

Beyond the Student: Structural Factors that Affect Grade Retention

by Sireen Irsheid

When students are held back in a grade (or retained), they are less likely to complete high school, according to both national and Chicago-specific research. Most efforts to respond to the risk of grade retention have focused on the individual characteristics of the student. There has been little attention to systemic-level factors that affect student retention—an important lens because:

1. High school graduation is **highly predictive of many later-life outcomes**, including health, employment, income, and incarceration.
2. Structural racism—manifested in racially segregated neighborhoods and high-poverty schools—results in **different lived experiences and grade retention rates** by race and gender.
3. Understanding how structural factors are related to student retention can help us:
 - a. Learn **how and where to intervene** with education, neighborhood, and housing policies at the federal, state, and district level, and;
 - b. Help **reimagine schools and classrooms** as sites that disrupt mechanisms of inequity and protect students against factors associated with not graduating from high school.

Findings

Neighborhood factors associated with retention in grade

Students were more likely to be retained if they lived in census tracts with high rates of unaffordable housing, high rates of neighborhood poverty, low rates of home ownership, or limited access to green space. Retention rates were higher in these census tracts, even when comparing students with similar test scores, grades, suspension rates, and attendance.

- Compared to students living in census tracts with the most resources, the odds of being retained were:
 - 67% higher in census tracts where the most families spent 30% or more of their income on housing;
 - 56% higher in census tracts where the fewest families owned their home; and
 - 37% higher in census tracts where there was the least green space.
- Among students living in the same census tracts, boys (vs. girls) and Black students (vs. peers of other races/ethnicities) were more likely to be overage for grade, a proxy for prior retention.

Elementary school factors associated with retention in grade

Students were more likely to be retained in grade if they attended elementary schools with high poverty rates and high suspension rates, even when comparing students with similar achievement.

- Comparing students with similar test scores, grades, and attendance, the odds of being retained in grade were:
 - 32% higher in schools where more than 1% of students are suspended in a year vs. schools with few suspensions; and
 - 100% higher in schools with the highest poverty rates (top quartile) than schools with the lowest poverty rates (bottom quartile).
- In the same school, boys (vs. girls) and Black students (vs. peers of other races/ethnicities) were more likely to be overage for grade, a proxy for prior retention.

High school factors associated with stronger graduation rates for overage students

Overage students who attended high schools with a great racial equity climate were twice as likely to graduate high school in four years as overage students who attended schools with poor racial equity climate.¹

- 31% of students who started high school overage graduated in four years in schools with a poor racial equity climate;
- 66% of students who started high school overage graduated in schools with fair racial equity climates;
- 70% of students who started high school overage graduated in schools with good racial equity climates; and
- 74% of students who started high school overage graduated in schools with great racial equity climates.

Students who attended high schools with higher levels of civic engagement among students were also more likely to graduate than students who started high school with similar achievement levels but attended high schools with lower levels of civic engagement.

- The increase in graduation rates was seen among all students, regardless of their age at starting high school, race, gender, or age.

Policy & practice takeaways

Knowing that students' neighborhood and school environments influence grade retention, **educators, city leaders, policymakers & advocates** could consider strategies to reduce retention rates and increase high school graduation rates by:

1. Using data-driven discussions to understand what additional supports students need to avoid being retained in grade (e.g., transportation, access to housing, accessible academic supports, school practices, etc.).
2. Working to decrease financial strain and promote more positive neighborhood conditions for families, making connections across policy areas:
 - Increasing housing affordability programs that support rental affordability and home ownership;
 - Adding more green space such as building parks, planting trees, bushes, and grass; and
 - Investing in programs like Chi Block Builder (previously known as Large Lot Program) to reclaim abandoned or vacant lots for community organizations and neighbors to repurpose.
3. Creating a team of social workers, counselors, teachers, and special education interventionists to ensure practices and interventions do not over-ascribe academic needs to students and help support families access necessary resources.
4. Making sure schools serving students with the highest poverty rates have sufficient supports and resources to address any chronic challenges with high retention and suspension rates.
5. Intentionally building and enriching supportive school climates for all students, including:
 - Using restorative practices vs. exclusionary discipline practices, like suspensions;

- Supporting civic engagement by incorporating it in school curricula; and
- Using data from student surveys to assess the racial-equity climate in the school, and providing educator training(s) on how school policies, the racialized lived experiences of young people and their communities, and educators’ positions in and relationship to social and racial hierarchies shape their perspective and reactions to young people of color.

Data & methods

The data used in this study is based on 67,789 first-time ninth-graders who attended a Chicago Public School (CPS) high school between the years 2012–15, and who had previously attended a CPS elementary school; 10,014 of these students (14.8%) were overage students. Elementary students who were 15 years old by September 1 the year entering high school were considered overage for grade. Most students who began high school overage for grade were overage because they were retained in elementary school, but there are a small number who enrolled in school at an older age. Racial equity climate and civic engagement were measured using supplemental measures on the *5Essentials* Survey.²

Findings reported here can be found in the full study, on pages:

- Neighborhood findings: p.81-97
- Elementary school findings: p.102-109
- High school findings: p.116-120

Study details

Irsheid, S. (2022). *Understanding the impact of educational and noneducational structures of opportunity and disinvestment on students overage for grade* (Publication No. 5275) [Doctoral dissertation, University of Chicago]. Knowledge@UChicago.

About the author

Sireen Irsheid is an Assistant Professor at NYU Silver School of Social Work, a clinician, and critical race scholar whose research and practice focus on the complex interplay between race, education, mental health, and structural violence. Specifically, her work takes an interdisciplinary approach to examine and disrupt the multidimensional aspects of systemic racism and contextual processes that lead to mental health, education inequities, and the school-prison nexus. Sireen earned her PhD from the University of Chicago Crown Family School of Social Work, Policy, and Practice, her MSW from Columbia University, and her BA in Clinical and Child Developmental Psychology from DePaul University. She is also a licensed clinical social worker, holds certificates in Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction and Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, and is the mental health lead of Klinik Kids—a non-profit that provides national innovative sports-based mental health training to professional coaches, school staff, and young people. Sireen completed this work as an affiliated researcher with the UChicago Consortium on School Research.

¹ Racial equity climate and civic engagement were measured using supplemental measures on the *5Essentials* Survey. See “Data & methods” for details.

² **Racial equity school climate** measured the extent to which each student perceived their school as fair and equitable. Responses ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). Statements included, “race is a factor in decisions about discipline at this school,” “race influences adult’s expectations for students at this school,” “race influences whether students have access to advanced courses,” and “race influences the overall quality of education that students receive in CPS.” Lower scores indicated positive racial equity school climate.

School civic engagement measured the extent to which each student experienced civic engagement in their course. Statements included, “this year in my class, I have: discussed current events and/or controversial issues, learned about societal issues I care about, worked on an action project to respond to an issue that impacts my community or society, involved in a project that improves my school or community,” etc. Responses ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree), but some responses ranged from 1 (never) to 5 (almost every day) when asked about civic engagement activities in the classroom. Higher scores indicated positive school civic engagement. See Appendix B in Irsheid (2022) for details.