1

Grade Retention

Lingering Questions

Each spring many thousands of children across the country receive the same dark message: they are failures. These youngsters are to be held back, retained, repeat a grade – all synonyms for failing. According to one national source (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2000: 299), 8% of second graders in 1999 were a year behind as a result of kindergarten or first grade retention. Applied to the roughly 7.2 million kindergartners and first graders in fall 1997 (U.S. Department of Education 2000a: 58), an 8% retention rate translates into well over a half million children. Academic difficulties during the early elementary years tend to persist (e.g., Entwisle and Alexander 1989; 1993), so the problems signaled by (and perhaps aggravated by) this setback likely will cast a very long shadow. With so many children involved, this is a matter of grave concern.

The decision to hold children back implies they have fallen short and are not yet ready for work at the next grade level. Unlike many other educational decisions, this one is highly public. The pupil's classmates go on, but the retained child must start over, with new classmates, most of whom are younger, smaller, and brighter. The new teacher knows the child is repeating; so do the new classmates. Furthermore, the judgment of failure is almost never reversed. Most children who repeat a grade will be "off-time" for the rest of their time in school.

Schools use retention to help children who have fallen behind catch up, but does it really help? There are many skeptics, who do not see "catching up," but instead humiliation and harm. Are these apprehensions warranted? Despite strong opinion and much study, the issue is not decided. In the next chapter we review what is known (and believed)

about the consequences of retention. First, though, we sketch the dimensions of the problem. There may be disagreement about the pros and cons of retention, but no one disputes its seriousness. We first consider retention rates, then some of its possible "costs."

Falling Behind: The Magnitude of the Problem

Estimates vary, but into the 1990s close to 30% of 12- to 14-year-olds were overage for grade, many no doubt because of earlier retentions (Heubert and Hauser 1999: 150). Next to dropout, failing a grade is probably the most ubiquitous and vexing issue facing school people today. In these days, children can "fail" kindergarten – on the order of 4%–5% do so according to recent national estimates (Karweit 1999: 7; Reaney, West, and Denton 2001; Zill, Loomis, and West 1997) – and in many school systems failing first grade is common.

Astonishing though it is, no authoritative source monitors retention trends on a national level, a result of what Weiss and Gruber (1987) call the "managed irrelevance of federal statistics." The Common Core of Data, the primary set of federal statistics on elementary and secondary education, does not include data on such sensitive matters as retention. "In a delicately balanced political environment . . . they [the National Center for Education Statistics] have enough trouble getting local districts to categorize grade levels and instructional staff in comparable ways without getting into emotionally laden issues." This leaves a critical void, prompting Hauser (2001: 155) to comment, "I doubt that governments currently make important policy decisions about any other social process with so little sound, basic, descriptive information."

As a consequence, assorted second best options have to do. At the national level, retention rates usually are inferred from annual census data that map the distribution of October school enrollments by age and grade for large, nationally representative samples. Panel surveys like the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS88) project are a second source for estimating retention rates across the country. Individual school systems and states, of course, also often keep records on retention, but with definitions and the quality of record keeping uneven, it hard to piece together a general picture from local sources.

The Census Bureau regularly monitors children's grade in school in relation to their age. These enrollment data, available since 1966 in the Current Population Survey (CPS) school enrollment supplements,

are representative of the civilian noninstitutional U.S. population in the 50 states plus the District of Columbia and can be used to identify children who are in a grade below the modal grade of children their age. They permit educated guesses at overall retention rates, but with no allowance for differences across states or districts in age of school entry, cutoff dates, late starts, and the like, such CPS estimates are best thought of as approximations.

Using these CPS data, Hauser and his colleagues (Hauser 2001; Hauser, Pager, and Simmons 2000; Heubert and Hauser 1999; see also Roderick 1995a) report prevalence estimates for grade retention back to the 1960s. They identify children who are a year or more older than is typical for their grade in school, but retention is not the only reason for being overage for grade (sometimes referred to as "age grade retardation"). Starting school late generates the same pattern, and children assigned to special education classes also often fall off the normal grade progression timetable. And, too, state policies differ. Twelve states, for example, have kindergarten cutoff dates *after* the October reference date used in the CPS; in five others the cutoff is established at the level of school districts (Corman 2001). For these reasons, CPS overage for grade calculations are but a rough guide.

Hauser and his colleagues focus on *changes* in overage enrollments, comparing successive grades between years as opposed to the number or proportion of overage children in a given grade in a given year. Their reports cover roughly three decades for different cohorts of school beginners. For that reason, their many comparisons are hard to summarize. Still, Hauser concludes (2001: 163) that "grade retention is pervasive in American schools." For example, 21% of children ages 6–8 in 1987 were overage for grade according to his calculations. Because being overage could be due to retention, late start, or other considerations, Hauser uses the 21% figure not as an estimate of retention, but as a baseline for anchoring the same children's later experience (a conservative approach). And what happens to this cohort later? At ages 9–11, the percentage overage stands at 28%, and at age 12–14 it is 31% (see pp. 159–161).

Overage enrollments thus increase roughly 10 percentage points over the elementary and middle school years. An indeterminate, but presumably large, fraction of the 21% baseline rate would have to be added onto this figure to gauge the group's retention experience. According to the National Household Education Surveys for 1993 and 1995, about 9% of children who meet the age eligibility cutoff for kindergarten are

held out a year by their parents, so-called academic redshirts;[1] another 5%–6% are identified as repeating kindergarten (Zill et al. 1997: 17; see also Meisels 1992). The late starters would show up in CPS data as overage for grade, but not because of retention. In the NHES surveys, then, roughly two-thirds of the overage first grade enrollment traces to delayed kindergarten entry and a third to kindergarten retention.[2]

The percentage of overage first graders rose steadily from the early 1970s through the late 1980s and leveled off thereafter (Hauser 2001: 160). Applying the NHES two-third–one-third divide for delayed entry versus retention to overage 6- to 8-year-olds in 1987, that cohort's cumulative retention through middle school (age 12–14) would be on the order of 17%–18% – that is, Hauser's 21% baseline figure less 14% due to delayed kindergarten entry plus 10% increase from baseline.

The estimates described apply to the country as a whole, but for certain children in certain settings, retention rates are much higher. Hauser's report documents large differences in overage enrollments when comparing Whites, Blacks, and Hispanics, differences that increase over the course of children's schooling. All three groups had roughly similar rates at ages 6–8, but by ages 9–11 minority children were 5 to 10 percentage points above Whites, and the difference increased further at ages 15–17. In recent years, by high school almost half of African-American males are overage for grade as against roughly 30% of Whites (these last figures combine overage enrollments with dropout). Also, boys' retention rates exceed girls' for all racial and ethnic groups.

Analyzing CPS enrollment data for 1979, Bianchi (1984) estimates that in an "average" household (husband–wife family with income above the poverty level, where the wife has a high school education and either does not work outside the family or works part-time) about 18% to 19% of males aged 7 to 15 were enrolled below their modal grade. This estimate is close to Hauser's estimate through middle school for 6- to 8-year-olds in 1987 and close also to the 19.3% overall level of grade retention reported retrospectively by the parents of eighth graders in the NELS88 project, a national longitudinal survey of an eighth grade cohort begun in 1988 (Meisels and Liaw 1993). Retrospective accounts of this sort probably are not completely reliable, but neither is inferring

[1] Later-maturing boys are the children most often held out, usually middle class and born in the late months of the calendar year (Graue and DiPerma 2000; Zill et al. 1997).

[2] Another fraction would be children held out on entering first grade, but as 98% of children now attend kindergarten (U.S. Census Bureau 1999), the number of such children must be small.

retention from overage enrollments using CPS data (e.g., Corman 2001). Still, with figures from two such different data sources so well aligned, these estimates probably are reasonable for this period.

In Bianchi's analysis retention rates were about the same for "average household" Whites, African-Americans, and Hispanics, but rates escalated rapidly with other risk factors. For children of high school dropout parents who were living in poverty, the rate was about 50% for males of all three racial/ethnic groups, and around 40% for comparably disadvantaged females. Bianchi's findings reveal that the likelihood of retention differs greatly according to a child's level of family resources, a pattern also seen in later studies. For example, 31.3% of NELS88 eighth graders in the lowest family socioeconomic status (SES) quartile had repeated a grade versus 8.2% in the highest quartile (National Center for Education Statistics 1990: 9).

A like pattern is evident too in more recent data for early retentions specifically. Among second graders in 1999, 5% of those in families above the poverty level repeated either kindergarten or first grade as against 16% of poor children. Likewise, the risk of retention for children of college graduate mothers is less than half that for children whose mothers lack high school degrees: 6% versus 16%. And although in these data differences associated with race/ethnicity are negligible (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2000: 299), that is true also of CPS estimates for the earliest grades (e.g., Hauser 2001: 164).

State level sources also afford a sense of overall retention levels. However, as noted, not all states report retention rates and their reporting procedures vary. Thirteen of the 36 states covered in the National Research Council's survey of state practices (Heubert and Hauser 1999: 136–137) collect no retention data at all; others provided figures for two or three grades only; and still others just gave an overall total for all grades. Likewise, 5 of 15 southern and border states covered in a recent Southern Region Education Board (SREB) survey of retention provided figures grade by grade (Denton 2001: 3).

With the understanding that these data are incomplete and may not be strictly comparable (or altogether reliable), Table 1.1 reports state retention levels, by grade. These data are compiled from several sources: Shepard and Smith (1989: 6–7) for the early years; Heubert and Hauser (1999: 137–147) for the 1990s, updated for five southern states with information from Denton (2001: 2). Because the present volume focuses on retention over the elementary and middle school years, Table 1.1

TABLE 1.1. *Percentage of Students Retained in Grade in Selected States, by Grade Level and Year*[a]

	Grade Level:	K	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Alabama	90s[b]	4.70	8.03	3.00	2.40	2.17	2.17	3.00	6.70	5.20	12.60
Arizona	79–80	5.20	7.70	4.00	2.40	1.90	1.40	1.30	3.10	2.30	4.40
	85–86	8.00	20.0	8.00	5.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	8.00	7.00	6.00
	90s	1.57	2.33	0.97	0.63	0.43	0.43	1.00	2.50	2.23	5.90
Delaware	79–80	NA[c]	11.40	5.10	2.90	2.40	3.10	2.40	7.90	8.10	13.10
	85–86	5.40	17.20	4.90	2.80	2.30	3.00	3.20	9.60	7.70	15.60
	90s	1.90	5.37	2.17	1.47	0.80	0.83	1.53	3.20	2.03	NA
D.C.	79–80	NA	15.30	10.00	7.20	7.20	6.30	3.10	NA	NA	20.50
	85–86	NA	12.70	8.40	7.40	5.40	4.60	2.80	10.60	6.60	NA
	90s	NA	12.93	9.50	8.13	6.97	5.80	2.93	13.17	14.07	17.00
Florida	79–80	6.10	13.70	7.40	7.00	5.90	4.60	5.50	10.40	8.30	10.20
	85–86	10.50	11.20	4.70	4.50	3.80	2.60	3.50	7.90	5.80	12.10
	90s	3.23	4.28	2.40	1.78	1.28	0.88	4.48	5.45	4.20	13.93
Georgia	79–80	NA	11.00	4.70	3.80	2.80	2.50	2.60	5.30	7.40	13.30
	85–86	8.00	12.40	6.70	7.80	5.20	3.90	5.30	6.70	7.50	18.10
	90s	3.70	4.00	2.40	1.70	1.30	1.10	2.10	2.50	2.10	12.40
Kentucky	79–80	2.30	12.60	5.70	3.40	2.20	1.80	1.90	4.20	3.60	5.80
	85–86	4.00	5.30	4.90	3.00	2.30	1.90	2.70	5.40	3.80	9.60
	90s	NA	NA	NA	NA	1.10	0.75	1.85	2.70	1.75	10.70
Louisiana	90s	8.70	11.80	5.95	5.10	5.40	4.60	8.10	10.80	6.10	15.70
Maryland	79–80	NA	7.60	3.50	3.30	2.50	2.50	1.80	8.50	7.60	8.60
	85–86	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
	90s	0.93	2.37	1.27	0.80	0.57	0.30	2.30	3.40	2.43	11.87
Mississippi	79–80	NA	15.10	6.90	4.80	5.00	5.60	5.10	13.50	11.10	12.40
	85–86	1.40	16.10	7.00	5.30	5.70	6.00	5.60	11.20	9.30	12.90
	90s	5.03	11.80	6.17	4.97	5.97	6.67	7.83	15.07	12.53	20.53
North Carolina	79–80	4.50	9.80	6.00	4.50	3.20	2.80	3.40	6.80	7.10	14.10
	85–86	6.00	9.30	5.00	5.70	2.70	2.10	8.10	7.90	11.00	13.90
	90s	3.83	5.43	2.98	2.35	1.33	0.93	2.63	3.33	2.48	15.55
Ohio	90s	NA	4.27	1.77	1.37	0.93	0.83	1.77	2.63	2.40	9.53
South Carolina	77–78	NA	8.30	4.40	3.50	2.70	2.60	3.50	3.80	2.60	NA
	90s	NA	6.93	2.83	2.28	1.78	1.90	2.90	3.78	2.70	15.70
Tennessee	79–80	2.40	10.70	5.60	3.90	3.10	3.30	2.80	7.30	5.60	8.50
	85–86	3.90	10.90	5.10	3.90	3.30	3.20	3.20	8.10	6.10	9.60
	96–97	4.30	5.50	2.50	1.80	1.20	1.40	2.70	7.20	5.70	13.40
Texas	90s	1.60	5.90	2.63	1.27	1.10	0.87	1.70	2.80	2.03	17.40
Vermont	90s	1.83	1.90	1.10	0.60	0.47	0.30	0.33	1.50	1.40	4.53
Virginia	79–80	6.20	11.00	6.30	5.30	4.40	4.20	4.20	7.70	12.60	11.50
	85–86	8.30	10.20	4.80	4.20	3.70	2.90	3.40	8.10	9.70	13.90
	90s	5.48	7.43	3.90	3.23	2.73	2.23	3.65	6.58	8.65	13.00
West Virginia	79–80	1.70	10.80	3.40	2.20	1.90	1.80	1.40	3.50	2.50	NA
	85–86	4.40	7.50	3.30	2.70	2.30	2.20	1.80	4.60	2.50	NA
	90's	5.07	5.67	2.63	1.80	1.23	1.23	2.03	3.93	2.87	NA
Wisconsin	96–97	1.20	2.20	1.00	0.50	0.30	0.20	0.60	1.00	0.80	8.50

[a] Figures for 1977–78, 1979–80, and 1985–86 are from Shepard and Smith (1989: 6–7); figures for the 1990s are the average of individual year figures from 1994–95 through 1999–2000 as reported in Huebert and Hauser (1999: 137–147) and Denton (2001: 2).

[b] The 1990s averages are from 1994–95, 1995–96, 1996–97, with the following exceptions: Florida and South Carolina also include 1999–2000; Kentucky excludes 1996–97; Louisiana includes 1995–96 and 1998–99; North Carolina also includes 1998–99 (except for kindergarten); Tennessee and Wisconsin only have 1990s data for 1996–97; Texas includes 1994–95, 1995–96, and 1998–99 (but kindergarten data are missing for 1998–99); and Virginia includes 1994–95 and 1995–96.

[c] NA, not available.

reports figures for grades 1 through 8, with kindergarten and ninth grade (usually the first year of high school) included for comparison. Starting with the 1994–1995 school year, the "90s" entries are the average of the available annual data (usually 3 years; see the table legend). This "smoothing" does no great harm because fluctuations year to year in most localities are not large.[3]

From Table 1.1 we see that retention rates "spike" at certain points in the student career. During the elementary years, the rate generally is highest in first grade, often two or three times rates over grades 2 through 5. And it is impressive that this holds whether rates are high or low in absolute terms (compare Mississippi and Virginia, for example). But it also is the case in most states that levels of first grade retention are much reduced in the 1990s relative to earlier periods, often dramatically so. There are exceptions (e.g., the District of Columbia, South Carolina), but the most striking time trend in Table 1.1 is this broad-based retreat from early grade retention specifically.

In many localities rates begin inching up again in middle school (grades 6–8). Then in ninth grade, the first year of high school in most localities, they soar, often surpassing even the heretofore peak rates from first grade.[4] This holds especially in the 1990s, so the ninth grade trend runs counter to the historic trend for first grade. Ninth grade retention rates generally have not declined over time; indeed, in many places they have increased.

School transitions, and the adjustments they require, we know challenge young people (e.g., Entwisle and Alexander 1989; 1993; Roderick 1995b). Transition shock no doubt helps account for the high rates of retention evident in Table 1.1. for first and ninth grades (a pattern observed by Morris [1993], also), but why the former rates have declined over time and the latter not can only be surmised. Perhaps problems skipped over in the early years later become so severe they can no longer be ignored, or possibly younger children are deemed better prospects for growing out of their problems.

Many critics of retention (e.g., Epstein 1987; Shepard and Smith 1988) object especially to the practice of holding children back in the early grades. For them, Table 1.1 holds much good news. Good news, yes; but far from a sweeping victory, as the grade specific retention rates

[3] Table 1.1 does not include states for which data are available only for the earlier periods or are spotty for the elementary and middle grades.

[4] Our table does not cover the remaining years of high school, but the figures for ninth grade generally exceed those for later years as well (e.g., Heubert and Hauser 1999: 138–146).

displayed in Table 1.1 imply high *cumulative* risk of retention across the student career. And more than that, these statewide figures obscure local highs and lows. In high-poverty school systems, for instance, it is not unusual for half the student population to repeat one or more grades before high school (e.g., Education Week 1998). From all of this it seems safe to conclude that, despite recent reductions in early retention specifically, retention rates remain high in general and are especially high for poverty level children and minority youth – so-called at-risk students, whose academic problems dominate educational policy discussions.

Shepard and Smith (1989: 9) attribute the high rates of retention that prevailed through the mid- to late 1980s to the education reform movement ushered in by the 1983 report "A Nation at Risk" (National Commission on Excellence in Education 1983). Although widely credited with prompting the "excellence movement" of the 1980s, this report probably instead helped crystallize trends already gathering steam. A "swelling chorus of complaints" about social promotion in the public schools extends back at least to the 1970s (Larabee 1984; for historical perspective, see Rothstein 1998) and so predates the commission's work.

The Excellence Commission focused its recommendations on a narrow set of policy options, such as the "New Basics" high school curriculum and higher educational standards. In consequence, "social promotion" declined for a time, as presumably is reflected in the high "baseline" retention figures in Table 1.1. But the educational reform movement is not the only factor behind high retention rates. Large demographic shifts in the school-age population no doubt also have played a role. In 1980 about 74% of U.S. children age 18 and under were classified as non-Hispanic White. By 1999 this percentage had shrunk to 65%, and projections to 2020 anticipate a further decline to 55%. Non-Hispanic Blacks, by way of comparison, made up 9.3% of youth age 18 and under in 1980, increased to 10.5% in 1999, and are projected to rise to 12.2% by 2020. The trend for Hispanic youth (any race) is more dramatic still. Their share of the total increased from 5.7% in 1980 to 10.8% in 1999 and is projected to soar to 17.2% by 2020 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2000: 20).

Minority group youngsters who are poor are at great risk of school failure (e.g., Kaufman, Bradby, and Owings 1992), so over the next few decades rates of retention may rise considerably above current levels if the momentum to limit social promotion continues. As reviewed, retention rates in many localities already are quite high and "tightening up" policies could well drive them higher still. By one estimate, for

example, two-thirds of Los Angeles's 1.1. million children were reading below grade level in 1999 (Sahagun 1999). Is it practical or wise to hold back so many youngsters? How can marginal students who have experienced only failure be shielded from further failure? For many of these youth enforcing rigid standards will backfire: they will be encouraged to drop out, to act out, or to do both (McDill, Natriello, and Pallas 1986; Pallas, Natriello, and McDill 1987). Poor, inner city minority youth are those whose promotion prospects are most in jeopardy. For many of them flunking a grade could well shape life chances and incur costs for years to come. The next section reviews some of these possible costs.

Some Costs of Retention, in Dollars and Otherwise

Although retention is commonplace, its costs and benefits are not easily calculated. Some costs are clear-cut, but others are hard to assess because firm evidence is lacking. One obvious consequence of grade retention is increased educational expenditure. The extra year of schooling demanded of repeaters was estimated in the mid-1980s to add about $10 billion to the nation's school bill, on the basis of the then average annual per pupil expenditure of $4,051 and a national annual retention rate of 6% (yielding 2.4 million repeaters per year: Center for Policy Research in Education 1990; see also Dyer and Binkney 1995). The 1985/86 figure for per pupil expenditures (based on enrollments, not attendance) would be just over $5,000 in 1998/99 dollars, but expenditures per pupil today are higher still (a bit under $6,400: U.S. Department of Education 2000a: 187). Additionally, repeaters often receive extra services, including special education services – for example, 8.5% of children age 5–18 with no disabilities were identified as repeaters in 1995 versus just over a third of those with a learning disability (U.S. Department of Education 1997: 54). If $10 billion was a reasonable estimate for 1985, then almost certainly the cost associated with repeaters' "extra" year now is well beyond $10 billion – retention rates remain high, per pupil expenditures are up, and extra services are more costly. Retaining up to half the children in a district one or more times by the fifth year of elementary school is roughly equivalent to increasing its elementary school population by 10%, and the associated costs almost certainly exceed 10%.

One cost especially hard to calculate is a deferred one: school discontinuation. Failing a grade in school is a major risk factor for high school dropout, increasing dropout odds in many studies two- and threefold (e.g., Jimerson 2000). High school dropout entails severe costs. To cite

but one example, in 1999 a high school diploma or general equivalency diploma (GED) conferred a wage premium of about a third, comparing dropouts in the 25–34 age range with comparably aged high school graduates (U.S. Department of Education 2001: 137–139). This sizable 1-year differential implies much larger differences over a lifetime – on the order of $100,000 according to one estimate, even after adjusting for related disadvantages that would depress dropouts' earnings for other reasons (McDill et al. 1986). Being behind in school is one of the strongest predictors of dropout even when other risk factors such as minority status and poverty background are taken into account (Grissom and Shepard 1989; Rumberger 1995; Rumberger and Larson 1998; Temple, Reynolds, and Ou 2000). Indeed, connections between dropout and early retention specifically are documented in several sources (Cairns, Cairns, and Neckerman 1989; Ensminger and Slusarcick 1992; Lloyd 1978; and Stroup and Robins 1972; Temple, Reynolds, and Ou 2000), including the BSS (e.g., Alexander, Entwisle, and Horsey 1997; Alexander, Entwisle, and Kabbani 2001).

Retention affects life success after high school in other ways as well. For example, Royce, Darlington, and Murray (1983: 444–445) report that, compared to similar students who had not repeated a grade, repeaters were more likely later to be unemployed or not seeking work, to be living on public assistance, or to be in prison. Here too the retention–dropout linkage no doubt is relevant, as about half the prison population and half of welfare recipients lack high school degrees (Educational Testing Service 1995; National Research Council 1993). The excess costs for teaching students who repeat a year is thus in actuality only a small fraction of the long-term costs to the student and to society.

Beyond costs calculated in dollars, there also may be psychological costs involving self-esteem and personal happiness. These costs are borne by both children and their families – parents because dreams for their children are compromised, and children because they grow to see themselves as failures or misfits. Teachers and parents worry a great deal about the socioemotional consequences of children's being off-time in school, and with good reason. Repeating a grade seems to increase children's adjustment problems in school (Kellam, Branch, Agrawal, and Ensminger 1975), perhaps because it disrupts peer relations. When children move from grade to grade they generally keep the same peers, but retention separates children from their peers. Evidence indicates that school performance deteriorates when peer groups are disrupted (Felner and Adan 1988; Felner, Ginter, and Primavera 1982).