



Early Grade Retention and Student Success

Evidence from Los Angeles

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SUMMARY

When a student fails to master academic material, educators face a range of choices—they can provide extra tutoring, place the student in summer school, or, as a last resort, hold the student back for a year. This last option—retention—often proves to be a difficult and contentious issue for both schools and parents. In California, we currently lack a clear picture of retention: Who is retained? How do retained students fare in the repeated year? And can retention help struggling students reach proficiency?

This report examines these questions by focusing on early elementary school retention in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), which serves 11 percent of the public school students in the state. We find that 7.5 percent of students in the district are retained before the third grade. We also find that retention rates vary across schools and even across schools with similar student populations.

Risk factors for retention, in addition to poor academic performance, span a range of student characteristics. We find that relatively younger students and boys are much more likely than other students to be held back, even when all else is equal. Other risk factors include low household income, English learner status, and Latino or African American race/ethnicity. Students with several of these risk factors can face up to a one-in-nine chance of being retained.

Retention is a severe step, but it can benefit struggling students. We find that students retained in the first or second grade can significantly improve their grade-level skills during their repeated year. Gains in reading skills among students retained in the first grade are

significant and widely experienced. Among those retained in the second grade, the level of improvement in English language arts (ELA) and mathematics is also remarkable—many students improve at least one proficiency level and a significant percentage attain proficient status, with larger shares in math (41%) than in ELA (18%).

Our interviews with LAUSD principals show quite varied attitudes to retention. Many acknowledge that it can have short-term benefits, but some remain concerned about long-term consequences. Our findings suggest that a blanket policy against retention may be misguided. Of course, earlier interventions to prevent retention are in the best interests of all—of students and, because of costs, of school districts and the state.

In times of budget cuts, the intervention options available to a district or school may be severely constrained. Intervention costs fall more heavily on the district, which makes choices about where and how to use its funds to support at-risk students. But if a district or school cannot or does not provide adequate interventions to prevent retention, retention costs will fall largely on the state. Thus, policymakers at all levels have an interest in the range of early educational interventions—up to and including retention.

Please visit the report's publication page to find related resources:
<http://www.ppic.org/main/publication.asp?i=910>