

Final CCA Research Assignment:

Should elementary school students be held back if they are behind in their development?

Nolan Russell

EDU 595 Introduction to Educational Research

Dr. Mary Louise Stahl

May 4, 2025

## Annotated Bibliography

Blazer, C. (2019). *Elementary school grade retention* (Information Capsule Vol. 1805). Research Services, Miami-Dade County Public Schools.

This Information Capsule, supervised and edited by Christie Blazer, reviews the research conducted on elementary level grade retention. Blazer reviews existing research on the practice of grade retention at the elementary school level and summarizes the key findings of the research. The author's primary purpose is to synthesize these findings from multiple studies to offer a clearer understanding of how grade retention impacts students' academic performance, social-emotional development, and long-term outcomes. Blazer provides a comprehensive review of the key findings, noting that while retained students tend to show short-term academic improvement, the long-term effects on achievement are inconclusive. The review also highlights that students from minority and low-income backgrounds are more likely to be retained, and that retention may have a mixed effect on high school dropout rates and social and emotional adjustment. Additionally, Blazer emphasizes that when retention is implemented it should be accompanied by targeted interventions designed to support students both academically and socially. The article's population primarily consists of elementary school students, and the methodology involves reviewing various studies that examine the outcomes of retention over different time periods.

The author concludes with several recommendations for educators, such as using multiple criteria for retention decisions and providing additional academic and social-emotional support during the retention year. This article is particularly relevant for educators and policymakers involved in decision-making regarding the use of retention as

an educational strategy, offering both the benefits and limitations of retention and practical suggestions for its effective implementation in elementary schools. This Information Capsule is highly relevant for a CCA paper on whether elementary students should be held back if they are behind in their development, as it provides a thorough review of the research on grade retention and its impact on students' academic, social, and emotional outcomes. It is a highly useful guide to find other sources and acts as an excellent summary of the key findings. Likewise, Blazer's synthesis of the evidence, particularly the mixed effects of retention on long-term achievement and the importance of supplemental interventions, offers valuable insights for considering alternatives to retention for students who are struggling developmentally.

Callen, I., Carbonari, M. V., DeArmond, M., Dewey, D., Dizon-Ross, E., Goldhaber, D., Isaacs, J., Kane, T. J., Kuhfeld, M., McDonald, A., McEachin, A., Morton, E., Muroga, A., & Staiger, D. O. (2023). *Summer school as a learning loss recovery strategy after COVID-19: Evidence from summer 2022. Road to COVID recovery research brief* (CALDER Working Paper No. 291-0823). National Center for Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research (CALDER).

In the aftermath of the pandemic, there was a strong need to address learning gaps in reading and math. In response, school districts expanded summer programming to help address COVID learning loss. The authors of this research brief evaluated the effectiveness of these summer school programs as a response to pandemic-related learning loss in eight U.S. districts serving over 400,000 students. By measuring students' academic progress from spring to fall 2022, they found a positive impact on math achievement in six of the eight districts, especially among upper elementary students,

although reading scores remained relatively the same, with notable improvement in only one of the districts. The study used large-scale administrative data and statistical comparisons to estimate program effects. Unfortunately, relatively few students received tutoring in the districts that offered it during summer school, limiting the researchers' ability to differentiate the effect of the combined programming. Likewise, the students attending these programs were from a wide range of academic performance and were not limited to those who are behind in their development, limiting its relevance to the discussion of retention. Nonetheless, the source is relevant to the question of grade retention because it supports the idea that targeted academic interventions like summer school can aid student recovery without requiring students to repeat a grade, offering a less disruptive alternative to retention. Thus, while not all participants were academically behind, the intervention still showed benefits, indirectly supporting the idea that proactive support can prevent the need for retention.

Carrasco-Tolentino, S. (2017). *Elementary grade retention policies and teachers' perceptions on retention practices and interventions* (Publication No. 10256477) [Doctoral dissertation, Azusa Pacific University]. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses.

In this doctoral dissertation, Carrasco-Tolentino examines elementary grade retention policies, practices, and the perceptions of teachers regarding retention interventions in Southern California school districts. Building on previous research, the study focuses on retention policies and how they align with the state's Pupil Promotion and Retention regulations. The author conducted a content analysis of retention policies in 9 elementary school districts and interviewed 11 kindergarten through sixth-grade teachers to explore their views on retention criteria, interventions before and during the

retention year, and the effectiveness of retention practices. The methodology included an Interview Protocol, Sentence Completion Activity, and Self-Ranking Scale to gather data and triangulate findings. Four key themes emerged from the data: (1) comprehensive, data-driven decision-making for retention, (2) varied interventions based on purpose and implementation, (3) individualized attention and academic/social development during retention, and (4) potential negative effects of ineffective or inappropriate interventions. The study found that teachers considered differentiated instruction in small groups or one-on-one tutoring as the most effective form of intervention, while non-differentiated whole-group instruction was viewed as ineffective, an interesting insight into some alternative strategies teachers feel could be more effective than retention. Overall, teachers expressed mixed opinions on retention; some believed it was beneficial when done with appropriate interventions, while others questioned its overall effectiveness.

This dissertation is relevant to the topic of whether elementary students should be held back if they are behind in their development, as it highlights both the potential benefits and drawbacks of retention practices. It provides insight into how retention is implemented in various school districts and how interventions can impact the effectiveness of retention as an educational strategy. The study also sheds light on the fact that while retention is often seen as a last resort, districts are not legally required to track or collect data on the number of students retained, which can result in inconsistent practices. Moreover, the study underscores the importance of providing targeted interventions, particularly with research showing that retained students may experience short-term benefits but often fail to maintain them long-term, potentially leading to higher dropout rates. Lastly, it highlights the perceptions and opinions of the teachers

who know their students' needs better than any researchers and have strong insights into what strategies work best. These insights are essential for informing more equitable and effective retention policies that prioritize student development, both socially and academically.

Clark, M. G., & Gibbs, B. G. (2025). Retention and educational inequalities in the U.S.. *Educational Policy*, 39(1), 44-76. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08959048231209258>

In this article, Clark and Gibbs examine the impact of grade retention on educational inequalities in U.S. elementary schools. Clark and Gibbs aim to investigate the implications of grade retention in U.S. elementary schools, focusing on its potential to reinforce educational inequalities. They seek to understand how retention affects long-term academic outcomes and disciplinary practices, particularly for marginalized groups. Using national data from the Future of Families and Child Wellbeing Study (2014–2017) and logistic regression, they analyze predictors of elementary school retention and its long-term academic and disciplinary outcomes. This study uses data from the Future of Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS), a nationally representative sample that includes 3,004 youth from 77 U.S. cities. The sample encompasses diverse racial and ethnic groups, including Black/African American, Hispanic/Latino, and White students. The authors employ logistic regression to identify predictors of grade retention and assess its effects on long-term academic and disciplinary outcomes.

The key finding is that retention does not improve academic performance in subjects like English or Math. Additionally, the study reveals that retention is linked to increased exclusionary discipline, particularly for Black students, aligning with concerns about the School-to-Prison Pipeline (STPP). Despite retention being unrelated to family

income or race as predictors, boys were more likely to be retained than girls. The article is directly relevant to the debate on whether elementary students should be held back when behind in their development. The findings suggest that retention does not lead to improved academic outcomes, and in fact, may contribute to long-term disciplinary issues for certain student groups, particularly Black students. This highlights the potential harm of retention as an educational strategy, especially when it disproportionately affects marginalized students and may reinforce existing inequalities. The authors advocate for considering alternative approaches that address underlying issues, such as socioeconomic disparities and unequal disciplinary practices, rather than relying on retention as a solution.

Hughes, J. N., West, S. G., Kim, H., & Bauer, S. S. (2018). Effect of early grade retention on school completion: A prospective study. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 110*(7), 974–991. <https://doi.org/10.1037/edu0000243>

In this 14-year prospective study, Hughes and colleagues investigate the long-term effects of grade retention in elementary school (Grades 1–5) on high school completion outcomes, including obtaining a high school diploma, GED, or dropping out. The authors aim to examine whether early retention impacts students' likelihood of completing high school, using a rigorous statistical approach to equate retained students with continuously promoted peers based on various covariates. The study included 734 academically at-risk, ethnically diverse students from Texas, with a mean age of 6.57 years at the start of the study. The authors used propensity score weighting to match retained students (sample of 256) with those who were promoted (sample of 478), controlling for 65 variables assessed in Grade 1. The results indicated that retention

significantly increased the likelihood of dropping out of high school, despite no significant impact on graduation versus GED outcomes. Additionally, the negative effects of retention were most pronounced for African American and Hispanic girls. The study emphasizes that, although grade retention does not harm students' academic achievement or motivation in the short term, it significantly increases the risk of dropping out before earning a high school diploma. This research highlights that retention, while not immediately detrimental to academic performance, can have negative long-term consequences for student outcomes.

The article is highly relevant to the topic of whether elementary students should be held back if they are behind in their development. Hughes et al.'s findings provide crucial evidence that retention in elementary grades may lead to higher dropout rates later in a student's academic career, suggesting that alternatives to retention should be considered for students who are struggling in early grades. The study's findings can help inform policy debates about retention and provide evidence for educators and policymakers on the importance of addressing developmental delays and academic struggles without resorting to retention.

Hwang, S. H. J., & Cappella, E. (2018). Rethinking early elementary grade retention: Examining long-term academic and psychosocial outcomes. *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness*, 11(4), 559-587. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19345747.2018.1496500>

In this article, Hwang and Cappella investigate the long-term effects of early elementary grade retention on academic achievement and psychosocial outcomes, building upon prior research by using causal analysis methods. The study uses a nationally representative data set from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study,

Kindergarten Class 1998–1999 (ECLS-K), which tracks a cohort of students from kindergarten through eighth grade. The authors utilize propensity score methods to compare students who were retained in first or second grade with those who were similar in observed characteristics but promoted. By analyzing academic and psychosocial outcomes six or seven years later, they find that retention significantly negatively affects reading achievement, although no consistent effects were observed for other academic or psychosocial outcomes. The study highlights that while grade retention is a common intervention in elementary schools, its effectiveness is limited, particularly in reading achievement.

This study is crucial for informing the ongoing debate over whether elementary students who are behind in their development should be retained. The findings show that early grade retention has lasting negative effects on reading achievement, suggesting that retention may not be an effective intervention for struggling students in the long term. The study's use of a nationally representative sample and rigorous methodological approach adds weight to its conclusions, providing valuable evidence for policymakers and educators when considering retention as a strategy. The implications for educational practice call for a reconsideration of retention policies and emphasize the need for more effective, long-term interventions.

Kramer, S. V., & Schuhl, S. (2023). *Acceleration for all: A how-to guide for overcoming learning gap*. Solution Tree.

In *Acceleration for All*, authors Sharon Kramer and Sarah Schuhl provide a comprehensive guide aimed at helping K–12 educators and leaders bridge student learning gaps through a mindset shift from remediation to acceleration. While not directly

related to the topic of holding students back, the ideas presented in this book provide valuable insights for helping students who are behind in their development and provide alternative solutions to avoid resorting to grade retention. The authors argue that all students deserve to learn at grade level or beyond, positioning acceleration as an essential aspect of educational equity. They offer practical, research-based strategies designed to ensure that all students receive sustained accelerated learning. These strategies emphasize core instructional practices, collaborative team action, and the development of a culture of collective efficacy within schools. The book addresses critical elements such as shifting from deficit thinking to strengths-based thinking, ensuring all students have access to grade-level learning, and supporting collaborative leadership. Key elements include the development of learning cycles that integrate instruction, assessment, interventions, and extensions, as well as continuous improvement processes for sustained student success.

While it may seem less specifically tied to the to the discussion of whether elementary students should be held back if they fall behind in their development compared to the other sources in this annotated bibliography, this book's approach is still highly relevant. Many studies have shown that retention is not an effective long-term solution for struggling students, and this book offers valuable alternatives. By focusing on acceleration instead of remediation, Kramer and Schuhl propose a solution that ensures all students are continually challenged at grade level. This approach may prevent the need for retention by addressing learning gaps early on through proactive strategies, including targeted interventions, personalized support, and fostering a culture of high expectations for all students. Given that other research suggests retention can lead to

negative outcomes, such as lower self-esteem and disengagement, this book provides an essential framework for helping students catch up without the adverse effects of being held back. The book's emphasis on a strengths-based, solution-oriented approach offers educators practical tools to provide the support needed for every student to succeed academically.

Neitzel, A. J., Lake, C., Pellegrini, M., & Slavin, R. E. (2022). A synthesis of quantitative research on programs for struggling readers in elementary schools. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 57(1), 149–179. <https://doi.org/10.1002/rrq.379>

This article examined how different reading programs helped elementary school students who have trouble with reading. The authors reviewed 65 studies evaluating the effectiveness of various reading interventions for elementary students with reading difficulties. Most studies were randomized experiments, and the synthesis found strong positive effects for one-to-one and small-group tutoring. It didn't matter whether the tutor was a teacher or a teaching assistant, as both were equally effective. Whole-class cooperative learning strategies that included additional tutoring for struggling readers also yielded very positive results, a strategy that worked really well for struggling readers and benefited more students overall. The authors highlight that aligned interventions within an RTI (Response to Intervention) model are most effective. Overall, the research shows that struggling readers can make strong progress when the right support is provided through structured intervention programs. The article is particularly relevant to the retention debate as it provides evidence that well-implemented reading interventions can close achievement gaps, offering credible alternatives to holding students back for reading struggles.

Redding, C. (2022). Is teacher-student and student-principal racial/ethnic matching related to elementary school grade retention? *AERA Open*, 8(1), 1-16.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/23328584211067534>

The purpose of this study was to explore the impact of racial/ethnic matching between students, teachers, and principals on the likelihood of elementary school grade retention, and to examine if this matching could explain disparities in grade retention rates. Using data from the *Early Childhood Longitudinal Study: 2010-2011* cohort, Redding analyzed the retention rates of students in kindergarten through fourth grade, focusing on the relationship between grade retention and student-teacher and student-principal racial/ethnic matching. The study also investigated how these relationships might be moderated by factors such as region, gender, and retention policies. The sample included 33,420 student-year observations from 7,590 unique students. The results revealed that although racial/ethnic disproportionalities in grade retention existed, with Black students being retained at higher rates than White students, no significant evidence was found that racial/ethnic matching between students and their teachers or principals reduced the probability of grade retention. Furthermore, when controlling for student characteristics like academic performance and behavior, racial/ethnic disparities in retention rates diminished. The study suggests that factors like standardized test scores and classroom behavior play a stronger role in grade retention decisions than racial/ethnic matching.

This article is relevant to the debate on whether elementary students should be held back when behind in their development, as it highlights that grade retention remains a persistent practice despite mixed evidence regarding its effectiveness. It adds something

specific and different to the conversation by focusing on how grade retention impacts different racial demographics, making unique observations about the lack of impact that racial/ethnic matching between students and their teachers or principals had on student success. The study suggests that retention is influenced more by academic performance and behaviors rather than racial/ethnic factors, challenging the assumption that matching students with teachers and principals of the same race might improve retention outcomes. This is an interesting and somewhat surprising finding that adds depth to the discussion on the topic. It also underscores the complexity of grade retention policies, particularly in the context of racial/ethnic disparities.

Strong, J. Z., & Anderson, B. E. (2024). Effects of a summer tutoring program on reading achievement in grades K-5. *Reading & Writing Quarterly*, 40(5), 456-472.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/10573569.2023.2266807>

In this study, the authors evaluate the effects of an 18-day summer tutoring program designed to improve reading achievement for students in grades K-5. The program, which provided 15 minutes of differentiated reading instruction (DRI) and 30 minutes of interactive read-aloud (IRA) lessons daily, involved 179 students from an urban elementary school. Participants were grouped based on their skill profiles, with each group receiving targeted instruction in specific areas such as phonemic awareness, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. The study employed paired-samples statistical tests to analyze pre-test and post-test data on letter-sound knowledge, decoding skills, oral reading fluency, and academic reading attitudes. The results indicated significant gains in letter-sound knowledge and decoding skills for some groups, particularly those in the phonemic awareness and word recognition (PAWR) and word recognition and

fluency (WRAF) groups. However, there were no significant gains in oral reading fluency for the fluency and comprehension (FAC) group, and negative results for the vocabulary and comprehension (VAC) group. The findings also indicated no evidence of summer learning loss in academic reading attitudes and showed that tutors were able to implement the program with acceptable fidelity.

This article is relevant to the question of whether elementary students should be held back if they are behind in their development because it demonstrates an alternative approach to addressing reading deficits—summer tutoring. The study suggests that targeted tutoring, especially in the areas of phonemic awareness and decoding, can help struggling students improve their reading skills without negatively affecting their attitudes toward reading. This provides evidence that interventions like summer tutoring may be effective in addressing academic delays and could be a preferable option to retention, which is often associated with negative long-term effects. Overall, the findings in this study suggest that summer school/tutoring is a far more practical and effective approach for narrowing learning gaps without holding students back.

Virtusio, L. (2024). *Elementary summer school: Culturally responsive practices and academic outcomes for English learner students in grades 4–6* (Doctoral dissertation, Loyola Marymount University). ProQuest LLC.

Virtusio's mixed-method study examined the academic and cultural responsiveness of a voluntary summer program for English Learners (ELs) in grades 4–6. Qualitative data from staff interviews and quantitative data from assessment scores showed that while EL students improved in English language arts, math, and language

proficiency. EL students who attended summer school increased their scaled scores in English language arts (ELA), math, and English Language Proficiency. This was a very promising finding, as there was a significant change in scores from before to after the summer school program for these EL students. The study found that summer school was a powerful educational practice to help address the needs of EL students. While not specific to the topic of retention, the findings of this study demonstrate how effective summer school can be with students with academic challenges, or in this case, students learning a new language. In other words, this study suggests that summer school can benefit academically vulnerable groups like English learners, offering a valuable alternative to retention.

Walker, Q. D., Grant, N., Johnson, C., & Rollins, C. W. (2021). The intersection of trauma, mental health, and academic performance among school-aged youth. *International Journal of the Whole Child*, 6(2), 36–52.

Walker and colleagues explore how trauma and mental health challenges, especially those intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic, affect the academic performance of school-aged children. The article synthesizes evidence linking trauma exposure to declining academic outcomes and highlights the need for trauma-informed educational practices. The authors advocate for schools to implement evidence-based interventions that address students' emotional and psychological needs alongside academic instruction. This article is relevant to the topic of this paper in three ways. Firstly, it demonstrates the link between trauma or mental health challenges and poor academic performance, highlighting how this could be a factor in some students who are struggling academically. Secondly, it shows an impactful connection between interventions that address students'

emotional and psychological needs and improved academic performance. Lastly, it advocates for and verifies the validity of several interventions that could be more viable options than retention, or at least valuable tools to utilize alongside other interventions. More specifically, the authors emphasize the need for flexible ways to deliver instruction and address student social and emotional needs. They advocated for teaching mindfulness in schools, encouraging parental involvement, and providing counsellors to students exhibiting behavioural problems and/or tardiness. Their findings suggest these tactics will not only mitigate trauma and mental health challenges but also assist struggling students. Overall, the strategies discussed in this paper were found to be very reliable and should be considered by educators and practitioners as viable alternatives to retention.

## **Research Synthesis & Recommendations**

### **Introduction**

Grade retention is the practice of having students repeat a grade level when they have not met academic or developmental benchmarks. Whether retention is effective has long been one of the most debated topics in education. Those in favour of retention argue that advancing students who have not mastered essential skill sets them up for continued failure and academic frustration. According to Kauchak and Eggen (2020), supporters believe retention provides students with extra time to catch up academically and reinforces the importance of mastering foundational content before progressing. This approach, they argue, sends a strong message about accountability and the value of learning. However, there are also those who oppose retention, pointing to research that challenges the effectiveness of grade retention, especially in

the long term. Studies show that students who are retained often face increased risks of academic disengagement, reduced self-esteem, and a higher likelihood of dropping out of school altogether (Kauchak & Eggen, 2020). Many experts and educators now advocate for alternatives such as targeted interventions, tutoring, and summer programs, which aim to address learning gaps more effectively without the social and emotional toll of repeating a grade.

Both sides have supporters who are confident in their stance, indicating the need for more research to determine whether retention is effective. Thus, this paper attempts to fill that gap with a thorough synthesis to explore the question: Should elementary school students be retained when they fall behind in their academic or developmental progress? Through a synthesis of current research on the academic, social, and emotional outcomes of grade retention, this paper will analyze the effectiveness of retention as an educational strategy. Based on the findings, it will offer informed recommendations for educators and policymakers to consider when addressing student learning gaps in the early grades. Ultimately, the goal is to determine whether retention supports or hinders student development, and which alternatives, if any, provide more equitable and beneficial outcomes.

## **Synthesis**

The question of whether elementary school students should be retained when they fall behind in their academic or developmental progress is a critical issue in educational policy and practice. The research reviewed in this paper presents numerous studies on the effectiveness and implications of grade retention. Overall, there is consensus that retention, though sometimes beneficial in the short term, often fails to produce lasting positive effects on student achievement and may exacerbate negative outcomes, particularly for marginalized students. The findings

suggest a need for alternative interventions that better support struggling students while minimizing potential harms associated with retention.

Hwang & Cappella (2018) found that the effectiveness of grade retention is limited, particularly in reading achievement. Clark & Gibbs (2025) also found retention to be ineffective, with no indication of improvement in academic performance in subjects like English or Math. Other studies point out that grade retention can offer some short-term academic improvements, particularly in the first year after retention, but ultimately does not lead to sustained success. Blazer (2019) highlights that retained students may show temporary academic gains, but these improvements are not sustained over time and are often more detrimental in the long run. Likewise, Hughes et al. (2018) found that over time, retention increases the risk of high school dropout, especially for minority students, despite no significant impact on academic performance during the retention year. This suggests that while retention may help students catch up academically in the short term, it does not address the root causes of their academic struggles or prevent long-term disengagement from school.

Additionally, studies emphasize the social and emotional toll that retention can have on elementary students. Carrasco-Tolentino (2017) notes that while some teachers view retention as beneficial with the right interventions, others express concerns about its negative impact on students' social and emotional well-being, particularly when retention is not followed by personalized support. Retained students may face stigmatization, lower self-esteem, and feelings of failure, which can contribute to disengagement and behaviour problems. Clark and Gibbs (2025) further argue that retention can perpetuate educational inequalities, disproportionately affecting minority students and reinforcing systemic disparities. This is consistent with findings from Redding (2022), which show that retention decisions are often influenced more by

standardized test scores and behaviour than by racial/ethnic factors, suggesting that retention policies may not address the underlying structural issues contributing to academic underperformance. Overall, the research indicates that retention is a largely ineffective tactic at the elementary level that often does more harm than good.

## **Recommendations**

As a result, three recommendations can be made from this research. Firstly, retention should only be used as a last resort after intervention strategies have been implemented throughout the school year. Secondly, practitioners should explore summer school programs that address learning gaps as an alternative to retention. Thirdly, if retention is utilized, the student should not be left to fend for themselves; instead, they should have additional academic and social-emotional support during their retention year. Ultimately, not every student will excel in school, especially not in every subject. This is acceptable within reason, as academia is not for everyone. However, basic skills in literacy, math, critical thinking, comprehension, etc., are vitally important to all children regardless of the career they wish to pursue. Without these basic skills, a child simply cannot develop into a functioning adult. This is why it is crucial to ensure that no student is left behind, particularly at the elementary school level. When a student falls behind the standards of their age, the administrators and teachers must help them eliminate those gaps in ways that are least detrimental to them and the students around them. These three recommendations will help in reaching the goal of leaving no student behind.

### *Recommendation One: Implement Intervention Strategies During the School Year*

Firstly, retention decisions should not be made lightly and should only be used as a last resort. As discussed above, retention is largely ineffective and can even be detrimental in many

cases. Policymakers should reconsider retention as a blanket strategy for struggling students, especially considering the long-term negative outcomes identified in several studies (Hughes et al., 2018; Clark & Gibbs, 2025). Instead, schools should invest in early and targeted intervention programs and accelerated learning programs, including tutoring, mentoring, and family engagement strategies, to address academic struggles before retention becomes a consideration. These alternative strategies show promise in addressing developmental delays without the drawbacks of retention. Thus, instead of retention, schools should provide additional academic and social-emotional support for students who are struggling. Emphasizing holistic support for struggling students would better address the root causes of academic challenges while minimizing the potential harms associated with retention.

Teachers should collaborate with students and parents to identify the most effective academic support for each child's unique learning needs, addressing gaps as soon as they are identified. Schools should approach administrators and the school board to secure funding for both academic and social-emotional support resources. Teachers and special education staff, where applicable, should be consulted to ensure they are prepared to tailor their strategies to meet student needs, and parents should be kept informed for transparency and support at home. To effectively monitor progress, students should be assessed within the first month of school to determine their math, literacy, and reading levels. From there, interventions should be applied for students who are significantly behind, with continuous adaptation of the strategies throughout the school year. Teachers will track academic progress and attendance, while researchers can synthesize data across different school boards to help improve intervention strategies. Resources needed for these interventions include curriculum materials, funding for tutoring and after-school programs, and access to counsellors and mental health support services. Scheduling software

should be used to plan and track interventions, while tools like Google Classroom can facilitate communication with parents and monitor student progress. This comprehensive approach will ensure that learning gaps are addressed in a timely and effective manner.

Kramer and Schuhl (2023) advocate for an acceleration model, which focuses on providing continuous, grade-level learning opportunities and support tailored to students' needs. This model emphasizes proactive interventions, such as differentiated instruction and collaboration between educators, rather than waiting for students to "catch up" before they move on to the next grade level. These programs should be designed to provide targeted interventions in specific areas of need, such as reading or mathematics, and offer continuous learning opportunities at grade level. Such programs would help students close learning gaps without the negative impact of retention on their social-emotional development and long-term outcomes (Kramer & Schuhl, 2023). A critical component to this is proactivity. Addressing these gaps early, preferably at the start of the year, can have a significant impact on students' academic progress. In other words, instead of waiting until the end of the year to fail the student and hold them back a year, teachers and administrators should be proactive in their approach by applying different strategies, such as after-school tutoring, differentiated instruction, flexible grading, or one-on-one teaching with a teacher assistant separate from the main classroom. Quantitative studies have shown that one-on-one tutoring is most effective for struggling readers (Neitzel et al., 2022), a sentiment that teachers agreed with, arguing that it is the best intervention strategy (Carrasco-Tolentino, 2017).

Another option is providing alternative testing/grading methods, such as personalizing the standards to set realistic benchmarks for them or assigning marks based on completion and effort. Making grading and deadlines less strict and more flexible for a struggling student to

ensure they still learn the material, but have less emphasis placed on the marks they receive, could alleviate pressure and stress on them. This can be a bit of a slippery slope, as you do not want students to abuse this and skate by on laziness, which is why it would be important for the teacher to hold the student accountable to still complete their schoolwork to their best ability. It is an approach that would not work for every student, particularly some with behavioural issues, but it could be quite effective in the right context. For instance, students who suffer from anxiety or stress and are overwhelmed by school or those who have seemingly given up because they are behind and feel they cannot meet academic standards. Temporarily lowering the standards or removing their need to reach certain standards could allow these students to simply focus on completing the assignments at their own level and allow the teachers to help them gradually progress without feeling overwhelmed. This would also apply to students dealing with mental health issues or trauma, where flexibility is vital in helping them maintain their academic standing (Walker et al., 2021). Similarly, I would encourage schools to have support staff to help students with social-emotional needs, as these can often have drastically detrimental effects on their academic performance (Blazer, 2019). Better addressing these needs first would target the root cause of their academic struggles and help improve their confidence, motivation, and ambition, leading to better academic outcomes (Walker et al., 2021).

Overall, these alternative approaches should be prioritized over retention strategies. Teachers, parents, and administrators need to be proactive to address learning gaps early in the school year and resort to retention only after other alternatives have been exhausted. In those cases, decisions to retain students should not be based solely on academic performance but should also consider developmental progress, emotional well-being, and the availability of targeted support. Teachers and educators should consider a variety of factors, such as social and

emotional adjustment and academic growth, to ensure retention decisions align with students' overall needs (Blazer, 2019; Carrasco-Tolentino, 2017). Overall, retention at the elementary level should be avoided unless all other measures have already been exhausted.

### *Recommendation Two: Prioritize Summer Programs Rather Than Retention*

If none of those intervention strategies were enough to guide the student back to the expected standards during the school year, practitioners should utilize the summer months as an opportunity to bridge those learning gaps before the next school year. The research strongly encourages schools to explore summer alternatives to retention, such as summer school, summer tutoring, or acceleration programs that address learning gaps without holding students back. When well-implemented, these summer programs have shown promise in improving academic outcomes, particularly in literacy and math, while also providing a cost-effective way to help students make progress without the negative long-term effects of retention (Kramer & Schuhl, 2023; Strong & Anderson, 2024).

To maximize the benefits of summer programs, schools should develop and promote summer school or tutoring programs as a proactive measure. This approach ensures that students receive timely and targeted support, which is essential for closing learning gaps effectively before the new academic year begins. The planning for these programs should take place during the school year, particularly in the spring, with the actual program running during the first month of summer break. These programs should be coordinated by principals and administrators, who will oversee the logistics, curriculum, and overall implementation, while teachers will run the program. Schools should approach the school board and administrators to secure funding, plan logistics,

and ensure proper staffing. Necessary resources include summer teachers or staff, curriculum and materials for summer school, funding for the programs, and online platforms to engage parents and monitor student progress.

Additionally, summer teachers should be informed about the specific academic and behavioural needs of the students, as well as the program's goals and targeted learning gaps. Parents should also be consulted for support and consent, ensuring their involvement in the process. To monitor the effectiveness of the summer programs, teachers should track student attendance and progress through weekly assessments and pre-/post-program tests. Principals will track overall academic improvements, including progress into the next school year and graduation rates, while researchers can analyze data from various summer programs to offer insights for future improvements.

The success of such approaches aligns with the findings from Strong and Anderson (2024), who demonstrate that summer tutoring programs targeting reading skills can effectively close learning gaps without the harmful effects of grade retention. However, the findings suggest that the effectiveness of such programs may vary depending on the specific areas of focus and the students' needs (Strong & Anderson, 2024). The results indicated significant gains in letter-sound knowledge and decoding skills for some groups, particularly those in the phonemic awareness, word recognition, and fluency. However, there were no significant gains in oral reading fluency, vocabulary, or comprehension. Overall, this is encouraging because it shows that summer tutoring can be effective, as shown by the drastic improvements in phonemic awareness, word recognition, and fluency. It seems likely that the lack of progress in other skills could have more to do with that program not prioritizing those skills enough, rather than a flaw with summer tutoring overall. Making adaptations and improvements to their approach and content to better

incorporate these areas would likely lead to improvements as well. Overall, the findings in this study suggest that summer school/tutoring is a far more practical and effective approach for narrowing learning gaps without holding students back (Strong & Anderson, 2024).

These findings have long been supported by research, as the idea that summer school can have a positive impact on student achievement is not new, with numerous studies from the past few decades finding similar results (Cooper et al., 2000; Matsudaira, 2008; Hall et al., 2017). Likewise, more recent studies have also shown that summer school helps elementary ESL students catch up in literacy (Virtusio, 2024) and was an effective tool for bringing elementary students back to their grade-level standards after Covid (Callen et al., 2023), both of which further demonstrate that summer tutoring is effective for bridging learning gaps.

Intriguingly, some studies have shown improvements in math/STEM but not literacy, while other studies have shown improvements in literacy but not math. However, this is encouraging, as the lack of success in one area in one study is counteracted by the success in that same area in a different study, which shows that summer school can be effective for both math and literacy if the content and teaching are well implemented. It is also likely that some strategies will be more effective for some students than others, and some students will inevitably fall through the cracks, as has always been the case. However, it does seem definitive that summer school is a tactic that can at least mitigate and limit these cases. It is also a very cost-effective strategy that makes good use of school locations during the summer months when they are otherwise largely unutilized (Matsudaira, 2008). Overall, the research is conclusive and consistent that summer tutoring programs are a more effective tactic than retention for elementary students who are behind.

*Recommendation Three: Provide Additional Support When Retention is Utilized*

Many school boards are currently utilizing retention strategies despite their relative ineffectiveness. Those school boards should consider the first two recommendations first, but if they insist on continuing with their retention-based strategy, they must at least do so more effectively. Likewise, for schools that do attempt both prior recommendations to no avail, this third recommendation could be an effective last resort. The teachers and administrators cannot view the student as a lost cause and should never give up on their potential. While retention is rarely as effective as the prior strategies suggested, it has been shown to work for some students (Blazer, 2019; Hughes et al., 2018).

In scenarios where retention is utilized, the research recommends providing additional academic and social-emotional support during the retention year. This includes one-on-one tutoring, after-school programs, peer support, and counselling to mitigate the emotional and social impacts of retention. Teachers, principals, and parents should work collaboratively to ensure the student receives the appropriate support, with clear accountability for progress tracking and regular evaluations. Intervention strategies should begin at the start of the retention year and continue throughout the entire academic year, with a flexible approach that adapts to the evolving needs of the students. To support these interventions, funding for tutors, after-school programs, counsellors, and mental health services are necessary, along with tools such as scheduling software to facilitate intervention planning and progress tracking.

The research argues that if retention is deemed necessary, it should be accompanied by differentiated instructional interventions, including counseling, individualized instruction, tutoring, after-school programs, and peer support. This approach helps ensure that students are not simply held back but are instead provided with the resources needed to succeed, mitigating the negative impacts of retention on long-term academic performance (Carrasco-Tolentino, 2017;

Blazer, 2019). Teachers, principals, and parents all play crucial roles in implementing these interventions. Teachers provide direct academic support, while principals oversee the implementation of these programs. Parents are encouraged to support their children at home, ensuring alignment between school and home efforts.

For successful implementation, it is essential to approach the school board and administrators for policy approval, funding, and permission. Teachers, tutors, counsellors, and special education staff should be consulted to develop tailored strategies for each student. Parents must be informed to ensure transparency and support throughout the process, as research shows that increased parental involvement can have a significant positive impact on student academic performance (Walker et al., 2021). This can be further aided with the use of platforms like Google Classroom that engage parents and help them monitor their child's progress, ensuring a collaborative approach to the student's development. Teachers will track academic progress, attendance, and participation, while school boards and administrators monitor the overall effectiveness of the program, looking at graduation rates and program outcomes. Researchers will synthesize data across different school boards to evaluate the broader impact.

The social and emotional support may be particularly important given that the student will be in a classroom with an entirely new group of classmates, while all their former classmates have moved on to the next grade. This can present many challenges, including feelings of embarrassment and shame, a lack of relationships in the new classroom, and feelings of loneliness and lack of support (Blazer, 2019). Due to this, both Blazer (2019) and Carrasco-Tolentino (2017) emphasize that when retention is deemed necessary, it must be accompanied by tailored interventions, such as individualized instruction, counselling, and peer support, to

prevent these negative emotional outcomes, social isolation, or disengagement. These supports should be proactive and ensure that students are not left behind academically or emotionally.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, while grade retention is a common practice for addressing developmental delays, it often fails to provide lasting benefits and may exacerbate existing disparities. While there is no one-size-fits-all solution, the research is clear that retention is rarely the most effective response to students' developmental delays, and thus, should only be used after other options have been exhausted. The studies reviewed suggest that retention should be used sparingly, only when accompanied by comprehensive, individualized support systems. Moreover, policymakers and educators should consider more inclusive and effective interventions, such as summer tutoring or acceleration programs, which address academic struggles without the social and emotional consequences of being held back. Ultimately, if the three recommendations shared by this paper are implemented within all schools, learning gaps should substantially decline, bringing us closer to the goal of leaving no student behind. By prioritizing timely interventions and proactive support systems over retention, schools can promote equity, enhance academic outcomes, and better serve the development of all students.

## References

- Blazer, C. (2019). *Elementary school grade retention* (Information Capsule Vol. 1805). Research Services, Miami-Dade County Public Schools.
- Callen, I., Carbonari, M. V., DeArmond, M., Dewey, D., Dizon-Ross, E., Goldhaber, D., Isaacs, J., Kane, T. J., Kuhfeld, M., McDonald, A., McEachin, A., Morton, E., Muroga, A., & Staiger, D. O. (2023). *Summer school as a learning loss recovery strategy after COVID-19: Evidence from summer 2022. Road to COVID recovery research brief* (CALDER Working Paper No. 291-0823). National Center for Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research (CALDER). <https://caldercenter.org/publications/summer-school-learning-loss-recovery-strategy-after-covid-19-evidence-summer-2022>
- Carrasco-Tolentino, S. (2017). *Elementary grade retention policies and teachers' perceptions on retention practices and interventions* (Publication No. 10256477) [Doctoral dissertation, Azusa Pacific University]. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses.
- Clark, M. G., & Gibbs, B. G. (2025). Retention and educational inequalities in the U.S. *Educational Policy*, 39(1), 44-76. <https://doi.org/10.1177/089590482312092>
- Cooper, H., Charlton, K., Valentine, J. C., & Muhlenbruck, L. (2000). Making the most of summer school: A meta-analytic and narrative review. *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development*, 65(1), Serial No. 260. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3181549>
- Hall, G., Fay Poston, K., & Dennehy, J. (2017). Summer learning programs: Investigating strengths and challenges. In N.L. Deutsch (ed.), *After-School Programs to Promote*

Positive Youth Development (1-2o). Advances in Child and Family Policy and Practice.

[https://www.wcwonline.org/pdf/ghall/Hall\\_et\\_al\\_\(2017\)\\_summer\\_learning.pdf](https://www.wcwonline.org/pdf/ghall/Hall_et_al_(2017)_summer_learning.pdf)

Hughes, J. N., West, S. G., Kim, H., & Bauer, S. S. (2018). Effect of early grade retention on school completion: A prospective study. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 110*(7), 974–991. <https://doi.org/10.1037/edu0000243>

Hwang, S. H. J., & Cappella, E. (2018). Rethinking early elementary grade retention: Examining long-term academic and psychosocial outcomes. *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness, 11*(4), 559-587. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19345747.2018.1496500>

Kauchak, D., & Eggen, P. (2020). Introduction to Teaching: Becoming a Professional (7th ed.). Pearson Education (US). <https://reader2.yuzu.com/books/9780135760468>

Kramer, S. V., & Schuhl, S. (2023). *Acceleration for all: A how-to guide for overcoming learning gap*. Solution Tree.

Matsudaira, J. D. (2008). Mandatory summer school and student achievement. *Journal of Econometrics, 142*(2), 829–850. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jeconom.2007.05.015>

Neitzel, A. J., Lake, C., Pellegrini, M., & Slavin, R. E. (2022). A synthesis of quantitative research on programs for struggling readers in elementary schools. *Reading Research Quarterly, 57*(1), 149–179. <https://doi.org/10.1002/rrq.379>

Redding, C. (2022). Is teacher-student and student-principal racial/ethnic matching related to elementary school grade retention? *AERA Open, 8*(1), 1-16.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/23328584211067534>

Strong, J. Z., & Anderson, B. E. (2024). Effects of a summer tutoring program on reading achievement in grades K-5. *Reading & Writing Quarterly*, 40(5), 456-472.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/10573569.2023.2266807>

Virtusio, L. (2024). *Elementary summer school: Culturally responsive practices and academic outcomes for English learner students in grades 4–6* (Doctoral dissertation, Loyola Marymount University). ProQuest LLC.

Walker, Q. D., Grant, N., Johnson, C., & Rollins, C. W. (2021). The intersection of trauma, mental health, and academic performance among school-aged youth. *International Journal of the Whole Child*, 6(2), 36–52.