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TECHNICAL REPORT

Retaining Students in Grade

A Literature Review of the Effects of
Retention on Students' Academic
and Nonacademic Outcomes

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Prepared for the New York City Department of Education

The research described in this report was prepared for the New York City Department of Education and conducted within RAND Education, a unit of the RAND Corporation.

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SUMMARY

Grade retention refers to the practice of keeping students at the same grade level for an additional year. The rationale behind retention is that it gives low-achieving students an extra year to catch up to the grade-level standard. As part of an increasing emphasis on standards and accountability, many districts are making decisions about grade retention based on student scores on district or state standardized tests. While eliminating social promotion has considerable intuitive and political appeal, it has also raised important concerns, partly because prior studies have shown that students do not appear to benefit from being retained in grade and, indeed, that retention may increase their risk of dropping out of school.

PURPOSE OF THIS REPORT

In 2003–2004, the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) implemented a new promotion and retention policy for 3rd-grade students in New York City (NYC) public schools. The policy was extended to grade 5 in 2004–2005, grade 7 in 2005–2006, and grade 8 in 2008–2009. NYCDOE asked the RAND Corporation to conduct an independent longitudinal evaluation of the 5th-grade social promotion policy and to examine the outcomes for two cohorts of 3rd-grade students. This study—conducted between March 2006 and August 2009—examined (1) policy implementation, factors affecting implementation, and implementation progress over time; (2) the impact of the policy on student academic and socioemotional outcomes; and (3) the links between implementation and desired outcomes.

As part of the overall study, we conducted a systematic and rigorous search of the literature on grade retention—in particular, what was known about the characteristics of retained students and the short- and longer-term effects on student outcomes (both academic and nonacademic). This report presents the results of this literature review and helps place the findings of the larger evaluation in the context of previous studies.

METHODS

A systematic search of the literature was conducted to identify relevant studies published since 1980. Three selection criteria were used for inclusion: relevance, methodological rigor, and time of publication. To be included, a study had to examine K–12 grade retention, and the results needed to address at least one of the following issues: (1) characteristics of retained students and (2) effects of grade retention on any of six student outcomes, i.e., academic achievement, socioemotional

outcomes, behavioral outcomes, propensity to drop out of school, postsecondary education, and employment outcomes. The study had to be either a work of empirical research that used well-established statistical methods or a systematic and rigorous review of past research. Empirical studies were required to use a credible comparison group or statistical method to control for selection bias. Studies based mainly on descriptive statistics were excluded. For a review essay to be included, it had to use a clear analytical method for synthesizing past research, such as a systematic literature search process, selection criteria for inclusion, or statistical procedures for combining the results of past studies (for example, meta-analysis). Only studies published between 1980 and 2008 were included in this review.

Based on the criteria of relevance and publication date, a screening of titles and abstracts yielded a total of 178 studies. Of the 178 studies, 54 failed to meet the methodology criterion, 29 were not particularly relevant to the topics covered here, two were not yet published, and two failed to meet both the relevance and methodology criteria. As a result, 91 met all three criteria and were included in this review. Among the 91 selected studies, 87 were empirical, three were meta-analyses, and one was a systematic review of past research.

OVERALL FINDINGS

Our review of these 91 studies produced the following conclusions:

- Relative to students who are promoted, retained students are more likely to be male, minority, younger than their peers, of low socioeconomic status, and living in poor households and single-parent families. They are also more likely to have poorer academic performance prior to retention; significantly lower social skills and poorer emotional adjustment; more problem behaviors, such as inattention and absenteeism; more school transfers; poorer health; and disabilities. Parents of retained students are more likely to have lower IQ scores and lower levels of cognitive functioning, lower educational levels, lower occupational levels, less commitment to parenting responsibilities for their children's education, lower expectations of their children's educational attainment, and less involvement in school.
- In general, retention does not appear to benefit students academically. In most of the studies included here, we find negative relationships between retention and subsequent academic achievement. On the other hand, a few studies have found academic improvement in the immediate years after retention. Even so, these gains are often short-lived and tend to fade over time. Findings from the few studies using rigorous methods to adjust for selection bias have been mixed as well—with some showing short-term gains and others reporting gains that disappeared over time.

- Retained students have a significantly increased risk of eventually dropping out of school.
- Compared with their peers, retained students also appear less likely to pursue postsecondary education and more likely to have poorer employment outcomes in terms of earnings (although only a few studies have looked at this outcome).
- Findings on social, emotional, attitudinal, and behavioral outcomes among the retained students compared with their promoted peers appear mixed, with some studies reporting positive outcomes and others finding insignificant or even negative results.