



# Can Moving Teachers Between Grade Levels Actually Hurt Student Learning?

A great deal of attention has been given to the learning loss that can take place under brand new teachers, but there is a growing body of research that shows moving teachers between grade levels, or “grade switching,” can actually be harmful to student achievement too. While grade switching is a common practice for many reasons (about a quarter of all teachers in a school have switched grades any given year), here are a few things to consider when determining teacher assignments for the coming year.

## Grade switching isn’t good for teachers.

While most teachers generally improve from one year to the next, switching grades hinders their own growth as a teacher. For example, teachers going from their second to third year of teaching generally improve quite a bit, but a recent study found that the typical rate of improvement drops by 20 percent if they’re asked to take on a new grade. That same drop in teachers’ effectiveness was seen even in more experienced teachers, and cut across all grades.

## The negative impact on student learning is big and can still be measured two years out.

One study found that second graders assigned to a teacher from another grade experienced the equivalent of about 42 to 50 days less learning (that’s more than two months!) compared with students who were taught by an experienced second grade teacher. When those students moved onto third grade, they were still losing about 22 days of learning.

## “Strategic” grade switching may actually backfire.

Many principals try to shift their strongest teachers to tested grades and subjects. This seems like a logical approach, but it often involves moving those less effective teachers into the earlier (untested) grades. Given this is when children learn how to read, this strategy can do real damage that is hard to undo in later grades. Moving stronger teachers to tested grades may boost school performance in that year, but the harm to students who do not learn to read as well as they might have otherwise becomes evident when they reach later grades. The one exception is “looping,” when a teacher follows an entire class of students for two or more years; this practice has benefits for student learning.

## Our most vulnerable students are more likely to be assigned to a teacher who switched grades.

Students of color, students of lower socio-economic status, and English learners are not only more likely to be assigned to brand new teachers, they are also all somewhat more likely to have teachers who have been switched to new grades - meaning that these students disproportionately suffer the effects of these lower-performing teachers. Schools can take immediate action to track and reduce this practice.

## Teachers who switch schools see an even bigger decline in effectiveness.

The impact of a teacher taking on a new assignment is made worse if she goes to a new school. About 7 percent of teachers move to new schools each year, which research finds is even more detrimental than grade switching in the same school (creating a hit to student learning about twice as large as a within-school switch).

## Keeping teachers in the same grade also helps retain teachers.

Teachers who switch grades tend to leave their schools the next year at a rate 40 percent higher than average. That's pretty huge!

## WHAT CAN SCHOOL LEADERS DO?

- Avoid moving teachers between grades if at all possible. Once you do move a teacher, try not to do it again.
- Track how often you move teachers between grades and which students are being assigned to those teachers. Make sure that your most vulnerable students have teachers with experience in that grade.
- Invest in the future. Keep the strongest reading teachers in early grades. This will help student learning and performance on state tests.
- When hiring teachers from other schools, give priority to effective teachers who have had experience teaching the grade you need to fill.

### Other Resources on School Staffing Practices

Learn more in these *Teacher Quality Bulletin* blog posts.

[Switching it up isn't always a good thing](#)

[Teacher turnover hurts - but not in the way you think](#)

[Feel the Churn](#)

[Not-so-strategic staffing](#)

## About NCTQ

The National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) is a nonpartisan, not-for-profit research and policy organization that is committed to modernizing the teaching profession. We conduct research to assist states, districts, and teacher prep programs with teacher quality issues. We propose new changes to restore the teaching profession to strong health so we can provide every child with the education needed to ensure a bright and successful future and to offer all teachers—from aspiring to veteran—the conditions needed to thrive and succeed.

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