

Retention

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VISIBLE LEARNING

**A Synthesis Of Over 800 Meta-Analyses
Relating to Achievement**

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Retention is the practice of not promoting students up a grade level in school (that is, the student repeats the level) and it is based on the belief that children learn more academically by repeating a grade (Fait, 1982). This is one of the few areas in education where it is difficult to find students with a positive ($d > 0.0$) effect, and the few that do exist still hover close to a zero effect. Overall, there are negative effects for students who are retained, and there are more positive effects in the long term for promoted students than for retained students – even when matched for achievement at the time of decision to retain or promote.

Retention has been found to have a negative effect on academic achievement in language arts, reading, mathematics, work-study skills, social studies, and grade point average. Promoted students score better than retained students on social and emotional adjustment and behavior, self concept, and attitude towards school. Jimerson (2001), in the most recent study on retention, based on 169 achievement effects, found a mean effect of $d = -0.39$, and this negative effect was mirrored across many subjects: language arts ($d = -0.36$), reading ($d = -0.54$), and mathematics ($d = -0.49$). A further 246 effect sizes related to socio-emotional and behavioral outcomes and these also were systematically negative ($d = -0.22$); as was attendance, which was lower for the retained students ($d = -0.65$).

Holmes (1983; 1989) synthesized the results from 63 studies on the effect of retention and reported an overall effect of $d = -0.15$. Thus the groups of non-promoted comparison groups on the various outcome measures, over most academic and personal educational outcomes and at every age level. This negative effect increases over time, such that after one year the retained groups were scoring 0.45 standard deviation units lower than the comparison groups who had gone on to the next grade and in many cases were being tested on more advanced material. This difference became larger each subsequent year, with the difference reaching 0.83 standard deviation units for measures taken four or more years after the time of retention. Moreover, being retained one year almost doubled a student's likelihood of dropping out, while failing twice almost guaranteed it. These negative effects are partly caused by schools and teachers not providing special interventions for the retained students, and thereby the students are retained in programs that were not beneficial to them in the previous year. Another possible effect is the negative influence of peer groups on the beliefs of the retained student, and the effects of being forced to interact with students of different ages. Holmes (1989) concluded that it would be difficult to find another educational practice on which the evidence is so unequivocally negative (see also Byrnes, 1989; Cosden, Zimmer, & Tuss, 1993; Dauber, Alexander, & Entwisle, 1993; Grissom & Shepard, 1989; House 1989; Kaczala, 1991; Mantzicopoulos & Morrison, 1992; Meisels & Liaw, 1993; Morris, 1993; Peterson, DeGracie, & Ayabe, 1987; Shepard, 1989; Shepard & Smith, 1989; Tomchin & Impara, 1992).

The effects are bad enough for achievement, but when the negative equity effects are added, the situation is dire for retention. Consider two students for the same achievement, and it is for times more likely that the student of color (African American, Hispanic) will be retained and the other (white) student promoted (Cosden et al., 1993; Meisels & Liaw, 1993). The only question of interest relating to retention is why it persists in the face of this damning evidence.

To cite some typical conclusions: long-term follow-up studies, especially, found no difference in achievement between retained and promoted participants. On teacher rating of reading and mathematics achievement, there were no differences between the groups.

The extra year had produced no benefit for retained children over controls on teacher ratings of social maturity, learner self-concept, or attention at the end of first grade (Shepard & Smith 1989).

The research indicate that the threat of non-promotion is not a motivating force for students; grade retention does not generally improve achievement or adjustment for developmentally immature students; economically, grade retention is a poor use of the education dollar, because it increases the cost of education (the retained child spends an additional year in the public school system) without any benefits for the vast majority of retained children; characteristics such as low socioeconomic status and peer classroom conduct affect the likelihood that a child will be retained (Byrnes, 1989).

Perhaps one of the most frightening and costly effects of retention is the increased risk of dropping out of school. Although one of its goals is to provide children with the opportunity to be more successful, and therefore stay in school longer, retention clearly has the opposite effect. Being retained one year almost doubled a student's likelihood of dropping out, while failing twice almost guaranteed it. In fact, retention is the second greatest predictor of school drop-out (Foster, 1993).

Students are retained in rather arbitrary and inconsistent ways, and those flunked are more likely to be poor, male and from a minority, although holding students back is practiced to some degree in rich and poor schools alike. The effects of flunking are immediately traumatic to the children and the retained children do worse academically in the future, with many of them dropping out of school altogether. Incredibly, being retained has as much to do with children dropping out as does their academic achievement. It would be difficult to find another educational practice on which the evidence is so unequivocally negative (House, 1989).