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Gateway Literacy Retention Policies: Perspectives and Implications from the Field

Jennifer Barrett-Tatum, *Western Carolina University*
Kristen Ashworth, *College of Charleston*
David Scales, *Western Carolina University*

Abstract

South Carolina's Read to Succeed Law (RTS) is different than the other 15 states' literacy-based third grade retention laws. It mandates literacy intervention training for in-service and pre-service teachers. Research indicates academic gains from retention are short-lived, diminishing over time and increasing drop-out rates. Through a statewide survey, this study identifies educators' perceptions and knowledge of retention and the RTS policy, and examines the relationship between knowledge and perceptions. Educators were not familiar with retention research or RTS specifics, but favored retention. Implications include the need for more teacher training regarding new state policies and the efficacy of their foundations. This study provides evidence that policymakers should consider the means of implementation and shoulder accountability for a structured and equitable support system.

Keywords: Education policy; Retention; Intervention; Literacy; Teacher development

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Literacy gateway retention: A growing political agenda

An ever-growing federal agenda for students' academic uniformity and success is inextricably linked to the increasing number of states adopting a "no social promotion" grade-level retention gateway (Brown, 2007). Over 30 percent of states rely on retention in third grade, or earlier, as a means of intervention to improve children's literacy knowledge (Barrett-Tatum, 2017; Workman, 2014). Policy creation as a means for academic intervention serves as an accountability measure within the education system. The last few decades of federal policies Bill Clinton's Goals 2000, George W. Bush's No Child Left Behind (NCLB), Barack Obama's Race to the Top, and almost unanimous Common Core State Standards adoption have all geared state lawmakers to create policies that declare children should all be able to read and comprehend at a specific norm-based level by the end of a specified grade, namely third (Workman, 2014). Christopher Brown (2007) predicted that, by renewing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) after NCLB, an increased number of states would adopt "no social promotion" policies at a specific grade level, and the number of failing and retained students would also increase. Arizona, Indiana, Oklahoma, and Ohio created third grade test-based retention gateway policies modeled after Florida between 2010 and 2012, and several other state legislatures (e.g., North Carolina, South Carolina, Mississippi) have introduced similar bills (Workman, 2014).

Each state legislature designed literacy retention laws with different focal priorities (Barrett-Tatum, 2017; Bornfreund, Cook, Lieberman, Loewenberg, 2015). For example, Florida focused on accelerated reading initiatives approved by the Florida Center for Reading Research and post-retention interventions with little to no attention to family involvement, alternative assessments, or good cause exemptions. Mississippi was similar but did offer alternatives to retention and portfolio good cause exemptions. North Carolina's reading and retention policy also included good cause exemptions and a parenting plan, but North Carolina's main focus in policy was highly scripted literacy progress monitoring and assessments prior to students reaching third-grade testing (Barrett-Tatum, 2017). Given the trend of retention policies based on reading scores, one must ask, "Who benefits from grade-level gateway testing policies?"

In 2013, South Carolina (SC) passed Read to Succeed (RTS), a state policy that is entirely unique. The policy is complex, detailed, and multifaceted. The state gave the school systems four years to prepare for full implementation, and the intervention and retention aspects of the law did not take effect until the 2017–2018 school year. Read to Succeed requires in-service and pre-service teachers to acquire specific numbers of hours of reading courses or professional development based on their position. This includes teachers of all grade levels and administration. Additionally, districts and schools are required to monitor and provide intervention for students reading below grade level. Students below level on standardized or state end-of-grade testing might face retention or summer intervention requirements. The specific details of RTS requirements are provided in the study context section below. This research study investigates how SC's educators perceive retention as a means of literacy development intervention, their understanding of the newly implemented state educational policy—RTS—and their perceptions on the efficacy of RTS and its implementation.

What research tells us about retention as an academic intervention

Playing the carrot-and-stick game with student promotion as a way to motivate and enforce schools to make educator and curricular interventions for students falling below grade level has been a method for improving at-risk or failing students for decades. The retention-as-a-means-for-intervention policy surge began prior to the accountability era brought on by the NCLB in 2002. Among the first to use this policy, the Chicago Public Schools System implemented a "no social promotion" policy based on literacy test scores in 1996, with many other low-income school systems following suit (Allensworth, 2005). Andrew Huddleston (2014) published a review of literature on retention as an intervention that concluded that longitudinally, the short-term improvements in student academic achievement are short-lived, with most studies indicating that students' academic gains were insignificant within three to seven years after intervention.

A significant example of fading gains over time is seen in Florida's retention implementation in 2002 and the resulting student outcomes. Although an initial study of Florida's retained students by Jay Greene and Marcus Winters (2007) showed that there was positive student growth on literacy measures in the first three years after retention, the brief increase in assessed literacy skills was short-lived. Students who were retained in third grade did not show statistically significant improvements four years after the retention (Froman, Brown, & Luzon-Canasi, 2008), and six years after retention, the initial gains in student literacy achievement faded to statistical insignificance (Schwerdt, West, & Winters, 2017).

Two decades of research across multiple states shows that, while some post-retention academic improvement is initially seen, academic benefits dissipate within three years of retention, and students who were retained do not perform better on standardized assessments than their peer counterparts in third grade who were matched for below-level reading scores but not retained (Jimerson & Ferguson, 2007). Student data from third-grade literacy-based retention policies in Chicago, Florida, New York City, Georgia, Texas, Wisconsin, and Louisiana all indicate short-term, fading gains that may initially lead policy-makers and educators to the conclusion that retention as intervention is effective for academic gains (Huddleston, 2014).

Retention's influence beyond academics

The premise for retention as an academic intervention banks on the theory that students who did not comprehend learning standards during the academic year will be able to master the skill if they repeat another year of the same instruction. Retention potentially does little to solve the root problems of poor achievement in school. For example, some retained children are simply "recycled" and exposed to the same instructional approaches that did not support their achievement during the previous year. But what effects do students experience in this grade-level recycling process?

Retention is noted for its negative costs at the students' expense. Early grade retention has caused negative side effects that should be considered when developing educational policy. Shane Jimerson, G. Ernest Anderson, and Angela Whipple (2002) noted in a review of 17 students that examines the relationship between retention

and high-school dropout rates, that retained students are five to ten times more likely to drop out than non-retained peers. Retention is, indeed, the number one predictor of dropping out of school. Beyond not achieving a high-school degree, Jimerson and colleagues (2002) also noted that retained students are more likely to be unemployed, receive government assistance, and/or become imprisoned than their non-retained counterparts.

Jimerson and Phillip Ferguson (2007) completed a 12-year longitudinal study following a group of students retained at some point in the primary grades. Three additional groups were included 1) students who were placed in transitional classes; 2) students who were socially promoted; and 3) students who were normally promoted to the next grade. Students were compared academically and behaviorally starting with baseline data in the primary years and ongoing through their junior year of high school. Students who were retained not only were the lowest-performing academic group but also had the highest dropout rate and the highest rate of behavioral aggression.

Decades of literature on retention do not provide evidence that it is an effective means of intervention in isolation and show that other types of interventions should be considered for policy and practice (Jimerson, 2001). Most studies use quantitative measures to assess retention effectiveness, while few follow the process of implementation qualitatively (Range, Pijanowski, Holt, & Young, 2012). Read to Succeed is a unique third-grade gateway retention policy in that kindergarten to grade 12 (K–12) educators and administrators must receive a specified number of literacy course hours with named competencies. Additionally, the state must approve district and school literacy intervention plans. It is imperative to the creation of future educational policies to examine how the implementation of this distinctly individualized and teacher-focused policy will influence intervention, retention, and the learning opportunities of all students (Stamm, 2014).

Retention and targeted student groups

There is a continued national agenda for improved student equity, academic uniformity, and success that contributes to the growing number of states adopting grade-level retention policies (Brown, 2007). Issues of educational inequalities promote policy creation (Lorence & Dworkin, 2006), as seen in historical milestones such as *Brown v. the Board of Education* (1954), ESEA (United States, 1965), *Savage Inequalities* (Kozol, 1991), A Nation at Risk (United States, 1983, Goals 2000 (Stedman, 1995), NCLB (2001), Race to the Top (2011), and Common Core College and Career Ready Standards (2010).While such policies have worked toward holding the educational system accountable for all student populations, distinct subgroups of America's populations are overrepresented in repeating grades, dropping out of school before graduation, and, based on previous retention policy data, are the most likely to be retained in literacy gateway retention states (Greene & Winters, 2007). Numerous large-scale studies have indicated that African American, Hispanic, English as a second language, and low-income students have higher retention rates than any other demographic (e.g., Greene & Winters, 2007; Thomas, 2000; Tingle, Schoeneberger, & Algozzoni, 2012). Boys are twice more likely to be retained, and African American

or Hispanic children are three times more likely to be retained than their Caucasian counterparts (Tingle et al., 2012).

Veronica Thomas (2000) claims the "get tough" mentality for failing students may stigmatize specific groups of students, such as African American and other minority groups. Studies from Florida's flagship retention policy reveal that minorities had increased probabilities of being retained when compared to their white peers (Greene & Winters, 2007). Therefore, in targeted third-grade gateway states, these specific populations of students are most often retained and subject to continued unequal treatment in schools.

What practicing educators know about retention as an intervention

Multiple literature reviews indicate that retention is not beneficial as a method for academic intervention (e.g., Aldridge & Goldman, 2007). While research indicates that retention is not an effective form of intervention for students' sustained academic growth and development and has negative side effects on their socio-emotional well-being and graduation (Jimerson, 2001; Jimerson et al., 2002; Jimerson & Ferguson, 2007), educators still perceive retention to be an effective intervention method for academic growth (Pettay, 2010; Range, Pijanowski, Holt, & Young, 2012; Tomchin & Impara, 1992; Witmer, Hoffman, & Nottis, 2004). Educators most often make decisions about individual students based on their own belief systems, which were formed through their own experiences from their professional careers (Tomchin & Impara, 1992) and often rely more heavily on these lived experiences and practical knowledge than on research findings (Kagan, 1992). In a study by B.L. Pettay (2010), 31 elementary educators were surveyed before and after a professional development session that outlined the long-term ineffectiveness of student retention in the elementary grades. Prior to the professional development, teachers had positive perceptions of the effectiveness of retention. After the professional development, teachers had significantly lower perceptions of retention. Yet in a follow-up qualitative interview with each of the 31 teachers, they verbally contradicted their negative perceptions of retention and claimed that based on experience they still believed that retention was a positive and effective intervention. This could be due to the fact that elementary teachers see the temporary positive effects but do not have the opportunity to follow children through to their high-school graduation—or lack thereof. This implies that it is plausible that educators rely more on their own individual and limited lived experiences than on scientifically based evidence.

On the whole, educators have a positive view of retention as a means of intervention. Beginning with Ellen Tomchin and James Impara's (1992) foundational study and their creation of the Teacher Retention Beliefs Questionnaire (TRBQ), several survey-based studies followed that examined teacher perceptions regarding retention. In Tomchin and Impara's 1992 study, 135 kindergarten to grade seven teachers were surveyed regarding their perceptions of retention as an intervention. Teachers agreed that retention is necessary for students performing below grade level in order to promote future success and the ability to meet curriculum and grade-level standards, though it was agreed that retention is best if it occurs in the primary grades. Over a decade later, Stacie Witmer, Lynn Hoffman, and Katharyn Nottis

(2004) used the TRBQ with 35 primary teachers to gain perspective on retention beliefs, but the study also focused on a secondary piece about teacher knowledge concerning what research says about the effectiveness of retention, Teacher Tention Beliefs and Knowledge Questionnaire (TRBKQ). Similar to Tomchin and Impara's (1992) study, teachers in Witmer's study perceived retention to be an effective method of intervention, and findings suggested that teachers had minimal knowledge of the research-based effectiveness of retention. This suggested that teachers' beliefs about knowledge were based on experience and not research or scientifically based evidence.

Bret Range, John Pijanowski, Carleton Holt, and Suzie Young (2012) extended this inquiry by specifically addressing the perceptions of retention of both teachers and administration. Their investigation of 245 primary grade teachers and administrators within one school district mirrored Tomchin and Impara's (1992) study concerning educator perceptions and knowledge of retention as an intervention method. Teachers and administrators believed that retention was an effective academic intervention, but teachers significantly more so than administrators. They also believed it had better effects when conducted in the early primary grades, kindergarten especially.

In sum, the literature indicates that educators have a positive belief about the effectiveness of retention as an academic intervention. This may be due to educators' lack ofknowledge of the literature regarding the temporary benefits of retention and its lasting negative consequences (Witmer et al., 2004). However, it is plausible that teachers will believe that retention is a positive and effective intervention due to their experiences, even if they have seen the research indicating that its benefits are insignificant after three years. Educators' beliefs about the efficacy of retention as an intervention may sway their perceptions of students as learners, their actions toward student-intervention teaching opportunities, and the ways in which they implement retention-based policies into instructional practices (Huddleston & Carothers, 2016).

RTS study context: A shift occurs from retention to intervention

In the search for educational equality, SC adopted retention policies that negatively influence its most marginalized children (Greene & Winters, 2007; Tingle et al., 2012). The state looks to remediate students at the earliest possible signs to reduce the number of students who may fall significantly below grade level on the state assessment. The following sections detail the unique intervention-based focus of RTS.

Retention exemptions increase

While states continue to develop retention policies as a means to address a child's lack of reading proficiency by the third grade, states have begun to adapt and adjust retention policies to reduce the number of students actually being retained. This is due to the lack of long-term student gains and as a means to decrease the heavy financial burden upon the district and state resulting from retaining students (Huddleston, 2014; Smith & Shepard, 1989). An analysis of state retention policies indicates that a growing number of states are adding extensive lists of good cause exemptions that exclude students from being retained (Barrett-Tatum, 2017). Good cause exemptions include items such as English for speakers of other languages

(ESOL) services, at least two years of previous reading intervention, and individualized education programs (IEPs) that include alternative testing. The RTS policy has one of the largest lists of good cause exemptions to restrict the number of students being retained (Barrett-Tatum, 2017).

Intervention requirements

Retention is also discouraged in some state policies through mandates requiring tutoring, intervention services, and summer reading institutes for below-grade-level readers, though additional services are limited to what districts can afford. South Carolina uses the South Carolina College and Career Ready Standards and Assessment to determine which students require intervention and retention. These standards and assessment have been in place since spring 2016, making them relatively new to educators and students alike. Districts and schools created RTS-approved intervention plans for students' literacy development based on standardized test scores, district assessments, and routine teacher assessments. Districts and schools must also conduct a state-approved analysis and reflect annually on the findings of student intervention to determine if retention is necessary.

The RTS policy attempts to go beyond simple student retention by addressing the essential components of preparing educators and leaders, providing pre-kindergarten access and quality to low-income populations, and gathering and analyzing assessment data in pre-kindergarten and early grades. The policy requires data-driven classroom interventions and summer intervention institutes beginning at the pre-kindergarten level. Kindergarten is provided in all schools and is the first grade level in which assessment and intervention may occur.

Mandating state-wide teacher competencies

Some states, such as Michigan, Mississippi, and West Virginia, have added higher-education course requirements for literacy instruction and intervention. Yet, RTS is entirely unique in that it requires a specific set of literacy-based assessment and intervention competencies for all licensed educators. This includes all grade levels, special education, administration, and other educators who work with children's language and literacy development. Teacher preparation programs in early childhood, elementary, and ESOL in SC must contain four literacy courses covering foundations in reading, instructional practices, assessment of reading, and content area reading and writing. Within these four courses, higher-education programs have to evidence RTS mandated competencies; for example, pre-kindergarten through grade five educator programs must cover approximately 170 different competencies across the four courses or 12 credit hours. Special education programs also have to cover all competencies, but they may be disseminated across various courses, as decided upon by the institution's program and approved by the South Carolina Department of Education's RTS office. Teachers of middle and secondary grades teachers speech therapists, counselors, psychologists, media specialists, and administrators must obtain six credit hours (or 60 professional development hours) of foundational and content-specific literacy coursework. In-service teachers have 10 years from certification to acquire the same knowledge and training regarding literacy competencies

through approved professional development. The RTS office must approve all higher education coursework and professional development courses and content.

Considerations for RTS implementation

Read to Succeed (2013) has not specified what is considered to be statistically below grade level. Lawmakers wrote RTS for the Palmetto Assessment of State Standards (PASS), which no longer exists. The RTS policy states the score of a one out of four was to indicate when students should not be socially promoted to fourth grade. Previous PASS scores are only reported in three levels: not met, met, exemplary (SC Department of Education, 2015 ELA Reading Report). It would be difficult to tell based on state-published data the approximate percentage of overall third graders this might include. Now, however, SC has adopted new standards and a new assessment. Since 2014, the state has used the ACT Aspire assessment, followed by the SC READY. As of summer 2017, the state website and RTS law does not specify qualifications for SC READY and qualifying scores for retention. The full implementation and retention of RTS went into effect for students in the spring of 2018.

Study significance and research questions

This research adds to the limited studies regarding teacher and administrator perceptions and knowledge concerning retention. Past research claims educators are unaware of empirical evidence concerning the long-term effects of retention, therein contributing to their perceptions of retention (Range et al., 2012; Tomchin & Impara, 1992; Witmer et al., 2004). The latest study on knowledge and perception (i.e., Range et al., 2012) is limited to one district. The statewide study outlined here investigates how well teachers and administrators understand SC's specific retention policy. Few quantitative retention policy studies were followed by in-depth qualitative analyses examining policy influences on classroom-level instruction, learning, and family communications (Brown, 2007; Huddleston, 2014).

Read to Succeed focuses on educators' instructional competencies for the teaching of reading to all students, and teacher accountability in remediating and intervening for students of concern. The RTS policy encourages intervention at the earliest possible opportunity to reduce the number of below-grade-level readers and student retention. The requirements related to educators' knowledge and skill to differentiate student instruction and provide intervention is significant to the field of education policy. Read to Succeed mandates include unique intervention variables at the district and school levels, including how students are to be identified, what educational supports they will receive, and how they will be monitored for progress. The availability of highly qualified reading specialists, professional development, instructional and personnel resources, and funding for summer reading camps will vary heavily based on district finances. In addition, RTS does not account for vulnerable student populations being most at-risk for summer school and retention.

The present research is part of a two-year sequential explanatory mixed-method study, in which quantitative survey data was collected first and follow-up qualitative interviews with participants followed in year two. The research presented here represents the quantitative, survey-based phase of a longitudinal inquiry to better un-

derstand educators' knowledge, perceptions, and the implementation of an educational policy that promotes effective intervention. Findings from this study attempt to answer the following research questions:

1. What are educators' perceptions and knowledge of retention as a means for academic intervention regarding literacy?
2. What are educators' perceptions about and actual knowledge of RTS and its implications for classroom practices?
3. What is the relationship between educators' knowledge of retention and their perceptions of retention?

Methods

Data collection

In 2016–2017, an electronic Qualtrics survey was distributed to all teachers in grades one through three, literacy coaches, and administrators in SC public schools with public access email addresses. Permission was gathered to use the previously validated Teacher Perceptions of Retention Scales (Tomchin & Impara, 1992), which was used in a study of teachers and administrators by Range and colleagues in 2012 to measure participant perceptions of retention as an effective intervention. Permission was also gained to include relevant retention-related items from Witmer and colleagues (2004), which adapted the TRBQ to measure teacher and administrator knowledge concerning scientifically based research on retention as a method for reading intervention. The third part of the survey relates to educators' specific knowledge and perceptions of the state law. These are survey items from the SERVE Center at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (Anderson et al., 2014), and measured participants' knowledge of Read to Achieve (NC Law). The word "achieve" was changed to "succeed" to represent SC's RTS policy. While a previously established instrument was used to measure beliefs about retention, the reliability of the instrument was assessed within the sample. After recoding negative items, reliability was found to be acceptable ($\alpha = 0.819$).

Participants

The survey was sent to the school email addresses of 4,000 educators. Some districts' email accounts contained blocks against mass emails, therefore, several districts did not receive the email and were unable to participate. There was a response rate of 29.5 percent, despite multiple districts' system filters. Of the total respondents ($n = 1{,}179$), Caucasians made up 82.3 percent, African Americans made up 14.1 percent, and other categories (i.e., Asian American, Hispanic or Latino, and Native American) were each one percent. The demographics of respondents are representative of educators in SC. In SC, teachers in grades K–12 are 78 percent female, five times more likely to be Caucasian than African American, and only two percent identify as other than Caucasian or African American.

The majority of respondents comprised classroom teachers and was evenly distributed between first, second, and third grades. Literacy and English Language Arts support specialists made up 10.5 percent of respondents, and the remaining seven percent were administrators. Over 30 percent of respondents had 20 or more years

of public-school experience, and those who were newer to the profession (i.e., four years or less of teaching experience) made up 13.8 percent. Over half of the respondents' schools were in a suburban area, 37.2 percent were considered rural, and 11.7 percent were considered urban. Well over half of the respondents (63.6%) worked in a Title I school.

Analyses

A descriptive statistics analysis in SPSS (IBM Corp., 2013) provided a summary of educator beliefs and knowledge concerning retention and RTS. The first section of the survey was adapted from a four-point Likert scale survey (Range et al., 2012; Tomchin & Impara, 1992) of teacher and administrator beliefs and knowledge about retention as an intervention, in which respondents indicated their level of agreement with the given statements. The second section of the survey contained questions testing participants' knowledge of research-based information regarding retention, which were adapted from a previous study (Witmer et al., 2004). These survey items contained only one correct option; therefore, a variable was created to signify whether each participant's response was correct or incorrect on each question in this section. The same was repeated for the third section, which tested participants' knowledge specific to RTS by having them check all that applied. Each selection item was scored as correct or incorrect; either they knew the information or they did not.

To address the final research question, an analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted for each survey item related to perception with participants' sum scores of knowledge of retention. The five general knowledge items were scored dichotomously and summed. Tukey post hoc tests were used to determine whether significant differences in perceptions existed between participants with high and low knowledge of retention research.

Results

Reliability analyses were conducted for the survey subscales using Cronbach's alpha (Cronbach, 1951) as the measure of internal consistency. The ten perception items demonstrated substandard reliability ($\alpha = .355$), as did the five general knowledge items ($\alpha = .565$). The ten items concerning who will benefit from RTS or retention showed only moderate reliability ($\alpha = .762$), as did the ten alternatives to RTS items ($\alpha = .672$).

Perceptions about retention

The analyses concluded that 62.1 percent of participants believe retention to be an effective means of literacy intervention. Just under half of respondents (47.9%) believe that retention is necessary for keeping up grade-level standards, and a relatively high percentage (78.8%) believe that retention is a good opportunity for immature children to catch up. The majority (60.4%) do not believe that retention makes up for educational support that children may not receive at home. The majority of respondents (71.4%) do not believe there are any social or emotional negative side effects to retention if completed prior to fourth grade, and even more (81.8%) believe that children who are retained do not become permanently labeled. Regarding be-

havioral issues, 74.6 percent do not believe that retained students have more behavioral problems than their peers. Some respondents (41.7%) believe that children who are receiving special education services should not be retained, but only a few (8.7%) believe that children should never be retained. Table 1 shows responses by group (teachers, administrators, and ELA specialists).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for perceptions about retention

	Role	Mean*	Median	Mode	% Agree
Retention is an effective means of preventing students from facing daily failure in the next grade.	Teacher Administrator ELA Specialist	2.23 2.77 2.68	2 3 3	2 3 3	66.6 36.1 43.5
Retention is necessary for maintaining grade level standards.	Teacher Administrator ELA Specialist	2.54 3.08 2.89	2 3 3	2 3 3	51.8 25.3 33.1
Retaining a child in grades K–3 harms the child's self-concept.	Teacher Administrator ELA Specialist	2.95 2.78 2.71	3 3 3	3 3 3	27.2 32.5 36.3
Retention is an effective means of providing support in school for the child who does not get support at home.	Teacher Administrator ELA Specialist	2.72 3.19 2.98	3 3 3	3 4 3	42.3 19.3 32.3
Retention in grades K–3 is an effective means of giving an immature child a chance to catch up.	Teacher Administrator ELA Specialist	2.00 2.31 2.22	2 2 2	2 2 2	80.7 71.1 68.5
Retention in grades 4–7 is an effective means of giving an immature child a chance to catch up.	Teacher Administrator ELA Specialist	3.01 3.35 3.24	3 4 3	3 4 4	25.8 13.3 18.5
Students receiving the services of a learning disabilities teacher should not be retained.	Teacher Administrator ELA Specialist	2.34 2.25 2.04	2 2 2	2 2 1	57.0 60.2 66.9
Students who have been retained cause more behavior problems than other children.	Teacher Administrator ELA Specialist	2.99 2.81 2.84	3 3 3	3 3 3	24.1 32.5 30.6
Students who have been retained are permanently labeled.	Teacher Administrator ELA Specialist	3.22 3.13 2.92	3 3 3	4 4 3	16.8 21.7 27.4
Children should never be retained.	Teacher Administrator ELA Specialist	3.57 3.36 3.25	4 4 3	4 4 4	7.2 12.0 18.5

Note: * The Likert scale ranged from one (agree) to four (disagree).

Knowledge of research on retention

Participants' knowledge of research findings about retention as an intervention varies. Though few believe that the academic gains made by retention exceeded those of promoted peers (7.8%), the majority of participants believe that retention promotes academic gains and that, over time, the academic gains continue to increase (45%). Others believe that it takes a few years for the academic gains to present themselves (12.7%). Only 34.4 percent of respondents are aware that academic gains that may arise due to retention are temporary, fading as children progress through school. Additionally, 61.7 percent of participants understand that the likelihood of dropping

out of school increases for children who are retained. A large majority of respondents (97.3%) are aware that minority students and those from low socioeconomic families are more likely to be retained than their white, middle-class counterparts. Just over a third (37.1%) believe that retained students are likely to be picked for play partners. Participants also indicated that socially, retained students are less likely than their counterparts to be picked as academic partners by their peers (96.3%), though only 4.6 percent believe that retained students are treated differently by their peers. A relatively low number of respondents (18.3%) think that retention has a positive effect or no effect on a child's self-concept, and 36.6 percent think that it will not influence a child's self-concept if he or she is retained in kindergarten or first grade. Nearly half of respondents (45%) believe that research says retention at any grade may lead to stronger negative self-concepts than positive.

Perceptions about RTS

Although participants report that they are "very familiar" with the RTS mandates (82.9%), familiarity with specific aspects of the law varies. The majority of participants (64.5%) agree with the goals of RTS, at least in theory, but only 12.9 percent firmly believe that the goals are attainable. Over a quarter of participants (27.6%) do not believe that RTS goals are attainable, while about half (54%) believe that the goals are at least "somewhat" attainable.

Participants believe that RTS is beneficial for below-grade-level readers (68.4%), but do not think the law is beneficial for students with low socioeconomic status, students in the response-to-intervention (RtI) process, English-language learners, students receiving special education services, or students with ADHD. Table 2 provides the percentage of respondents from each group (teachers, administrators, ELA specialists) who believe that RTS is beneficial for each subgroup.

Table 2. Beliefs about the benefit of RTS on student subgroups

Subgroup	Total sample	Teachers	Adminitrators	ELA specialists
Students receiving free and reduced lunch	20.4	19.5	24.1	25.8
Above grade level	24.6	24.5	24.1	25.8
On grade level	33.1	33.1	31.3	34.7
Below grade level	68.4	69.6	54.2	69.4
English-language learners	33.7	34.3	27.7	33.1
Learning disabilities	24.0	24.4	19.3	24.2
Developmental delays/disabilities	28.3	29.5	26.5	21.0
Speech or language delays/disabilities	16.5	17.5	10.8	12.9
Emotional disabilities	11.7	12.8	7.2	6.5
Intellectual disabilities	10.8	11.1	8.4	9.7
Other health impairments (such as ADHD)	19.1	19.9	13.3	16.9

Note: The survey question read as follows: "What student subgroups do you believe will benefit from RTS or retention? Select all that apply."

Knowledge about RTS

Educators responded to questions concerning the good cause exemptions of RTS. Students who are reading two or more levels below grade level in first and second grade may be recommended for summer intervention camps, and students reading below grade level on the SC READY assessment may have to repeat third grade. Therefore, educators were asked to identify good cause exemptions named within the law. Both good cause exemptions and common misconceptions about exemptions were listed as possible choices. Over a quarter (27.6%) of all educators responded that they were unable to answer this question because they did not know enough information about good cause exemptions. Table 3 provides the percentage of agreement for each of the actual good cause exemptions listed in the RTS.

Table 3. Participant knowledge of good cause exemptions of retention in RTS

Good cause exemption	Total sample	Teachers	Administrators	ELA specialists
Children with an IEP who have received at least two years of intensive reading intervention.	41.3%	38.4%	49.4%	59.7%
Children whose home language is not English, but only in the first two years in English-speaking school.	27.5%	23.1%	43.3%	51.6%
Children who have already had two years of intensive reading intervention.	27.9%	25.4%	32.5%	45.2%
Children who have been approved by administration, superintendents, and the Read to Succeed office through portfolio assessments.	29.5%	25.4%	44.6%	52.4%
Children who show proficiency through approved alternative assessments.	33.7%	29.5%	48.2%	57.3%

Relationship between knowledge and perceptions

The final research question asks about the relationship between participants' knowledge of retention and their perceptions about retention. Groups of participants with the highest general knowledge of retention (i.e., those who answered at least four out of five general knowledge questions correctly) and those with the lowest general knowledge (i.e., those who answered zero or one out of five general knowledge questions correctly) responded significantly differently on the majority of survey questions measuring their perceptions of retention (see Table 4). Participants with the highest knowledge of the research on retention (i.e., answered all five questions correctly), were more likely than those with low knowledge to disagree that retention is necessary for maintaining grade-level standards, that it is an effective way of providing support for children who do not get it at home, and that it is an effective way of giving an immature child in grades four through seven a chance to catch up. High-knowledge participants were also more likely to agree that students receiving special education services should not be retained.

Table 4. Perceptions about retention by low and high general knowledge of retention

	ANOVA*		Tukey post hoc**	
	F	Effect (η^2)	High knowledge	Low knowledge
Retention is an effective means of preventing students from facing daily failure in the next grade.	46.623	0.166	M_5 = 2.91 M_4 = 2.85	M_0 = 1.89 M_1 = 1.94
Retention is necessary for maintaining grade-level standards.	22.819	0.089	M_5 = 3.14	M_0 = 2.33 M_1 = 2.32
Retaining a child in grades K–3 harms the child's self-concept.	33.916	0.126	M_5 = 2.45 M_4 = 2.42	M_1 = 3.24
Retention is an effective means of providing support in school for the child who does not get support at home.	26.922	0.103	M_5 = 3.23	M_0 = 2.29
Retention in grades K–3 is an effective means of giving an immature child a chance to catch up.	20.969	0.082	M_5 = 2.41 M_4 = 2.39	M_0 = 1.72 M_1 = 1.78
Retention in grades 4–7 is an effective means of giving an immature child a chance to catch up.	10.702	0.044	M_5 = 3.50	M_0 = 2.84 M_1 = 2.87
Students receiving the services of a learning disabilities teacher should not be retained.	10.907	0.044	M_4 = 1.95	M_1 = 2.50
Students who have been retained cause more behavior problems than other children.	11.260	0.046	M_5 = 2.59	M_0 = 3.27
Students who have been retained are permanently labeled.	28.232	0.108	M_5 = 2.68 M_4 = 2.82	M_0 = 3.42 M_1 = 3.52
Children should never be retained.	22.339	0.087	M_5 = 3.27 M_4 = 3.21	M_0 = 3.72 M_1 = 3.74

Notes: * For each F, df = (5, 1171) and p < .001.] ** Subscript labels represent knowledge scores, with 5 being the highest score and 0 the lowest.

Participants with lower knowledge were more likely than those with high knowledge to agree that retention is an effective way to prevent students from experiencing daily failure the next year and is an effective means of giving immature children in grades kindergarten through three a chance to catch up. Participants with lower knowledge were also more likely to disagree that retention is harmful to children's self-concepts, that it can lead to behavior problems, that retained children are permanently labeled, and that children should never be retained.

Conclusions and implications

This study's implications address not only the RTS policy itself but also concerns for the fidelity of any new educational policy when educators are not informed. Research indicates that a vast majority of educators have positive beliefs regarding the impact of retention on student academic success (Range et al., 2012; Tomchin & Impara, 1992; Witmer et al., 2004) and are unaware of what longitudinal, scientifically based research indicates about the long-term effects of retention as an academic intervention (Jimerson et al., 2002; Schwerdt et al., 2017; Witmer et al., 2004). Similarly, in SC, the majority of participants believed the new literacy-based state retention policy

was beneficial for students reading below grade level, while being unaware of details regarding retention conditions and mandates.

This study presents unique findings related to stakeholders' opinions and perceptions about retention based on their knowledge of the research base on the topic, and the academic and social impact that it has on students. Unlike previous surveys concerning educator beliefs and knowledge on retention, this study is able to illustrate the unique finding that educators who are more knowledgeable about the research-based implications of retention have a more negative perception of it as an intervention method. Educators who seemed to be supportive of retention (i.e., those who believed that retention is a good way to address academic failure) knew much less about the research findings related it. This finding highlights the importance of educators and other stakeholders staying up to date with current research. A subpopulation of educators continues to inform itself about research through professional publications and organizations, and this subpopulation is also more likely to understand RTS and the impact that its mandates can have on students. Implications clearly call for supporting educators in being informed about research regarding retention and its unintended consequences, and promote educators becoming advocates for best-practices literacy instruction and intervention that support students in becoming literate citizens (Huddleston & Carothers, 2016).

Those in the education field rarely (if ever) debate the importance of evidence-based practices in schools. Educators are expected to maintain knowledge and training on evidence-based instructional practices and interventions and to implement them with fidelity in their classrooms. Research strongly suggests that retention, in general and as a means of academic intervention, is not effective over time and can actually be detrimental (e.g., Huddleston, 2014; Jimerson et al., 2002), leading to the conclusion that it is not an evidence-based practice. Considering the prominent research regarding the lack of efficacy in retention-based intervention practices, there is concern that with stakeholders maintaining positive attitudes toward retention, few would counter this policy's use and effectiveness.

Consideration should be given to the possible causes for educators' lack of knowledge concerning the RTS mandates. Are educators responsible for reading and interpreting the law? Is it the responsibility of the state to issue a universal, simplified breakdown of the law and all its components, or is it the job of each district or school to interpret and communicate details of the law to educators? If so, how can it be assured that each district will come to the same interpretation? Many details regarding RTS mandates are still unclear.

Concerns for RTS mandates include unknown variables in districts' methods for intervention prior to third-grade testing. How students are to be identified, the educational support they will receive, and how they will be monitored for progress is individualized at the district level. The availability of highly qualified reading specialists, resources, and funding for summer reading camps will vary heavily based on each district's finances and Title 1 status. Additionally, RTS has not clearly identified how students in tier 2 and tier 3 of the RtI process will receive intervention; this will also vary from district to district.

The lack of uniformity across the state concerning interpretation, implementation, intervention, and resources should be considered when evaluating the effectiveness of RTS and other educational policies. Educational policymakers view written policies as means-to-the-end solutions to perceived educational issues (Brown, 2007). However, the success of educational policies is highly reliant on the interpretations, beliefs, and preferred levels of fidelity of the stakeholders (i.e., district systems, administrators, educators) who implement them (Barrett-Tatum, 2015; Hill, 2001; Huddleston & Carothers, 2016). Findings and implications from this study provide evidence that policymakers should consider the means of implementation and shoulder accountability for a structured and equitable support system. Further studies are required to better understand how stakeholders interpret policies and make instructional decisions related to policies. Future investigations should include the examination of the barriers educators face when implementing policies and what supports policymakers should put in place for successful implementation.

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