



The Effect of Retention Under Mississippi's Test-Based Promotion Policy

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POLICY ISSUE

Motivated by a need to improve early literacy, over a dozen states have implemented test-based promotion policies that require students who score below a minimum standardized test score threshold to repeat the third grade. These policies are intended to support the most struggling learners, providing them with an additional year of instruction, intervention, and academic reinforcement to build essential reading skills. Research finds generally positive impacts from test-based promotion policies targeted to early grades, though the results are not uniform across localities. This makes it critically important to measure the impacts of such policies in a variety of contexts so that local policymakers can understand the impacts on their constituents, and to provide a broad view to policymakers considering similar policies in hopes of improving outcomes for young students who are struggling to read.

This study examines the impact of third-grade retention under Mississippi's test-based promotion policy, adopted in 2013 as part of a comprehensive statewide effort to improve early literacy. Under the policy, students who score below a set threshold on the third-grade state reading exam must repeat the third grade and receive intensive reading instruction and interventions, unless they qualify for specific "good cause" exemptions. Mississippi has received considerable attention in recent years for its substantial improvements in student reading outcomes, and many states are looking to Mississippi for evidence of promising early literacy initiatives that could work in other localities. The results of this study contribute new knowledge to this important conversation by illustrating the causal effects of being retained in the third grade under Mississippi's test-based promotion policy.

STUDY DATA AND FINDINGS

This study focuses on the first cohort of students subject to Mississippi's policy, those who were in third grade in the 2014-15 school year. Slungaard Mumma and Winters compare the later test scores, absences, and special education statuses of approximately 4,700 students who scored just above and just below the 2015 state reading test score that determined promotion to the fourth grade. In particular, they examine the differences in these outcomes when both groups of students—those who were retained and those who were promoted—were in sixth grade, the latest grade for which both groups had available end-of-year test score data. More infor-

KEY FINDINGS

For students who were in the 3rd grade in 2014-15, retention under Mississippi's policy led to:

- Substantially higher 6th grade **ELA** scores
- No significant impact on 6th grade **math** scores
- No significant impact on **absences** in 6th grade or 4 years after retention
- No significant impact on **special education** identification in 6th grade or 4 years after retention



This study was commissioned by the Foundation for Excellence in Education.

mation about the study sample, data, and methodology can be found in the full working paper at wheelockpolicycenter.org.

The results show that, for this group of students, repeating the third grade under Mississippi's policy led to:

- **Substantially higher sixth-grade ELA scores.** The magnitude of this effect (1.2 standard deviations) is very large relative to other causal studies of educational interventions, about three times larger than the effect of Florida's version of this policy (0.42 standard deviations), and larger than typical estimates of the Black-White test score gap (between 0.5 and 1 standard deviations). This effect was driven by positive effects for Black and Hispanic/Latinx students.
- **No significant impact on other outcomes.** The authors looked for effects on other available student outcomes but did not see a difference (positive or negative) in math scores, absences, or the likelihood of being identified for special education in the sixth grade.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Mississippi's test-based promotion policy led to substantial and sustained improvement in literacy outcomes for Mississippi students who repeated the third grade in 2015-16, particularly for Black and Hispanic/Latinx students. The positive magnitude of this finding is very large and, given similar results in other contexts, suggests that this may be a policy intervention other states should consider. Additionally, the policy does not appear to have negatively affected students' educational experiences in other measurable ways such as increased absences or a greater likelihood of being placed into special education.

That said, though the results are distinctly positive for the policy treatment overall, the analysis cannot entirely disentangle the extent to which the observed benefits in ELA are due to the additional year of instruction or to other specific features of the approach Mississippi took to providing literacy-focused supports and interventions to students. Furthermore, that the

analysis does not find a corresponding impact on math outcomes is inconsistent with results from similar studies in other localities and worthy of further consideration. Future research can build upon this promising evidence from Mississippi by continuing to track the long-term academic and non-academic outcomes of students affected by the policy—including later cohorts—and studying the state's specific implementation of test-based promotion and parallel literacy-focused initiatives.

FULL REPORT

For the complete working paper, visit wheelockpolicycenter.org.

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