Making the Grade

Three models of student grade retention policy and the impact on student performance

Japanese students never repeat a grade. Instead, the needs of struggling students are addressed in the classroom. Teachers differentiate instruction and high-achieving students support their peers. Japan had very few low-performing students on PISA 2015.

The U.S. has a rate of grade repetition at about the OECD average. States vary in their approach to grade retention. Some states allow local districts to set policies while others have statewide policies. Currently, 16 states require students who do not pass a 3rd grade reading test to repeat a year. Grade repetition, particularly when attached to a specific test, often carries a stigma in the U.S. Data from PISA 2012 show that U.S. students who had repeated a grade were reading at a level three full years behind their peers who had not repeated a grade.

The Dutch have one of the highest rates of students repeating a grade in the OECD. The Netherlands school system allows grade-repetition wherever necessary, in an attempt to ensure that as many students as possible reach the same minimum standards sooner or later. Most grade repetition happens in the first two years of primary school. And there is no statistically significant difference in PISA 2012 reading performance between Dutch students who have repeated a grade and those who have not.

For more on how top performing education systems support struggling students, see the Supporting Equity section under each of CIEB’s top performing country profiles.

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