

# RETHINKING GRADE RETENTION AND ACADEMIC REDSHIRTING: HELPING SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS MAKE SENSE OF WHAT WORKS\*

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## Abstract

In this article, the authors discuss two interventions deployed to remediate low performing students. The first is grade level retention in which a student is required to repeat a given grade due to lack of academic or social progress. The second is academic redshirting in which a parent voluntarily delays the entrance of her child into kindergarten to allow the child more time to grow and develop. The article has three goals: (a) to compare the predictors of students who are retained to the characteristics of students who are academically redshirted, (b) to synthesize current research regarding grade retention and academic redshirting, and as a result of this synthesis, (c) to provide educators with recommendations for practice when faced with retention or redshirting decisions.



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## 1 Introduction

The emphasis on national standards has led to accountability measures that have placed tremendous pressure on educators, parents, and students (Jimerson & Ferguson, 2007; Jimerson et al., 2006). For some schools, this translates to eliminating social promotion, the process of promoting students, “with their class or completion group whether or not they have obtained the requisite skills for the next grade, as judged by standardized or classroom assessments” (Xia & Kirby, 2009, p. 1). Opponents of social promotion contend that it does low-performing students a disservice by placing them into classrooms in which they are ill-equipped to be successful (Burkam, LoGerfo, Ready, & Lee, 2007). In the 1960s, social promotion was used extensively (Jacob & Lefgren, 2002), but by the 1980s, public perception of social promotion was vastly different and educators viewed it as the primary reason why students were not meeting expectations (Penfield, 2010). Due to the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB, 2002) some school districts have adopted strict promotion policies or raised the age of school entry to deter the use of social promotion (Marshall, 2003)

As a result, two interventions utilized by educators and parents to aide low performing students exist in schools: grade retention and academic redshirting. Grade retention is the practice of requiring students to repeat a grade because they have not demonstrated mastery of the curriculum (Beswick, Sloat, & Willms, 2008) and is usually initiated by the school or teacher. The debate concerning the use of grade retention has resurfaced, mostly due to NCLB (2002), and the adoption of high stakes promotion policies in states (Florida and Texas) and large school districts (New York and Chicago) (Burkam et al., 2007). Conversely, academic redshirting refers to delaying entry into kindergarten in order to allow more time for social, emotional, cognitive, and physical development (Frey, 2005) and is usually initiated by students’ parents. Academic redshirting is sometimes referred to as voluntary retention because students are held back before they enter the school setting. The term, redshirting, is borrowed from college sports and refers to the period of time when freshmen athletes forgo a year of competition in order to gain maturity. Despite the differences in when students repeat (after or before starting school), grade retention and academic redshirting are connected. The application of either ensures that students are older than their same grade peers (Martin, 2009).

This paper has three goals: (a) to compare the predictors of students who are retained to the characteristics of students who are academically redshirted, (b) to synthesize current research regarding grade retention and academic redshirting, and as a result of this synthesis, (c) provide educators with recommendations for practice when faced with retention or redshirting decisions. It is essential for practitioners to understand the characteristics of retained and redshirted students, as well as what current researchers are finding concerning these interventions. Without this information, educators run the risk of making uninformed decisions based on intuition.

## 2 Grade Retention

Although a historical debate for at least 90 years (Jimerson & Ferguson, 2007), grade retention has again resurfaced due to NCLB and state promotion policies (Burkam, et al., 2007; Jimerson et al., 2006). Grade retention was popular in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, but decreased during the Great Depression because it was viewed as harmful to students’ self esteem. After the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), policy makers again called for rigorous standards and the elimination of social promotion (Burkam, et al., 2007). Although the numbers of students retained declined in the 1980s, numbers increased again in the 1990s (Allen, Chen, Willson, & Hughes, 2009). By 2009, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2009) predicted that about 10% of students in kindergarten through eighth grade had been retained at one time.

The conceptual framework that underpins the use of grade retention is multifaceted. The primary rationale for retention is “rooted in the philosophical perspective that early reading problems reflect immaturity and that biological maturation will enhance literacy development” (Beswick et al., 2008, p. 116). In simple terms, because students are allowed to relearn curriculum they should show academic improvement in the years after the retention (Chen, Chengfang, Zhang, Shi, & Rozelle, 2010; Xia & Kirby, 2009). Another

widely adopted mental model argues that when low-performing students are retained, the resulting classroom is more homogeneous academically which improves the teacher's ability to differentiate instruction (Brophy, 2006; Hong & Raudenbush, 2005). Finally, others speculate that the threat of retention causes students, especially older children, to take academics more seriously. These beliefs, coupled with the perceptions of educators that retention is beneficial (Silberglitt, Jimerson, Burns, & Appleton, 2006; Range, 2009), explain why it still persists in both the political and educational arenas.

### 3 Academic Redshirting

Students who are young for a grade level, especially in kindergarten, can exhibit difficulties with academic achievement and maturity (Lee & Burkam, 2002). When compared with older peers, these problems can be quite pronounced. As a result, students who are young for a grade level have been found to have an increased chance of being retained (Corman, 2003; Graue & DiPerna, 2000; Willson & Hughes, 2006). To alleviate this problem, academic redshirting, or delayed kindergarten entry, has emerged as an intervention parents pursue to promote the achievement of their children (Frey, 2005; Pong, 2009). Academic redshirting was used in the 1970s and saw growth in the 1980s (Graue & DiPerna, 2000). By 1995, it was estimated that 9% of first and second grade students had experienced redshirting (Zill, Loomis, & West, 1997). Recent estimates suggest between six and nine percent of students are redshirted each year (Oshima & Domaleski, 2006). After students have been academically redshirted, they become older for their grade. The perception is this enables redshirted students to gain one year of cognitive and physical development (Marshall, 2003; NICHD Early Childhood Care Research, 2007). Additionally, some parents view redshirting as a proactive way of dealing with the increased rigor of kindergarten classrooms.

The theoretical framework that underpins academic redshirting is also connected to views of child development and school readiness. This includes the timing of when students should start school and how students compare academically and socially to same age peers (Martin, 2009). Parents of redshirted students typically cite two reasons why their children started school one year later: (a) the child's birthday was late in the year; or (b) the child is socially immature when compared to same age peers (Frey, 2005). Additionally, early childhood teachers identify a student's age as a primary factor when making recommendations about school readiness (NICHD Early Childhood Network, 2007). Finally, a subtle rationale for redshirting is to provide an academically and socially ready student a competitive edge among younger peers (Frey, 2005; Martin, 2009).

## 4 Characteristics

### 4.1 Retained Students

Research has shown that various predictors preclude students who are retained. The primary predictor to being retained is low performance on academic measures, usually in reading or math (Willson & Hughes, 2006). However, because low academic achievement correlates to other demographic variables, identification of those variables is important when discussing retention. Demographic characteristics of retained students include the following: minority (usually African American or Hispanic), male, low socio-economic background, living with one parent, young for grade, and being born to a teenage mother (Chen, et al., 2010; Martin, 2009; Greene & Winters, 2009; Hong & Yu, 2007).

Despite these findings, other studies do not support the sum of these variables. For example, Corman (2003) reported a strong correlation between being male and being retained, yet found little evidence that ethnicity positively influenced rates of retention (Greene & Winters, 2009). Additionally, Willson and Hughes (2006) found that retained students were no more likely to be male, to be eligible for free or reduced lunch, to perform lower on a measure of cognitive reasoning, to have lower math skills, to exhibit social, emotional, or behavioral problems, or to experience conflict in their relationships with teachers (p. 44). The authors speculated their results were different from previous findings because predictors of grade retention differed within their Hispanic/Latino sample. However, retention continues to be applied to students who are classified as minority and from poor backgrounds (Willson & Hughes, 2006; Xia & Kirby, 2009).

Another important predictor of retention includes variables associated with the characteristics of retained students' parents. Retained students' parents are characterized as having low IQ scores, little involvement in school, and void of long-term educational goals for their children (Hong & Raudenbush, 2005; McCombs, Kirby, & Mariano, 2009). Although Willson and Hughes (2006) found no relationship to retention and parental level of income, the authors concluded their most important finding was the correlation between grade retention and Hispanic parents' sense of shared responsibility for their child's academic success. This shared responsibility included homework support, attendance at parent/teacher conferences, and proactive responses to learning difficulties. Although exclusive to Hispanic parents in the study, such parental behaviors are likely to exist in other student retention populations.

Finally, one of the most powerful predictors of grade retention seems to be the attitudes of teachers (Range, 2009). Classroom teacher attitudes about struggling students greatly influence the chance of students being retained and current research findings do little to sway their views (Bonvin, Bless, & Schuepbach, 2008). The most frequent reasons provided by teachers for recommending retention include poor academic achievement, lack of maturity, and lack of effort (Range, 2009; Tomchin & Impara, 1992; Witmer, Hoffman, & Nottis, 2004).

#### 4.2 Redshirted Students

In contrast, academic redshirting is seen as predominantly middle class phenomena (Frey, 2005). Redshirted students are most likely Caucasian males from higher income families and have late summer birthdays (Cosden, Zimmer, & Tuss, 1993; Graue & DiPerna, 2000; Zill et al., 1997). Academic redshirting is not initiated by low income families because delaying school entry can be a financial burden because school serves an educational and child care purpose (Frey, 2005). Additionally, students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds have limited access to high quality preschool programs (Burkam, et al., 2007; Taylor, Gibbs, & Slate, 2000). Middle class students who are typically redshirted have access to quality preschool, and when these students are redshirted, elevate the rigor of the kindergarten classroom (Frey, 2005).

### 5 Grade Retention Literature

The majority of research findings conclude that students who repeat a grade are harmed both academically and socio-emotionally. Specifically, retained students show short-term gains in achievement followed by a long-term fade in progress as well as negative attitudes toward school (Burkah et al., 2007; Ou, & Reynolds, 2010). Grade retention deters students from graduating from high school and enrolling in post-secondary education (Martin, 2009; Ou & Reynolds, 2010; Ou & Reynolds, 2008). Three early meta-analyses concerning retention, all with methodological limitations (Xia & Kirby, 2009) found that retained students' exhibit academic delay and most drop out of high school (Holmes, 1989; Holmes & Mathews, 1984, & Jimerson, 2001). Finally, grade retention is an expensive intervention. For example, a hypothetical retention rate of 1% nationwide would cost departments of education \$2.6 billion dollars (Eide & Showalter, 2001).

Recent retention literature (McCombs et al., 2009; Xia & Kirby, 2009) usually focuses on one of three student outcomes: (a) retention's effect on the academic achievement of students, usually in reading and math (Chen, et al., 2010; Greene & Winters, 2009; Lorence & Dworkin, 2006), (b) retention's effect on the socio-emotional outcomes of students (Hong & Yu, 2008; McCombs et al., 2009), and (c) retention's role in increasing student drop-out rates (Allensworth, 2004; Jacob & Lefgren, 2007; Ou & Reynolds, 2008).

However, grade retention studies have methodological concerns (Allen et al., 2009; Burkam et al., 2007; Hong & Raudenbush, 2005), most importantly "the lack of an exogenous instrument to proxy for grade retention" (Greene & Winters, 2009, p. 136). Research studies that measure retentions' impact on reading and math achievement use a variety of assessments in their statistical analysis. For example, some studies use school district assessments while others use state mandated assessments. As a result, inferring connections between studies with similar findings is difficult. This same comparison issue is present in studies that measure grade retention's impact on students' socio-emotional outcomes. Additionally, another flaw is that some studies include retention numbers based on subjective teacher decisions. The reader is not explicitly

told why the retained students were forced to repeat a grade (Greene & Winters, 2009). Finally, retention studies exhibit poor research designs including small sample sizes and lack of control concerning extraneous variables (McCombs et al., 2009). However, aggressive retention policies implemented in states like Florida and Texas have allowed researchers to make more meaningful comparisons between retained and promoted students (Greene & Winters, 2009).

Retention studies typically utilize two strategies as a basis for research design: (a) same grade comparisons, and (b) same age comparisons (Hong & Raudenbush, 2005). Same grade design compares retained students to their current classmates, regardless of the fact that the retained students are one year older (Malone, West, Flanagan, & Park, 2006). Most same-grade research shows negative consequences for students (Hong & Raudenbush, 2005). Conversely, same age studies compare the achievement of retained students to a group of students who are low-performing but were promoted (Roderick, 1995). Same-grade comparisons show both positive and negative outcomes for students (McCombs et al., 2009).

Grade retention literature presented and synthesized in this article is from the previous six years. For organizational purposes, the literature is divided into the following subheads: (a) grade retention and academic achievement; (b) grade retention and social-emotional outcomes; and (c) grade retention and dropping out of school. Additionally, literature within each subheading is grouped based on whether the study disputed or supported the use of grade retention.

### 5.1 Grade Retention and Academic Achievement

Researchers typically report retention's effects on two different times within a student's schooling, namely the short-term and long-term. In the short term, recent research had shown that early grade retention does not promote the academic achievement (reading and/or math) of students the year after retention (Abbott et al., 2010; Burkam et al., 2007; Chen, et al., 2010; Hong & Raudenbush, 2005; Hong & Yu, 2007; Wu, West, & Hughes, 2008). This might be attributed to the fact that retainees are not provided the breadth of academic remediation to elevate their proficiency to that of low-performing but promoted peers (Abbott et al., 2010). In the long term, researchers have reported similar findings. For example, Hong and Yu (2007) found that first grade retainees were still behind academically three years after the retention year. By fifth grade, the retained students were still underperforming their same age peers. Similarly, Martin (2009) found that early retention continued to negatively impact the academic motivation, academic engagement, homework completion, and absenteeism of high school students.

Conversely, other recent research has reported that retention benefits students academically in the short and long term (Griffith, Lloyd, Lane, & Tankersley, 2010; Hughes, Chen, Thoemmes, & Kwok, 2010). Many of these studies have been conducted in states (Florida and Texas) or school districts (New York) in which students are held to competency standards before being promoted. For example, Greene and Winters (2006; 2007; 2009) and Ladner and Burke (2010) explored the impact of Florida's retention policy on student performance. In sum, these studies found positive academic increases in student achievement the year after retention and beyond. Similarly, Lorence and Dworkin (2006) concluded that the high stakes promotion policy "revealed that socially promoted pupils lagged behind the reading ability of the retainees" (p. 1026-1027). Finally, McCombs et al. (2009) studied reform efforts in the New York City public schools and found that retained students' performance the subsequent year improved drastically and proficiency rates on the state test continued to increase in sixth and seventh grades.

### 5.2 Grade Retention and Socio-Emotional Outcomes

Research conducted that aims to measure grade retention's impact on students' socio-emotional well-being is typically longitudinal. The intent of such studies is to determine how early grade retention impacts students' self-esteem, academic confidence, behavior problems, and peer interactions. Recent research concerning retention's impact on such outcomes again has conflicting conclusions (Bonvin et al., 2008). When compared to low performing but promoted peers, retained students have been found to have increased aggression, lower general self-esteem, and decreased academic self-concept (Brophy, 2006; Jimerson & Ferguson, 2007; Martin, 2009).

Nevertheless, McCombs et. al, (2009) analysis of the New York City promotion policy found that retention, even three years later, did not negatively affect students' feelings of school belongingness or academic self confidence. Other studies (Bonvin, et al., 2008; Wu et al., 2010) show only short term gains in socio-emotional outcomes. For example, studies have found that, in the short term, grade retention improved students' social acceptance (Bonvin, et al., 2008) and self-confidence (Hong & Yu, 2008) and decreased teacher rated hyperactivity and peer-rated sad behaviors (Wu et al., 2010). However, these positive results were not present two to four years after retention.

### 5.3 Grade Retention and Dropping Out of School

There is no dispute concerning retention's effect on increasing student drop-outs (Brophy, 2006). According to McCombs et. al, (2009), there is general consensus in the academic community that retention negatively impacts the ability of students to persist to graduation. Both Jacob and Lefgren (2007) and Ou and Reynolds (2008) studied retention's impact on student drop outs in the Chicago Public Schools. Jacob and Lefgren (2007) reported that eighth grade retentions increased the probability students would drop-out and contributed this, "to the greater social dislocation caused by preventing students from moving to high school with their peers" (p. 22). Ou and Reynolds (2008) concluded that grade retention in the elementary grades was one of the strongest predictors to dropping out of high school. Additionally, in an analysis of retention in Baltimore, Alexander, Entwisle, and Dauber (2003) found that 67% of retained students dropped out of high school.

### 5.4 Summary of Grade Retention Research

In sum, the majority of grade retention research concludes it does little to promote the academic and social competencies of students (Jimerson, Ferguson, Whipple, Anderson, & Dalton, 2002). Brophy (2006) surmised that grade retention resulted in three outcomes, namely no achievement benefits, detrimental social costs, and higher drop-out rates. However, in states that have implemented test promotion policies, some researchers (Greene, 2006; Greene, 2007; Ladner & Burke, 2010; Lorence & Dworkin, 2006; McCombs et. al, 2009) have reported that retained students performed better academically after retention. However, further analyses of these positive findings, especially within Florida, have found flaws within their methodologies (Briggs, 2006; Chatterji, 2010; Wiley, 2006).

Two important points should be made in synthesizing grade retention research. First, most studies that report the positive effect of grade retention only find this effect concerning academic achievement on standardized assessments. Very few studies measure retention's impact on all three areas: (a) academic outcomes; (b) social outcomes; and (c) dropping out of school. Because retention's impact on students' outcomes is complex, it is important to consider all three student outcomes when drawing conclusions about effectiveness. Second, "...grade retention is associated with an increased risk of dropping out of school" (Xia & Kirby, 2009, p. 26). In fact, grade retention has been found to be one of the most powerful predictors for students who do drop out (Jimerson et al., 2002). This statement is pivotal in the argument against the use of grade retention.

## 6 Academic Redshirting Literature

As opposed to grade retention, the breadth of research on academic redshirting is not as extensive. As a result, the scope of literature presented in this paper concerning redshirting is older than five years. Research conducted to determine the effects of academic redshirting on students' academic and social development has failed to provide a clear picture of its ramifications. Similar to grade retention studies, academic redshirting research typically utilize same grade or same age methodologies. Redshirting studies can be found that support, dispute, or find no effect on the use of redshirting (Martin, 2009). For organizational purposes, literature synthesized about redshirting is organized into studies that report positive or negative effects on student outcomes.

## 6.1 Positive Student Outcomes

Having older students in class holds an intuitive appeal because the perception is they can handle more rigorous work. Consequently, some researchers have concluded that redshirted kindergarten students have higher achievement and this advantage was still present in the upper grades, although the achievement gap was not as pronounced (Datar, 2006; Lin, Freeman, & Chu, 2009; Oshima & Domaleski, 2006; Yesil-Dagli, 2006). Additionally, Datar (2006) surmised redshirting accelerated the achievement of low socioeconomic students, disabled students, and boys. In a large scale study, the NICHD Early Child Care Research Network (2007) found modest positive academic effects for redshirted students during their kindergarten year with additional advanced academic functioning in the third grade. However, this group of researchers stated the effects were not strong enough to completely warrant academic redshirting. Internationally, Pong (2009) found that academically redshirted students in Hong-Kong had higher mathematics, reading, and science scores than same grade peers.

## 6.2 Negative Student Outcomes

Most of the negative outcomes associated with academic redshirting reflect socio-emotional issues (Pong, 2009). For examples, researchers have concluded that redshirting increases behavior problems and negatively impacts self-esteem (Byrd & Weitzman, 1997; Graue & DiPerna, 2000; Spitzer, Cupp, & Parke, 1995). In regards to academics, Graue and DiPerna (2000) found that there was not advantage academically to being redshirted. Malone et al., (2006) reported redshirted students scored higher in reading however their math scores lagged behind students who entered kindergarten on time. Additionally, Martin (2009) studied the long-term effects of redshirting and surmised that redshirted students displayed academic disadvantages in secondary school including more disengagement, lower homework completion, and lower academic achievement. Other negative trends conclude that more males are redshirted than females and redshirted students qualify for special education services at a higher rate (Graue & DiPerna, 2000; May, Kundert, & Brent, 1995). Finally, Frey (2005) stated academic redshirting was a driving force in increasing the rigor of the traditional kindergarten to a level that is not developmentally appropriate for students that start kindergarten on time.

## 6.3 Summary of Academic Redshirting Research

Despite the policy push of some (Brophy, 2006) to set the eligibility of kindergarten entrance later, research does not definitively support academic redshirting as beneficial to the achievement and socio-emotional development of students (Marshall, 2003). In fact, age of entry into school as a source of policy has limited empirical support (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2007). This limited support is illuminated by research that finds academic redshirting occurs to males more often than females and also has links to increased chances of special education placement and socio-emotional issues (Graue & DiPerna, 2000; May et al., 1995). Finally, educators have expressed concerns that academic redshirting has transformed the traditional kindergarten into a grade that is inappropriate for most students who start school on time (Frey, 2005; Marshall, 2003).

## 7 Recommendations for Practice

Reading the literature concerning grade retention and academic redshirting raises more questions than provides answers. Because these two interventions are linked, reporting research that has studied them on a large scale is crucial. Sifting through the recommendations from current studies, educators can find important recommendations to consider when faced with making retention or redshirting decisions. A common theme found within both literatures is the responsibility of the school to clearly communicate expectations and decision making procedures.

## 7.1 Grade Retention Recommendations

Most importantly, educators should consider grade retention's impact on the three outcomes, namely academic, socio-emotional, and dropping out of school. Grade retention should not be evaluated using only one of these domains because it clearly impacts many student outcomes (Burkam et al., 2007). Special attention should be made to retention's effects on socio-emotional factors and dropping out of school (Holmes & Mathews, 1984; Jimerson, 2001). Although McCombs et al. (2009) found positive effects of retention up to seventh grade, the authors warned that retention's impact at the high school level was unclear.

The numbers of retentions can be reduced if schools focus on: (a) identifying struggling students early, (b) utilize formative, research-based interventions, (c) collect data on interventions, and (d) utilize a team decision making approach. First, McCombs et al. (2009) and Burkam et al. (2007) recommended school districts begin by identifying at-risk students early. This identification usually comes in the form of a universal screening assessment. Secondly, schools should provide a breadth of research based interventions during the school day or extend the school day via Saturday and summer school (Lorence et al., 2002; Lorence & Dworkin, 2006). Thirdly, educators should collect formative data on all interventions and use that data to make informed decisions concerning the student's future. Data should be inspected by all educators who are familiar with the student including the teacher, counselors, instructional aides, administrators, and parents.

If the decision is to retain a student, simply cycling the student through the same curriculum, taught with the same methodologies, will not ensure success. A student's retention year should be vastly different from the previous year in terms of instruction and interventions (Abbott et al., 2009; Burkam et al., 2007; Ezarik, 2003). Because teacher beliefs concerning struggling students are a powerful influence on instructional success (Witmer et al., 2004), administrators should carefully select the classroom retained students are assigned. Retained students should begin the year with interventions and not have to wait for the application of a universal screening. Finally, retained students need plenty of one-on-one instruction in reading and math taught by certified teachers or trained tutors (Abbott et al., 2009).

Schools should develop a school policy as a problem solving mechanism for students in danger of retention (Abbott et al., 2009). The policy should clearly outline what data are considered when retaining a student, as well as outline a public relations plan for communicating this information to the parents (Brooks, 2003). If the student is in kindergarten, the following data should be collected: (a) early childhood screening scores; (b) universal assessment scores; (c) birthday; (d) relative size in relation to peers; and (e) demographic information. For students in first and second grades, additional data should be collected which includes: (a) scores on all formative assessments; (b) previous teachers' reflections; and (c) classroom observations by at least two educators. Schools are encouraged to begin conversations early with parents who have children that might be targeted as a candidate for grade retention (Brophy, 2006; Jimerson, 1999). Throughout the school year, educators should meet with these parents at least once a month to ensure stakeholders are aware of the academic concern, have input on the interventions planned, and understand what data will be collected.

Furthermore, the beliefs of teachers concerning retention should not be the lone factor that requires a student to repeat a grade. A team of educators should be charged with making the retention recommendation. Classroom teacher attitudes about struggling students greatly influence the chance of students being retained (Bonvin et al., 2008). In order to minimize bias, others should be involved in the decision including the principal, school counselor, previous classroom teachers, and the parents of the student.

Finally, before schools recommend grade retention they should exhaust all possible interventions, including referral to special education for a learning disability. Although special education is an expensive process, retention is no less expensive costing the education system over 14 billion dollars annually and \$9,941 per each retention (Greene & Winters, 2004; Jimerson & Ferguson, 2007). Lorence and Dworkin (2006) argued that retention at the third grade level, as opposed to the primary years, possibly helps to avoid any learning disabilities students might have because many learning disabled students have already been identified. The discrepancy model many states use to determine qualification for special education services does not typically benefit primary grade students. Retaining students, who might be non-identified learning disabled, is an ethical issue educators do not want to face.



## 7.2 Academic Redshirting Recommendations

Because many families are under the impression that redshirting is beneficial for their children (Marshall, 2003), the responsibility is placed firmly on schools to provide factual information about redshirting. Before students enter kindergarten, schools should ensure that the parents of incoming kindergarten students are aware of the school's kindergarten readiness tests or screening procedures. This communication would likely come from early childhood educators. However, if this is not an option, schools have to be proactive. For example, schools should contact daycares and headstart programs within their attendance boundary to collect information on families and communicate school expectations.

Because parents typically initiate the desire to redshirt, educators should questions to determine the rationale for the request. This is the opportunity for the school to present both positive and negative outcomes associated with the intervention. Because social immaturity is a primary reason given for redshirting (Marshall, 2003), educators should provide concrete examples of social skills taught in the curriculum, explain the role of the school counselor in teaching social skills, and provide a list of outside agencies that can offer assistance in developing social competencies.

Before school begins, schools should hold kindergarten orientation meetings for parents and discuss factual information about academic redshirting. Educators should discuss the expectations of the kindergarten classroom as well as average class size of kindergartens. Additionally, educators should discuss the rigor of today's kindergarten classroom and explain how redshirted students might increase that rigor. For example, schools might allow parents to preview the communication arts and math curriculum. Additionally, schools might provide an overview of what a "day in the life of a kindergartener" looks like (Marshall, 2003).

Schools should share redshirting data with incoming kindergarten parents in an anonymous way. The number of students in kindergarten that are a year older than classmates is important information to share with parents. The effects of being the youngest in class are felt in districts where a large number of children are redshirted (Lincove & Painter, 2006; Graue & DiPerna, 2000). Evidence also suggests that older kindergarten students increase the difficulty of their classroom (Frey, 2005; Marshall, 2003).

Finally, parents should be warned against the idea of starting an academically immature student on time with the easy option of letting the child repeat a grade if there continues to be academic or maturity issues. As discussed, grade retention research is not only complex, but full of contradictions with a majority of it concluding is not beneficial for students.

## 8 Conclusion

In sum, both grade retention and academic redshirting are interventions exhibiting unclear ramifications on student outcomes. Students who are retained or redshirted have common characteristics, although the characteristics are exclusive to each intervention. Additionally, both are grounded in research which concludes they provide negative and positive outcomes for students. For practitioners, it is vital to stop using intuition to make retention or redshirting recommendations. It is the ethical responsibility of schools to understand outcomes associated with each and communicate both sides to parents. This process must start with school leaders, who should model a factual decision-making process. Until researchers are able to affirm the use or disuse of either intervention, practitioners are faced with the challenge of making decisions based on conflicting research findings.

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