

Alternatives to repetition

There is no single strategy that seems to be effective for all students who are not achieving to teacher and/or parent expectation. Successful approaches include a combination of evidence-based intervention strategies and programs that support the academic, social and behavioural presentation of individual students. Early identification is extremely important and research shows enormous benefits from structured and engaging programs that incorporate basic literacy skills, social skills, emotional literacy skills and prosocial values.

The Learning Support Team within a school is responsible for developing appropriate intervention programs for students who are not achieving to expectation. The LST may access and implement specialised academic support, including within school and regional programs, e.g. Support Teacher Learning intervention, Reading Recovery, Designated STLA, additional assessment such as a psychological (school counsellor), language or occupational therapy assessment. The results of such assessments should make practical recommendations for support and remediation.

Further Reading

Andrew J. Martin (2011): Holding back and holding behind: grade retention and students' non-academic and academic outcomes, *British Educational Research Journal*, 37:5, 739-763 This article also cites a comprehensive list of additional research articles.

Helen McGrath (2006): To repeat or not to repeat? *WORDS*, Journal of the Western Australian Primary Principals' Association.

Dianna Kenny (1991): Is more of the same better? A study of grade retention (Melbourne, ACER)

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Making a Decision about Repetition: A Best Practice Guide



Every year there are some students who don't achieve as well as their teachers or parents expect. Parents of a student who is not achieving the expected outcomes academically, who may be socially immature or who may have missed a lot of school because of illness or holidays may wonder if repetition would benefit their child. Current research does not support repetition as a strategy for students who are not achieving to expectations.

Within any class and any grade there will be a wide range of academic achievement. There will also be differences in maturity, social skills, ability to concentrate and behavioural presentation. Current "good practice" caters for a wide range of student ability. Teachers and support personnel are skilled at making accommodations to the class program in order to cater for all students.

Repetition was a more common and accepted practice in the past when concepts and skills were taught in discrete one-year courses and the focus was primarily on academic achievement as an indicator of success or failure. Current good practice, with reference to the "response to intervention model", suggests that students learn at their own rate and that work should be adjusted to suit student needs, regardless of grade level. Therefore, there is little point in students repeating a grade to do "more of the same".

Research into the outcomes of repetition suggests that there are few, if any benefits for a student to repeat a grade and do the same thing that led to his or her lack of achievement. Repetition may, in fact, cause long-term negative outcomes. Having a child repeat a grade assumes that another year of that grade will benefit the student. There may be individual cases where a child may appear to benefit from repetition, but current research suggests that these cases are

very rare. While there is evidence to suggest that a student may benefit in the year of repetition, or even the year after, it appears that these benefits are short-term, and within a few years the positive effect of repetition has disappeared. Students who did not repeat a grade appear to have similar, or even better, academic and social outcomes as those who did repeat.

Repetition is most likely to occur in the early grades of primary school and those in favour genuinely believe that the initial benefits will last long-term. Unfortunately, the negative effects usually occur much later, in high school, and are not apparent to the initial decision-makers.

Academically

Research that compares the outcomes for similar low-achieving students who repeat and do not repeat is very clear:

- Students with language and learning difficulties, intellectual disabilities, challenging behaviour and/or attention and concentration difficulties do not benefit from repetition. In fact, subjecting those students to another year of schooling is more likely to have a negative effect, particularly in the long-term.
- Repeated students may show some academic gains within the first few years of repetition, but these gains reduce over time. By mid to late high school, repeated students may actually be achieving at a slower rate than similar peers who did not repeat.
- Students who repeat a year and do "much of the same" are found, long-term, to be significantly lower in academic motivation, engagement, and literacy and numeracy achievement. Generally, students do not "catch up" academically.

- In the long-term, students who did not repeat generally achieve better academically, leave school later, and are more likely to access post-school education, such as university or TAFE.

Socially and emotionally

Research information suggests that repetition may have negative or harmful effects. There appear to be few, if any, positive outcomes:

- In the short-term, repetition may cause significant stress, a sense of failure and a loss of self-esteem. Even when managed sensitively, students who repeat are likely to feel that they have "failed". Most students look forward to going on to the next grade with their peers and feel a sense of shame and loss of status. This may be exacerbated if younger students from the repeated grade out-achieve the repeated student (which is quite likely).
- In the long-term, as they progress through high school, students who have repeated have a greater tendency to miss days of school, not complete homework and assignments and disengage from learning. Because of their non-engagement with school, they are more likely to develop challenging and oppositional behaviours. Students may lose their sense of community "connectedness".
- Long-term studies vary, but in general, it appears that over time, peer relationships are not adversely affected by repetition. Repeated and non-repeated students report a similar attitude and perception of peer relationships.
- In the long-term, there is little evidence to suggest that students who are repeated because of perceived immaturity or difficulties with peer relationships have any better outcomes than similar students who did not repeat.

