



The effects of exemptions to Florida's test-based promotion policy: Who is retained? Who benefits academically?

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ABSTRACT

We evaluate the impact of Florida's test-based promotion policy on the probability that low-performing students are retained using data on the universe of third-grade students in the state of Florida from 2001 to 2004. We also examine the effect of formal exemptions to the policy on student proficiency in reading two years later. In an evaluation of retention for third-grade students over time with a logit model we find that Florida's policy has increased the probability that minority students are retained to a greater extent than white students. Contrary to previous research, this differential retention occurs after controlling for student academic proficiency. However, in an evaluation of the academic performance of students who were in the first class subject to the retention policy, we find that retained students outperform students who received an exemption from the policy in reading two years after baseline, indicating that on average exemptions have not been granted to those individuals who would benefit from promotion.

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1. Introduction

Florida is one of several large school systems to have recently adopted test-based promotion policies intended to end “social promotion” – the practice of promoting students to the next grade level for socialization reasons regardless of their academic proficiency. In Florida, third-grade students are required to reach a minimal benchmark on the reading portion of the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) in order to be promoted to the fourth grade. Similarly aggressive policies are currently operating in Texas and the large urban school systems of New York City and Chicago.

One particular worry about test-based promotion policies is that they could lead to disproportionate retention by race and income. In Florida and several other school systems, this concern is further exacerbated by the existence of formal exemptions to the policy. The idea behind these exemptions is that they can promote students whose test score for some reason is not an accurate indicator of their proficiency or who would for some reason benefit from promotion despite their low proficiency level. To our knowledge, the effect of these formal exemptions from the retention treatment on the probability that a student is retained and on later academic outcomes has yet to be evaluated in the literature.

In this paper we evaluate whether formal exemptions were granted disproportionately to students with different observable characteristics. We then go on to measure the impact of being exempted from the policy treatment on later proficiency.

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2. Previous research

A large body of previous research has found that retaining a student harms his academic progress (Alexander, Entwistle, & Dauber, 1994; Holmes, 1989; Jimerson, Carlson, Rotert, Egeland, & Sroufe, 1997; Peterson, DeGracie, & Ayabe, 1987) and increases the likelihood that he will drop out before completing high school (Allensworth, 2005; Eide & Showalter, 2001; Grissom & Shepard, 1989; Jimerson, 2001a, 2001b; Roderick, 1994). However, much of this research suffered from a variety of limitations, particularly the lack of an exogenous instrument to proxy for grade retention.

The existence of modern test-based promotion policies, however, has provided researchers with the ability to make more meaningful comparisons of promoted and retained students. Roderick and Nagaoka (2005), and Jacob and Lefgren (2004) utilize a regression discontinuity design to study a test-based promotion policy in Chicago. These studies both found a positive effect from retention after one year that became insignificant in the second year after retention. Greene and Winters (2007) utilized a regression discontinuity design and an across-year approach in Florida and found a positive effect from retention that increased in the second year after retention.

The potentially harmful effects of grade retention inspire even more controversy because minority students are more likely than white students to be retained. Table 1 shows that about 2.9% of all third-grade students in Florida and 4.0% of African-American and Hispanic students were retained in the two years before the policy was put into effect (2000 and 2001). However, during the first two-years after the policy was implemented (2002 and 2003), retention in the third-grade increased to about 11.7% of all students and about 17.2% of African-American and Hispanic students in the state.

House (1998) argues that such differential retention by race indicates the existence of institutional racism in retention decisions and the development of public policy. Bali, Anagnostopoulos, and Roberts (2005) found that school district structure and the general political ideology in the surrounding community can further influence retention rates. However, at least some research indicates that these racial differences narrow or disappear once other characteristics are controlled (Bianchi, 1984), particularly when the researcher is able to control for student proficiency (Corman, 2002; Nagaoka & Roderick, 2004).

Nagaoka and Roderick (2004) provide the only previous estimates on the impact of a test-based promotion policy on the differential probability that students are retained by race. Their findings indicated that higher retention rates

for minority students under Chicago's policy were entirely due to the greater likelihood that a minority student had low proficiency. However, Chicago's policy did not allow for formal exemptions to the retention decision, while Florida and most other systems provide several explicit ways that a student can be promoted despite failing to meet the test-score requirement.

3. Florida's policy to end social promotion

In Florida, students must meet at least the Level 2 benchmark (the second lowest of five levels) on the FCAT reading test in order to be promoted to the fourth grade. Students who score at Level 2 are considered to have "limited success" with the challenging content on the test.¹ The entering third-grade class of 2002–2003 was the first that was subjected to the mandate.

Low-performing students who fail to receive an exemption from the policy are subject to retention as well as a series of other interventions. Retained students must be assigned to a "high performing teacher" during their retained year; schools must develop an Academic Improvement Plan for these students that must address the student's specific academic needs and create "success-based intervention strategies" for his improvement and must create a performance portfolio for the student; retained students who fail to meet the necessary test score cut-off are required to attend a summer reading camp where they receive literacy instruction; during their retained year, schools are required to provide these students with an additional 90 min of reading instruction.²

4. Exemptions from the retention policy

There are several exemptions by which a student with test scores below the FCAT benchmark could be exempted from the policy, and thus promoted to the fourth grade. Here we list each of the categories.³

- (1) (PROM.LEP) – Student is listed as limited English proficient and has had less than two years instruction in English for speakers of other languages program.
- (2) (PROM.DISNOT) – Student with disabilities whose Individual Education Plan indicates that participation in the statewide assessment program is not appropriate.
- (3) (PROM.ALTTST) – Student demonstrated an acceptable level of performance on an alternative standardized reading assessment approved by the State Board of Education.
- (4) (PROM.PORTF) – Student demonstrated, through a student portfolio, that the student is reading on grade level as evidenced by demonstration of mastery of the Sun-

Table 1
Grade retention before and after policy implementation

	2 years prior to policy (%)	2 years under policy (%)
Percent of all third-grade students retained	2.9	11.7
Percent of African-American and Hispanic students retained	4.0	17.2

¹ Florida Department of Education, "FCAT Explorer: Parent & Family Guide" <http://www.fcateexplorer.com/parent/shared/en/about.fcate.asp>.

² Florida Department of Education, <http://www.firn.edu/doe/commhome/sig/proghome.htm>.

³ Definitions provided by the Florida Department of Education and recorded verbatim. In later analyses we also include a variable P0 indicating that no code for the individual was listed.

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