



Personalized Learning 1.0

IN 2002, YEARS BEFORE THE CURRENT FERVOR over personalized learning, the state of Florida embraced a primitive form of the concept. Under the leadership of then governor Jeb Bush, the state decided that 3rd graders who did not demonstrate basic reading proficiency on state tests should be held back and receive intensive remediation. Before advancing to 4th grade, where they would increasingly be asked to “read to learn,” they would need to show that they had learned to read.

Florida’s test-based promotion policy is part of a broader effort to improve early reading instruction, which has included state-funded reading coaches, evidence-based professional development, and mandatory blocks of time dedicated to reading in all elementary schools. The policy is also less draconian than it may sound. Most English language learners and students with disabilities are exempt, and other low-performing students are permitted to demonstrate reading proficiency through a portfolio of work. As a result, fewer than half of students not meeting the promotion standard are actually retained.

Some 16 states have now enacted versions of Florida’s policy, yet controversy continues to swirl around it. Proponents of test-based promotion argue that the threat of retention provides a powerful incentive for educators to help students become strong readers by 3rd grade, and that students who fall short could stand to benefit from an additional year of schooling. Critics, meanwhile, warn that retained students may suffer, due to stigma, reduced expectations, and the challenges of adjusting to a new peer group.

At least in Florida, the proponents’ argument at first seemed to hold sway. As Marcus Winters and Jay Greene reported in our pages, the first students who were retained saw dramatic performance gains in both reading and math, as compared to low-performing students in prior cohorts who had moved to 4th grade with their age peers (see “Getting Ahead by Staying Behind,” *research*, Spring 2006). Florida students’ performance on state reading tests and the National Assessment of Educational Progress rose rapidly in the years following the policy’s introduction (see “Florida Defeats the Skeptics,” *check the facts*, Fall 2012).

But skeptics warned that the academic gains made by retained students would diminish over time and that they would ultimately be less likely to complete high school: nationwide, students who are unusually old for their grade are far more likely to drop out. Would retained students in Florida suffer that fate?

Now, some 13 years later, it is possible to examine that concern.

In a new study in the *Journal of Public Economics*, two colleagues and I report on the long-term outcomes of the first six cohorts of 3rd graders retained under the policy, two of which we can track through high school.

We find that the gains made by retained students did diminish over time, as critics predicted, but these students still entered high school performing at higher levels in both reading and math than similar peers who were promoted on time. The retained students needed less remedial course work in high school and earned higher grades overall. But they did not complete more credits and were no more (or less) likely to graduate from high school or enroll in college.

In short, the results are mixed, casting doubt on the worst fears of retention’s critics but not fully vindicating the Florida policy—especially given the cost of providing an additional year of instruction to retained students. Our study will not end the debate over test-based promotion, but we do hope it will prompt policymakers to take the next step: identifying and implementing changes in high schools that will help translate students’ better preparation into better results.

Since 2002, the tools available to policymakers and educators seeking to tailor instruction to students’ needs, interests, and abilities have multiplied. Some efforts to personalize learning turn the Florida model on its head, enabling students to move ahead with their grade cohort while still working to master specific concepts and skills. Others, like the Summit Learning Program model, combine competency-based progression through core academic content with an emphasis on projects designed to foster student agency (see “Pacesetter in Personalized Learning,” *features*). One result, as Michael Horn notes in this issue, is widespread confusion about how to define personalized learning (see “Now Trending: Personalized Learning,” *what next*).

Will the current generation of personalized learning strategies, in all its variety, find clearer success than the first? If the Florida experience is any indication, it may be more than a decade before we have solid evidence—and even then there will probably be room to debate what it means.

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MISSION STATEMENT In the stormy seas of school reform, this journal will steer a steady course, presenting the facts as best they can be determined, giving voice (without fear or favor) to worthy research, sound ideas, and responsible arguments. Bold change is needed in American K-12 education, but *Education Next* partakes of no program, campaign, or ideology. It goes where the evidence points.
