Grade Retention and Social Promotion

Repeating a grade level for the second time (i.e., grade retention) has been a long-standing practice in public schools in the United States. Despite its frequent use, the practice of retaining students who fail to meet grade level standards has limited empirical support. However, simply promoting students to the next grade when they have not mastered the curriculum of their current grade (i.e., social promotion) is not an educationally sound alternative. For these reasons, the debate over 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 who struggle behaviorally, whose academic skills are below grade-level standards, or who demonstrate chronic absenteeism. NASP urges educators to consider the long-term costs of retention for students and to use other strategies such as multitiered systems of supports (MTSS; Shinn & Walker, 2012), an individualized plan of study for struggling students (Meador, 2018), or early educational interventions, as these have greater potential to positively affect both long-term educational achievement and employment successes (Peguero et al., 2021).

RATIONALE

Grade retention in American schools has a long history characterized by fluctuations in the frequency and application of this educational practice. Nationally, approximately 2% of all students were retained in 2016 (de Brey et al., 2019) and 10% of students report having repeated a grade at some point (Goos et al., 2021; Planty et al., 2009). However, given the recent trend in many states requiring retention of third graders not reading at grade level (National Conference of State Legislatures [NCSL], 2019), it is likely retention rates will increase. It is also critical to note that there is evidence of significant ethnic and racial disparities in retention rates. Both Black and Hispanic students are retained at higher rates than their White peers (de Brey et al., 2019; Peguero et al., 2021). This is the case regardless of school characteristics, such as availability of school resources or whether the school is in an urban, suburban, or rural community (Peguero et al., 2021). Overrepresentation has also been documented among retained students for both English learners (e.g., Buckmaster, 2019; Duran, 2008) and those with learning disabilities (e.g., Barnett et al., 1996). Research does not indicate benefit for these groups; in fact, retention is associated with high drop-out rates in English learners and does not positively impact their language development (Buckmaster, 2019). A paucity of research is available regarding the impact of retention on American Indian, Pacifica Islander, and Alaskan Native students. Clearly, additional retention research is needed with a broader range of minoritized populations.

Furthermore, social promotion has received much less attention in the literature than retention, as statistics are more readily available for the practice of retaining students. In fact, virtually no statistics are kept on the practice of social promotions (Thompson & Cunningham, 2000).

Goos et al. (2021) summarized a number of potential disadvantages of grade retention. These include simple repetition of content without adequate cognitive stimulation, negative impact on social–emotional well-being (e.g., self-concept, self-confidence, academic motivation, behavior, and interpersonal relationships), and the extra costs associated with retention to both families and the government. Given these potential disadvantages, examination of the actual effects of retention is critical.

Most studies conducted over the past 4 decades on the effectiveness of grade retention fail to support its efficacy in remediating academic deficits (e.g., Andrew, 2014; Fruehwirth et al., 2016). However, many of these studies had methodological weaknesses, such as a lack of random assignment to retention and nonretention groups and a failure to adequately control for preexisting differences between retained and promoted students. Such factors may affect students' academic and social–emotional trajectories. Consequently, some researchers question if preexisting

vulnerabilities—rather than retention—are at the root of poor postretention outcomes (e.g., Wu et al., 2008). Such premorbid factors include family poverty, limited English proficiency, low cognitive competence or low achievement, and poor learning-related skills (Bowman-Perrott et al., 2010; Hughes et al., 2018).

Consistent with this possibility, recent studies using more rigorous methods to control for preexisting vulnerabilities are less likely to report negative effects or to report different types of impacts for various student groups, such as those from marginalized backgrounds (e.g., Allen et al., 2009; Hinojosa et al., 2019; Hong & Yu, 2008; Hughes et al., 2010; Hughes et al., 2018; Mariano et al., 2018; Wu et al., 2008). Nevertheless, in general, findings from more recent studies examining the academic and psychosocial impact of retention have been mixed at best. For example, in a meta-analysis of 84 studies conducted by Goos et al. (2021), 35% of effects were found to be significantly negative, 41% were nonsignificant, and 24% of effects were significantly positive. The studies included in this meta-analysis used more rigorous methodology than prior reviews. Based on the data, the authors concluded that in general, grade retention has no (positive or negative) effect on development. It is important to note, however, that most studies examining the effects of retention on academic achievement have focused on the practice in elementary schools, despite the fact that a greater percentage of high school students are retained, primarily because of the failure to attain the credits necessary for graduation (1.9% versus 2.3%; de Brey et al., 2019).

Although evidence concerning short-term impacts of grade retention has been mixed, the long-term impacts for students who are retained are concerning. There is evidence to suggest that students who are retained have higher rates of special education placement, absenteeism, suspensions, and dropping out (Goos et al., 2021; Hughes et al., 2018; Jacob & Lefgren, 2009; Stearns et al., 2007). The likelihood of students with disabilities dropping out of school also substantially increases when they have been retained, with the odds increasing as much as 33% for those with learning disabilities and 73% for those with emotional and behavioral disorders (Reschly & Christenson, 2006). Moreover, retained students from minoritized backgrounds have disproportionately lower school completion rates compared with White students who have been retained (Hughes et al., 2018). Notably, the negative effects of retention appear to carry over beyond the pre-K–12 years, with retained students less likely to enroll in any type of postsecondary education and more likely to have lower socioeconomic status and receive governmental financial assistance (Goos et al., 2021).

Given the considerable risks and lack of documented effectiveness of grade retention, as well as the considerable evidence that targeted interventions help struggling students improve their academic performance and improve attendance (Peguero et al., 2021), schools should consider alternatives to grade retention that target the specific needs of students who are struggling socially, emotionally, behaviorally, or academically.

ROLE OF THE SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGIST

Although there are multiple reasons why students may be retained, failure to master grade-level academic skills is the primary reason (Picklo & Christenson, 2005). Children may also be retained because of a lack of social competence or immaturity (Hong & Yu, 2008; Renaud, 2013). Chronic absenteeism is also a significant risk factor for academic failure (Bartholomay & Houlihan, 2014) and retention. Regardless, students whose performance is substantially below that of their grade-level peers need a culturally responsive, intensive, individualized intervention plan with frequent progress monitoring (Stevenson & Reed, 2017). Consistent with an MTSS, a targeted approach that addresses students' academic, social, and mental health challenges and links specific evidence-based interventions to a student's individual needs is recommended (Shinn & Walker, 2012). Such an approach requires data-based decision making.

School psychologists can participate in the assessment of student needs, facilitate the development of individualized learning plans, and support teachers with implementing classroom interventions and progress monitoring. Learning plans should include involvement of specialists and relevant related services providers as indicated by need. School psychologists are also well positioned to create interventions that address the underlying causes associated with learning difficulties and truancy and provide direct counseling or teacher and parent consultation to decrease difficulties that may be connected to chronic absenteeism, learning challenges, and mental health issues. The implementation of MTSS may also result in a referral to special education if learning difficulties are suspected to be a function of an underlying disability and appropriate progress is not being made with tiered support.

NASP encourages school psychologists to actively collaborate with other professionals by assuming leadership roles in their school districts to implement models of service delivery that ensure:

- Equitable learning opportunities for students from diverse backgrounds
- Universal screening for academic, behavioral, and social–emotional difficulties
- Culturally relevant and trauma-informed approaches to education that support the development of key academic and social–emotional competencies
- Multitiered systems of support models with frequent progress monitoring to provide early, intensive, evidence-based instruction and intervention to meet the needs of all students across academic, behavioral, and social–emotional domains

Furthermore, NASP urges schools to maximize students' opportunities to learn both in and outside of school through effective teacher professional development on research-based curricula and interventions. Additionally, schools are encouraged to implement strategies such as the use of research-based interventions during the school day, individualized tutoring, after-school and summer programs, and more intensive interventions for struggling students that target specific academic weaknesses (Jimerson et al., 2005), as well as behavioral and mental health needs. School psychologists should also develop opportunities for parent collaboration through which information regarding retention and more effective alternatives can be shared. Given that parent involvement in interventions may improve outcomes (Jimerson et al., 2006), such collaboration may be helpful in effectively supporting students at risk for academic failure.

Should retention be considered despite the lack of evidence of its efficacy, the retention year should not be a simple repeat of instruction and content; instead, retained students should receive enhanced instruction that accelerates learning in the areas in which they lag and challenging curricula in the areas where they are skilled (Goos et al., 2021). It is critical that systematic and targeted assessment be used to identify both the specific areas in which the student is struggling and the underlying causes of these challenges so that instruction and supports can address student needs.

SUMMARY

Whereas the effects of social promotion have been sorely underinvestigated, the practice of grade retention has significant limitations. In general, this strategy does not yield positive outcomes for students (Andrew, 2014), particularly in the long term. Continuing to implement retention without research support for this approach is costly and ineffective. Moreover, there is evidence that retention is disproportionately used with students of color, those with disabilities, and English learners. This practice may contribute to further negative outcomes, such as dropping out of school. Given that some states now require retention of elementary school students whose reading scores are below standards (NCSL, 2019), it is important for school psychologists to advocate at the local, state, and national levels to raise awareness regarding the potential negative outcomes associated with retention. MTSS is an evidence-based strategy that can be used in lieu of retention to address underlying academic weaknesses and social–emotional difficulties (Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012). Furthermore, school psychologists are in a position to share information with parents, administrators, and lawmakers regarding the potential negative outcomes associated with retention. School psychologists are urged to work with their school systems and legislators to consider the underlying disparities and challenges that undermine the development and demonstration of academic and social–emotional competencies that are key to success in school. Investing in trauma-informed approaches, early childhood and early intervention programs, and evidence-based, school-wide programs that provide a seamless set of supports across classrooms and intervention tiers is recommended. Using existing structures such as response to intervention and positive behavioral interventions and supports facilitate the type of problem solving and progress monitoring approaches needed (Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012). Such strategies will help all students receive interventions designed to address areas of identified need in order to promote student success.

RELATED RESOURCES

Additional information concerning grade retention and social promotion practices can be found in the following two NASP documents:

- [Grade Retention and Social Promotion](#) (White Paper)
- [Integrated Model of Academic and Behavioral Supports](#) (Position Statement)

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