REPEATING A YEAR

COST	EVIDENCE	IMPACT	EFFECT
		-3	-0.20

Negative impact for very high cost based on limited evidence.

WHAT IS IT?

Repeating A Year (also known as “grade retention”, “non-promotion”, or “failing a grade”) describes the process by which pupils who do not reach a given standard of learning at the end of a year are required to join 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.

KEY FINDINGS

1. Requiring pupils to repeat a year has a negative impact on average. 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. Where pupils are not achieving expected outcomes, alternative interventions might provide intensive support that may make repeating a school year unnecessary, e.g 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.

HOW EFFECTIVE IS THE APPROACH?

The average impact of a pupil repeating a year is about three months' less progress over the course of a year than if the same pupil had not repeated the year, when compared with similar pupils.

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 at secondary 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).

Pupils who repeat a year make an average of three 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.

BEHIND THE AVERAGE

Negative effects are typically a little greater in secondary schools (-4 months) than primary (-2 months).

Similar negative effects are seen for literacy and mathematics.

Studies have mainly been undertaken in the USA.

CLOSING THE DISADVANTAGE GAP

Research into the socioeconomic “attainment gap” suggests that disadvantaged pupils have, on average, lower attainment than their more advantaged peers. As a result, disadvantaged pupils are more likely to be asked repeat years or grades, which is likely to entrench underachievement and lead to a lack of confidence and motivation associated with school.

HOW COULD YOU IMPLEMENT IN YOUR SETTING?

Given the typical negative impact of making pupils repeat a year, it is not recommended that schools adopt this approach. Some of the reasons that repeating a year might have a negative impact include pupils feeling stigmatised for failure and being in a class with younger pupils. In exceptional circumstances it may be beneficial for a pupil to repeat a year, such as if they have missed schooling through illness or for other legitimate reasons. If this is the case, it is crucial to:

- ensure that repetition of the year is agreed in consultation with the pupil and parents to ensure that they do not feel punished
- consider how you will provide additional support to pupils repeating a year, rather than hoping the same approach will get different results.

The average overall negative effects of repeating a year on pupils’ learning suggests that teachers, schools, and parents should consider other approaches in supporting pupils to catch up with peers and reach appropriate levels for their year group or grade level. For example, One-to-One Tuition could be used as an intervention to target gaps in understanding and provide additional support.

WHAT DOES IT COST?

Annual funding for school places, as determined by the National Funding Formula for the 2021-22 financial year, is likely to fall between £3,000 and £4,500 per pupil for Primary school children, and between £4,500 and £6,000 for Secondary school pupils. The costs associated with one individual pupil repeating a year are therefore very high.

HOW SECURE IS THE EVIDENCE?

The security of the evidence around repeating a year is rated as low. 71 studies were identified that meet the inclusion criteria of the Toolkit. Overall, the topic lost two additional padlocks because:

- A small percentage of studies that have taken place recently. This might mean that the research is not representative of current practice.
- A large percentage of the studies are not randomised controlled trials. While other study designs still give important information about effectiveness of approaches, there is a risk that results are influenced by unknown factors that are not part of the intervention.

As with any evidence review, the Toolkit summarises the average impact of approaches when researched in academic studies. It is important to consider your context and apply your professional judgement when implementing an approach in your setting.

Copyright © The Education Endowment Foundation. All rights reserved.