

MACS Guidelines for Student Retention



Purpose

'Learning brings forth ... hope – a hope that is based on the experience of God's love and care for all' (Catholic Education Melbourne 2016).

These guidelines are to be read in conjunction with the MACS Student Retention Policy.

The policy and related guidelines support the Catholic faith by celebrating the uniqueness of each student and embracing all students as respected and valued members of their learning communities. The policy acknowledges that local pastoral discretion is an important element of decision-making when considering student retention.

Scope

These guidelines are for use by all schools governed by Melbourne Archdiocese Catholic Schools Ltd. (MACS).

Definitions

Exception

MACS provides some exceptions to the maximum age requirements which allow students to enrol with agreement by the principal. A student who falls within an exception automatically meets the age eligibility requirements to apply to enrol in a MACS school.

Exemption

A student who does not qualify for an exception will be required to apply for special consideration. Exemptions from the minimum and maximum age requirements are rare, rather than being considered usual practice.

Late entry

Late entry refers to the commencement of school one year later than expected, according to chronological age.

Year-level repetition/retention

Retention describes the repetition of the last year of schooling in which a student was enrolled.

Age Exemptions for Schooling in Victoria

In Victoria, attending school is compulsory for all students aged from 6 to 17 years. Primary schools cater for students aged 5–12 years and secondary schools for students aged 13–18 years.

Exemptions from the minimum and maximum age requirements are rare and not considered normal practice. MACS schools are provided with guidelines for exception to the maximum age requirements and advice related to the application for exemption process. Refer to the Maximum Age Exemption Application Form.

Generally speaking, students aged 13 years and over must be enrolled in a secondary school. Further, a person aged over 18 years must not be enrolled at or allowed to attend a MACS school. However, in certain circumstances, some exceptions and exemptions may apply as follows:

1. Exceptions

A person who falls within an exception in Victoria automatically meets the age eligibility requirements to apply to enrol in or attend a MACS school. If the principal is satisfied that the student meets the criteria for the exception, the principal may enrol the student on the basis of their age.

Exception does not require the completion of the Maximum Age Exemption Application Form and the decision to enrol the student is made by the school's principal.

2. Exemptions

A student who does not fall within an exception may be eligible to apply for an exemption. In certain circumstances, some exemptions may be granted at the discretion of the MACS regional general manager – the categories for which are outlined in the table below. Exemption categories are related to exceptional circumstances.

Applications for exemption must be submitted and supported by the principal of the school through completion of the Maximum Age Exemption Application Form. There is no automatic eligibility to enrol in or attend a MACS school for students older than 17 years.

An exemption from school attendance and enrolment may be granted where leaving school is in the best interest of the student.

Making a Determination to Repeat a Student for an Additional Year of Study

There are several important considerations that should be analysed carefully before making a decision about retaining a student in the same year level.

Key considerations in decision-making

- A student may only repeat one year level
- The student must meet the age requirements for schooling in Victoria, or an application for exemption will need to be submitted through the principal to the MACS regional general manager
- Decisions are based on the best interest of the student – the potential benefits or negative consequences relating to their educational progress, wellbeing, and social and emotional development must be thoroughly considered
- The potential need to access translation services to support families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds
- Additional costs involved to parents/guardians/carers and the school
- Retention decisions should not be solely based on behavioural or emotional problems
- Retention should only be considered in exceptional circumstances.

Key considerations relating to the student

- Physical size compared to the student's new peers
- Physical disabilities which may affect learning
- Medical conditions that might lead to chronic absenteeism
- Academic potential to catch up
- Social maturity level compared to their new peers
- Whether a younger sibling will then be in the same year level
- Student's current self-concept and likely impact of repeating a year on this
- Whether the student has the capacity to improve significantly if being retained
- The student's own views on being retained
- The parent/guardian/carer's views on retention.

Alternative strategies to repeating a year

- Targeted interventions to support areas of academic and/or social difficulties
- Specifically designed classroom adjustments and support
- Increased parental engagement
- Introduction of short-term intensive catch-up groupings to re-teach missed work
- Use of composite or multi-age classes
- Implementation of mentor systems to provide individual monitoring and support.

Suggestions for consideration if retaining a student

- Review best practice examples to monitor and support students during this critical transition period
- Provide social and professional support by peers, teachers and parents/guardians/carers
- Review how to make a positive transition for students to ensure students' wellbeing
- Implement initiatives such as being accompanied by previous teachers before and after the transition to the new class
- Consider how to provide teachers with the support they need to differentiate the curriculum for students at all levels of achievement within an inclusive school environment
- Consider year-level retention only in extreme situations whereby a student will be severely disadvantaged if expected to continue to the next year level.

Further reading

Catholic Education Commission of Victoria Ltd (CECV) Learning Diversity webinar – [Selecting an Intervention: A Process to Support Decision-making](#)

CECV [Transition for Students with Diverse Needs](#)

Department of Education and Training [Enrolment Policy](#)

[Education and Training Reform Act 2006 \(Vic.\)](#)

[Education and Training Reform Regulations 2017 \(Vic.\)](#)

Appendix

Appendix 1: Literature search

International research into repeating a year of study

Using the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2009 data, an analysis showed that requiring low-achieving students to repeat a year level led to poor performance (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) 2011).

A review of the variation in student performance among OECD countries showed that countries with high rates of year-level repetition experienced poorer student performance. Differences were explained by rates of repetition and socioeconomic background regardless of the country's wealth (OECD 2011). Students do not repeat year levels in Norway and Korea – and these two countries were the best-performers in the tests. The review concluded:

These results suggest that, in general, school systems that seek to cater to different students' needs by having struggling students repeat grades or by transferring them to other schools do not succeed in producing superior overall results and, in some cases, reinforce socio-economic inequities (OECD 2011).

Year-level retention in Australia

It must be noted that in all research to date, retention in Australian schools has not been supported – either academically or socially.

There is very little research on the long-term effects of retention on Australian students. According to Romanes and Hunter (2015) from the Grattan Institute, from the available data '... the evidence is unequivocal: holding kids back is the wrong solution. Not only is repeating a year unhelpful, it's one of the few educational interventions that does a great deal of harm.' They suggest that, according to evidence:

The retained student will also have lower self-esteem, attend school and complete homework less often, be less motivated and have a more pessimistic view of their academic potential. Despite completing an additional year of schooling, they are unlikely to ever catch up with their peer and are more likely to drop out of school without finishing (Romanes & Hunter 2015).

They propose that: 'Instead of trying to eliminate classroom differences, we should provide teachers with the support they need to differentiate the curriculum, rather than pitching it at the classroom average or at year-level expectations.'

According to Anderson (2012) year-level retention in Australia has been used to address school failure or delay entry into school due to a child being deemed unready. The practice of repeating early years of schooling, although supported by some parents and early childhood educators, has not been evidenced in the research as retention has been argued as being ineffective (Anderson 2012). Regarding gender differences in retention rates, research across Queensland schools found that boys were over-represented in all year levels from pre-school to Year 3 (Anderson 2015).

In John Hattie's major synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to student achievement (2009) he proposed that retention was one of the most debated issues – yet it was also one with the least positive effects. Indeed, he stated that it was difficult to find any research that reported a positive effect from student retention. Overall evidence confirmed negative effects for students who were retained, especially on academic achievement in language, arts, reading, mathematics, work-study skills, social studies and grade point average. Further, his research concluded that promoted students were deemed higher on social and emotional adjustment, behaviour, self-concept and attitude towards school than those who were retained.

A study of 3261 students from six Australian secondary schools on the implications of year-level retention (Martin 2011) also reported clear differences. Year-level retention was found to be a significant negative predictor of academic self-concept and homework completion, as well as being strongly associated with maladaptive motivation and weeks absent from school. Retention was also found to be a negative predictor of self-esteem. Overall, Martin's research found predominantly negative effects of year-level retention which remained significant after controlling for socio-demographic and ability factors.

Research summary

- Year-level retention aims to redress concerns that students are unlikely to make successful progress in the next school year due to their low performance (Rathmann, Loter & Vockert 2020). Retention usually means a change in the learning environment with new classmates who are younger.
- Retention can be a forced or voluntary decision by teachers, parents or students' own choice.
- Australian schools tend to repeat less than 10% of students, although this varies according to jurisdiction and school.
- Transitions such as retention can be perceived as critical events that may trigger profound emotions and stress and affect student wellbeing.
- Most research considers effects on academic achievement, which may result in some early gains – but they are not necessarily retained.
- In some studies retention has resulted in the short-term in an increase in performance, school engagement and belongingness and a decrease in hyperactivity, sadness and personal withdrawal. In most studies, though, retention has been linked to a decline in motivation and considered an ineffective intervention for later academic achievement and social/emotional wellbeing.
- There is a lack of research or evidence in Australia on the short- and long-term effects of year-level retention on which to base decisions.
- Most recommendations are opposed to retention with a preference for improved student differentiation within an inclusive school.

References

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- Martin, AJ 2011, 'Holding back and holding behind: Grade retention and students' non-academic and academic outcomes', *British Educational Research Journal*, 37 (5), 739–763.
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