

# KERA UPDATE

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## Ungraded Primary — New Non-Cognitive Data Raises More Questions

Newly released data on Kentucky public school retentions (kids held back) raises more questions about the functioning of Kentucky's experiment with multi-age instruction. This program, called "Ungraded Primary," eliminated the traditional Kindergarten through 3rd Grade school structure. Kentucky now requires these students to be assigned to learning groups based solely on teacher determination of progress. The program also includes significant changes in instructional methodology, many of which are not well documented to actually improve performance.

One of the more significant concerns about Kentucky's Ungraded Primary program is that virtually no direct data is available. For example, there are no state-wide testing results for these students. Data collection has been so inadequate that the state does not even know how many children fail to graduate from the program on-time with their peer group.

As a result of inadequate data, researchers trying to get at least a rough idea for what is happening in Primary have had to focus on the somewhat indirect results for Primary's recent graduates — the kids in 4th Grade.

Several years ago, the first unsettling statistic was identified, an absolutely enormous amount of enrollment of 4th Graders in Kentucky's tutorial and remedial program, the Extended School Services program. The alarming and very obvious increase in ESS for 4th Grade is shown on the graph to the right.

Now, the very troubling trend in 4th Grade ESS enrollment has been joined

by an unsettling trend in another 4th Grade statistic — retention for 4th Grade jumped 0.36 points from the 1993-94 school year to 1994-95.

While this jump doesn't seem very dramatic, it should be pointed out that any student retained in 4th Grade must be tested again on the Kentucky KIRIS test. KIRIS is a high stakes test used to hold schools accountable. Teachers earn rewards up to several thousand dollars a piece in schools with good KIRIS scores, and schools can be taken over by the KY Department of Education if they have poor scores.

With so much riding on KIRIS, there is a tremendous inducement for schools to avoid "double-jeopardy" and not retain kids to take this test twice. Thus, any increase should not be taken lightly. Clearly, the increase in retentions in 4th Grade, especially after declines posted in the early years of KIRIS testing, raises another alarm flag that the graduates of Ungraded Primary may not have the skills they need to prosper in 4th Grade. Certainly, there may be a number of

possible reasons for this noticeable increase in 4th Grade retention. But, with so little evidence available about Ungraded Primary, the growing warning flags from the limited data that does exist indicates the Legislature and the Department of Education need to get a better feel for what is really happening in Ungraded Primary as quickly as possible.

