

Leading Scholars Criticize Study on 3rd Grade Retention of English-Learners

By Corey Mitchell on [February 21, 2019 4:45 PM](#)

A collection of nationally-known English-language-learner scholars are challenging the "assumptions, approach, and findings" of recent research that suggests struggling ELLs could benefit from being retained in 3rd grade.

The Working Group on ELL Policy, with support from more than a dozen other ELL researchers, [issued a scathing critique](#) of "[An Extra Year to Learn English? Early Grade Retention and the Human Capital Development of English Learners](#)," a working paper from the National Bureau of Economic Research, making the case that it could have negative implications for students who are often marginalized and misunderstood.

Here's a [link to their letter](#).

The authors of the working paper, David Figlio of Northwestern University and Umut Ozek of the American Institutes for Research, posit that some English-language learners in Florida benefited from being retained in 3rd grade, thereby triggering an extra year of school and support, including extended blocks of daily reading instruction and summer school classes that came with it.

This blog, [Learning the Language, explored the report findings](#), and took at broader look at the public debate over so-called "literacy laws" that recommend having students repeat 3rd grade if they fail to achieve a targeted score on reading tests.

In their critique, the Working Group on ELL Policy also questioned what actually benefited the students—the grade retention, the targeted reading instruction and related academic support, the teachers leading the instruction, or some combination of those factors.

"Whether grade retention is a good idea for all struggling [English-learners] is not a finding this study can support," the scholars from the Working Group on ELL Policy wrote in a strongly worded letter posted to their site.

In an interview with *Education Week*, Ozek said he and Figlio plan to revise their working paper, based on feedback from colleagues and other researchers, before submitting the final version, but don't expect the results to change much.

"We understand the sensitivity around the issue because English-learners are a vulnerable population," Ozek said. "This is a highly contentious topic and [retention is not] the most popular intervention."

In their letter challenging the research, The Working Group urged policymakers in other states to tread carefully before trying to pitch a similar approach.

"Without situating Figlio and Ozek's study in the broader scholarship on EL education, and fully considering its limitations and implications, policymakers risk applying this study's findings in ways that could exacerbate inequalities for [English-learners]," the letter reads.

"We therefore urge caution and care in promoting or undertaking major policy changes for students who are already too often racially, socioeconomically, and linguistically marginalized in our schools and communities."

The research group also questioned why the authors didn't do more to explore the social-emotional impact of grade retention, which can be stigmatizing for students.

Released in mid-January, Figlio and Ozek's work has generated buzz in English-learner research circles. It remains unclear if any state-level lawmakers or policy leaders will pitch plans to replicate what's happening in Florida.

Like the The Working Group of ELL Policy, Ozek also expressed concern about state lawmakers or education department leaders potentially developing state policy based on their research findings in Florida.