



ENHANCED

Learning

RETAINING STUDENTS IN GRADE

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Questions Answered

- What is retention?
- How many students are impacted by retention?
- Is retention beneficial?
- What does research say about retention?
- What can we do instead of retention?
- How can we help the struggling student?

Students vary in their academic performance and behavior. This is particularly evident during the early years of school. For students who are lagging behind academically or who appear more immature than their peers, retention (it used to be called failing or flunking) has often been used. The idea is to provide them with a year to grow and/or to improve their academic performance. At the early levels, the extra year is intended to give the student time to acquire readiness skills or develop pre-reading abilities. (Shepard & Smith, 1988) Retention is a common practice, but it may not be effective.

Estimates place the annual retention rate in the United States at 7 to 9 percent. Based on this rate, the cumulative retention rate for a given age group entering school may be higher than 50 percent by the time that class



reaches grade twelve. (Shepard & Smith, 1989) It is estimated that 2.4 million students are retained in a year, and that the retention rate has been on the rise for the past 25 years. There are also some noteworthy individual differences. Boys are retained more often than girls, and more minority students are retained than Caucasian students. Students who have ADHD or some type of learning disability are also more likely to be retained. An important point is that the frequency of the practice of retention should not be confused with its effectiveness.

After reviewing retention research, one author reported that one-fourth to one-third of all kindergarten children nationwide are retained. (Nelson, 1991) Some national statistics show that as much as \$10 billion each year is being spent on students who are retained needlessly. (Mills, 1992) In short, retention appears to be

a widely practiced strategy for dealing with students who differ academically or behaviorally from what's considered normal. (Reynolds, Temple, & McCoy, 1997) Of great concern is the fact that the highest retention rates are found among poor, minority, and inter-city youth. (National Association of School Psychologists, 2011b).

The question is whether this attempt to help students actually works. The answer is, generally speaking, no. The professional research on retention not only states that it doesn't help the delayed students, but it often actually does them harm. It doesn't appear to produce any significant benefits related to academic achievement. There is a major flaw in the reasoning that these children simply need an extra year to catch up with their peers. Many of these special needs youngsters require intensive *interventions* to address their learning and social difficulties, which will not be solved by repeating the same material in the same way once or twice again. Further, most studies have found retention to have negative effects on students' self-esteem. While one of the goals of retention is to give students the opportunity to be more successful and to stay in school longer, it actually has the opposite effect. Being retained one year almost doubles a student's likelihood of dropping out of school. (Dawson, 1998; Foster, 1994; Holmes, 1989; Peterson, DeGracie, & Ayabe, 1987, Jimerson, 2001) Studies suggest that retention was perceived by students to be one of the most stressful events that they could experience. (Brooks, 2011)

A review of the research literature strongly suggests that retention not only impacts the academic progress of at-risk students, but also lowers their self-esteem and their motivation. When a student drops out of school, it is a sign that they have lost hope; they believe there is no way to improve their situation. The student demonstrates a type of "learned helplessness" in their thinking.

Likewise, retention is generally not appropriate for LD and ADHD students. Repeating the program that failed to educate them in the first place will most likely fail the second time around, as well. A far better idea is to implement more appropriate instructional procedures that fit the needs of the students. (Shelton, 1994) Just promoting students who are academically and/or emotionally behind their peers, without introducing the appropriate support, is also counter-productive.

If a student has struggled with kindergarten or first grade, some type of intervention is needed. Promotion with remediation has been found to get better academic results than retention. The major adjustment should be to provide experiences suited to the student's individual capacities. The curriculum and program must be made to fit their needs, rather than forcing the student to fit a prescribed curriculum.

Ideally, early-childhood teachers would be able to provide student-centered, developmentally appropriate programs that effectively meet their students' needs. Then all students would have successful kindergarten experiences, and failures would be eliminated. But in reality, it won't happen. Limitations of all types affect most classrooms. The fact is some students won't do well in their first or second year of school. We're still left with the question of what to do. (Thompson & Cunningham, 2000)

The preceding discussion of retention and its negative impact assumes the predominant strategy of pretty much sending students through the same curriculum and teaching methods a second time. That strategy is the greatest flaw in retention. As we've seen, simply retaining students will solve nothing and is likely, in the long run, to compound their problems. Holding them back simply opens a window of opportunity on their academic difficulties. If the opportunity isn't capitalized on, the window will probably slam shut within a relatively short time.



How can we make the most of the opportunity? We need to intervene with tutoring, incentive or motivational plans, and remedial instruction, meant to address the reasons the students were having difficulty. (National Association of School Psychologists, 2011b) Under what conditions might retention, with other accommodations and interventions, be appropriate for your student? Here are some considerations.

- ✓ Have your student tested for academic potential. If your student is cognitively capable of completing the work, retention is not the answer. A different type of environment is needed. A smaller class, greater reinforcement, more definite structure, or alternative teaching methods might be helpful.
- ✓ If your student is physically small and has a birthday near the school district's cut-off date for first grade, retention may be appropriate. Other conditions must also apply, however. Size alone is not a sufficient reason for retention.
- ✓ Emotional immaturity isn't likely to be helped by retention alone. To make changes in this area, a student will need exposure to some type of social skills training and/or structured socialization opportunities. If a student isn't displaying appropriate social behavior, s/he needs to be taught those skills, and not just left to mature another year.
- ✓ Develop a complete plan for remedial services. If an individual education plan (IEP) can be developed for the academic, social, language, speech, or behavioral needs of the student, retention would not be appropriate. Move the student on with his or her peers; but make sure a total plan is incorporated into next year's efforts.
- ✓ Match the student with the proposed teacher. The teaching style and expectations of next year's teacher will make a significant impact on your student. If those prospects

don't look positive, another year with a good teacher may be more appropriate. Some different strategies will still be needed; but the better teacher match is a significant consideration.

- ✓ Retention affects the whole family. If there's a younger sibling who would be in the same grade as the retained student, it may not be a good idea. How would the entire family handle the decision? A supportive, non-critical attitude is crucial. The window-of-opportunity perspective, rather than the failure-to-achieve, one should be the dominant reaction by the entire family. The parents will set the tone by their positive attitude.
- ✓ There is a possibility the school is motivated to retain the student based on economic considerations. It may be more economical for a school to retain a student in a regular kindergarten, than to promote him or her to first grade and provide the necessary special education services. It's crucial to do what's best for the student, not what's economical for the school.
- ✓ Some schools or teachers warn parents by the end of the second month of school if their student is in danger of being retained. If that's the case, the student should not be the only focus of attention. There must be a total appraisal of the classroom learning environment, appropriate suggestions made to the teacher, and specific intervention approaches instituted. (Gredler, 1992; Robertson, 1997)
- ✓ Once a student has been placed in the appropriate program, there should be on-going monitoring of the effectiveness of any interventions, based upon the stated goals and the input of educators, parents, and the child. Ineffective strategies should be modified and replaced if they are not helping the student. But remember that many strategies take longer than five or six months to show that they are effective.

The key consideration in retention is how to best meet the developmental needs of the student. When a teacher raises the question of retention, some type of problem does exist. To say most research does not support retention doesn't help the student who's struggling. When weighing the pros and cons of the decision to retain a student, it is very important to emphasize to educators, as well as parents, that a century of research has failed to demonstrate the benefits of grade retention over promotion to the next grade for any group of students. Your goal as an educator is to find another, more appropriate, way to help your student be successful. If retention seems to have merit, a detailed educational plan is still necessary. Retention,

by itself, does not solve the problem. The major consideration must be the development and implementation of a teaching and treatment plan that will speak to the deficit areas of the student.

It is understandable that the task of identifying and providing students with interventions that lead to success is not always easy to achieve, and may be more costly. However, we should keep in mind the possible consequences if we neglect to provide the appropriate services: students who fail in school, or drop out emotionally and physically, whose goals and dreams are replaced by a sense of hopelessness, and whose futures become far less promising. ■

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