

Retention leads to discipline problems in other kids

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When students repeat a grade, it can spell trouble for their classmates, according to a new Duke University-led study of nearly 80,000 middle-schoolers.

In schools with high numbers of grade repeaters , suspensions were more likely to occur across the school community. Discipline problems were also more common among other students, including [substance abuse](#), fighting and classroom disruption.

Public debate typically focuses on how retention affects an individual student's academic performance, said lead author Clara Muschkin. So she and her colleagues decided to take a wider view and consider how holding students back may affect the school as a whole.

"The decision to retain students has consequences for the whole school community," said Muschkin, an associate director of the Duke Center for Child and Family Policy. "That wider effect is an issue worth considering as we debate this policy."

The study by Muschkin, Elizabeth Glennie and Audrey Beck looked at 79,314 seventh-graders in 334 North Carolina middle schools.

For information on retention and discipline problems, the authors turned to administrative data from the state's public school system. The authors found that different schools have greatly varying numbers of older and retained students, with significant consequences.

The authors took pains to account for a range of factors that might offer alternative explanations for their findings, including schools' socioeconomic composition and parents' educational status. Even after controlling for such factors, the presence of older and retained students was still strongly linked with more discipline problems in the entire group.

For instance, if 20 percent of children in seventh grade were older than their peers, the chance that other students would commit an infraction or be suspended increased by 200 percent.

"There's a strong relationship here that we think is likely to be causal," Muschkin said.

The study focused on two groups in particular: students who repeated a grade, and students who were a year older than their classmates, on average. When there were more older and retained students present, discipline problems increased for all subgroups in the study, including black and white students and boys and girls. Two groups saw a particularly large jump in discipline problems: white students and girls of all races.

"This finding took us by surprise," Muschkin said. "These two groups appear to be a bit more affected than others by the influence of older peers."

In early adolescence, a time of major physical and psychological change, students are particularly vulnerable to peer influence, Muschkin noted. However, more research is needed to understand why some subgroups appear to respond more strongly than others to the influence of their classmates, she said.

Holding students back became a popular educational option as criticism

of "social promotion" mounted. The study suggests that since retention has school-wide ramifications, educators should do more to assist older and retained students with their academic struggles; for instance, through tutoring, summer school and peer mentoring.

"Support for older and retained students is an investment in the achievement and climate of the entire school," Muschkin said.

The paper appears online Feb. 28 in *Teachers College Record*.

Provided by Duke University

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