

The Facts on Education

Should Students Be Allowed to Fail Grades?

Grade retention, also called ‘failing’, means that a student is required to repeat the same grade due to lack of achievement.

Research over the past 100 years has shown that grade retention does not benefit students having academic or social adjustment difficulties compared to similar students who are not held back to repeat a grade. In fact, grade retention has consistently been associated with negative outcomes:

- Students who are required to repeat a grade are more likely to drop out of high school and less likely to attend post-secondary education. Grade retention is one of the most powerful predictors of dropping out of high school, regardless of when retention occurs.
- Grade retention is associated with increased behavioural problems.
- Grade retention can have a negative impact on achievement and social and emotional adjustment.
- Retained students are more likely to have lower educational and employment outcomes during late adolescence and early adulthood.
- Retained students experience lower self-esteem and lower rates of school attendance.

Some parents and teachers believe that grade retention may be a good practice in certain circumstances, e.g. if instruction has been inconsistent due to family relocation, or if a student had serious illnesses or emotional trauma. However, no studies have been able to predict accurately which students will benefit from being retained, and the overall evidence is strongly against retention.

Researchers advocate alternatives to grade retention, such as early intervention when students experience difficulties; reading programs, summer school, and tutoring while working closely with parents. Grade retention is not a remedy for poor academic performance; specific remedial strategies are needed to support the individual student.

For online resources on grade retention as well as the research references that inform this issue, please visit:

www.cea-ace.ca/facts-on-education

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