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COMMENTARY

The Effects of Grade Retention on Student Misbehavior

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Test-based accountability has become the new norm in public education over the last decade. All states have established test-based performance benchmarks for students and meeting these standards is a prerequisite for grade promotion in many states. As of 2014, 16 states (including California) plus the District of Columbia require the retention of third-grade students who do not meet grade-level expectations in reading.

Grade retention has been a longstanding and highly debated intervention for low-performing students. Proponents of grade retention policies claim that holding back students who are not ready for more challenging course content translates into higher achievement in the following years. On the other hand, critics argue that grade retention imposes significant emotional burden on students because they are stigmatized as failing and they face the challenges of adjusting to new peers. In this study, "Hold Back to Move Forward? Early Grade Retention and Student Misbehavior," I explore an important way this emotional burden might manifest itself, and present the first evidence on the effects of grade retention in early grades on student disruptive behavior.

The biggest challenge in revealing the causal impact of any grade retention policy is that retention decisions are not random. In other words, teachers and principals typically make retention decisions based on student attributes that are not necessarily observable to the researcher. For instance, in cases where parents have the right to appeal retention decisions (such as the retention policy in California), parental involvement is expected to play an important role in who gets retained and who gets promoted. Therefore, in such cases, the observed differences in future outcomes between retained and promoted students might reflect the differences in parental involvement, instead of the causal effect of grade retention.

To deal with this selection issue, I make use of a key feature of the early graderetention policy in Florida. Since 2002, all third graders in Florida are categorized into 'achievement levels' based on their reading performance in curriculum standards-based Florida Curriculum Assessment Test (FCAT-SSS). If a student fails to perform at achievement level two or higher, the law requires that he/she should not be promoted to the fourth grade. I utilize this non-linearity created by the retention policy and compare students who score right below and right above the promotion cutoff in a regression discontinuity framework.

The findings suggest fairly large short-term effects of grade retention on student misbehavior. In particular, I find that grade retention increases disciplinary incidents by about 40 percent in the two years following the grade retention. Yet these effects dissipate beyond the third year. I also find that these short term adverse effects concentrated among economically disadvantaged and male students.

The overarching conclusion in the recent literature is that grade retention, especially in early grades, leads to significant achievement gains in the short-run. I find that these short-run benefits come with the burden of higher rates of student misbehavior.

These findings might help better assess the costs and benefits associated with increasingly popular test-based retention policies that incorporate instructional support mechanisms for the retained students, such as the current early grade retention policy in California.

The full study can be found in Umut Özek, "Hold Back To Move Forward? Early Grade Retention And Student Misbehavior," Education Finance and Policy, Summer 2015, Vol. 10, No. 3, Pages 350-377.

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