

The Medium Run Effects of Florida's Test-Based Promotion Policy

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Policies Intending to End Social Promotion

- In the past, public schools have tended to promote students to next grade level even if they have very low academic proficiency
 - The idea is that holding them back would be harmful to their self esteem, and thus counterproductive
- But in recent years more and more people have argued that it might be better to ensure that students have the skills necessary to succeed at the next grade level

Previous Research

- There is a wide body of research going back several decades that finds student proficiency is harmed by retention
- But past research has been severely limited by its inability to account for unobserved differences between retained and promoted students
 - Past research has not been able to make apples-to-apples comparisons
- We use a research strategy widely considered to provide causal estimates in order to evaluate the effect of a policy that includes retention
 - This research has been peer reviewed and will be published in a forthcoming issue of *Education Finance and Policy*

Test-Based Promotion

- Florida is one of several school systems that have recently adopted test-based promotion policies intended to end social promotion
- Students must meet a minimum threshold on a reading test in order to be default promoted to the next grade

Florida's Policy

- Policy first enacted statewide in 2002
- Third grade students required to meet the Level 2 benchmark on the state's reading exam in order to be default promoted to the fourth grade
 - Second lowest of five levels
- Could receive one of a variety of exemptions and be promoted even if scored below threshold
 - About 60 percent of students in the first class subjected to the policy with scores below the benchmark were retained

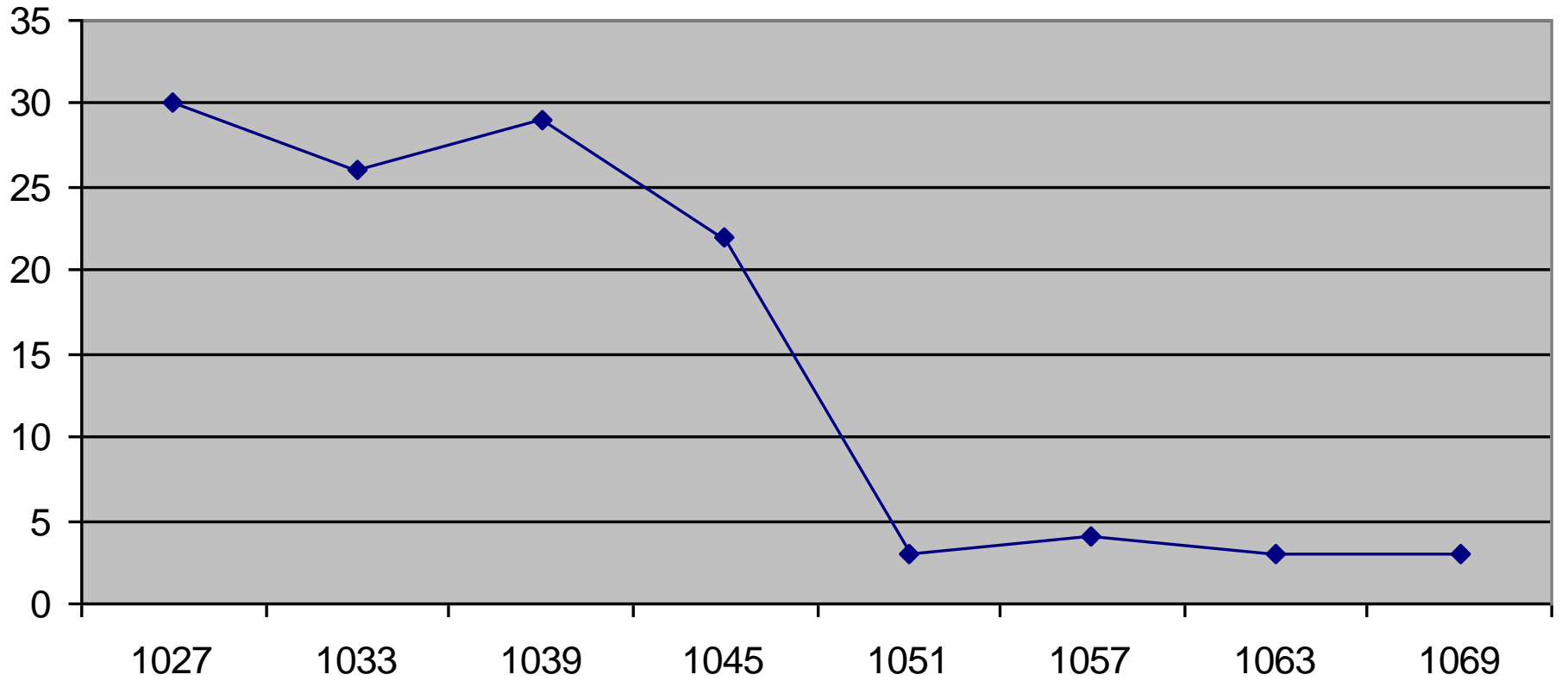
Interventions Other than Retention

- Retained students were required to attend summer school
- Were required to be placed in the classroom of a “high-performing teacher”
- Schools were required to develop academic improvement plans for each of the retained students
- Retained students were required to receive an additional 90 minutes of daily reading instruction during the school year

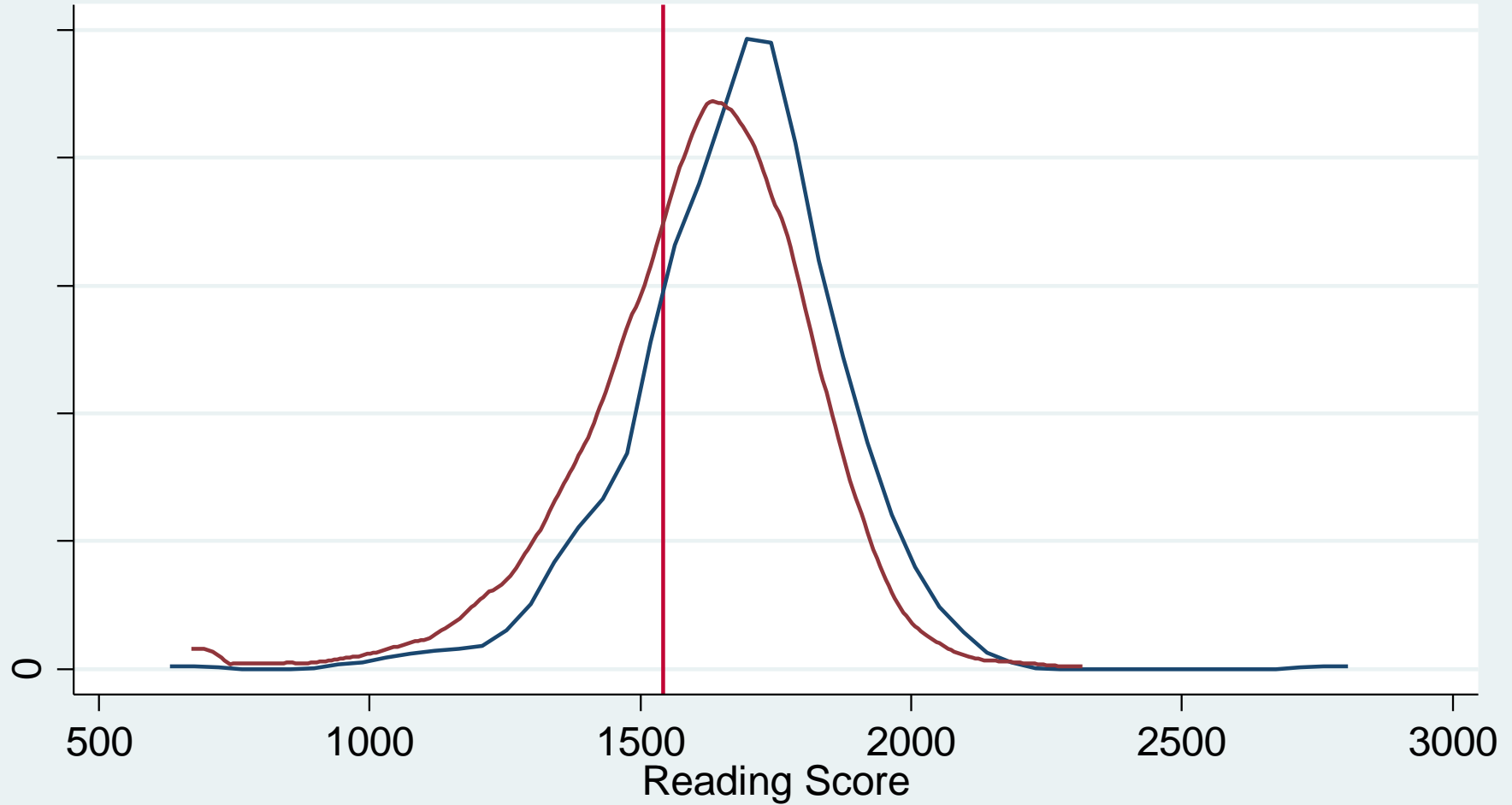
Our Research Approach

- We use a research strategy known as “regression discontinuity”
 - Replicates a randomized experiment
 - One of the few techniques recognized to produce causal estimates by What Works Clearinghouse
- Essentially, the procedure compares the later academic outcomes of students who barely pass the exam to those who barely failed it
 - The difference of one or a few questions right on the exam
 - Largely explained by randomness
- Compare students when in same grade level
- Look at the medium-run effects of the policy on student achievement
 - Can follow students through the seventh or eighth grade
- Here we will focus on the second class subjected to the policy
 - Measuring the effect on the first class is tricky

Percentage of Students Retained



Seventh Grade Reading



kernel = epanechnikov, bandwidth = 39.8757

Summary of Findings

- Retention had a large short-run effect that declines over time, but is still distinguishable and meaningful in size as late as 7th grade
 - Some other treatments have been found to fade out completely in a short period of time
 - Head Start
- The magnitude of the effect is substantial
 - Reading – by 7th grade 0.183 standard deviations
 - Math – 0.174 standard deviations
 - One-year effect of teacher quality – between 0.1 and 0.2 standard deviations
- Also see similar positive effect on 5th grade science test
- Results similar on low-stakes standardized test

Multiple Interventions

- We are not able to completely separate the effect of retention from that of other interventions tied to the policy
- However, we do show that assignment to a “high quality” teacher in the retained year is not driving the result
- We find strong evidence that remediation under a policy similar to Florida’s has a large and sustained positive effect on student achievement

Still More to Learn

- We now want to know whether that positive effect leads to higher rates of high school graduation
- What effect does this have on students in their initial third grade year?
- The evidence thus far, however, suggests that Florida's remediation policy is a promising avenue for improving student achievement