

More kids are repeating a grade. Is it good for them?

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As Braylon Price remembers it, he struggled with pretty much everything the first full school year of the pandemic. With minimal

guidance and frequent disruptions, he had trouble staying on top of assignments and finishing homework on time.

It was so rocky his parents asked for him to repeat sixth grade—a decision they credit with getting him on a better track.

"At first I didn't really want to do it," said Braylon, now 13. "But then later in the year I thought it would probably be better for me if I did."

The number of students held back for a year of school has surged around the country. Traditionally, experts have said repeating a grade can hurt kids social lives and academic futures. But many parents, empowered by new pandemic-era laws, have asked for do-overs to help their children recover from the [tumult](#) of remote learning, quarantines and school staff shortages.

Twenty-two of the 26 states that provided data for the recent academic year, as well as Washington, D.C., saw an increase in the number of students who were held back, according to an Associated Press analysis. Three states—South Carolina, West Virginia and Delaware—saw retention more than double.

Pennsylvania, where the Price family lives, passed a pandemic-era law allowing parents to elect to have a redo for their kids. The following year, the number of retained students in the state jumped by about 20,000, to over 45,000 students.

Braylon's mother has no regrets about taking advantage of the new law.

"Best decision we could have made for him," said Kristi Price, who lives in Bellefonte, in central Pennsylvania.

While the family's two daughters managed to keep up with school

despite limited supervision, Braylon struggled. He went back to in-person school for the first full academic year of the pandemic but it was "wishy-washy," his mother said. Students were quarantined on and off, and teachers tried to keep up with students learning at home, online and in hybrid models. That winter, Braylon suffered a spinal cord injury from wrestling that forced him to go back to remote learning.

On his repeat of sixth grade, Braylon had an individualized education program that helped him build more focus. Having more one-on-one attention from teachers helped too. Socially, he said the transition was easy, since most of his friends had been in lower grades or attended different schools already.

Research in the education world has been critical of making students repeat grades.

The risk is students who've been retained have a two-fold increased risk of dropping out, said Arthur Reynolds, a professor at the University of Minnesota's Human Capital Research Collaborative, citing studies of students in Chicago and Baltimore.

"Kids see it as punishment," Reynolds said. "It reduces their academic motivation, and it doesn't increase their instructional advancement."

But backers of retention say none of the research was conducted in a pandemic, when many children wrestled with Zoom lessons and some stopped logging in entirely.

"So many children have struggled and have had a lot of problems," said Florida state Sen. Lori Berman, a Delray Beach Democrat. Berman authored a law aimed at making it easier for parents to ask for kindergarten to fifth graders to repeat a grade in the 2021-22 school year. "I don't think there is any stigma to holding your child back at this

point."

Generally, parents can ask for children to be held back, but the final decision is up to principals, who make decisions based on factors including academic progress. California and New Jersey also passed laws that made it easier for parents to demand their children repeat a grade, although the option was only available last year.

In suburban Kansas City, Celeste Roberts decided last year for another round of second grade for her son, who she said was struggling even before the pandemic. When virtual learning was a bust, he spent the year learning at a slower pace with his grandmother, a retired teacher who bought goats to keep things fun.

Roberts said repeating the year helped her son academically and his friends hardly noticed.

"Even with peers, some of them were like, 'Wait, shouldn't you be in third grade?' And he's just like, 'Well, I didn't go to school because of COVID,'" she said. "And they're kind of like, 'OK, cool.' You know, they move on. It's not a thing. So it's been really great socially. Even with the parent circles. Everybody's just like, 'Great. Do what your kid needs to do.'"

Ultimately, there shouldn't be just two options of repeating a grade or going on to the next, said Alex Lamb, who has been looking at research on grade retention as part of her work with the Center for Education, Policy Analysis, Research and Evaluation at the University of Connecticut to help advise school districts.

"Neither of those options are good," she said. "A great option is letting students move on, and then introducing some of these supports that are research-backed, that are effective and that allow for academic and

social-emotional growth of students and then communities."

In Pennsylvania's Fox Chapel Area School District, two students were retained at the behest of educators, while eight families decided their students would repeat a grade. Another six discussed the new legislation with the school and ultimately decided against holding their students back.

"As a school district, we take retention very seriously," Superintendent Mary Catherine Reljac said. She said the district involves parents, a team of educators, school counselors and principals to help decide what is best for each child.

Price says Braylon's retention helped him obtain an individualized education program, or IEP. The special ed plan gave him more support as he navigated sixth grade again. When he thinks about the difference between rounds one and two of sixth grade, Braylon said he felt like the extra support was instrumental, noting he likes having one-on-one aid from teachers sometimes.

"In online school, you didn't really do that," he said. "You did the work and then you just turned it in."

He doesn't want to be given the answer, he said, but guided enough that he can figure it out on his own.

"I think because of the pandemic, we, as parents, were able to see how much he was struggling and we were able to recognize that he was barely keeping his head above water, and that he needed more help in order to be successful on his own," Price said.

This story has been corrected to reflect that a total of 26 states and Washington, D.C., provided data on grade retention for the recent academic year.

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