

**Differences Between Students Who Were and Were Not Retained in Grade:
A Comparison of Academic Achievement, Reasons For Dropping Out, and
Reasons For Pursuing a GED® Credential
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Abstract and Executive Summary**

Abstract

This study examines the demographic, academic, social, and behavioral differences between GED Tests candidates who were and were not retained in grade. Differences between candidates who were and were not retained in grade are examined with regard to factors such as demographics, delinquent behaviors, reasons for dropping out of high school, and reasons for seeking a GED credential. Additional analyses explore the effect of grade retention on performance on each of the GED Tests, as well as on passing the entire GED Tests battery.

Executive Summary

Grade promotion policies regarding low-performing students have been increasingly under strict scrutiny and have yielded contentious debate with regard to these policies' effect on achievement, self-esteem, and the likelihood of students' dropping out of school. In that context, this study examines the demographic, academic, social, and behavioral differences between candidates who took the GED Tests in 2003 and 2004 in the United States and showed evidence of either being or not being retained in grade and immediately pursued their GED credential after dropping out of high school. This study also analyzes as the effect of grade retention on performance on each of the GED Tests and on passing the entire battery of tests. To obtain the sample of recent dropouts retained in grade, data were extracted based on (a) the candidate indicating he/she last attended traditional K-12 school in the year 2003 or 2004, and (b) calculations figured on date of birth, year the candidate last attended traditional K-12 school, and highest grade completed indicated that the candidate would have spent at least one more year in the school system than the highest grade he or she completed. The data used in this study come from the GED Testing Service's International Database (IDB), a centralized international database for candidates' demographic and test data collected from Official GED Electronic Scoring Sites.

The two groups that are being compared in this study are: (1) the nonretainees, and (2) the retainees. Demographic, academic, social, and behavioral differences between these two groups include the following:

1. Among the retainees, the percentages of males and minorities (Black and Hispanic) were disproportionately high. Retained candidates were also less likely to have completed 11th grade or above and to be employed either full-time or part-time when taking the GED Tests. Also, retainees were more likely to be in a correctional facility, be full-time students, or be single parents at the time of testing.
2. Most candidates reported that they dropped out of school because they did not like school and were absent too many times. However, while the nonretainees were equally or even more likely to report that they were unhappy or bored with the school environment, retainees were more likely to

have dropped out of school due to academic or behavioral problems. In addition, a larger proportion of the retainees than nonretainees reported that feeling too old for their grade was a reason why they left school.

3. More than half of all candidates regardless of their retainee status reported that they first learned about the GED Tests from a friend, neighbor, family member, or school personnel. The latter was cited by an even higher number of retainees than nonretainees, suggesting schools may refer students who have fallen, or are likely to fall, behind their grade level to the GED Tests as an alternative to achieving a traditional high school education.
4. Overall, educational and employment reasons for testing were prevalent among all recent dropouts. However, the retainees were more likely to seek an employment opportunity or a job promotion as well as personal satisfaction. When retainees indicated educational reasons, enrolling in a technical or trade program was more likely cited than enrolling in a two or four-year college/university.

Differences between the retainees and nonretainees in GED Tests performance include the following:

1. Although the retained candidates completed the GED Tests battery at the same rate as the nonretained candidates, the nonretainees of each gender, ethnicity, and primary language group considerably had higher standard scores than the retainees in each content area test, except in the small group of Hawaiian or Pacific Islander examinees.
2. Differences in GED Test standard scores and probability of passing the battery of tests between the retained and nonretained candidates are statistically significant even after controlling for demographic differences of gender, ethnicity, primary language, and highest grade completed.
3. Test-takers with lower academic knowledge and cognitive skills spent more time preparing for the tests. To achieve the same score level, the retained candidates spent much longer time preparing than the nonretained ones did.

Numerous studies have shown that grade retention negatively affects students academically and behaviorally and greatly increases the probability of a student's dropping out of school in later years. This study, through a unique population of recent high school dropouts, found that even among dropouts who sought an alternative to the traditional high school diploma, those who had not been retained in grade overall considerably outperformed those who were retained in grade on the GED Tests, regardless of their demographic characteristics. Furthermore, in order to achieve the same level of GED Test scores earned by the nonretainees, the retainees had to spend more hours preparing for the tests. Lastly, consistent with previous studies on the demographic characteristics of retained students, this study also demonstrated that among the recent dropouts who took the GED Tests, retained students were disproportionately male and from ethnic minorities. Based on all the effects grade retention has on students, now is a good time to reexamine our nation's retention policies and explore the alternatives.