

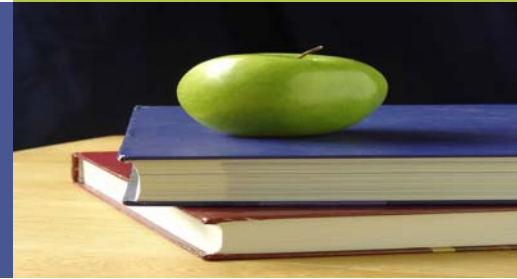
POLICY REPORT

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Grade Retention and African American Students: A Brief Look at Research, Policies, and Outcomes

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“The failure of children to master the grade-level material and be promoted to the next grade is an important indicator that our educational system does not succeed for a significant fraction of American children” (Corman, 2003, p. 409).



INTRODUCTION

Prior to the 1960s, students were generally promoted from one grade to another based on academic performance; those who performed poorly were held back to repeat a grade. Concerns that grade retention yields negative social, emotional, and cognitive outcomes including dropping out of school have since caused educators to re-evaluate this practice. However, with increased calls for educational accountability, grade retention has once again become an important and controversial issue (Jacob & Lefgren, 2007; Thompson & Cunningham, 2000). The subject of grade retention is even more complicated by the fact that it remains a popular remedy for low achievement in spite of research that documents its failure as a remedial process (Larsen & Akmal, 2007).

Grade retention can be seen as a motivational factor or as a punitive measure for poor performance. At best, it may provide an opportunity for students to become better prepared for the next grade level (Thompson & Cunningham, 2000). On the other hand, grade retention has been found to be one of the most powerful predictors for dropping out of school. As adults, students that have been held back a grade are more likely to be unemployed, on public assistance, or imprisoned (National Association of School Psychologists, n.d.). Not surprisingly, many researchers are convinced that retention as a means of remediation is simply not effective (Roderick, 1995). When gains do occur for retained students, they decline within two to three years (Jimerson, Pletcher, & Kerr, 2005). Those at the greatest risk for retention tend to be from low-income families, male, African American or Hispanic, older with respect to their grade level, and have developmental or attention difficulties. They often live in single parent households, have parents with little education that are less involved in their education (National Association of School Psychologists, n.d.).

RETENTION POLICIES

Retention policies generally vary by institution or agency; most however, argue that students should progress through school at a regular pace. This “one size fits all” approach to policy assumes that students have similar developmental and learning traits and abilities, a homogeneity of populations that may, in effect, not be true (Darling-Hammond, 1998).

Retention policies appear to be particularly disconnected from research findings. Retention policies also frequently utilize criteria which may or may not be empirically related to successful educational strategies. Larsen and Akmal (2007), in scrutinizing actual policy documents, point out that “(e)xamination of the districts’ policies on retention shows that the language of policy may be, at best, a misstatement of the research and, at worst, a perversion of what research has documented” (p. 41).

Most retention policies address student achievement at the individual level whereas there are indications that this is a systemic problem. Second, most retention policies have students repeat a grade without significant changes in teaching and learning approaches. Essentially, students are repeating the same process while they are expected to produce new and different outcomes.

Finally, retention policies impact students differentially across different groups with serious implications not only for educational outcomes but for issues of fairness and equity.

FINDINGS

This policy report uses the Educational Longitudinal Study of 2002 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002), a weighted sample of 10th graders, to examine the rates at which students are retained by race, gender, socioeconomic status, region of the country and achievement test scores.

Overall, African American students are retained at higher rates than any other racial or ethnic group and this finding is consistent across areas such as gender, socioeconomic status, region, and achievement scores, especially reading. Twenty-two percent of African American students have been retained at some point in their academic careers as opposed to 10% of White students, 9% of Asian/Pacific Islander students, and 16% of Hispanic students with the remaining students being held back at a rate of 15%. This finding is also consistent with the general overall gap in academic achievement between African American students and those of other races.

Table 1

Estimated grade retention rates for 10th grade students by race/ethnicity and gender: 2002

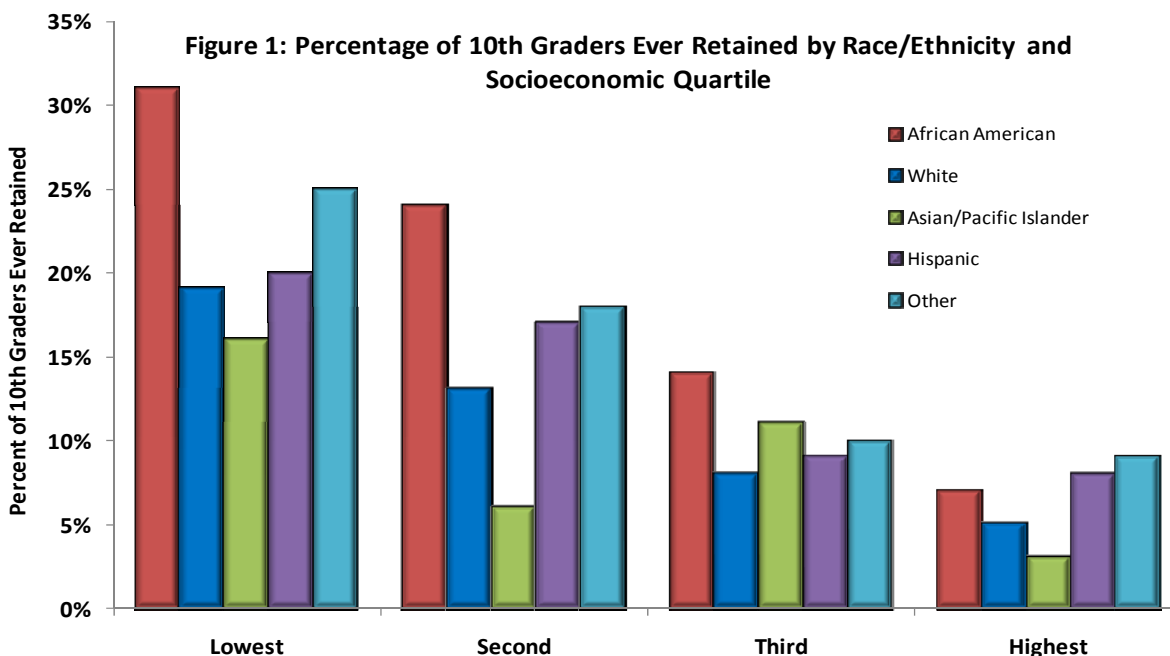
	African American	White	Asian/Pacific Islander	Hispanic	Other
Males	27%	13%	11%	18%	13%
Females	16%	7%	6%	14%	18%

Note. Percentage indicates number of 10th graders retained at least once in their academic career.

In general, males are more likely than females to be held back with African American males substantially more likely to be held back than other males (See Table 1). Although African American females are more likely to be retained than White or Asian females, their retention rates are comparable to Hispanic females and marginally less than those of Other students (i.e., American Indian/Alaska Native and multi-racial, non-Hispanic students).

With the exception of the most affluent socioeconomic groups, African American students are generally retained at rates higher than those of other racial and ethnic groups (see Figure 1). Thirty-one percent of African American students in the lowest socioeconomic quartile have been retained at least once. This contrasts to 19% for Whites, 20% for Hispanic students, 16% for Asian students and 25% for students in the Other category. In the highest socioeconomic quartile, African American retention rates (7%) are comparable to those of other races.

Figure 1: Percentage of 10th Graders Ever Retained by Race/Ethnicity and Socioeconomic Quartile



By and large, retention rates are relatively consistent over most regions, ranging from a low of approximately 10% in the West and Midwest to a high of 16% in the South with the Northeast reporting a mid-range rate of 13%. However, in the South, African American students are retained at significantly higher rates (26%) than White or Asian students (12%) and are followed closely by Hispanic students (19%) and students in the

Other category (23%). Similar patterns emerge in the Midwest and Northeast with African American, Hispanic, and Other students being retained at higher rates. In the West, however, Hispanic students, and students in the Other category are more likely to be held back (14% and 13% respectively) while rates are somewhat lower and relatively comparable for African American, Asian, and White students (7%, 6%, and 9% respectively).

Overall, 53% of students scoring in the lowest quartile of the achievement tests had been retained at some point in their academic career. Low performing African American students were the most likely to have been held back (35%) followed by low performing White (30%), Other (29%), Hispanic (26%) and Asian (22%) students.

Further examination of the assessment data show that African American students scoring in the lowest quartile of the reading test are more likely to have been held back than other students (See Figure 2). In math, retention rates (with the exception of Asian students) are more closely aligned.

IMPLICATIONS

Even a superficial look at retention rates show that African American students are retained at higher rates than other students. This is true across gender, across the three lowest socioeconomic quartiles, for standardized tests, and across most regions of the country. For African American students, the negative effects of poor academic performance are only compounded by academic retention.

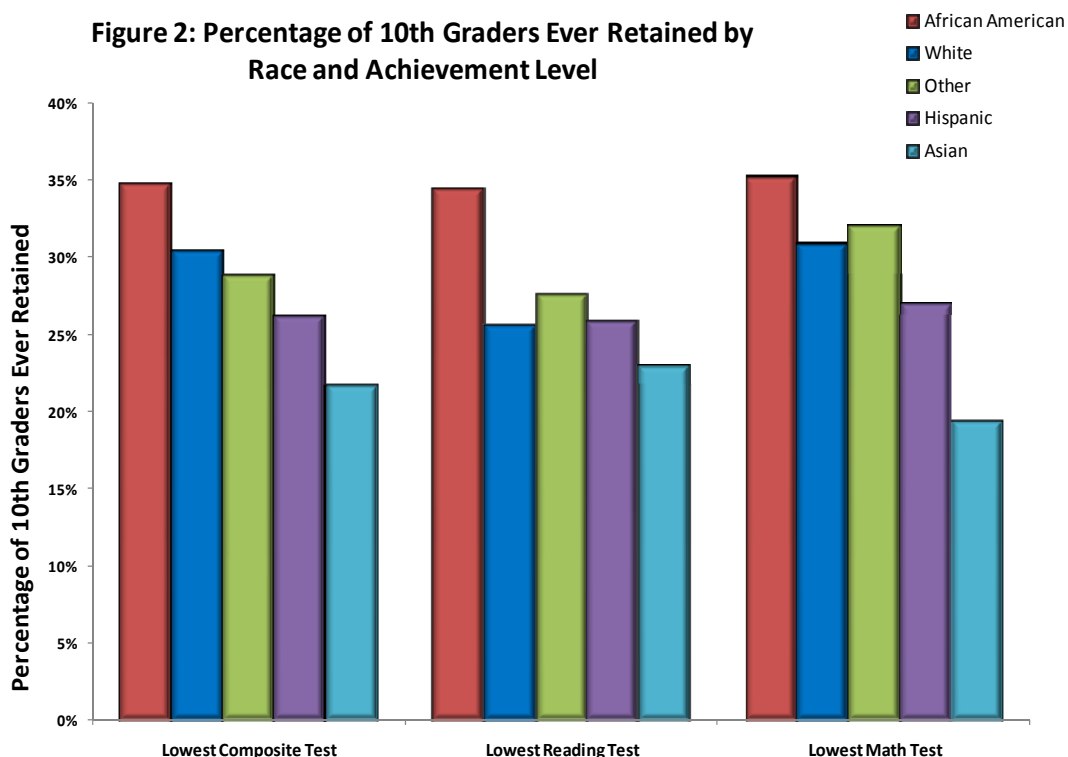
Efforts to close the academic achievement gap will inevitably impact the retention gap also. While the disparity in test scores has narrowed somewhat since the early 1970s, there is no indication of substantial progress toward actually closing the gap (KewalRamani, Gilbertson, Fox, & Provasnik, 2007). Until then, African American students will be differentially and negatively impacted by retention policies.

Holding students back is expensive. One estimate puts the national cost of retention at over 18 billion dollars per year. This practice not only engenders the cost of another year of schooling but also the significant economic and social costs associated with an inadequate education and dropping out of school (Xia & Glennie, 2005).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Widespread belief in the effectiveness of retention generates powerful motivation for students to be held back regardless of the research findings disputing this claim (Xia & Glennie, 2005). Teachers and school administrators must be made aware of these findings and assisted in creating and implementing viable, cost-effective alternatives. Because of the negative impacts associated with retention, it should only be used after other interventions have been tried and failed (Fager & Richen, 1999).

Figure 2: Percentage of 10th Graders Ever Retained by Race and Achievement Level



Instead of retention, educators should seek alternatives that support the development of social and cognitive competence (National Association of School Psychologists, n.d.). Special efforts utilizing evidence-based practices to improve academic achievement for students at-risk for retention should be instituted. This is especially true for African American students who are little more than one generation away from institutionalized racial discrimination.

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