



Grade retention in schools in Europe: huge differences between countries

The study *Grade Retention during Compulsory Education in Europe: Regulations and Statistics* compares how grade retention – making pupils repeat a school year – is applied in schools across Europe. It shows that practices vary greatly between countries: whether a child has to repeat a year at school depends more on the educational culture concerned and teacher appraisal than on the child's performance. It was produced for the Commission by the Eurydice network and covers 31 countries (all EU Member States, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Turkey).

What is Eurydice

The **Eurydice Network** provides information on and analyses of European education systems and policies. It consists of 37 national units based in all 33 countries participating in the EU's Lifelong Learning programme (EU Member States, EFTA countries, Croatia and Turkey). It is co-ordinated and managed by the EU Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency in Brussels, which drafts its studies and provides a range of online resources.

All Eurydice publications are available free of charge at

<http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/>

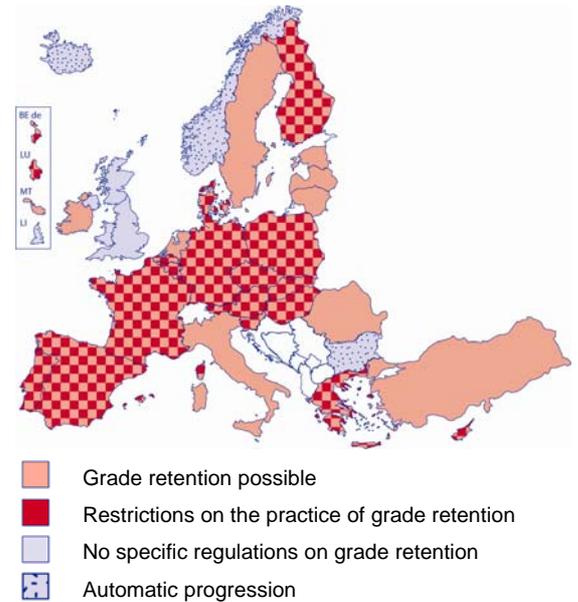
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Wide difference in grade retention rates

Grade retention is possible in most countries and basic regulations are often similar. In many countries, restrictions on retention are imposed by regulation but, rates of retention nevertheless vary significantly between countries. Data from the 2009 PISA survey (Programme for International Student Assessment) showed that some countries such as Slovenia, the United Kingdom, Iceland and Finland have very low retention rates (less than 3%); while other countries such as the Belgium (French Community), Spain, France, Luxembourg and Portugal reveal very high rates (more than 30%).

Figure 1: Grade progression in primary education according to existing regulations, 2009/10



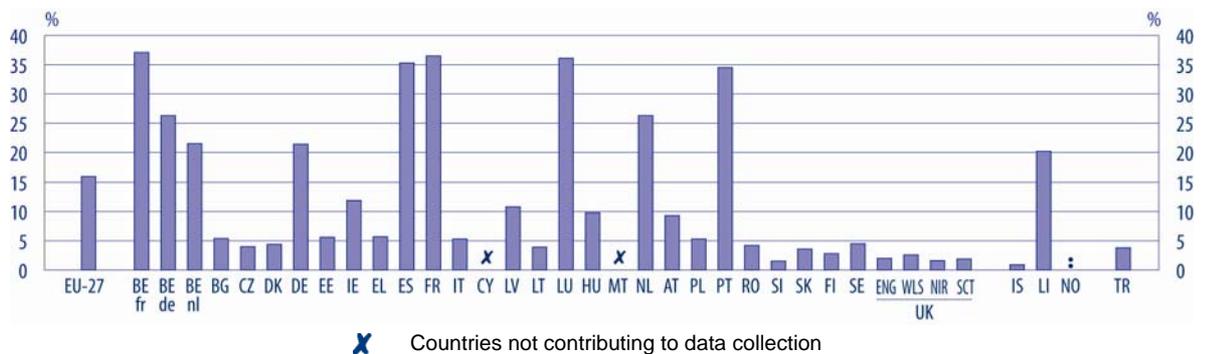
Source: Eurydice.

Where grade retention is widespread, the idea that it is beneficial for pupils is still prevalent in the education community

A prevailing culture of grade retention seems to be the main reason why the practice is used more often in certain countries, where the idea that repeating a year could be beneficial for pupils' learning remains strong. This view is often held by teaching staff, the education community

and parents, even though it has repeatedly been challenged. The Eurydice study demonstrates that there is no clear relationship between regulations and rates of repetition in practice. Therefore the challenge lies more in questioning certain assumptions and beliefs rather than regulatory change.

Figure 2: Proportion of 15-year-old pupils who have repeated a year at least once in primary and/or lower secondary education, 2009



x Countries not contributing to data collection

EU-27		BE fr	BE de	BE nl	BG	CZ	DK	DE	EE	IE	EL	ES	FR	IT	CY	LV	LT	LU
		37.1	26.3	21.5	5.4	4.0	4.4	21.4	5.6	11.9	5.7	35.3	36.5	5.3	x	10.8	3.9	36.1
HU	MT	NL	AT	PL	PT	RO	SI	SK	FI	SE	UK-ENG	UK-WLS	UK-NIR	UK-SCT	IS	LI	NO	TR
9.8	x	26.3	9.3	5.3	34.5	4.2	1.5	3.6	2.8	4.5	2.0	2.6	1.6	1.9	0.9	20.2	:	3.8

Source: 2009 PISA database, OECD.

Why and where a pupil would repeat a school year

In a few countries, automatic progression is an official principle (Iceland and Norway for all compulsory education and Bulgaria and Liechtenstein at primary level). The situation is similar in the United Kingdom because, although there are no specific regulations on grade retention, children are normally expected to progress through school within their own year group.

In all other countries, grade retention is permitted by legislation but usually with various restrictions such as automatic pro-

gression during the first years of primary education and/or a limit on the number of times a child may repeat a year.

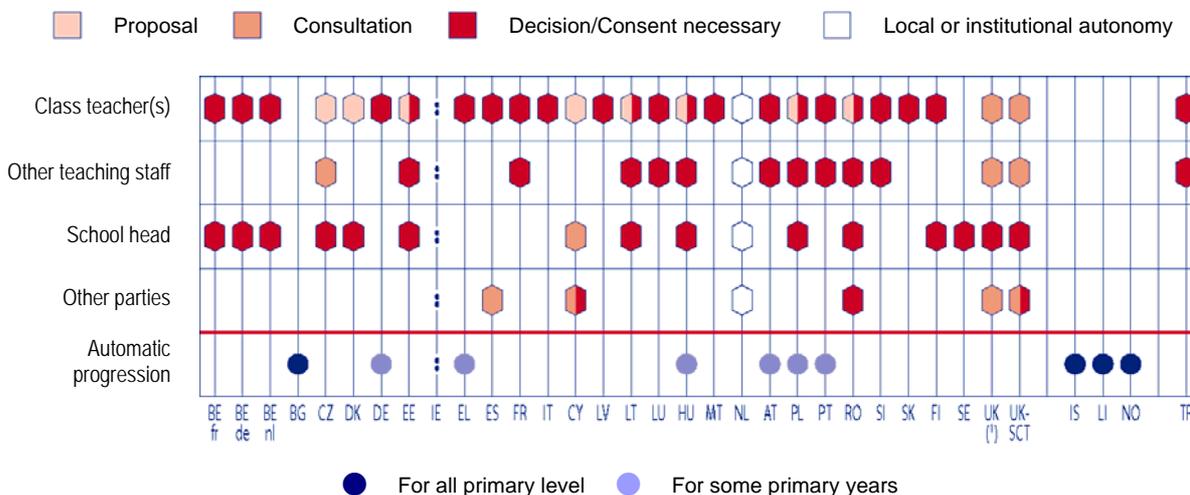
In all countries, support and remedial measures are available for pupils facing learning difficulties across the school year. Lack of sufficient progress at the end of the year is the most frequent reason why pupils may have to repeat a year, and this decision is usually based more on teacher appraisal than on standardised learning progress scales.

Decision-making process on grade repetition

In most countries the school takes the decision, whether the responsibility lies primarily with the child's teacher, the teaching staff as a whole or the head of school. It is possible for them to consult specialists outside of school but generally speaking, the decision is the school's responsibility. In some countries however, parties from outside the school may play a significant role. These external participants are often educational psychologists and/or guidance services who provide either advice or approval to ensure that the best informed decision is made about a pupil's case.

A few exceptions occur: in Cyprus at primary level, the final decision rests with the inspector assigned to the school who then approves or rejects the teacher's recommendation. While at lower secondary level in Scotland the decision-making power is shared between the school head and the local authorities and in Ireland, all decisions regarding pupil progression to the next year at lower secondary level are always made outside the school by the Department of Education and Skills.

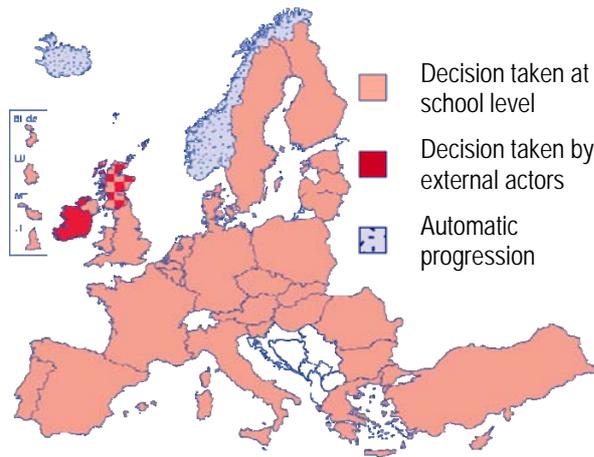
Figure 3: Role of education professionals within and outside the school in the grade retention decision-making process in primary education, 2009/10



Source: Eurydice.

UK (!): UK-ENG/WLS/NIR

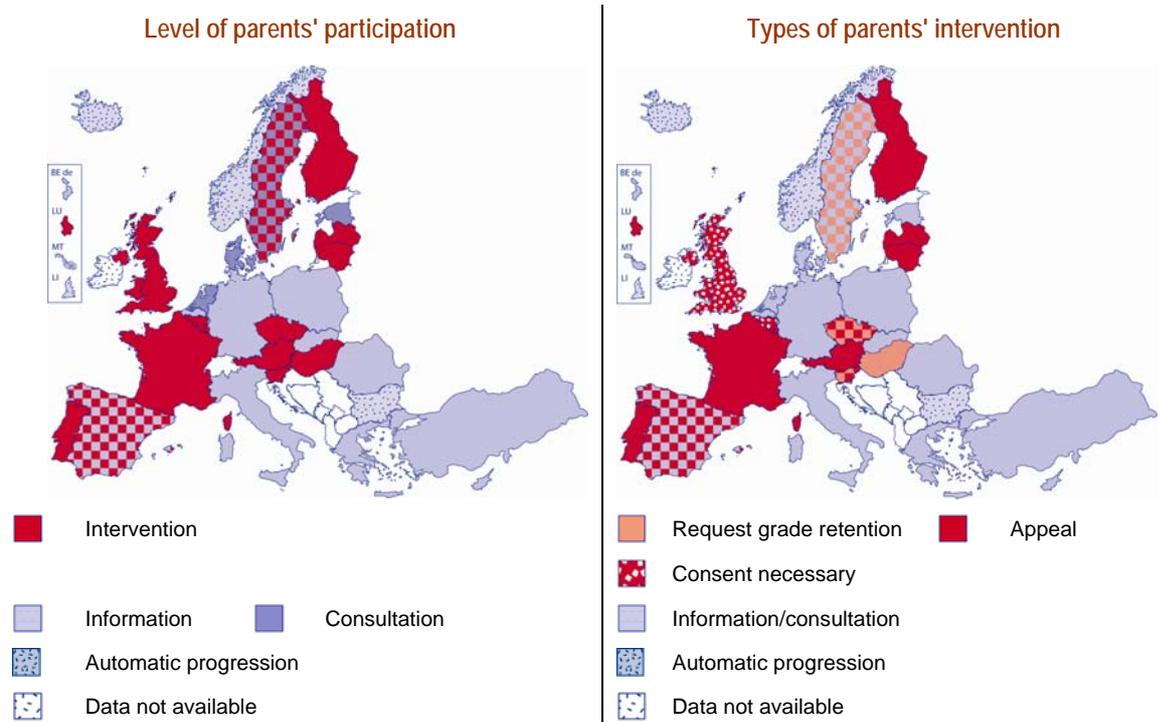
Figure 4: Role of education professionals in lower secondary education, 2009/10



Source: Eurydice.

Throughout school progression, parents are always informed of the child's progress and development. They may be consulted during the decision-making process (Denmark, Estonia, Malta, the Netherlands, Sweden). In a dozen countries, legislation provides for a more active role for parents: they may lodge an appeal (Czech Republic, Spain, France, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Austria, Portugal, Slovenia, Finland) or have to give their consent to any decision regarding repetition (French Community of Belgium, Slovenia, United Kingdom).

Figure 5: Parental participation in the decision-making process on grade retention at primary level, 2009/10



Source: Eurydice.

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The full study

Grade Retention during Compulsory Education in Europe: Regulations and Statistics

can be found in English, French and German on the Eurydice website:

http://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/thematic_studies_en.php

Printed copies of the full study

are available upon request at eacea-eurydice@ec.europa.eu