



HOLDING STUDENTS BACK: AN INEQUITABLE AND INEFFECTIVE RESPONSE TO UNFINISHED LEARNING



Holding Students Back: An Inequitable and Ineffective Response to Unfinished Learning

BACK IN MARCH 2020, WIDESPREAD RAPID SCHOOL CLOSURES IN RESPONSE TO THE ONSLAUGHT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC PRESENTED UNIQUE CHALLENGES FOR EDUCATORS, PARENTS, AND STUDENTS. While these closures were necessary to stop the spread of the virus, district and state leaders had to make urgent decisions about remote learning to try minimizing disruptions to students' education. Many students experienced disruptions due to food and housing insecurity, unreliable access to remote learning technology, reduced access to student supports and education services, and significant reductions to in-person classroom time. While the pandemic's long-term impact on education remains to be seen, the [Northwest Evaluation Association \(NWEA\)](#) found that students experienced [lower growth rates in math and reading](#) during the 2020-21 school year. These declines disproportionately affected Black, Latino, and Native students, as well as students in grades 3-5.

In response, some state and district leaders have considered requiring or giving families the option of having their children be held back a grade — also known as grade repeating or grade retention. Grade retention research dates to the early 1900s, and researchers from many fields have investigated its effectiveness. The research is clear that grade retention is not effective over time, and it is related to many negative academic, social, and emotional outcomes for students — especially students of color who have been retained. There is also clear evidence that other interventions — such as targeted intensive tutoring, expanded learning time, and supporting strong relationships between adults and students — have better outcomes for students.

Here's what you need to know about grade retention:

1. **Students who are held back experience negative academic, social, and emotional outcomes over time.**

- In general, students who are retained score better on math and English standardized tests during the year they repeat a grade and sometimes up to four years after. Over time, however, these students achieve at the same or worse levels than students who are not retained^{1,2,3}.
- Students who repeat a grade are more likely to be bullied or to engage in bullying due to having unsupported learning or behavior challenges or being a different age than students in their grade⁴.
- Parents of students who are retained are more likely to have lower expectations for their child's academic achievement⁵.
- Students who are held back are more likely to face lower earnings when entering the job market after high school, which can have negative economic impacts⁶.

2. Grade retention disproportionately affects Black, Latino, and Native students and English learners.

- Black, Latino, and Native students and English learners are more likely to repeat a grade than their Asian or White peers^{7,8}.
- Black and Latino students who are held back are more likely to be disciplined⁶ and less likely to graduate^{9,10} and continue their education past high school¹¹.
- Latino English learners who are held back in early grades may be less engaged in instruction, receive less teacher support, and have lower literacy skills¹².

3. Grade retention is only effective over the long term with significant additional supports.

- A [recent research study](#) about Latino English learners who were held back in Florida and experienced success over the long term demonstrated the effectiveness of intensive supports. These students received at least **90 minutes of [daily targeted reading instruction from high-performing teachers](#)** during the retained year. These students significantly improved their reading test scores, achieved English proficiency quicker, and were more likely to take [advanced courses in middle and high school](#). Unfortunately, most students do not receive these supports during the retained year.

4. There are more effective and less costly interventions to support students with unfinished learning.

- Recent [research](#) shows that students of color are more likely to experience remediation even when they have already demonstrated academic success. That research also shows that students who experience accelerated learning struggled less and had better outcomes than students who experienced remediation.
- When implemented well, [targeted intensive tutoring](#) can accelerate learning and double the learning students typically gain in a school year.
- One key but often overlooked strategy for supporting student learning is creating [strong relationships with teachers and school staff](#), which can dramatically enhance students' level of motivation and promote learning. Research shows that students who have access to more high-quality relationships are more academically engaged, have stronger social skills, and experience more positive behavior.
- Strong relationships also provide a foundation for student engagement, belonging, and, ultimately, learning. The more high-quality relationships students have with their teachers, the better their engagement in school.
- Research also shows that schools can help students at every age to get on grade level by increasing the number of hours of instruction students receive during the school day.

THE AMERICAN RESCUE PLAN

In response to the pandemic, the federal government is providing an additional \$123 billion to states and school districts through the [American Rescue Plan Act \(ARP\)](#), which requires states and school districts to use at least 5% and 20% of the funding they receive, respectively, to implement evidence-based interventions to address unfinished learning and to address students' academic, social, and emotional needs. See how much money your state is receiving here.

5. Many states have policies that require or allow students to be held back based on test scores, but most school leaders do not support holding students back to address unfinished learning because of COVID-19.

- Lawmakers' decisions on holding students back are [not generally supported by school leaders](#): 84% of principals across the nation said they would not require grade retention in response to COVID-19.
- The most common retention policies enacted in the United States are laws that require schools to hold back students if they do not meet a specified benchmark on third grade reading tests. At least [18 states require retention, and 12 states allow students to be retained](#) based upon these reading tests.
- Most of the states that require or allow students to be held back [did not issue COVID-19-specific guidance](#) on updating retention policies during the 2020-2021 school year, but lawmakers have floated it as an option.
- While [Mississippi](#) lawmakers paused the literacy test requirement for the 2021-22 school year, some lawmakers, like those in [Tennessee](#) and [Alabama](#), passed legislation or strengthened retention policies due to COVID-19.
- Lawmakers in [Florida](#), [New Jersey](#), [Pennsylvania](#), and [Kentucky](#) have allowed families to request grade retention for the 2021-22 school year in response to COVID-19.



Questions to Ask About Your School's Retention Policies

Retention policies are controversial and can change frequently. It is important for parents and advocates to be aware of what is going on in their state and district. Ask state, district, and school policymakers questions about mandatory grade retention to make informed decisions. Consider the following:

What retention policies currently exist in my state, district, and school?

- What data does the school use to determine which students must or are recommended to repeat a grade?
- What grade level(s) does retention affect students the most?
- What, if any, exceptions exist for [students with disabilities](#) and English learners?
- What supports are offered to educators making grade-retention decisions to ensure they are made without bias?
- How are families involved in decisions to hold students back? What other options are available?

What other supports are available to students who are not on grade level?

- How is my state and district using American Rescue Plan dollars to implement evidence-based interventions to support students with unfinished learning and meet their academic, social, and emotional needs? For example, could targeted, intensive tutoring be a more effective strategy for catching students up?
- If students are held back, what additional academic, social, and emotional supports do they receive during and after the repeated year(s)? Have those supports been proven effective?

What data is collected and publicly reported about grade retention?

- What data is available about which groups of students are retained in each grade level, school, district, and statewide? Can this data be broken down by race, ethnicity, income, and language and disability status to see whether some groups of students are more likely to be held back? Is the data publicly reported?
- What data is available about whether repeating a grade is helpful for students who are not on grade level? If this data is not collected, why not?

ENDNOTES

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