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ENDING SOCIAL PROMOTION MEANS STRONGER ACADEMIC GAINS FOR FLORIDA STUDENTS

New study in Education Next finds low-performing students benefit from retention policy

STANFORD—Florida third-graders held back as part of the state’s program to end social promotion make stronger academic gains than similar low-performing students who are not, according to a new study released by *Education Next: A Journal of Opinion and Research*.

Education researchers Jay P. Greene and Marcus A. Winters of the University of Arkansas compared low-scoring third graders in 2002, the first year of the state’s retention policy, with third graders from the previous year. They analyzed the test-score improvements made between each student’s first third-grade year and the following year on both the state’s own accountability exam (FCAT) and the Stanford-9, a nationally normed exam administered at the same time as the FCAT but not used for accountability purposes.

Greene and Winters found that students identified for retention did better on both the FCAT and the Stanford-9 than their low-performing counterparts in the study, regardless of whether they were actually retained or exempted and promoted (which the law allows in some cases). Students who were, in fact, retained, however, made larger relative gains.

“These results suggest it is better to offer students another opportunity to learn basic skills by repeating a grade rather than to promote them to the next grade for which they are not academically prepared,” said Greene, the study’s lead author.

Students identified for retention gained .06 of a standard deviation in reading on both the FCAT and Stanford-9 over equally low-performing third graders from the previous school year. In math, students identified for retention surpassed low performers who were not subject to the policy by 4.8 percentiles on the FCAT and 4.4 percentiles on the Stanford-9.

Retained students performed better than low-scoring students who were promoted by 4.10 percentiles on the FCAT and 3.45 percentiles on the Stanford-9 in reading. Retained students improved 10.0 percentiles on the FCAT and 9.3 percentiles on the Stanford-9 over promoted students in math.

The improvement in math scores was an unexpected benefit of the retention policy given the fact that students earn promotion by passing the reading portion of the FCAT, and that the main purpose of Florida's retention program has been to enhance student literacy.

In their analysis, Greene and Winters noted that similar gains were made by all three racial groups -- white, black, and Hispanic -- though whites showed benefit only on the Stanford-9 reading test. The results of the study also suggest that third graders who were given an exemption and promoted despite their failure to demonstrate reading proficiency would likely have benefited from another year in the third grade.

Some critics have argued that teachers and schools would respond to Florida's retention policy by manipulating test scores, either by cheating or by teaching students skills that would help them improve their test scores but would not provide real academic proficiency. Greene and Winters found no evidence to support this. Their analysis showed that results were consistent between the FCAT, a high-stakes test, and the Stanford-9, which is not, indicating that there was no serious manipulation of the state's high-stakes testing system.

The Florida state legislature revised the state's education law in 2002 to require third grade students to score at the Level-2 benchmark or above on the reading portion of the FCAT in order to be promoted to the fourth grade. Some exceptions were allowed, such as students with severe disabilities or limited English proficiency. In its first year of implementation, 60 percent of Florida's third graders who scored below Level-2 were retained.

Read more about Florida's program to end social promotion in "Getting Ahead by Staying Behind" now available exclusively online at www.EducationNext.org.

Jay P. Greene holds an endowed chair and is head of the Department of Education Reform at the University of Arkansas; he is also a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute. Marcus A. Winters is a doctoral fellow at the University of Arkansas and a senior research associate at the Manhattan Institute.

Education Next is a scholarly journal published by the Hoover Institution that is committed to looking at hard facts about school reform. Other sponsoring institutions are the Harvard Program on Education Policy and Governance and the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation.

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