



To Retain or Not Retain? Consideration for Florida's Parents and Educators During COVID-19

When Governor Ron DeSantis closed Florida's K-12 brick and mortar schools in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 virus, he provided parents and guardians the opportunity to request a grade level retention for their children. Florida's Education Commissioner Corcoran, the Florida Education Association (FEA), and guidance from the Florida Department of Education (FLDOE) subsequently reinforced the message that parents collaborate with school personnel if considering this option. Specifically, the FLDOE indicated that promotion decisions should be made in consultation with parents, teachers, and school leaders based on the student's classroom and progress monitoring data. In these unprecedented times, parents and educators may need further guidance as to what should be considered when making such high stakes decisions.

Retaining a student in a grade level is a decision that should not be taken lightly given the abundance of research indicating its ineffectiveness. Numerous national studies and the Florida Association of School Psychologists' [position paper on the topic](#) cite research across grade levels indicating the ill effects, including significantly increasing the risk that the retained student may eventually drop out of school. Further, there are significant inequities in grade retention in that minorities (typically Black and African American students) and males are retained more often than other groups of students. Finally, retention does not typically help students catch up. In lieu of grade retention, we support increasing access to remedial services including early intervention strategies and evidenced- based interventions delivered through a multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) framework targeting at risk students.

Considerations for parents/guardians regarding possible grade retention:

- Recognize that all students in Florida (and largely, the country) have missed a significant amount of traditional instruction during the last quarter of the school year. As a result, your child is likely not different than any other student regarding being behind from where you would expect. Hence, teachers will be working when students re-enter brick and mortar schools to address these gaps.
- In schools across the state, teachers have continued to teach your child virtually or through packets provided to you so that your child can continue to access the Florida standards. While likely not at the same pace or in the same way, teaching and learning have continued.
- Stress to your children that although teaching (and learning) look different, it continues to be important that they do their best work.
- Monitor how much time your child is spending engaged in instruction. If they are accessing instruction virtually, monitor their computers to ensure that they are on the appropriate educational sites.
- Has your child previously been retained? If so, another grade retention may put your child at increased risk of dropping out of school later.
- Does your child have an Individual Education Plan (IEP)? If so, speak with your child's Exceptional Student Education (ESE) teacher or case manager for strategies that may be useful in accessing instruction. Similarly, does your child receive supportive therapies, such as speech-language,

occupational, and/or physical therapy? If so, speak with your child's therapist(s) for suggestions and strategies to support your child's communication and motor skills while at home. Many of these services are designed to support your child's access to and progress with instruction.

- Continue proactive strategies such as reading and writing with your child if they are young and encouraging older students to read and write independently.
- Communicate with your child's teacher(s). Questions to ask include:
 - How is my child doing academically compared to other children at this time?
 - Given the circumstances, is my child performing how you would be expecting?
 - Is my child engaged in instruction (i.e., logging on, completing work, responding to teachers' questions, and participating)? If not, what are some strategies to address this?
 - Was my child struggling academically or behaviorally before COVID or were they on track?
 - If my child was struggling, what interventions were in place prior to the closure?
 - Are there interventions I can be doing at home?

Considerations for educators when discussing possible grade retentions:

- If you have not done so already, become familiar with the research on grade retention and alternatives (see FASP position paper embedded above).
- Consider data on your students. For the student being considered for grade retention by their parent/guardian, how was student performance prior to brick and mortar school closures?
- If the student was struggling prior to school closures, are there (or were there) interventions in place and/or has the student been addressed through the school's Problem-Solving Team? What has been the student's response to interventions?
- What specific interventions have been implemented at Tier 2 and Tier 3 and can these be implemented or modified for parents/guardians to implement at home?
- For students with IEPs, recognize that the trajectory of growth may not be the same as for other students during this time. Depending on areas of identified need, this may be expected. Continue working on IEP goals during the re-entry and revisit the IEP if needed in lieu of a grade retention.
- Recognize that access to effective core instruction (i.e., as should be occurring in brick and mortar) must occur for most disability categories prior to considering a student as a student with a disability. Hence, **lack of access to instruction does not equate to a disability**. While parents/guardians maintain their right to request an evaluation for a suspected disability, it is important that we educate parents on Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) and Response to Intervention (RtI) and how these frameworks have been impacted by school closures. Similarly, it is also important to assure parents/guardians that support via interventions will be provided to children as needed when schools reopen.
- Collaborate with other educators to address how the first weeks of the 2020-21 school year will focus on addressing the gaps in instruction that occurred during school closures. Vertical articulation will be critical during re-entry planning. Consider spending the beginning of the 2020-21 school year on the standards addressed during school closures for which there must be proficiency in order to move on to the upcoming year's academic expectations.
- Recognize the power of home-school collaboration and continue being strong partners with parents/guardians in the education of students.

Adopted by the following Executive Boards in May 2020:

Florida Association of Student Services Administrators (FASSA), Florida Association of School Psychologists (FASP), Florida Association of School Social Workers (FASSW), Florida Association of Speech-Language Pathologists and Audiologists (FLASHA)