

PROMOTION POLICIES A GLOBAL LITERATURE REVIEW:

Definitions, Trends, and Recommendations
for Latin America in the context of COVID-19



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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INTRODUCTION



Photo: El Diario de Hoy, El Salvador

Educational challenges that lead to grade repetition and school dropout are not uncommon. Unforeseen circumstances —such as natural disasters, political instability, or pandemics— cause school closures, disrupt schooling, and prevent learners' normal progression from one grade level to the next, exacerbating the situation. Unfortunately, in such cases, education systems often have limited capacities to meet students' individual learning needs at the appropriate pace.

This document summarizes the findings of a [literature review \(in Spanish\)](#) on this topic, commissioned by the USAID/LAC Reads Capacity Program (LRCP) that is implemented by AIR in association with Juárez & Associates. This review focuses on the discussion of policies to address school failure, including automatic promotion (AP) and repetition, and aims to respond to the following research questions:

» **What are the trends in promotion policies and what are the complementary strategies that make them successful?**

AP aims to reduce school dropout and repetition rates by advancing students with their same grade cohort, in many cases, regardless of their educational performance. Repetition aims to enable students to repeat an academic year to catch up on content they were not able to master.

During the COVID-19 pandemic schools have closed for long periods, disrupting the learning cycles of 1.6 billion children and young people worldwide, according to the UN. Given that student performance may suffer as a result of prolonged school closures, it is worth considering the benefits and limitations of various promotion strategies.

The LRCP's review explores student promotion models and provides a review of global trends, current policies in Central America, and educational implications of the COVID-19 pandemic. It also identifies specific strategies that, applied in combination with promotion policies, help to improve learning outcomes for students who are struggling academically. This review is intended for educational policymakers, ministries of education, and technical staff primarily in Latin America.

I. AUTOMATIC PROMOTION AND REPETITION: DEFINITIONS AND DEBATE

DEFINITIONS

AUTOMATIC PROMOTION

AP is defined as *the systematic progression of a student from one grade to the next regardless of learning achievement*. However, there are variations in the terminology and implementation of AP.

For instance:

- * Rigal (2016) uses the concept of "pedagogical or social promotion," which includes direct transition from one grade to another (or AP) and assisted promotion (measures to support students' learning).
- * School systems do not always implement AP systematically across all grades (e.g., a school may automatically promote students from Grade 1 to 2 but not from Grade 2 to 3).

The LRCP's review refers to AP as the direct transition from one grade to another, independent of other support measures.

REPETITION

Repetition is viewed as the alternative to AP. According to UNESCO's Institute of Statistics [UIS] (2012), a repeater is "a student who fails to be promoted to the next grade or fails to finish an educational program and must retake the same grade the following school year" (p. 17).

SCHOOL FAILURE

School failure can be defined from a systemic or individual perspective. According to OECD (2010):

- * At the systemic level, it is the failure of an educational system that is unable to provide a quality education to all.
- * At an individual level, it is defined as failure of a student in obtaining a minimum necessary standard, or ultimately dropping out.

THE DEBATE ON PROMOTION PRACTICES

Debate exists on the use and pertinence of AP and repetition for student progression. AP is a way to avoid social inequalities and stigma that can arise from grade repetition. Recent research has clearly linked repetition to school dropout rates (Eboatu, 2017); still, critics of AP prefer repetition because it maintains students' abilities within grades (Pasolini, 2011; Rubio, 1992). There is, however, a general agreement that neither model on its own leads to better student performance: researchers have documented mixed findings of studies comparing the effectiveness of both models (García-Huidobro, 2000; UIS, 2012; King, Orazem & Paterno, 2015).

Despite this debate, a key recommendation is that education systems go beyond promotion strategies to identify complementary school improvement policies and measures to ensure better learning opportunities for all. In agreement with Jimerson & Renshaw (2012), the **LRCP's review argues that the discussion should not focus on passing (AP) or failing students (repetition), but on implementing complementary measures that support them to succeed both academically and socially**. For example, if students have to repeat a grade, what additional measures should be put into place to ensure that they have the tools needed to succeed? If students are automatically promoted to the next grade, what additional measures should be taken to help them progress academically?

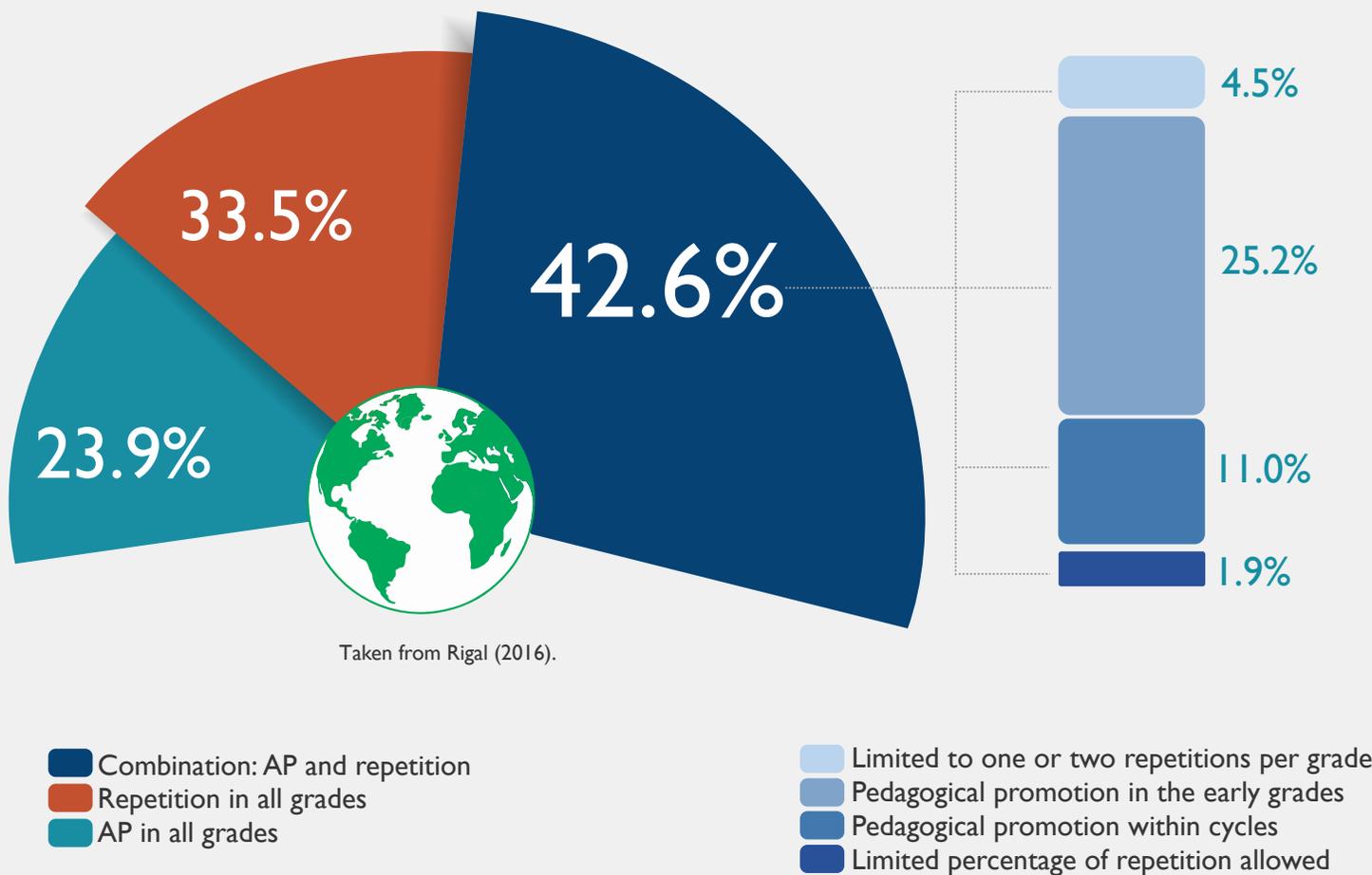
II. IDENTIFIED TRENDS

AP and repetition are the two main modalities to determine students' progression through grades around the globe. Between these two modalities, the LRCP's review of the literature indicates that, even with differences between countries and regions, the global trend is towards using AP as a general policy. Many education systems have restricted the use of repetition through actions such as implementing policies on continuous progression or partial promotion, limiting the number of repetitions allowed, and limiting the percentage of students who can repeat.

GLOBAL TRENDS

A systematic review of AP practices in 155 countries shows that most countries do not implement AP in isolation or uniformly across grades but rather in conjunction with other strategies and measures (Rigal, 2016). The LRCP's review identifies three school promotion models in basic education (Graphic 1): (i) models that use AP or repetition depending on the grade level (42.6% of the cases); (ii) repetition in all grades (33.5%); and (iii) AP in all grades (23.9%). In countries with combined models of AP and repetition, AP is most commonly used in the early grades (25.2% of the countries reviewed).

PROMOTION POLICIES AROUND THE WORLD GRAPHIC 1



TRENDS IN CENTRAL AMERICA

Prior to COVID-19, AP policies in Central America were applied primarily in the pre-school and early primary grades.

AP policies in basic education were linked to strong student attendance, **end-of-year grades at a minimum of 60-70%, completion of schoolwork and, in many cases, good behavior.**

In Guatemala, Panama and El Salvador, AP was only applied at the pre-school level. In Honduras, AP was applied up to first grade, and it was tied to **positive behavior, 90% attendance, and a parental signed commitment to support children at home.**

The Dominican Republic and Nicaragua **allowed AP through the second and third grades, respectively.**

In Costa Rica, until recently, there was no official AP policy, and repetition was much more common. Since 2011, the country uses a system in which pass/fail is determined per subject: students may pass on to the next grade level, but they may still need to repeat subjects for which they did not receive a passing grade.

According to the Costa Rican Ministry of Public Education, “the old rules that led students to repeat the whole year for missing one, two or more subjects did not make sense. They filled the classrooms with repeaters in subjects that they had already passed; these students were a distraction for their peers, did not engage in class, and had poor conduct, all the while representing a cost in terms of maintaining spaces and having teachers to help them” (MEP, 2011). While these changes in Costa Rica reflected a transition from repetition policies to those more in favor of AP, the change has been implemented slowly.



During the COVID-19 pandemic, the majority of schools across Central America closed and transitioned to remote learning; Nicaragua was the exception (UNICEF, 2020). School closures affect current and future students' academic learning, and urges the rethinking of promotion policies. Discussions about promotion policies have begun as governments contemplate how to handle the upcoming school year; however, most of these policies have not been formally altered in the region, as of the publication of the LRPC's review.

In the Dominican Republic, the Minister of Education, Antonio Peña Mirabal, granted AP to all students with the condition that teachers provide additional reinforcement to students with grades below 70% (CDN, 2020). On the contrary, in Honduras, the Secretariat of Education (SE) decided not to apply universal AP, even though a proposal was put forth to the National Congress to apply AP (La Tribuna, 2020b), and teachers have been publicly requesting the SE to adopt AP due to the effects of COVID-19 and Hurricane Eta (La Tribuna, 2020a). Instead, the SE has decided to extend the school year to allow students to make up for time lost.

In August, the Costa Rican Minister of Public Education, Guiselle Cruz Maduro, announced that schools will remain closed until 2021. Teachers should assess students' learning achievement and determine the status of their promotion. Students who do not meet promotion requirements must undergo additional teacher-led remediation at the start of the new school year (MEP, 2020). Costa Rica is the only country in the region that puts the onus of decisions between promotion and repetition into the hands of teachers themselves. In El Salvador, the requirements for AP have been reduced in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and the significant portion of students who have limited access and/or connectivity to participate in distance learning (MINEDUCYT, 2020).

Governments in the region are grappling with the issue of school failure and promotion policies; some of them are making one-time changes that affect only the current school year. Table I summarizes promotion policies in the region before and during COVID-19.

SUMMARY OF PROMOTION POLICIES IN CENTRAL AMERICA BEFORE AND DURING COVID-19

TABLE I

COUNTRY	POLICY FOCUS PRE COVID-19	TEMPORARY RESPONSES TO COVID-19
Nicaragua	Pre-school – Third grade	No official changes to promotion policies as schools remained open during COVID-19.
Dominican Republic	Pre-school – Second grade	Universal AP and provide remediation to students with grades under 70%
Honduras	Pre-school – First grade	Decision not to apply AP universally
Costa Rica	Repetition of failed subjects but not entire grade	Students would be evaluated individually
El Salvador	Pre-school only	Attendance no longer a criterion for AP in 2020-21 and individual AP may be applied after evaluating individual situations
Guatemala	Pre-school only	No official changes to promotion policies
Panama	Pre-school only	No official changes to promotion policies

* <https://www.unicef.org/lac/en/media/16041/file>

III. COMPLEMENTARY EDUCATIONAL STRATEGIES FOR PROMOTION

To ensure better learning outcomes and prevent dropouts, promotion policies should go hand-in-hand with school improvement strategies (Figueira, Rodríguez, & Fuentes, 2006). The recommendations in this section stem from findings of the LRCP's literature review on promotion policies and in particular the Méndez (2015) study which identifies and systematizes AP school improvement strategies from 155 countries. The evidence suggests that school improvement strategies should prioritize the following measures to achieve high quality education, ensure learning, and prevent school failure:



COMPLEMENTARY STRATEGIES

GRAPHIC 2



POLICY AND INSTITUTIONAL MANAGEMENT:

- * Focus on models of AP in primary education that include strategies for improving quality education, reorganizing to avoid concentration of over-age student groups, and keeping students with the same teacher during the first few grades.
- * Focus school improvement plans on early detection of learning issues and tailored teaching strategies.



FAMILY-COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION:

- * Provide mechanisms for parents and communities to participate and have a voice in educational decisions at the school level.
- * Establish mechanisms to systematically share information on students' academic progress and challenges with their families.
- * Encourage educators to connect with students, families, and communities to support students at greater academic risk.
- * Help parents identify students' learning difficulties, and guide them to collaborate on remediation processes.



ASSESSMENT AND EVALUATION OF LEARNING:

- * Continue to assess students' learning during school closures, particularly in reading, writing, and math with an emphasis on formative assessments rather than summative.
- * Ensure early detection of students' academic and social difficulties to allow for timely support interventions, including the design and implementation of individualized pedagogical plans aligned with students' challenges.
- * Provide timely and actionable data on students' academic and social well-being, and use results to provide tailored attention to students.
- * Develop tracking systems to monitor learners' progress as they move from one grade to the next.



PEDAGOGICAL APPROACHES:

- * Employ a pedagogical approach attuned to students' unique economic, social and cultural characteristics to respect their diversity and inclusion, for example, prioritizing students living in poverty who may face greater academic risks.
- * Apply accelerated learning principles with small groups of underperforming students to bring them level with their peers.
- * Implement individualized learning support for students with identified learning difficulties.
- * Validate the new types of learning developed during quarantine and those in restructured classrooms (e.g., under social distance measures, or hybrid) and find ways to connect them with content areas and cognitive domains to achieve meaningful learning.

IV. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Findings from the LRCP's literature review show that both AP and grade repetition are widespread policies globally, and are often implemented without complementary strategies. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has necessitated a shift in thinking. AP policies are viewed more favorably in developed countries where high levels of education are more likely to ensure learning. However, in developing countries, including in Latin America, AP has little effect on reducing school failure unless implemented with additional school improvement strategies. It is important to note that neither AP nor repetition alone helps learners to achieve required academic proficiency levels. Complementary school measures such as those recommended in the previous section are key for student success.

At a systems level, there may be a case for grade repetition when an education system does not have the capacity to provide differentiated instruction for students who have fallen behind and yet are automatically promoted. However, repetition is also often accompanied by negative social repercussions, particularly on young learners, and the potential academic benefit of repeating a grade should be weighed against the social and emotional consequences for the learner. During the COVID-19 context, when the majority of learners are all experiencing learning loss, governments must also consider the risk of widespread drop-out if students are required to repeat a grade. From a long-term perspective, it may make more sense to universally promote students and then concentrate on addressing the learning gaps through the strategies mentioned in this summary.

Based on the findings from this review, governments should consider the benefits and consequences of each promotion policy as outlined in this review, and ensure that the selected policy is accompanied by complementary school improvement strategies. **Specifically, governments should develop comprehensive school improvement policies and plans to address learning inequalities.** These policies and plans should promote:



Training and coaching for teachers and administrators on how to implement assessment, pedagogical and socio-emotional support strategies with their learners.



The inclusion of families and communities in educational decisions and their understanding of how to support learners at home.



Continuous formative assessment and tracking systems to inform instruction.



Differentiated teaching and learning strategies tailored to individual learner needs.

INTERESTED IN LEARNING MORE ABOUT AUTOMATIC PROMOTION?
DOWNLOAD THE FULL STUDY IN SPANISH HERE:
https://lacreads.org/sites/default/files/documents/pa00wzv5_payme_0.pdf

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