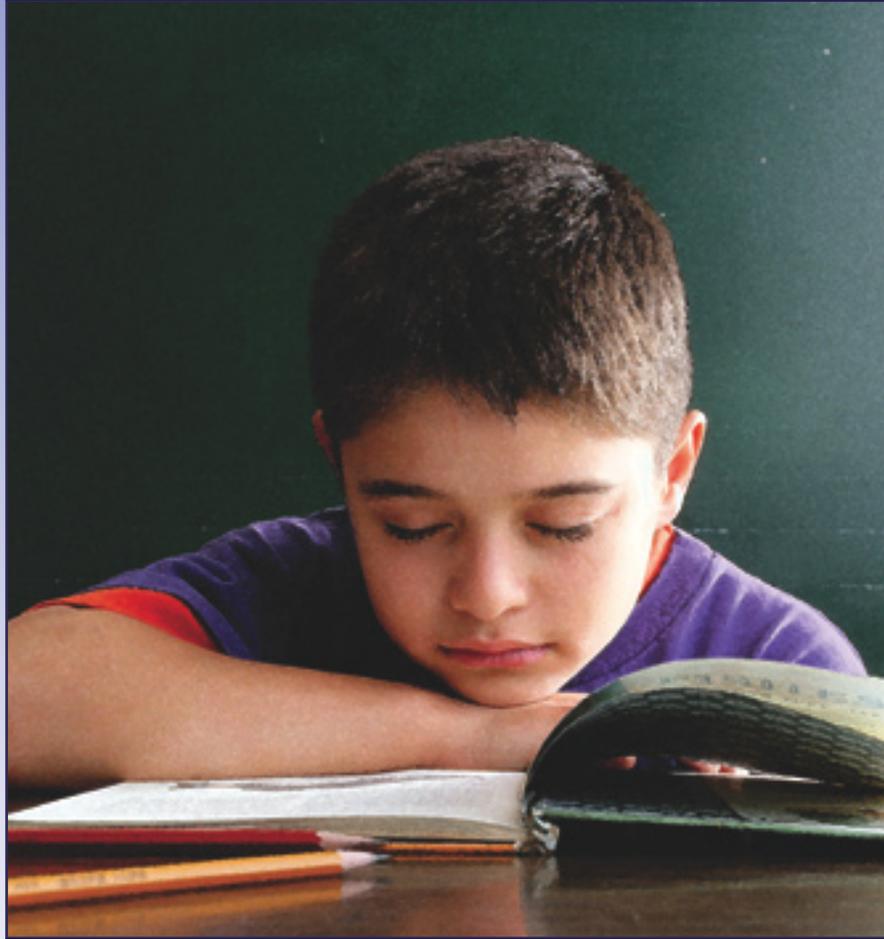


North Carolina Early Grade Retention in the Age of Accountability



A report by the
Kindergarten Readiness Issues Group
of the
Partners in Research Forum

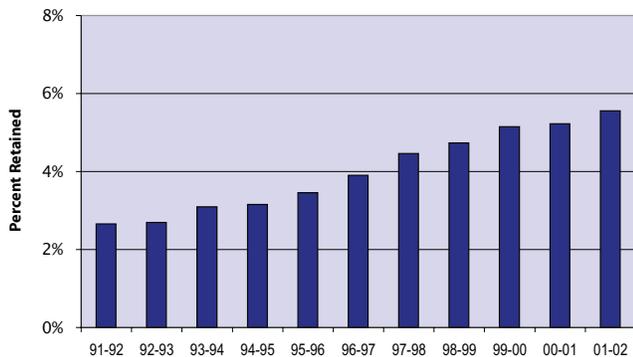
*This report is a collaborative effort by members of the FPG Child Development Institute,
the NC Child Care Resource & Referral Network, and the NC Department of Public Instruction*

WITH INCREASED ACCOUNTABILITY PRESSURES, early childhood leaders across North Carolina are concerned with grade retention in early elementary school. Often, the choice seems to be between retaining children who are not succeeding or passing them on to the next grade with their peers. The purposes of this brief are to highlight trends in retention in kindergarten through third grade in North Carolina and to discuss the implications of and alternatives to this practice.

Retention Over Time

Rates of retention in the early grades in North Carolina have been rising steadily during the past decade. As seen in Figure 1¹, the retention rate for children in kindergarten through third grade (K-3) has more than doubled since 1992, from 2.7% in 1991–1992 to 5.5% in 2001–2002. This means that 22,343 children were retained in kindergarten, first, second or third grade in 2001–2002. To see 2001–2002 K-3 retention rates for each North Carolina school district by grade, go to: www.fpg.unc.edu/~pir.

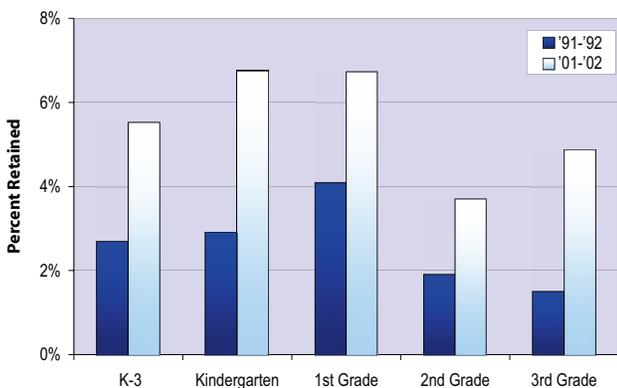
Figure 1. NC K-3 Retention Rates



Who Is Retained?

As seen in Figure 2, during the early years of schooling, kindergarten and first graders in North Carolina are most likely to be retained. Retention rates have increased dramatically for all grades during the past 10 years. To see 2001–2002 K-3 retention rates for each North Carolina school district by grade, go to: www.fpg.unc.edu/~pir.

Figure 2. Percent Retained in NC by Grade



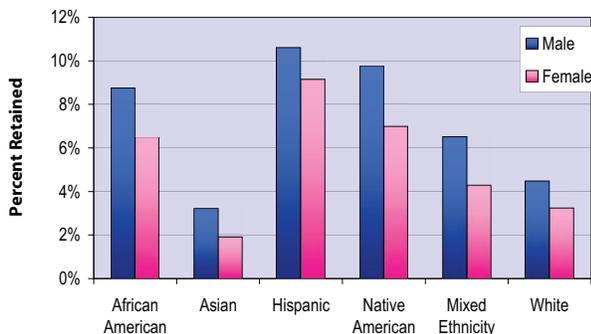
As seen in Figure 3, in 2001–2002, boys in North Carolina were more likely to be retained than girls. Across K-3, 4.7% of girls were retained, whereas 6.3% of boys were retained. Asian and White children had lower rates of retention than African American, Hispanic, or Native American children.

Retention rates among special education students were higher than among non-special education students. In 2001–02, 7.6% of special education students in K-3 were retained, whereas 5.0% of non-special education students were retained.

How much does retention cost?

It is easy to think that retention has no costs since special appropriations are not required and there is generally no mention of the impact of retention on costs in the discussion of per child appropriations during budget deliberations. But, in fact, there are large costs associated with retaining children. A retention decision obligates the state and local governments to an additional year of education for each retained child, and each year of education costs over \$7,500.

Figure 3. Percent Retained in NC by Ethnicity and Gender (K-3) in 2001–2002



So, what are the costs of retention? The costs can be estimated by multiplying the total average cost for educating a child in the state by the number of children retained. There were 22,343 children retained in K-3 in the year 2001–02 (the latest for which data are available). To put this in perspective, only 10 of the 117 school districts in the entire state had a total membership larger than this number. As shown in Table 1, the average expenditures per child for a year of education was \$7,616 in 2001–02. As shown in Table 2, when the annual expenditures are multiplied by the number of children retained, this works out to more than **\$170 million**. This is a huge expense—an expense that is often made without discussion of alternatives that might cost less or be more effective. It is important for policy makers to understand the fiscal implications of retention policies in order to make informed decisions about allocating

scarce resources to education. To see the cost of retention for each North Carolina school district by grade, go to www.fpg.unc.edu/~pir.

What Does Research Say about Grade Retention?

In 1999, the North Carolina Education Research Council (NCERC) produced a synthesis of research on retention and social promotion.² Some of the key points from that synthesis and from other research are highlighted below. (See the NCERC policy brief for a more detailed description of the research.)

- ◆ **Retention in the early elementary grades, especially before second grade, is harmful.** Students retained in first grade have been found to do worse academically and socially compared to other low-performing students who were not retained.³ Negative effects have also been found for kindergartners who were retained.^{4, 5}
- ◆ **Much of the research on retention across all grades suggests that retention is not helpful.** In one major review of the research, Holmes⁶ reviewed 63 controlled studies that compared the progress of retained students to those of low-achieving students who were not retained. Eighty-six percent (54 of 63) of the studies showed lower achievement for the retained students than for comparable non-retained students. Although studies generally do not adequately describe what happens during the year in which students are retained, in most schools retention does not necessarily entail an intervention. Students simply receive more of the same. Without specific interventions targeted towards a student's weaknesses, it is not surprising that research has shown that retention in itself does not positively affect achievement.
- ◆ **Retention is associated with school dropout.** In several studies, students who were retained in school were more likely to drop out of school compared to similar low-performing students who were not retained.^{2, 3, 7} Students who are retained tend to continue their low academic performance, dislike school, and be older than their classmates. Together, these factors may alienate students and lead to school dropout.

Research Conclusion: Retention in the early elementary grades generally does not have long-term benefits for students and may have unintended negative consequences.

Alternatives to Retention

If schools do not retain, what alternatives are there? This section highlights some effective interventions reported in the literature and used by local school districts to help low-achieving students. We spoke with representatives from seven school districts across North Carolina that have succeeded in keeping retention rates low and student achievement high.

- ◆ **Interventions start early.** Successful districts use the K-2 Assessment and other instructional assessments to identify children who need extra support as soon as possible so that interventions are in place early, usually within the first quarter of the school year. To paraphrase one instructional coordinator, we work to put effective interventions in place and then have very little need for retention.
- ◆ **Interventions occur in the context of the regular classroom setting.** Successful districts create teams of regular education teachers, special education teachers, and other specialists to develop interventions that work in the child's regular classroom. Team members use the child's Personalized Education Plans [P.E.P.] to guide and coordinate their work.

Table 1. Average Expenditures per Child

Local	\$1,645
State	\$4,472
Federal	\$578
Capital*	\$920
Total/Child	\$7,616

*Per pupil capital expense, 5-year average

Table 2. Retention Costs in North Carolina for 2001–2002

Grade	Number of Children Retained	Retention Costs
K	6,758	\$51,468,928
1	6,860	\$52,245,760
2	3,756	\$28,605,696
3	4,969	\$37,843,904
K-3 Total	22,343	\$170,164,288

... we work to put effective interventions in place and then have very little need for retention.

- ◆ **Coordination is key.** Successful districts have established procedures for regular communication among team members and in some instances have a staff person dedicated to coordinating regular and special education staff to support student achievement. Coordination does not happen by itself. Planning and resources are required for effective coordination.
- ◆ **Parents are involved.** Successful districts work closely with parents, telling them as soon as problems are identified. Parents are actively involved in designing the child's P.E.P., especially in identifying strategies that they can implement at home. Many schools have family nights that focus on reading and math strategies that can be used at home. A variety of strategies are used to communicate with parents who have different schedules and needs.
- ◆ **After school support is offered.** Successful districts offer extra support to low-achieving students after the regular school day by using volunteers as well as regular school personnel.
- ◆ **Enriched summer experiences are offered.** Many successful districts offer summer school as a way for students to catch up and have concentrated instruction in a smaller setting. A key to successful summer programs is presenting material in new ways to maintain student interest and meet the needs of children with various learning styles.
- ◆ **Literacy is emphasized.** Successful districts provide intensive early literacy experiences for all children, with a special emphasis on those who begin school with few literacy experiences.
- ◆ **Professional development is critical.** Successful districts recognize the importance of educating all staff members about interventions for low-achieving students. Schools often provide intensive training on a particular intervention, such as Reading Recovery or Math Grade Strategies. Districts reported choosing intervention packages because they present information in a way that is different from the approach used in the regular classroom.
- ◆ **Connections are made with community resources.** Successful districts use resources available from area community colleges and universities to help them support low-achieving students. When volunteers from the community are involved, they are trained so that they approach instruction in a way that is consistent with the philosophy of the school.
- ◆ **Staff have a “can-do” attitude.** Successful districts view their mission as trying to do everything possible to avoid student failure. Staff members never give up on children who are struggling to succeed. ■

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Endnotes

- ¹ All figures reported in this brief come from data provided by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. All figures exclude charter schools.
- ² North Carolina Education Research Council (January 1999). Research on retention and social promotion: Synthesis and implications for policy. *NCERC Policy Brief*. Available at <http://erc.northcarolina.edu/docs/publications/socialpromo.pdf>
- ³ Alexander, K. L., Entwisle, D. R., & Dauber, S. L. (2003). *On the success of failure: A reassessment of the effects of retention in the primary school grades* (2nd Edition). Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.
- ⁴ Shepard, L., & Smith, M. (1989). *Flunking grades: Research and policies on retention*. London: Falmer Press.
- ⁵ Shepard, L., & Smith, M. (1987). Effects of kindergarten retention at the end of the first grade. *Psychology in the Schools*, 24, 356-357.
- ⁶ Holmes, C. T. (1989). Grade level retention effects: A meta-analysis of research studies. In L. Shepard & M. Smith (Eds.), *Flunking grades: Research and policies on retention* (pp. 16-33). London: Falmer Press.
- ⁷ Cairns, R. B., Cairns, B. D., & Neckerman, N. J. (1989). Early school dropout: Configurations and determinants. *Child Development*, 60, 1437-1452.

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