



Education by the Numbers: Considering Retention in Light of the Covid-19 Pandemic

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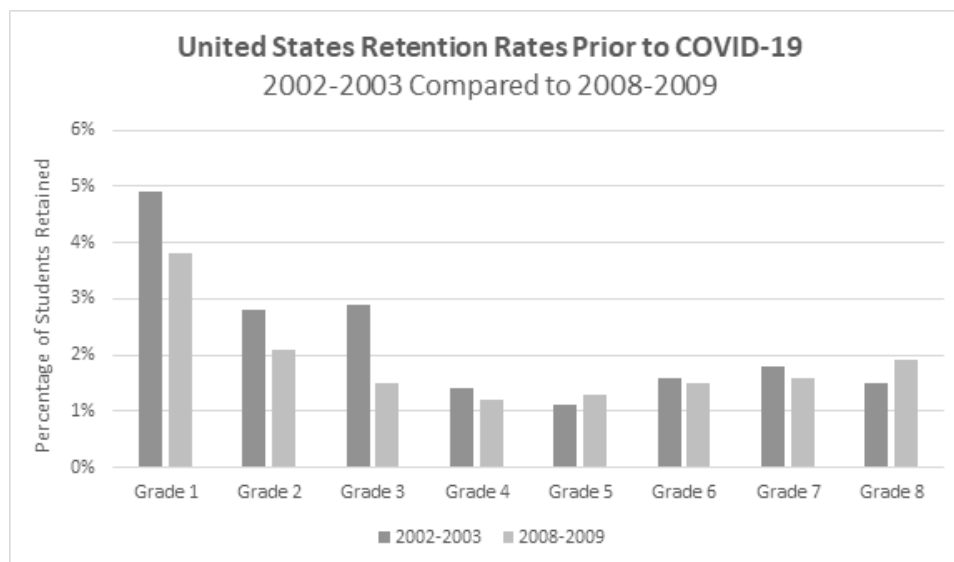
Retention Considered

The issue of retention has been researched and discussed over many years in the United States. According to Kamin and Lamb (2021) “Grade retention is not an educationally advantageous or cost effective solution for supporting struggling students, and may in fact cause more harm in the long run both to individual students and to their districts” (para. 3).

For example, the impact of retaining children in grade has negative impacts on children’s abilities to achieve in school (Kamin & Lamb, 2021). Research also indicates that retained children have an increase in school absences, experience behavioral difficulties, and undergo a decrease in self-esteem (AECF, 2018; Sitrin, 2021). In addition, children retained in the early years of schooling are more apt to drop out of high school, particularly if the students have disabilities, are Black or Hispanic, or English language learners (French & Mauriello, 2021; Hughes et al., 2018; Jacob & Lefgren, 2009; Loughlin, 2022; NASP, 2021). Let’s look at the numbers.

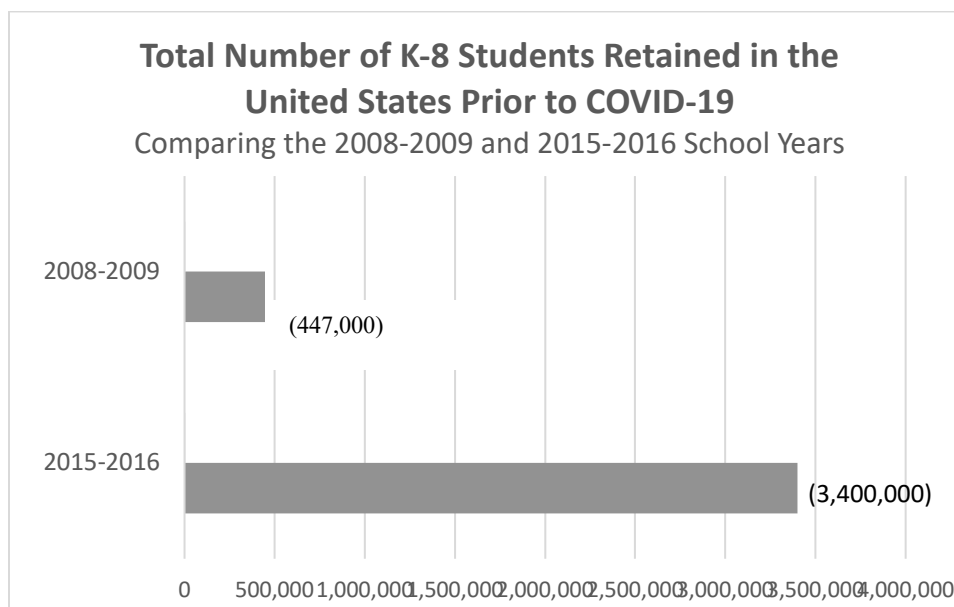
Retention Rates

Consider the retention rates during 2008-2009 for first through eighth grade public schools in the United States. Warren and Saliba (2012) report that the highest retention rates are for first graders at 3.5% in 2008-2009. The lowest retention rates are in grades four through six, although higher in grades two, three, seven and eight. During this time, almost a half-million public school students (447,000) were retained in the 2008-2009 school year. Three out of 10 children were retained in first grade, about 130,000 children.

Figure 1

Note: Based on educational research: Warren & Saliba (2012)

During the 2015-2016 school year, 3.4 million children in the United States repeated one or more grades beginning with kindergarten. See the following chart comparing 2008-2009 to the 2015-2016 retention rates in the United States. The numbers are alarming. The question becomes, “What impact has COVID had on current retention rates?”

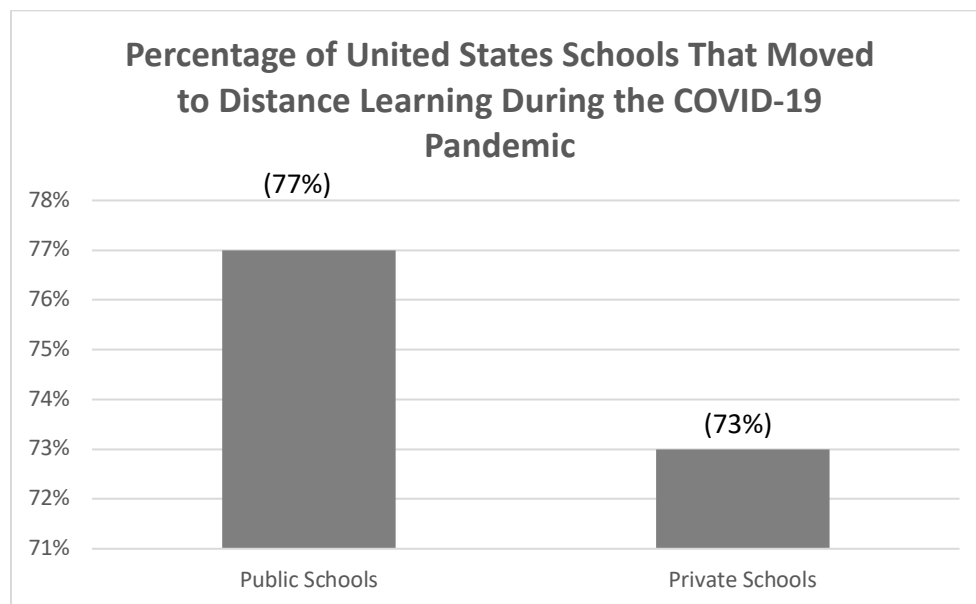
Figure 2

Note: Based on educational research: Loughlin (2022); Warren & Saliba (2012)

COVID-19 Pandemic

At the beginning of the COVID pandemic, spring 2020, most schools in the United States moved to distance education, mostly online learning models: 77% public schools and 73% private schools (NCES, 2022).

Figure 3



Note: National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2022)

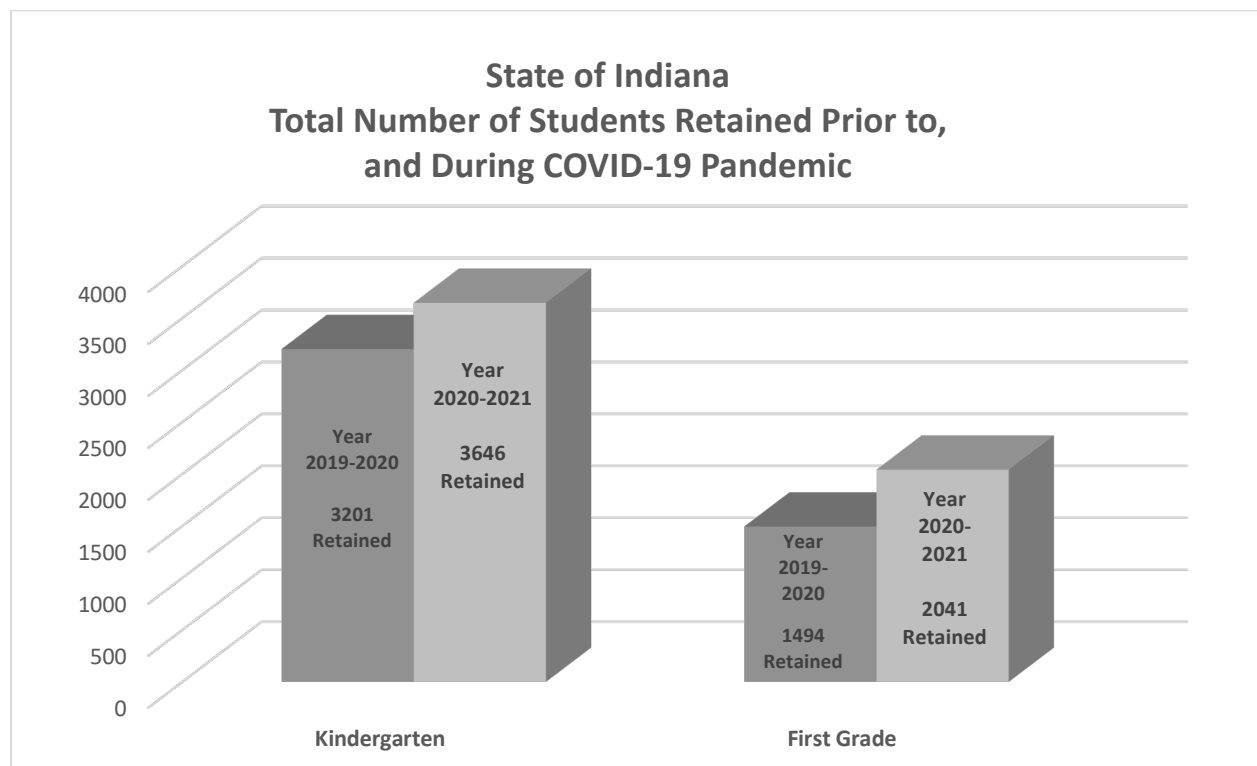
Loss of learning during COVID has amplified the retention issue for some states. According to Loughlin (2022), 22 of 26 states that released their data increased their number of retained children. In South Carolina, West Virginia and Delaware, retention numbers more than doubled; in Pennsylvania, the number of retained students increased from 20,000 to over 45,000 (Schultz & Hollingsworth, 2022). Statistics regarding retention for the entire United States were not available for 2020-2021 or 2021-2022; however, some states did submit their retention figures.

For example, in the state of Indiana, the number of children held back in grade increased during the 2020-2021 school year. Most retentions were in kindergarten and first grade: 3,646 kindergarteners (4.8% of the total statewide) and 2,041 first-graders (2.6% of the total statewide) (Loughlin, 2022). These numbers were a little higher than the 2019-2020 numbers of retained kindergarteners and first-graders, indicating an increase of retention numbers during COVID.

Compared to the previous 2019-2020 school year in Indiana, 3,201 kindergarteners were retained (4% of the total) and 1,494 first graders were retained (1.9% of the total) (Loughlin, 2022). Using actual student numbers, Loughlin (2022) reports that children retained in first grade were up 547 children, or an increase of 36% in 2021-2022, and children retained in kindergarten were up 445 children, an increase of 13.9%.

According to Loughlin (2022), overall, out of 6,771 students during the 2019-2020 school year, 229 children were held back, 3.38% of K-5 children. In 2020-2021, 439 children were retained (6.9%) out of the 6,400 Indiana K-5 enrollment. The COVID pandemic was deemed the most likely factor for the increased retentions. The numbers of retentions started to drop during the 2021-2022 year where 332 children were retained (5.2% of the K-5 enrollment).

Figure 4



Note: Loughlin (2022)

Declines in Reading and Math Scores Since COVID

During 2019 and 2022, reading and math proficiency also fell more than any other period of time in the United States (USA Facts, 2023). According to Sitrin (2021), some estimates suggest that nearly all students in the United States are behind in their reading and math by probably a year or more because of the COVID pandemic.

An automatic retention law, passed in a number of states, requires that children who cannot pass a third-grade reading test be retained. The automatic retention law in Tennessee would retain nearly 66% of third graders if the law is applied. If other states applied similar laws, hundreds of thousands of United States children would be retained (Sitrin, 2021). As one Michigan state senator exclaimed, “It’s a misguided law that was onerous before the pandemic. Now it’s just plain cruel” (Sitrin, 2021, para. 10). During the height of the pandemic, some states suspended the third-grade reading law that used standardized tests to determine who is retained and who is not.

nor socially or emotionally supportive for children's healthy growth and development (Kamin & Lamb, 2021; NASP, 2021). In fact, the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) does not support the use of retention as an intervention strategy for the loss of instruction during COVID-19 (NASP, 2021).

Instead of retention, whether COVID-related or not, educators and researchers recommend various alternatives to retaining children such as tutoring programs (Kraft & Goldstein, 2020; Loughlin, 2022; NASP, 2021), out-of-school support models (Bowden & Wasser Gish, 2021), guidance and family programs (Lapan et al., 2007), community partnerships (Sheldon, 2003), enhanced teacher education programs (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Loughlin, 2022), and alternative educational opportunities such as mixed-age instead of graded school programs (Stone & Burriss, 2019).

In addition, forced retention based on third grade standardized test reading scores, such as implemented in some states, is not recommended (French & Mauriello, 2021; NASP, 2021; Schwartz, 2022). The better option is not retention, but offering children more support to help them in their learning endeavors (AECF, 2018). Collins (2022) concludes, "It feels unfair to retain a child who, through no fault of their own, has been failed by adults. But it's also unfair to fail millions of children, year after year, by not doing what's needed to change how the system works" (para. 18). A world pandemic which impacts the schooling of children should also be considered when choosing between retention and offering children support for educational losses created by a pandemic.

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