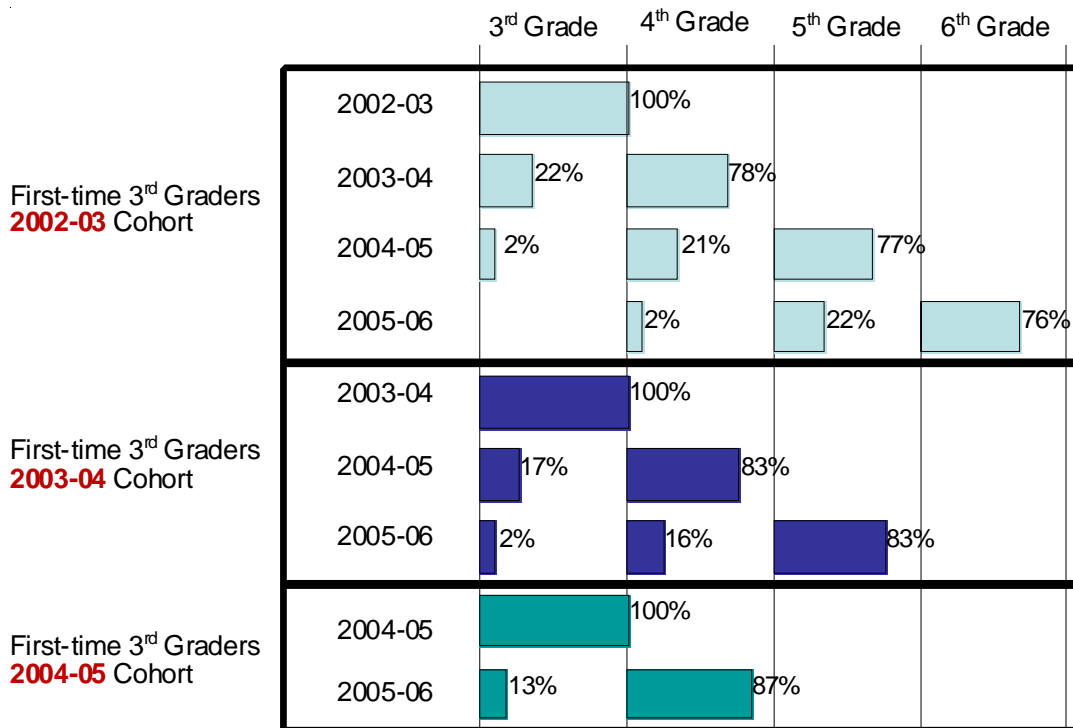
Longitudinal Retention Rates

The promotion and retention proportions generally hold constant in lock-step fashion over the subsequent grade levels. A small proportion (approximately 2%) of the students are retained in 3rd grade for a second time.

Improvement in Retention of 3rd Graders



Graphic Depiction of 3rd Grade Retention Patterns



*Subsequent year percentages reflect only those students still in M-DCPS.

Cohort Attrition

Each cohort starts out 3rd grade as an intact group. Through the normal course of events, many students move out of the county or leave the district for private schools. By this process, the number of students in the cohort group get smaller each year. Of course, students enter into the grade level from outside the district each year, keeping the overall size of the grade levels roughly constant over time.

of the next couple of years, an additional 4%, or so, leave the cohort. For the purposes of this investigation, no adjustments for incoming students has been made and the percentages for subsequent years are of the total number of students left in the shrinking cohort. While this is not an accurate depiction of promotion and retention in the whole of grades 4 and 5, it faithfully represents the status of the initial cohort group in its progression through M-DCPS.

From the 3rd grade to the 4th grade, each cohort loses approximately 8% of the students. For each

If a student scores in level 1 in 3rd grade, it is possible for that student to escape mandatory retention by

leaving the district and enrolling in 4th grade in a local private school. Private schools do not have to conform to the Florida School Code on the matter of retention based on FCAT scores. Some people have speculated that many students could avail themselves of this loophole and avoid retention. The tracking of students over time that is part of the methodology of this investigation allows us to observe these kinds of withdrawal and re-enrollment patterns. While there seems to be some increase in these types of re-enrollments, the numbers are small and this loophole does not appear to be a serious problem.

Multiple Retention

Of the 2002-03 cohort, 463 students were retained for a second time, spending three years in 3rd grade in M-DCPS. Of these students, 167 scored in Level 1 all three times they took the FCAT Reading test. By the normal standards, these students would have been retained for a fourth year in 3rd grade were it not for the provision in the law that says no student can be retained more than twice. These 167 students will essentially be two chronological years ahead and one academic year behind their 4th grade classmates.

Characteristics of Students Promoted to 4th Grade Without Achieving FCAT Level 2

Data collected from the Integrated Student Information System (ISIS) indicated that the 167 students slated to repeat third grade for a fourth time represented a small but relatively unique group.

- At the time of data collection (December, 2005), 49 students (29.3%) were enrolled in fourth grade classes in Zone and Stellar schools.
- Black, Non-Hispanic students were over represented (54.5%) considering they comprised approximately 29 percent of 3rd grade students from 2002-03 to 2005-06.

- Seventy students (41.9%) were designated as ESE students and the majority of these students were classified as specific learning disabled (56 students or 80.0%).
- ISIS files indicated Child Study Team (CST) conferences were conducted for all but two of the 167 students. However, subsequent evaluations (i.e., psychological, medical, and/or social) were apparently not recommended as a result of the CST conference for 47 or 28.5 percent of these students.
- A total of 112 students (67.1%) participated in psychological assessment. Of the 60 students with IQ data on file, scores ranged from 59 to 106 with an average of 83.9 (i.e., a score of 100 constitutes average or normal intellectual functioning).

Summary and Conclusions

Over the past three years, there appears to be considerable improvement in the general area of retention of 3rd grade students in M-DCPS. Level 1 scoring has decreased almost 10%, good cause promotion has increased almost 15%, and the proportion of students repeating 3rd grade in our district has dropped almost 10%.

Despite these gains, the raw numbers of students being retained are staggering. Over 12,500 students repeated 3rd grade in M-DCPS over the last three years. The emotional and social effects on the students and families are inestimable. The disruption of normal student flow has major logistic consequences for the district. Student retention is a strong predictor of eventual dropouts. It will be several years before the waves of retained students impact high schools. The potential long-range effects of this policy deserve special attention.