

---

## Synthesis

# Repeating a year<sup>i</sup>

Negative impact for very high cost, based on moderate evidence

---



-4

Repeating a year is also known as “grade retention”, “non-promotion”, or “failing a grade”. Pupils who do not reach a given standard of learning at the end of a year are required to repeat that year of learning by joining a class of younger students the following academic year. For students at secondary school level, repeating a year is usually limited to the particular subject or classes that a student has not passed.

Repeating a year is very rare in the UK, but it is relatively common in the USA, where the No Child Left Behind Act (2002) recommended that students be required to demonstrate a set standard of achievement before progressing to the next grade level. Students can also be required to repeat a year in some European countries including Spain, France, and Germany. In some countries, such as Finland, pupils can repeat a year in exceptional circumstances, but this decision is made collectively by teachers, parents, and the student, rather than on the basis of end of year testing.

## How effective is it?

Evidence suggests that, in the majority of cases, repeating a year is harmful to a student’s chances of academic success. In addition, studies consistently show greater negative effects for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, suggesting that the practice is likely to increase educational inequality. Repeating a year is also likely to lead to greater negative effects when used in the early years of primary school, for students from ethnic minorities, or for pupils who are relatively young in their year group (often referred to as 'summer born' pupils in the US and European literature).



Evidence suggests that in the majority of cases repeating a year is harmful to a student’s chances of academic success

Pupils who repeat a year make an average of four months’ less academic progress over the course of a year than pupils who move on. In addition, studies suggest that students who repeat a year are unlikely to catch up with peers of a similar level who move on, even after completing an additional

---

year's schooling. Studies also suggest that students who repeat a year are more likely to drop out of school prior to completion.

Although the overall average impact is negative, some studies suggest that in individual circumstances some students can benefit, particularly in the short term. However, it does not appear to be easy to identify which students will benefit, suggesting that repeating a year is a significant risk.

## Latin American Evidence<sup>ii</sup>

Evidence in Latin America does not show a general consensus about the benefits or risks that a policy of repeating (grade retention) has for learning outcomes. Most of the studies show that repetition is negative for students, teachers, and school performance. The research suggests that repeating, or failing, a grade tends to be understood as the student's responsibility, rather than a result of poor teaching methodologies, teacher-student relationships or other factors associated with the school environment or the broader socio-economic context.

For example, using the results of PISA 2009 on reading competence in Peru, a quantitative study explores the relationships between students' socio-economic background, the social composition of schools, grade repetition and the students' academic performance. Although it is not possible to establish causal inferences, the analysis concludes that students who repeat in their school life obtain lower academic performance than their peers who did not fail a grade. In the same line, the Third Regional Comparative and Explanatory Study (TERCE) shows that students who have repeated a course at least once, get lower results globally in all tests, especially in math and reading.

Based on the existing body of evidence in Latin America, repeating a year is not an effective practice to help students achieve desirable learning outcomes.

## How secure is the evidence?

There are no studies that have used an experimental design. However, overall, there are a number of high quality evidence reviews which show that negative effects have been found consistently over the last fifty years in both Europe and North America. The evidence is therefore rated as moderate.

---

## What are the costs?

The costs of school repetition are estimated based on having one student in the school for one more year. This means that the costs are generally very high.

## What should I consider?

Before you implement this strategy in your learning environment, consider the following:

1. Negative effects are rare for educational interventions, so the extent to which pupils who repeat a year make less progress is striking.
2. Negative effects are disproportionately greater for disadvantaged pupils, for pupils from ethnic minorities, and for pupils who are relatively young in their year group.
3. Have you considered alternative interventions such as intensive tuition or one to one support? They are considerably cheaper and may make repeating a school year unnecessary (see One to one tuition).
4. Negative effects tend to increase with time and repeating more than one year significantly increases the risk of students dropping out of school.

---

<sup>i</sup> **Copyright** © [2016] The Education Endowment Foundation. All rights reserved.

<sup>ii</sup> **Some rights reserved.** This text is available under a Creative Commons 4.0 Attribution NonCommercial Share Alike license. This means that it is possible to copy, distribute, and make derivative works of the content provided that its original authors are credited. The commercial use of the content is not allowed. In case of making derivative works (such as a translation, for example), you must use an identical license for them. The full text of this license can be found at [creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/deed.es](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/deed.es)