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COMMENTARY

Retained Students and Classmates' Absences in Urban Schools

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Generally speaking, research does not support the practice of grade retention: studies have shown that being retained can have negative effects on students, both academically and developmentally. And yet, while these effects of retention on retained students are fairly well documented, very little work has examined how retention might also have an effect on other, non-retained students in the same classroom. In previous research, I have examined how grade-retained classmates negatively influence the standardized achievement outcomes for other, non-retained students in the same classroom. This present study takes this agenda one step further by examining the effect of having retained classmates on the absence behavior of non-retained classmates.

A focus on absences is critical, as higher rates of absences are highly correlated with educational decline, high school dropout, weakened socio-emotional development, increased health risk behaviors, and greater risk of unemployment in adulthood. The problems stemming from absences are especially pertinent in urban school systems. Given these issues, this study asks: for urban school children, does the percentage of grade-retained students in a classroom influence the absence behavior of non-retained students in that same classroom? To answer this, I use a longitudinal and large-scale dataset of elementary school children in an entire school district. The benefit of utilizing district-level data is that it is possible to document cohorts of students by classrooms, grades, and schools year-after-year. Hence, this enables the clear-cut identification of exact classroom student groupings during each school year.

Using multiple methods that are deemed appropriate with large-scale, longitudinal data, I find that when non-retained students have a higher percentage of retained classmates, they tend to have a greater number of absences during that school year. Furthermore, when looking at the types of absences of these non-retained classmates, a more detailed, nuanced picture is revealed. Importantly, having a greater percentage of retained classmates shows that the other students in the classroom will have a greater number of *unexcused* absences during that school year. However, there is no relationship between the percentage of retained classmates and the number of *excused* absences that non-retained students may have.

This finding is critical. Excused absences might arise from academically-motivated or engaged students who have legitimate reasons for missing school. On the other hand, in research and practice, students with more unexcused absences are considered to be academically disengaged. Hence, what this research shows is that having a greater percentage of retained classmates may be increasing disengagement of other students in the same classroom. That disengagement surfaces in this instance as unexcused absences.

These findings are relevant for schools in California. First, prior research has noted that while California does use retention, the state does not aggregate information on the presence or effects of this practice. Hence, as more and more districts enact "get tough" retention policies, there will be an even greater need for California to take a more proactive approach in documenting and assessing who is most susceptible and who is placed at risk from this practice. Second, as many students in California are in urban

schools, researchers and practitioners can utilize the findings of this study to more efficiently guide policies and make educational adjustments to bolster supportive educational environments in California's urban districts, so that even with the presence of grade retention practices, the state's high-needs schools are nonetheless ensuring success for all children.

The full study can be found in Michael A. Gottfried, Retained Students and Classmates' Absences in Urban Schools, American Education Research Journal.

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