



From mountain to sea

Head Teacher Guidance Responding to Requests to Repeat a Year

April 2026

This guidance aims to support Head Teachers to respond to parental requests for their child to repeat a school year. There are separate arrangements for responding to requests to delay entry to Primary 1.

The guidance has been developed in consultation with representatives from ASHTA and PHTC.

Aberdeenshire position

In all but highly exceptional situations, the most appropriate class placement for a child or young person is with their chronological age peer group.

The Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004 (the "ASL Act") places a strict, legally binding duty on education authorities to ensure that all children and young people with additional support needs receive the support required to enable them to benefit from their education. Inclusive practice and the flexibility and personalisation inherent in Curriculum for Excellence mean learning needs can be met in the school stage appropriate to the learner's chronological age, with access to additional support and enhanced provision if required.

Additional support needs should therefore not be a reason for placing a child in a younger class. If parents raise the question of repeating a year, the first response of the Named Person should be to explain this and give reassurance and clear information about how needs will be met.

Research basis

Almost every education intervention studied shows some positive effect on learning and achievement if a pupil maintains their school stage. By contrast, research on repeating a year shows a consistently negative effect on children's progress, with increased chances of young people disengaging from school and leaving early (see attached summary of research evidence). A child who repeats a year would be old enough to leave school at the end of S3 or December of S4, having had little or no experience of senior phase education or opportunity to achieve national qualifications. If the young person chooses to remain at school, they may not be able to stay for S6 if they turn 18 before the beginning of the school year.

Research indicates that a few individual children and young people may benefit from repeating a year. However, that this is likely to be a short-term benefit and that it is difficult to predict which children will benefit and which will not.

It is therefore only in highly exceptional circumstances that repeating a year would be agreed to be the best option for an individual child or young person. These could include for example where a child or young person has (or will have) missed a great deal of education through illness (for comparison, the guidance for delayed entry to P1 refers to missing over 30% of the school year). However, even in these circumstances it would be expected that in almost all cases the child or young person's needs would be best met in their age-appropriate class, with additional support or enhanced provision as appropriate.

As well as being a risky intervention, removing a child or young person from their current peer group is highly intrusive. As such, it would need to be very carefully considered and justified, giving due weight to social and emotional factors. This can be less of an issue if the child is moving into the area and starting at a new school, but the emotional impact can still be great given the salience of a child's age in our culture.

Covid-19

In the absence of highly exceptional individual circumstances, it is not expected that children and young people will repeat a school year as a consequence of school closures during the coronavirus outbreak.

Process

When a school receives a request for a child or young person to repeat a year they should outline Aberdeenshire Council's position on this matter, and the reasons for this position.

The views of the child or young person as well as their parents/carers should always be considered and placement in a younger class should not be agreed if the child or young person or their parent indicates they are not in favour; it is too intrusive an intervention to proceed without commitment by all concerned to work together to ensure it is as successful as possible.

As with other situations where very intrusive interventions are being considered, consultation with the Educational Psychologist is appropriate in order to consider how the child or young person's needs can be met within their existing year group.

The Head Teacher should discuss the request with the School Quality Improvement Officer (QIO) in the first instance. The QIO will consider the views of the child/young person in accordance with UNCR Article 12, the parent/carer and the Head Teacher. They will take into account any relevant assessment information provided by partner agencies. They will consult with the school Educational

Psychologist and, if required, the Principal Educational Psychologist / Service Manager (IEW). Should the QIO determine that the threshold for exceptional deferred entry is met and that every effort has been made to meet the child or young person's needs within their existing year group, then they will make a recommendation to the Head of Education / Chief Education Officer.

If it is agreed that the child should be placed in a younger class, it is important that this is presented and explained to the child or young person in a way that minimises the risk of them seeing themselves as having failed or not being good enough. Work may also have to be carried out with the child or young person's peers in order to avoid stigmatisation or bullying.

It should also be explained to the parent that it may not be possible to reverse this decision at a later point if the parent later requests that the child or young person skips a year in order to re-join their original year group.

The request, the outcome and the reason for this outcome must be recorded in the child's chronology.

Appendix 1

ABERDEENSHIRE EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY SERVICE

What is the Impact on Learning and Wellbeing of Repeating a School Year? A Summary of Research Evidence

Introduction - Retention vs. Social promotion

The practice of having students repeat a year, usually called retention in the literature, is based on the view that students will catch up on academic learning by repeating a year. The extent to which retention is being used varies a great deal between nations (Eisenmon, 1997). For example, retention is relatively common in the US, where there has been an increasing pressure to hold students to a certain academic standard, and is very uncommon in the UK, where the emphasis is on social promotion (automatic progression), which generally means that students progress to the next level, regardless of their academic achievement, in order to keep them with their peers by age (Martin, 2011).

Lack of UK Research

Most of the research on repeating a year is done in the US and Australia. There does not appear to be any research done in the UK, probably because it is very uncommon to repeat a year here (Borodankova & Coutinho, 2001; Mitchell, 1995). In his book about secondary education in Scotland Mitchell (1995) wrote: 'It is highly unusual for pupils in Scottish Secondary schools to repeat a year, so no information is available on this area' (Mitchell, 1995, p. 59). However, it seems that the effects of retention are comparable and similar across many different countries (Eisenmon, 1997; Brophy, 2006), and therefore the findings are likely to transfer to the UK.

Impact on Learning

Research investigating the effects of retention on academic achievement is generally negative. Hattie (2008) found that almost all educational interventions have a positive effect on achievement, with a mean effect size of 0.4, where an effect size of 1.0 is equivalent to advancing achievement by one year. In contrast his synthesis of 7 meta-analyses of the effects of retention found a negative mean effect size of -0.16. The negative effect has been found in most course subjects, but especially in mathematics, reading and language arts (Jimerson, 2001). When compared to retained students, the academic outcomes are generally better for similarly low achieving children who have not been retained (Jimerson, 1999; Alexander, et al., 2003). In a longitudinal study modelling student's growth rates, Silberglitt et al. (2006) found that the learning curve of children who were repeating a year was not significantly different than it was the year before they repeated the year, and was not different from that of students that had similar abilities but were not required to repeat a year. Thus, having students to repeat a year does not prove to be an effective intervention to improve student achievement.

Short Term Achievement Gains

A few studies have shown that retention has a positive effect on performance, but this effect typically declines through subsequent years (e.g. Alexander et al., 2001; Ou & Reynolds, 2010). In fact, the negative effect of retention has been found to increase over the years (Holmes, 1989; cited in Hattie, 2008) and the gap widens when retained students are being compared to younger peers in their new class (Temple, 2004; cited in Martin, 2011).

Motivation and Attainment

Students who have been retained generally have lower attendance and a more negative attitude towards school than students who have been promoted (Jimerson, 2001; Martin, 2009, Ou & Reynolds, 2010). Although the goal of retention is to give children the opportunity to better their achievement and attainment, it has almost the opposite effect, as retention has been found to be a robust predictor of school drop-out (e.g. Jimerson et al., 2002; Jimerson, 2004; Ou & Reynolds, 2010)

Impact on Wellbeing

There are fewer studies investigating the effect of repeating a year on non-academic outcomes than on academic outcomes, and the findings of such studies have been more mixed (Martin, 2009). Nevertheless, the overall effect has been found to be a negative one. Jimerson (2001) made a meta-analysis of sixteen studies that addressed socio-emotional/behavioural adjustment outcomes of students that had repeated a year relative to a comparison group, and found an overall effect size of - 0.22. The greatest difference between groups in terms of socio-emotional/behavioural adjustment outcomes were evident in emotional adjustment where the effect size was -0.28.

Conclusion

There is robust evidence that repeating a year is most likely to have negative effects on a learner's academic achievement and engagement in school learning. Research indicates that emotional adjustment is also likely to be adversely affected.

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