

Guidance on the Use of Grade Retention and Special Education Eligibility to Address Instructional Loss

As states, districts, and individual schools prepare for the 2021–2022 school year, many are grappling with the myriad challenges associated with lost instructional time and other COVID-19 learning disruptions. Some schools may consider the use of retention or evaluation for special education services as a way of addressing these skill gaps. The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) opposes the use of retention as an intervention strategy to mitigate instructional loss during the COVID-19 pandemic, and it urges caution regarding the assumption that special education services are an appropriate way to address COVID-19 instructional loss. Though beyond the scope of this document, school-wide social and emotional support will be foundational to academic instruction and intervention.

INSTRUCTIONAL LOSS

Student experiences during remote learning were highly variable; however, schools should assume that students lost about 25% of instructional time during the 2019–2020 school year (NASP, 2020). It is more challenging to estimate lost instructional time during the 2020–2021 school year on a national scale, given that states and districts varied in the use of in person, virtual, and hybrid models of schooling, as well as the nature and quality of instruction. The broad impact of instructional loss therefore remains unknown, though limited research suggests more significant impacts on math when compared to reading (Kuhfeld et al., 2020) and more significant negative impacts on students of color (Dorn et al., 2020).

Although existing research indicates some students have experienced fewer academic gains than expected, we may not know the full impact of COVID-19 learning disruptions and loss of instructional time due to a lack of assessment data. Because of the timing of school closures, screenings and year-end accountability assessment data may not be available for the 2019–2020 school year (NASP, 2020) and data that are available may not have been obtained under typical conditions. As such, schools should be cautious about making high stakes decisions with these data and respond with culturally responsive, evidence-based, school-wide interventions to address any identified academic skills gaps. More targeted interventions should also be provided to those students who require more intensive academic support. NASP strongly cautions against the use of single metrics (e.g., year-end standardized tests) to make high stakes decisions, including student retention or consideration for special education eligibility.

IMPACT OF RETENTION ON STUDENT OUTCOMES

Retention is a costly intervention with little to no evidence of improving long-term academic outcomes. The majority of studies conducted over the past four decades on the effectiveness of grade retention fail to support its efficacy in remediating academic deficits (e.g., Andrew, 2014; Fruehwirth et al., 2016; Hwang & Cappella, 2019; Jimerson, 2001). In fact, repeating a grade prior to beginning high school increases the risk that a student will drop out even when other variables, including overall academic achievement and disciplinary records, are considered (Hughes et al., 2018; Jacob & Lefgren, 2009; Stearns et al., 2016). Moreover, retained students from minoritized backgrounds drop out at disproportionately higher rates compared with their White peers (Hughes et al., 2018).

There is also evidence of significant racial disparities in retention rates. Students of color are at greater risk of being retained, regardless of school characteristics, such as availability of school resources or whether or not the school is in an urban, suburban, or rural community (Peguero et al., 2018). The use of retention as a way of addressing COVID-19 instructional loss could exacerbate existing inequities in academic achievement and educational opportunities;

particularly given that students from minoritized and low-income backgrounds were disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 (CDC, 2020). For example, these students were less likely to have access to broadband internet and other supports necessary to participate in remote instruction (Chandra et al., 2020) and are more likely to have lost access to critical school-based services. Retention should not be used to remedy disparate access to schooling and school-based supports. This ineffective strategy could compound these losses rather than support student learning and long-term academic outcomes.

Despite the negative outcomes associated with retention, many states have mandatory retention laws, some of which were passed as a response to COVID-19. These mandates could result in hundreds of thousands of students being retained, causing untold academic and social consequences for students. Additionally, these mandates will create larger class sizes that could imperil districts for years to come. We strongly urge states to waive these mandatory retention requirements and instead focus efforts on implementing appropriate evidence-based interventions to address academic needs.

Given the limitations and potential negative impact of grade retention, as well as the considerable evidence that targeted interventions help struggling students improve their academic performance (Peguero et al., 2018), schools should consider alternatives to grade retention for students who are struggling academically. Specifically, school teams should consider the following before retaining a student.

- There is wide research support that retention is not an effective strategy to address academic deficits (e.g., Andrew, 2014; Fruehwirth et al., 2016; Hwang & Cappella, 2019; Jimerson, 2001).
- Under typical circumstances, grade retention is not recommended except in very rare situations when a student has missed a large number of school days (NASP, 2011).
- Students whose performance is substantially below that of grade level peers need a culturally responsive, intensive individualized intervention plan with frequent progress monitoring (Stevenson & Reed, 2017). This plan should include involvement of specialists and relevant related services providers as needed.
- Families should have input when retention is being considered for a student.
- A single assessment score (e.g., year-end standardized assessment) is not sufficient in making this determination, particularly following a period of disrupted educational experiences. Multiple sources of data should be considered.
- Decisions to retain should not simply lead to repeating the same curriculum for a second time. Retained students will need intensive intervention support that goes beyond repetition of material.

SPECIAL EDUCATION CONSIDERATIONS

It will be important to differentiate the need for extra help due to loss of instruction and other COVID-19 related learning disruptions from difficulties that are the result of an educational disability. Students suspected of having an educational disability should be provided with intensified intervention or a special education evaluation in accordance with federal, state, and district policies. However, it is inappropriate to consider special education services as an intervention or accelerated learning strategy to address instructional loss. Academic deficits due to loss of instruction must be addressed differently than deficits that are the result of a disability. School psychologists should not enter a hands-off waiting period with schools, but instead help teachers boost their core instruction to mitigate academic skill gaps. School psychologists can support teachers in planning and delivering class-wide and small group interventions to provide acquisition instruction and interventions for skills that are foundational for subsequent learning at each grade level (NASP, 2020).

We offer the following points to assist schools as they plan to address the unique academic challenges resulting from COVID-19 in the context of special education services.

- Schools must work to reestablish high quality core instruction with grade-level content for every student combined with a robust multitiered system of supports (MTSS), even in virtual or hybrid learning environments.
- Multiple sources of data (e.g., screening data, curriculum-based measurements, progress monitoring data, work samples, portfolios) should be integrated with standardized evaluation assessment results to evaluate student

learning. Refrain from using one metric (e.g., standardized test, single-point-in-time screening) as a basis for high stakes decision making, including retention and consideration for special education.

- Consider that most students have had some form of learning disruption during the 2019–2020 and 2020–2021 school years. Use multiple sources of data to help distinguish between academic gaps related to COVID-19 school closures and those that are related to a suspected disability. School teams should utilize data from before the pandemic, when available, in addition to current data to inform these decisions.
- To broadly address instructional loss, schools should implement class-wide interventions in reading and math for all students and engage in progress monitoring to identify students who may need more intensive instruction.
- Decision teams can use the resulting performance data of students to determine who really needs a diagnostic assessment, individualized instruction, and potentially an eligibility evaluation. Controlling the dose of instruction allows this identification to occur in a more rapid and nimble fashion than would be possible otherwise. It is possible to make a decision about the need for more intensive academic intervention following only 4 weeks of well-implemented class-wide intervention (NASP, 2020).
- Ongoing professional development related to differentiated instruction and class-wide interventions will help school staff better address the varying needs of students.

CONCLUSION

NASP cautions against the use of retention or special education as an intervention for pandemic-related instructional loss. There is substantial research opposing the use of retention under typical circumstances, and therefore it should not be applied following widespread educational disruption. If retention for specific students must be considered, it is critical that families have input on this high-stakes decision, multiple sources of data are considered, and the repeated grade includes access to high quality instruction and intensive intervention.

School psychologists should continue to advocate against the use of grade retention and especially against district and state policies that mandate retention based solely or predominantly on standardized test scores. Special education should be considered for students who are suspected of having an educational disability or are not responding to high quality targeted interventions. MTSS will be critical in addressing pandemic-related instructional loss and helping to determine which students need a diagnostic assessment, more intensive or individualized support, and possibly an eligibility evaluation. School psychologists can use their expertise to support such efforts and will be critical in addressing both academic and mental health needs related to the pandemic.

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