

Should Struggling Students Repeat a Grade?

At first glance, grade retention may look like old-fashioned common sense: Fail the year? Just do it over! In fact, with new emphasis on hard-nosed standards, the tactic is on the rise around the country. Old-fashioned, yes, says the National Association of School Psychologists. But common sense? Not on your life. Retention, cautions the association, is in fact “an ineffective and possibly harmful intervention.”

In fact, says professor Shane Jimerson, PhD., of the University of California in Santa Barbara and nationally respected authority on the topic, the practice may best be described as “educational malpractice.” Those are strong words. So what exactly is the problem? Here’s what studies have found:

Gains are only short term. At first, kids may do a little better, but within 2-3 years, they have generally lost those gains. Faced with new topics but without any help regarding the problems that made their school decide to hold them back in the first place, students continue to struggle.

Losses are long term. By the teen years, “average” students have different developmental interests than kids in their grade. They have more problems with friends and behavior, and research reveals that they are 5-11 times more likely to drop out of school. “Actually,” the NASP advises parents, “grade retention is one of the most powerful predictors of high school drop out.”

Retention is emotionally devastating for kids. Of course, all kids need to learn to be accountable. Retention, however, seems to lead them to believe they are incompetent and incapable. In a study of sixth graders’ perceptions, for example, students reported, says Jimerson, that grade retention was “as stressful as the loss of a parent and going blind.”

Retention is not used equitably. “The highest retention rates,” Jimerson has found, are “among poor, minority, inner-city youth.” For Hispanic and African-American kids, the retention rates are as high as 50%, and these kids are also more likely to be held back more than once. So if your child is struggling—and perhaps the school has talked about retention—what should you do? Britton Schnurr, PsyD., another researcher and currently a practicing psychologist with the Guilderland, New York, Central School District, cautions strongly. “Parents need to be informed,” she says, that “retention is not a benign intervention.”

But neither does she recommend ignoring a child in trouble. The real question, she says, isn’t whether to promote or retain; it’s “What is getting in the way.” In fact, parent involvement is a top strategy for success. Whether the topic is homework, friendships, or daily curriculum, do not hesitate to ask questions and seek help.

Working closely with your school staff, ask about your child’s learning style, strengths and weaknesses. What special supports, extensions and adjustments can the school provide to meet those needs? When those questions aren’t answered, says the NASP, kids lose. On the other hand, when parents, teachers, and school specialists work together, everyone wins: kids stay with their peers, learn what they need to learn, and can grow up healthy and whole.

