

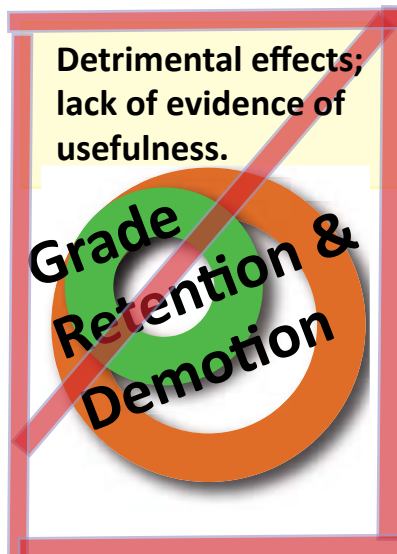
Grade Retention & Demotion

A Traditional Discipline Consequence

Tiers 2 & 3

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In 1990, Shepard and Smith estimated that each year in the U.S., 5-7% of students were retained at their grade level. In 2012, Tingle, Schoeneberger, and Algozzine reported that retention rates were between 7 and 15%. The rationale for these seemingly high rates of students being retained in grade or demoted to a lower grade is not known. The primary focus of this brief is on students who are detained in grade or demoted one or more grade levels as a disciplinary consequence for violating the school code of conduct. There is little information about the use of these strategies for the purpose of disciplinary action, although they are sometimes included in lists of traditional disciplinary consequences for student misbehavior and violations of the school code of conduct. While it is beyond our scope to address all of the issues involved in these actions, we will provide a brief overview of these topics, and some of the existent research.

What are Retention, Demotion, and Social Promotion?

Retention. Grade retention specifically refers to the process of having students repeat their current year of schooling due to unmet educational or social standards (Reschly & Christenson, 2013). Retention, therefore, means that a student would repeat the current grade in the subsequent year and be in classes with younger students.

Demotion. Although there is a lack of academic research regarding demotion and its definitions, demotion is considered the practice of placing a student in a lower grade level to repeat academic work with younger students. This could be one or more grade levels, and could occur at any time during the school year. Demotion may also include providing students with academic material from lower grades rather than switching their classrooms per se (Associated Press, 1988). Demotion would include retention, as it is a broader term applying to other situations where students repeat earlier grades at school.

Social promotion. Social promotion is the practice of having a student move to the next grade level along with peers, even if the student has not mastered the academic learning competencies expected for the current grade level (Frey, 2005; Reschly & Christenson, 2013). It is termed social promotion because it is presumed to be occurring to maintain social ties to age level peers regardless of academic competence at that grade level. However, promotion to a higher grade also may occur for academically gifted students who may have already mastered the academic content of their current grade.

Varying Contexts for Retention & Demotion

Perhaps the most common time when retention occurs is when school officials and/or parents request a kindergarten or first grade student to be retained (Goos, Van Damme, Onghena, Petry, & deBilde, 2013). Most meta-analyses on retention focus on retention in the early grades (i.e., kindergarten through third grade; Jimerson et al., 2006). This decision is most often couched in terms of the students academic and social “readiness” for first grade (or second grade).

Although retention most frequently occurs at younger grade levels, retention may occur at any grade level. However, it is increasingly less recommended as students enter middle and high school (Jimerson et al., 2006). By upper elementary and middle school grades, a trigger for potential retention is most likely to center around academic performance, particularly if adequate academic progress is not continuing at a pace with peers. Retention during these ages is much more likely to cause social and emotional issues for students. By high school, the issue of retention is a bit more complicated as students at that level are earning credits towards graduation. Students who are deficient in credits and not eligible to graduate might be considered as “retained”, although that term is not as commonly used in that context.

Special Education Students. For special education students, the concept of being retained is also complex. These students often have their progress judged based on their Individual Educational Plan (IEP), rather than their grade level. Many times, these students are considered part of their age cohort peers in grade level although their functioning and performance may not always match expectations for their grade level peers. The widespread strategy of inclusion for students with disabilities has sought to have these students in classes with similar aged peers for socialization and modeling of age appropriate behavior as well as for academic instruction. Additionally, special education students may still

be enrolled in school and receive educational services through age 21, and as a result, often are considered to be “seniors” for several years consecutively as if they had been retained.

Discipline consequences. Retention or demotion to a lower grade level has also been used as a disciplinary consequence for serious student misbehavior in school. This disciplinary consequence appears to be uncommon, and there is very limited research on this use of demotion specifically. A scholarly search conducted through PsychINFO, EBSCO, ERIC, and Google Scholar did not generate any articles regarding grade retention as a discipline strategy for behavior problems. However, students with social and emotional problems are often retained but not directly as a disciplinary consequence (Jimerson, Carlson, Rotert, Egeland, & Sroufe, 1997). Students with behavioral difficulties may also experience academic difficulties, with academic failure more often linked with the consequence of retention than behavior alone.



Why Are Students Retained or Demoted?

It is impossible to name the exact reasons that students are retained, but the most common are academic achievement, deficient social-emotional skills, low parental involvement, political motivations, and lack of prerequisite skills needed for the next grade. Students who are at increased risk for being retained include minority students, English Language Learners, students from high-poverty households, students who frequently change schools, students with chronic truancy or discipline problems, and students whose parents are not involved in school activities (Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012).

Misperceptions about outcomes. As previously mentioned, teachers often retain students when they are not achieving the academic standards or are demonstrating a lack of maturity compared to their peers. Educators also believe that retention helps to prevent future failure and maintains standards by showing that those



who are not achieving will not move on (Range, Holt, Pijanowski, & Young, 2012). One of the largest misconceptions that teachers have is that retention will help improve the child's self-concept and motivation, which has been shown to be inaccurate. There is evidence that socio-emotional outcomes are actually diminished for students who have been retained (Martin, 2011). In addition, a recent study reported that retaining students in first grade lowered parental expectations for students in subsequent years and impacted their math and reading achievement (Hughes, Kwok, & Hee Im, 2013).

Parent involvement. Willson and Hughes (2006) also found that when academic variables are controlled, parental involvement plays a factor in which students are retained. More explicitly, they found a negative correlation between the parents' sense of responsibility for the child's academic success and grade retention. This means that the more responsibility parents felt they had, the less likely the student was to be retained. The authors explained one possibility for this being that teachers perceived that those children would receive less academic support at home, thus would benefit from repeating the grade (Willson & Hughes, 2006).

High stakes testing. In 1999, President Clinton called for an end to social promotion in his State of the Union Address, opening the door for increased grade retention (Jimerson, 1999). In addition, the increase in high stakes testing under No Child Left Behind (NCLB) puts pressure on schools to retain students who do not perform up to standards (Neill, 2006; Range, et al., 2012). Because decisions are made based on these test results, when a student is not meeting the criteria the school often feels that the only option is to retain the student for another year in order to avoid social promotion and build those necessary skills. Based on ample evidence demonstrating the detrimental effects of retention, it is necessary to find alternatives for these students who lag behind peers based on academic performance and maturity.

Disproportionality Among Subgroups

Literature also shows that regardless of these academic and emotional factors, certain populations are more likely to be retained than others. Several studies have reported that non-Caucasian, male, and low socioeconomic status (SES) children are more likely to be retained than female, majority, high-SES children (Frey, 2005; Griffith, Lloyd, Lane, & Tankersley, 2010; Jimerson et al., 2006). Statistics suggest that 16% of African American versus 8% Caucasian, 13% boys versus 6% girls, and 16.9% from the lowest SES quartile versus 3.9% from the top quartile were retained according to data from the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2006).

What Do We Know About Retention, Demotion or Social Promotion?

History of the research. The effects of retention have been questioned since researchers first began investigating the topic almost a century ago. When Shepard and Smith did a review of the literature in 1990 they found that 54 of the 63 articles regarding retention found detrimental effects. The nine deemed as having positive effects showed that benefits diminished

over time. A study by Moser, West, and Hughes (2012) found that benefits of retention in early elementary grades completely diminished by the time students reached 5th grade. In a comparison of the literature, a study by Jacob and Lefgren (2004) found that effects of summer school outlasted the effects of retention, which diminish within 2 years (as cited in Greene & Winters, 2007).

Shortfalls of the literature. One issue with the literature stems from the discrepancy in the types of analyses being run. Most studies that support retention/demotion only assess the short term benefits and fail to follow students long-term (Jimerson et al., 1997). Another issue is in making unfair comparisons between control (or promoted) students and those who are retained. A study that reported positive effects of retention also reportedly gave additional help to those students who were retained and determined that promoted students had significantly lower scores than retained students (Lorence & Dworkin, 2006). In a similar study, retained students were enrolled in summer school in which the researchers found an improvement over promoted students of about half a standard deviation unit (Greene & Winters, 2007). While this study shows that retained students who receive additional supports do improve performance more than students who are promoted and not given any additional support, students who are retained in schools are not often given the supports that they need to succeed. Former U.S. Secretary of Education Richard Riley reported, “taking responsibility for ending social promotion means ensuring that students have the opportunity and assistance they need to meet challenging standards” (Jimerson, 2001b, p. 8). Therefore, if a school is going to be successful in retaining students, they must provide additional support to the students.

Early versus late-grade retention. Regardless of when the students are retained, a study by Jimerson (2001a) showed that results from both early and late retention resulted in retained students averaging scores below peers who were comparable in academics, but who

were promoted. Another study found that students retained in grades 1-8 answered academic questions correctly at a significantly lower rate over two years compared to promoted comparison peers (Griffith et al., 2010). There is little evidence supporting the notion that early retention leads to positive outcomes (Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012).

Difference in peer achievement. It was also hypothesized that placing retained students into classrooms with higher overall academic achievement would assist them in succeeding academically (Gottfried, 2012). The authors found that retained students who were placed in classrooms with higher academic abilities achieved lower test scores than retained students who were placed in classrooms with lower abilities. However, students who had not been retained who were low achieving improved their performance by being placed in higher achieving classrooms. There is sufficient data showing that retention leaves students worse off academically, but studies have shown that retention has detrimental effects on students’ social adjustment, as well.

Detrimental effects of retention. A study by Shepard and Smith (1990) interviewed students regarding their attitudes towards retention. Retention was reported as being more stressful than losing a parent, wetting themselves in class, and being caught stealing. In the short term, students who are retained tend to have worse emotional health, peer acceptance, and more absences than comparison peers who were promoted; in the long term these retained students don’t differ from promoted peers academically but still display lower levels of emotional health in the sixth grade, as well as the at the age of 16 (Jimerson et al., 1997). In a meta-analysis by Jimerson (2001b) he found that no research studies linked retention with increased social or personal adjustment.

While it is not said to be a direct cause, retention has been identified as one of the most powerful predictors of drop out (Jimerson, Anderson, & Whipple, 2002; Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012). Statistics from the article by Shepard and

Smith (1990) indicate that after two grade re-tentions, a student's likelihood of dropping out increases to 100%. Other statistics suggest that 78% of all dropouts have been retained at least once (Jimerson, 2001a). In addition to increased dropout rates, students who have been retained are also linked to poor occupational and life outcomes (Jimerson, 1999), which is documented through lower paychecks and employment rates than their low-achieving but promoted peers. Jimerson (2001b) also reports that these students have been linked to higher rates of substance abuse and arrests; however, it is not fair to say that these outcomes are linked to retention alone. This chain of events is caused by an accumulation of life events and other variables that lead to retention and poor life outcomes (Jimerson, 2001a; 2001b).

Correlates or causes of retention. Other factors that might influence retention rates are parents' IQs, attitudes towards education, peer acceptance, individual personality characteristics, and student behavior. Student characteristics such as withdrawal, popularity, shyness, confidence, and maladaptive behaviors are also influential (Jimerson et al., 1997). While student behavior is an apparent indicator of retention, researchers have come to no conclusions regarding the specific behaviors that impact this (Jimerson et al., 1997). While parent and student characteristics play a large role in the retention of the student, the ultimate decision is up to the teacher and parent regarding whether the student is promoted or retained.

When interviewing teachers, Range et al. (2012) reported that teachers believe that retention is heavily influenced by peers, academic achievement, and socio-emotional difficulties, which reflects the false belief that retention is both effective at improving students' academic performance and helping them reach the maturity level of their peers. As already discussed, retention is disproportionately used with male, minority and low SES students (Range et al., 2012; Tingle et al. 2012; Lorence and Dworkin, 2006). Because this method is ineffective, detrimental, and disproportionately implemented, it

becomes necessary to identify the reasons that these students are retained and work to find alternative solutions to these problems.

Retention or demotion versus social promotion. Despite its continued, relatively high, use in schools, research literature dating back to 1929 has stated the same conclusions as researchers today that retention does more harm to students than good (Powell, 2010). The American Federation of teachers reports, "neither social promotion nor holding kids back without help is a successful strategy for improving learning" (Jimerson, 2001b, p. 8). The position statement on grade retention and social promotion by the National Association of School Psychologists (2011) makes a similar statement in saying that, "...the dichotomy between grade retention and social promotion must be replaced with efforts to identify and disseminate evidence-based practices that promote academic success for students whose academic skills are below grade level standards" (p. 1).



What are Alternatives to Retention, Demotion, or Social Promotion?

Effective alternatives to retention within the school are before- and after-school programs, peer tutoring, and instructional aides to work with children on their specific skills (Jimerson et al., 1997; Shepard & Smith, 1990). Additional recommendations from Jimerson (2001a) include grouping students of mixed abilities and ages in classrooms, promoting effective early reading instruction, providing school-based mental health programs, identifying students

with specific learning disabilities and implementing and evaluating effective interventions with those students, providing appropriate special education to students in need, and implementing tutoring programs.

While students who have been retained suffer detrimental outcomes, when placed in classrooms with higher overall levels of achievement, low-achieving but promoted students display a significant positive relationship between their level of academic achievement and the level of academic achievement in the classroom. This goes to show that another alternative to retention is to place those students with high-performing peers. Cratty (2012) discovered that programs for gifted students led to an increase in academic achievement for low-achieving students who were at risk for retention when placed in these programs. This finding suggests that providing low-achieving students with proper resources and more direct instruction can lead to dramatic increases in performance over time.

Outside of the school, parent involvement has consistently led to greater school success among students (Jimerson, 2001b). As men-

tioned previously, the level of responsibility that parents feel for their students' performance and the level of education they themselves have received heavily influence student performance. Sheridan and Kratochwill (1992) add that the level of importance that the parents place on homework, family attitude toward education, and the weekly routine of the family all play a role in the success that students have in school (cited in Jimerson, 2001b).

Conclusion

Based on the host of research regarding the use of retention and its detrimental effects, schools should look to more effective methods of improving student academic or behavioral performance. There are a variety of things that the schools can do, including summer school, peer tutoring, reading programs, and establishing individual interventions for students who need more intensive supports. The bottom line is that neither retention nor demotion are effective disciplinary policies, as neither addresses the underlying issues. There is no evidence supporting the use of retention or demotion as effective disciplinary consequences, as each has potentially strong negative impacts on students.

Grade retention or demotion as a disciplinary consequence has no evidence of effectiveness in changing behavior, and has serious short and long-term detrimental effects on students. Its use is not recommended. No endorsement of its use should be implied as a result of this Brief!



Related Strategy Briefs

Related briefs can be found at <http://k12engagement.unl.edu>, including: Academic Support and Tutoring, Out of School Time Programs, Parent and Family Involvement, and Saturday School.

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Disciplinary Grade Retention & Demotion

