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# Early Grades Retention in Tennessee

Research review for the Tennessee  
State Board of Education

# Early grades retention in Tennessee

	<b>2011/2012</b> <b>3<sup>rd</sup> grade retention law</b>	<b>2018</b> <b>SBE Updated Policies</b>	<b>2021</b> <b>3<sup>rd</sup> grade retention law</b>
Change to law/policy	Third grade students shall not be promoted without basic understanding and skills in reading, based on standardized test results or grades	Updated promotion policies, which outlines basic guidelines for retention and types interventions used in lieu of retention	Updated third grade retention law, which outlines more specifics about measuring proficiency and offering interventions in lieu of retention
Alternatives to retention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Research-based interventions (district determined)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sufficient progress on student's individual promotion plan</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Summer learning program and/or tutoring in next year</li> </ul>
Exceptions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students with IEPs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not based solely on having an IEP, English learner (EL) status, or maturity.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• EL students in first 2 years of ELA instruction</li> <li>• Previously retained</li> </ul>

# Prior research on retention




**Data challenges:** Limited national and state data on prevalence of retention




**Negative or null effects:** Most research suggests that retention has, on average, null or negative effects on students

(Allen et al., 2009; Jimerson, 2001/2019; Xia & Kirby, 2009)



**Effects vary:** Effects of retention depend on the timing of retention and potential supports associated with retention

(Valbuena et al., 2021)



**Interventions matter:** More positive, short-term outcomes for retained students under policies with other academic interventions

(Jacob & Lefgren, 2004; Schwerdt et al, 2015)

# Questions guiding our analysis

1. **Who is retained across Tennessee?**
  - A. **How have retention rates varied across time?**
  - B. **To what extent do retention rates vary between schools and districts?**
  - C. **To what extent do student, school, and district characteristics predict retention?**
2. **To what extent are changes in retention and intervention policies associated with changes in retention patterns?**
3. To what extent are changes in retention policy associated with changes in outcomes for students targeted by these policies (third grade students who do not demonstrate reading proficiency)?
4. To what extent is retention associated with future student outcomes (e.g., student achievement, attendance, identification in special education)?

# How we define early grades retention

**Data:** Tennessee's student-level administrative data system which captures minimum and maximum grade for every year for every student in TN public school system

- **Years:** 2009-2010 to 2020-2021 years
- **Grades:** Kindergarten to third grade

**Defining retention:** We count a student as retained if their records indicate that they spent two full years in the same grade

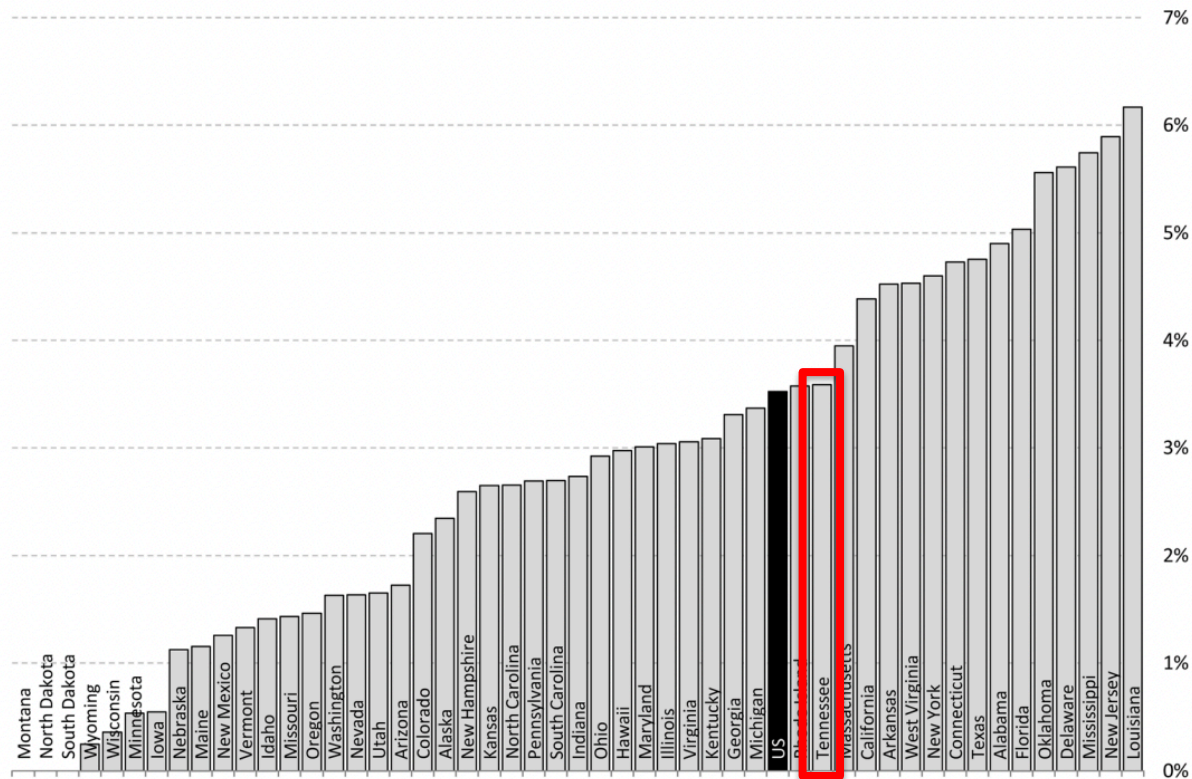
# Statewide historical trends in retention rates in the early elementary grades

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- Tennessee retention rates vs. national trends
- Overall retention rates by grade

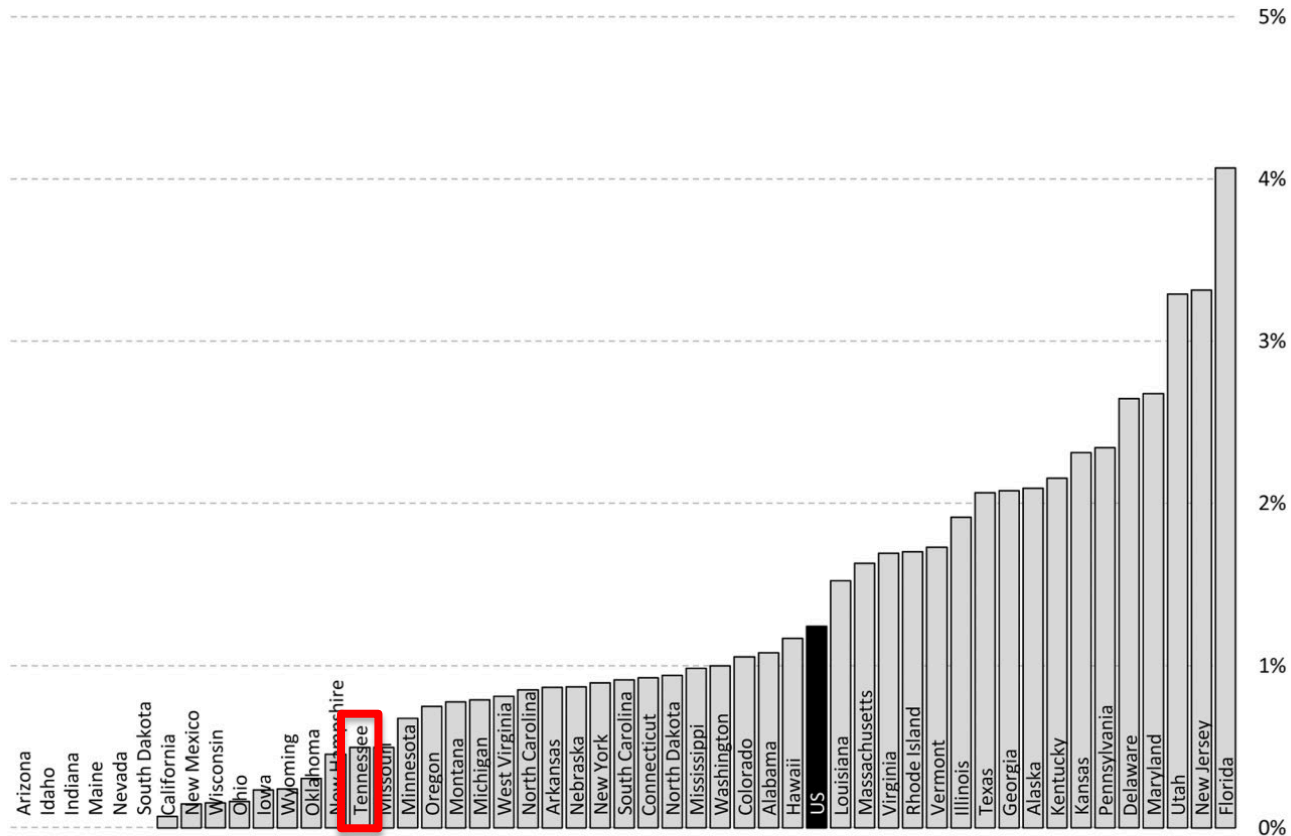


In 2009, Tennessee's first grade retention rates were slightly above national rates while third grade retention rates were lower than national rates.



**Figure 3.**  
Predicted First Grade Retention Rates, End of 2008–09 Academic Year, by State

In 2009, Tennessee's first grade retention rates were slightly above national rates while third grade retention rates were lower than national rates.

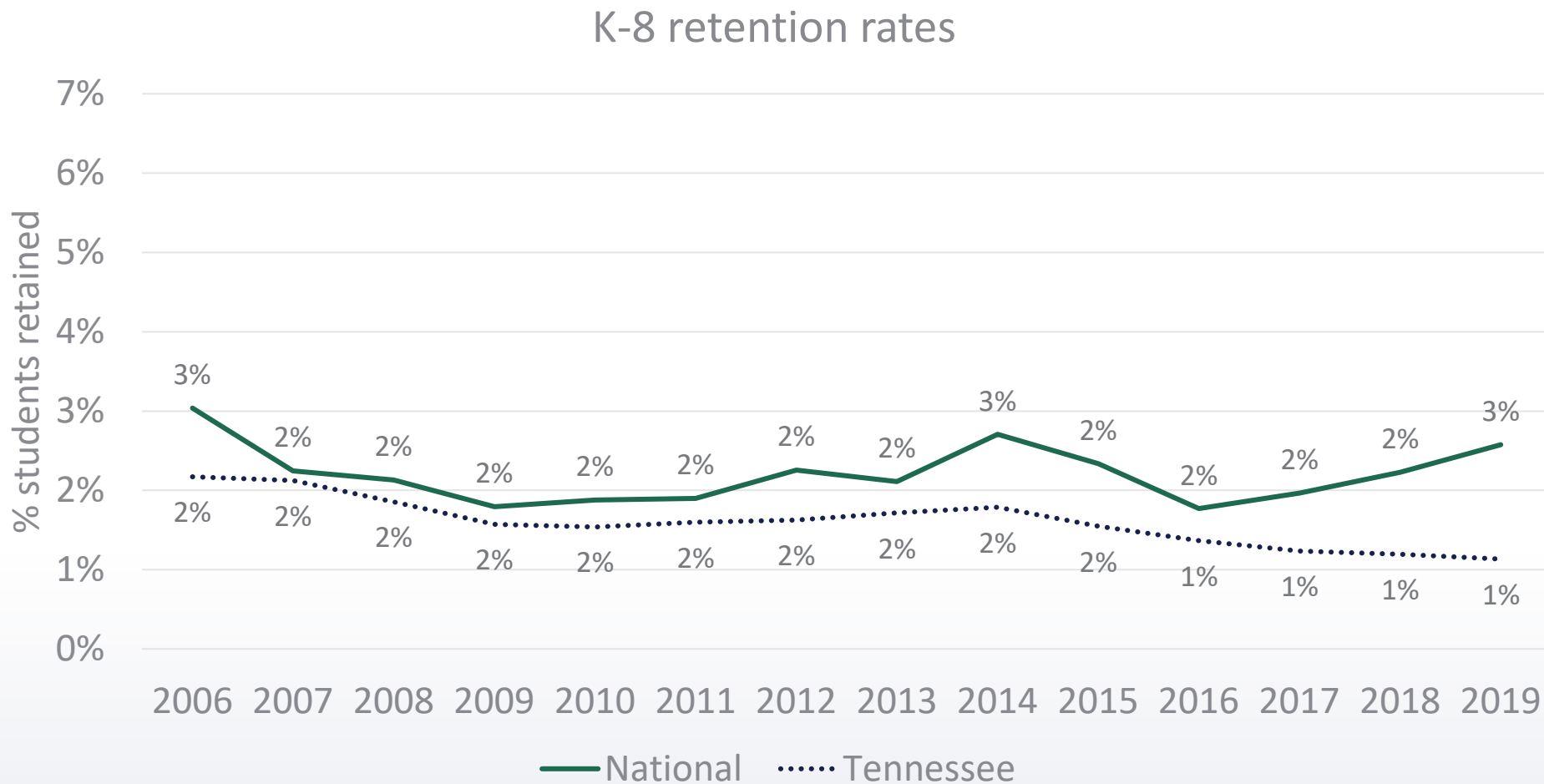


**Figure 4.**  
Predicted Third Grade Retention Rates, End of 2008–09 Academic Year, by State

**Source:** Warren, J. R., & Saliba, J. (2012). First-through eighth-grade retention rates for all 50 states: A new method and initial results. *Educational Researcher*, 41 (8), 320-329. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X12457813>



# Tennessee has lower retention rates in K-8 than the national average, with some differences in the trends over time.



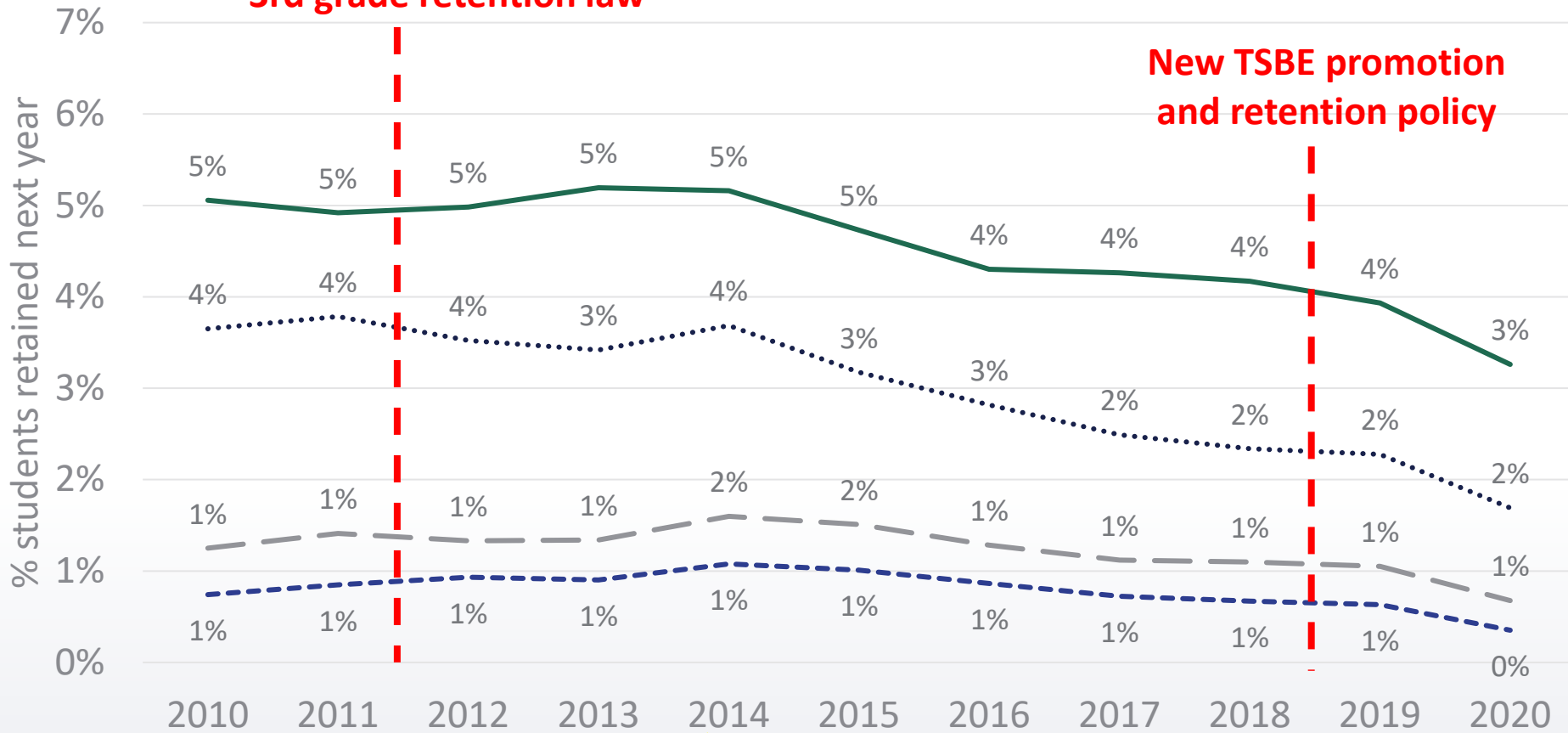
**Source for national trend:** National Center for Educational Statistics (2021). Education Digest: Table 225.90. Number and percentage of elementary and secondary school students retained in grade, by sex, race/ethnicity, and grade level: 1994 through 2019. [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d20/tables/dt20\\_225.90.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d20/tables/dt20_225.90.asp)

Tennessee's retention rates have been trending down over the past decade and overall trends do not appear to shift much amid law and policy changes.

Overall retention rates by grade

3rd grade retention law

New TSBE promotion and retention policy



— Kindergarten    ..... First    — Second    - - - Third

In 2014, about 9000 K-3 students were retained across the state (of a total population of about 300,000 K-3 students)

# Variation in retention in the early elementary grades

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- Differences in retention rates across student and school characteristics
- Differences in retention rates across districts

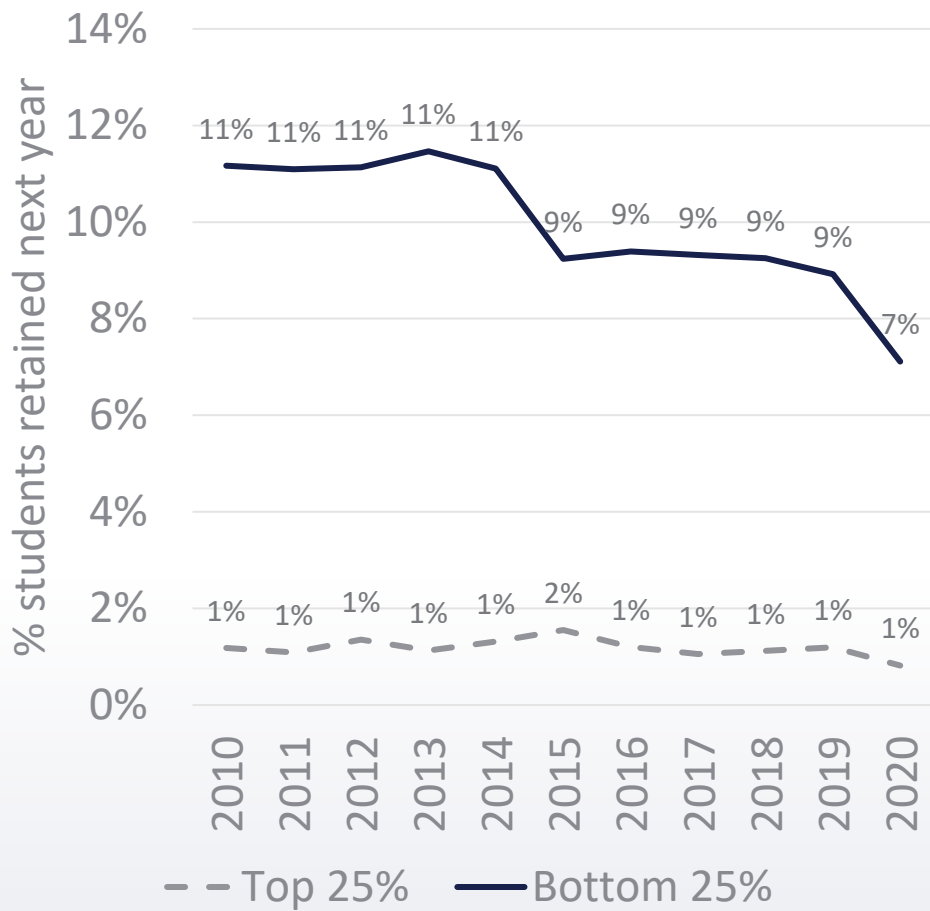
Retention rates also varied across certain student and school characteristics although these differences vary across time.

We examined differences in retention rates across years and grades by:

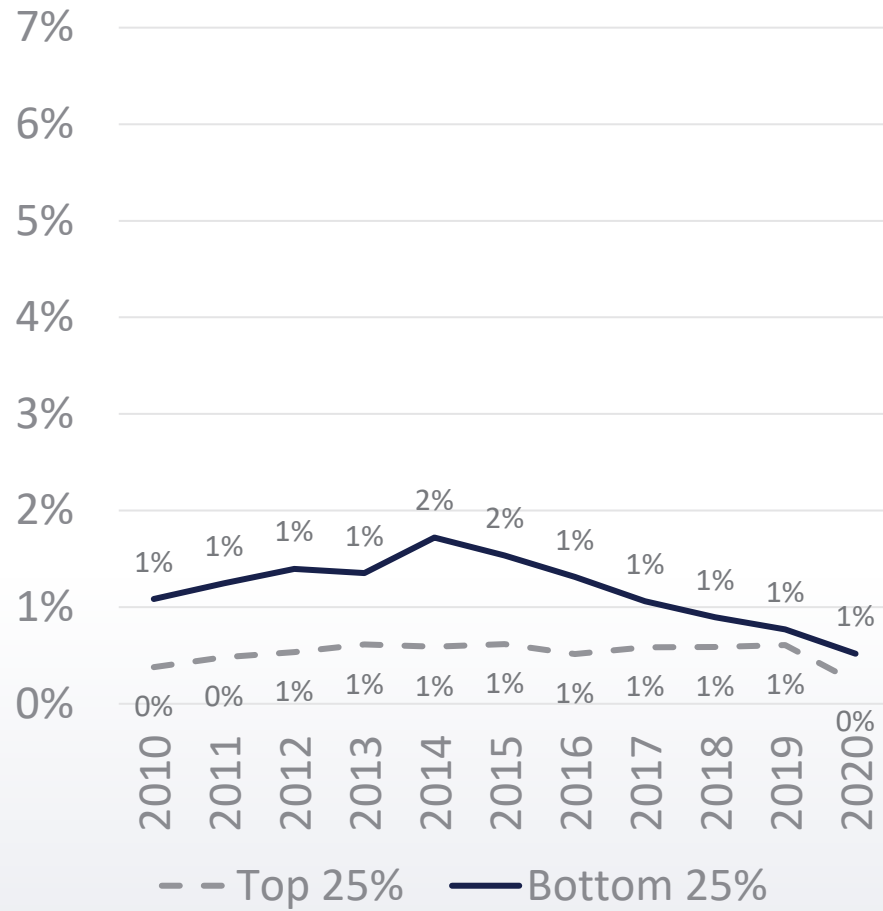
Student characteristics	School and district characteristics
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Age</li><li>▪ Sex</li><li>▪ Race/ethnicity</li><li>▪ Economic disadvantage</li><li>▪ Immigrant status</li><li>▪ English learner status</li><li>▪ Disability status and type</li><li>▪ Attendance record</li><li>▪ Disciplinary record</li><li>▪ Reading proficiency (3<sup>rd</sup> grade)</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Charter vs. traditional</li><li>▪ School achievement and proficiency rates</li><li>▪ School and district geographic location</li><li>▪ School and district size</li></ul>

Students who are relatively younger for their grade are much more likely to be retained, especially in Kindergarten and first grade.

### Kindergarten

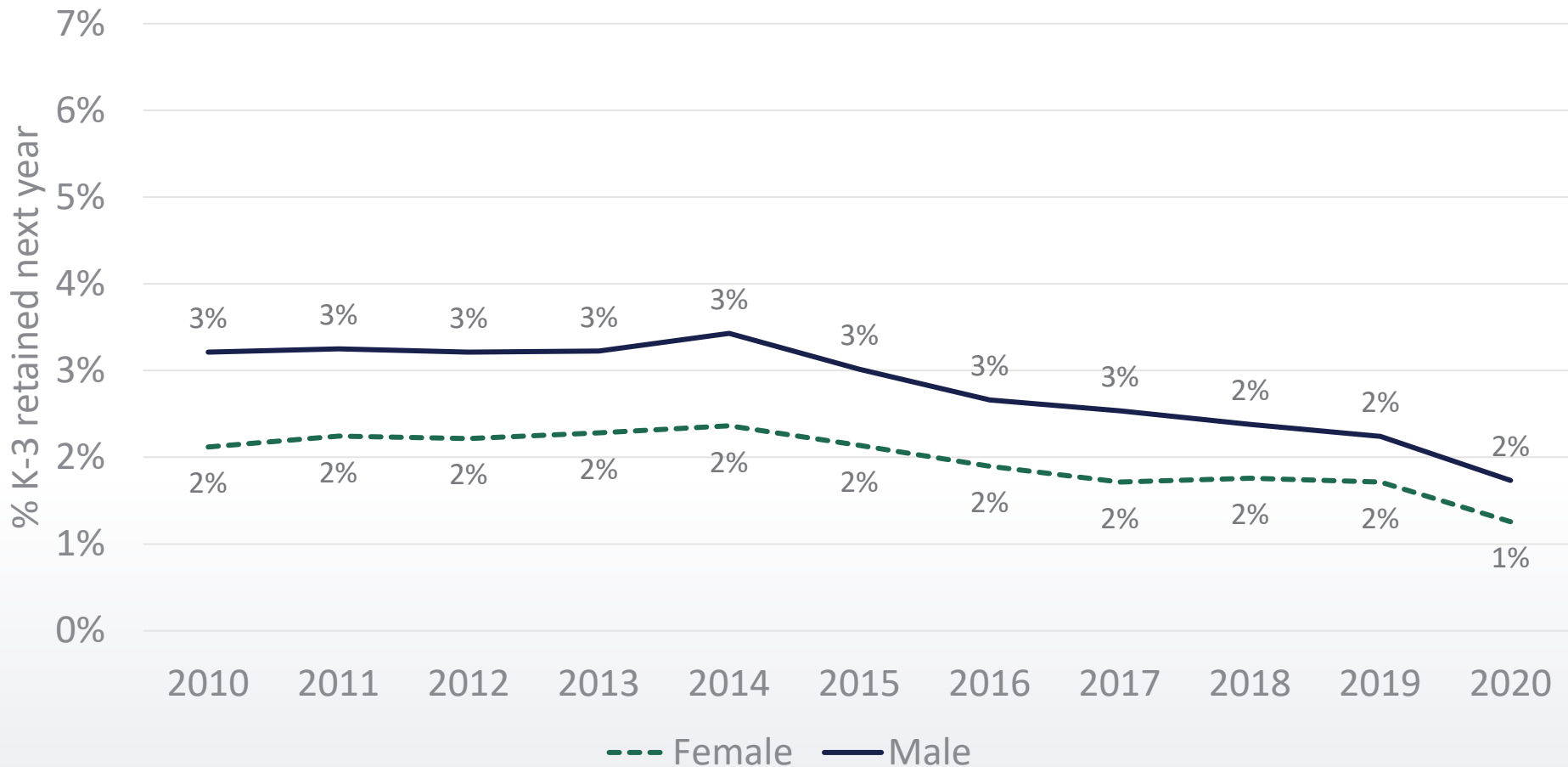


### 3rd grade



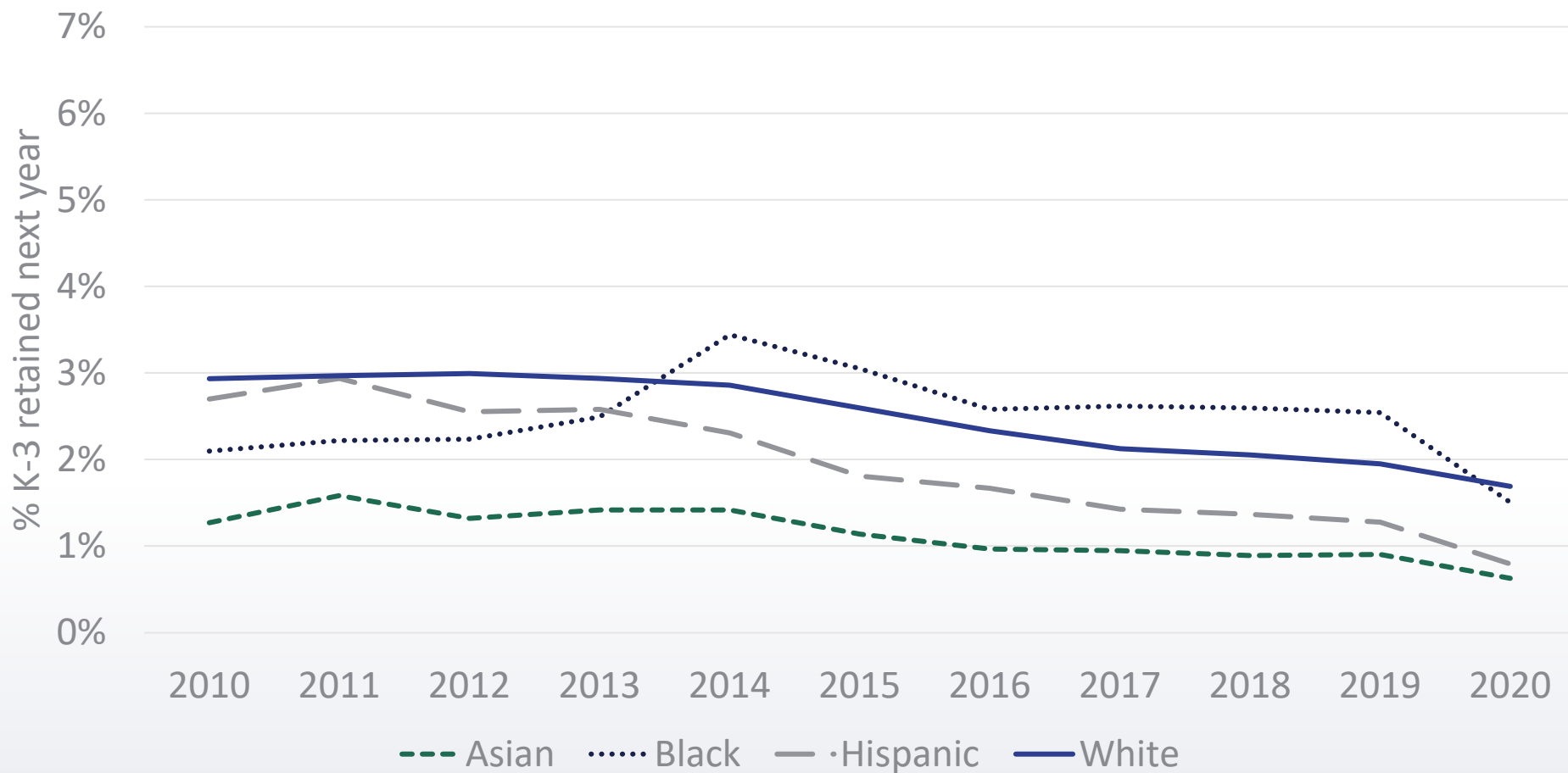
Boys consistently have higher retention rates than girls, across all years and grades.

K-3 retention rates by sex



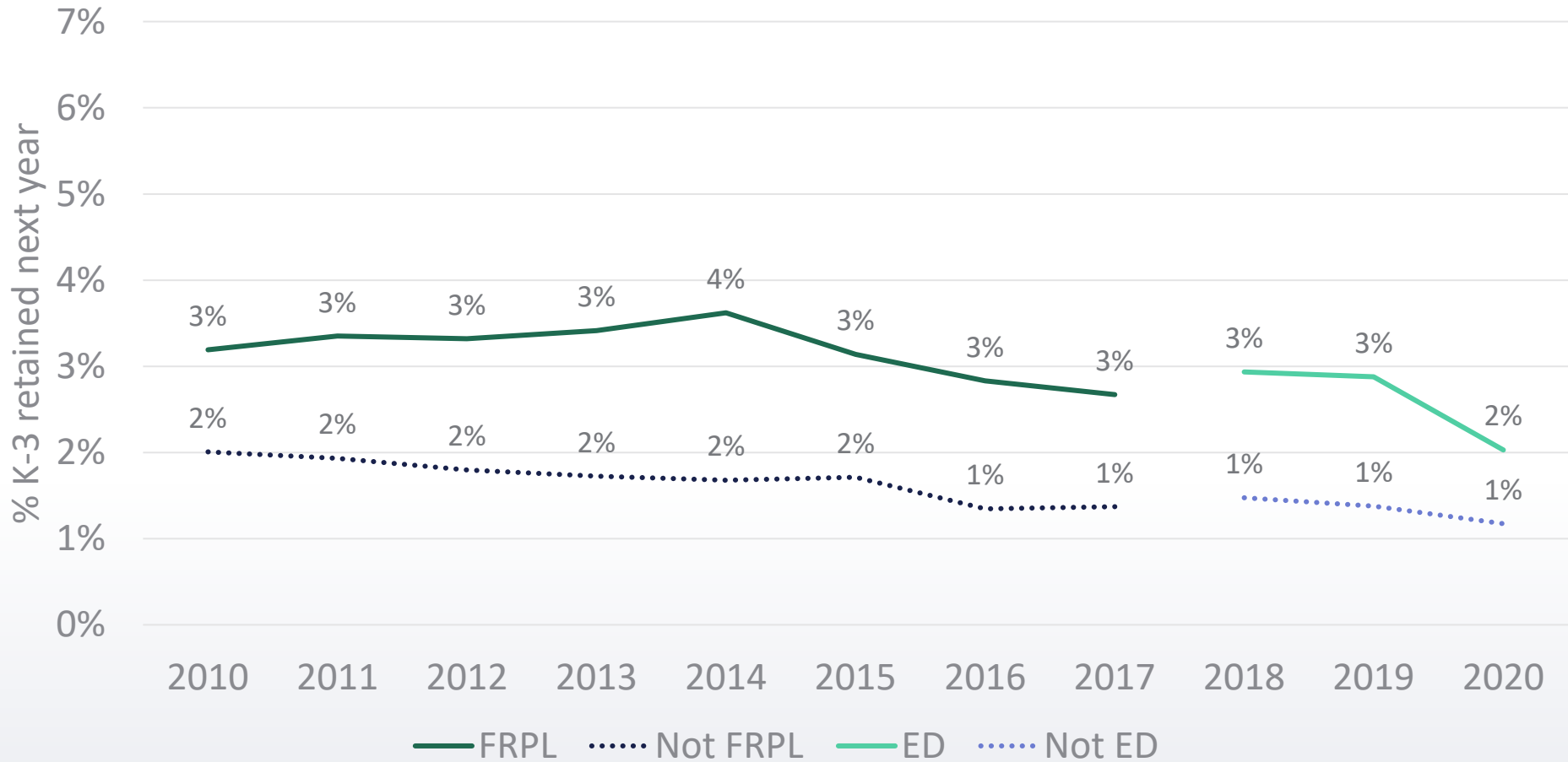
Historical patterns in retention rates vary somewhat by race/ethnicity, with retention rates decreasing for Asian, Hispanic, and White students.

K-3 retention rates by race/ethnicity



Retention rates are consistently higher for students identified as economically disadvantaged.

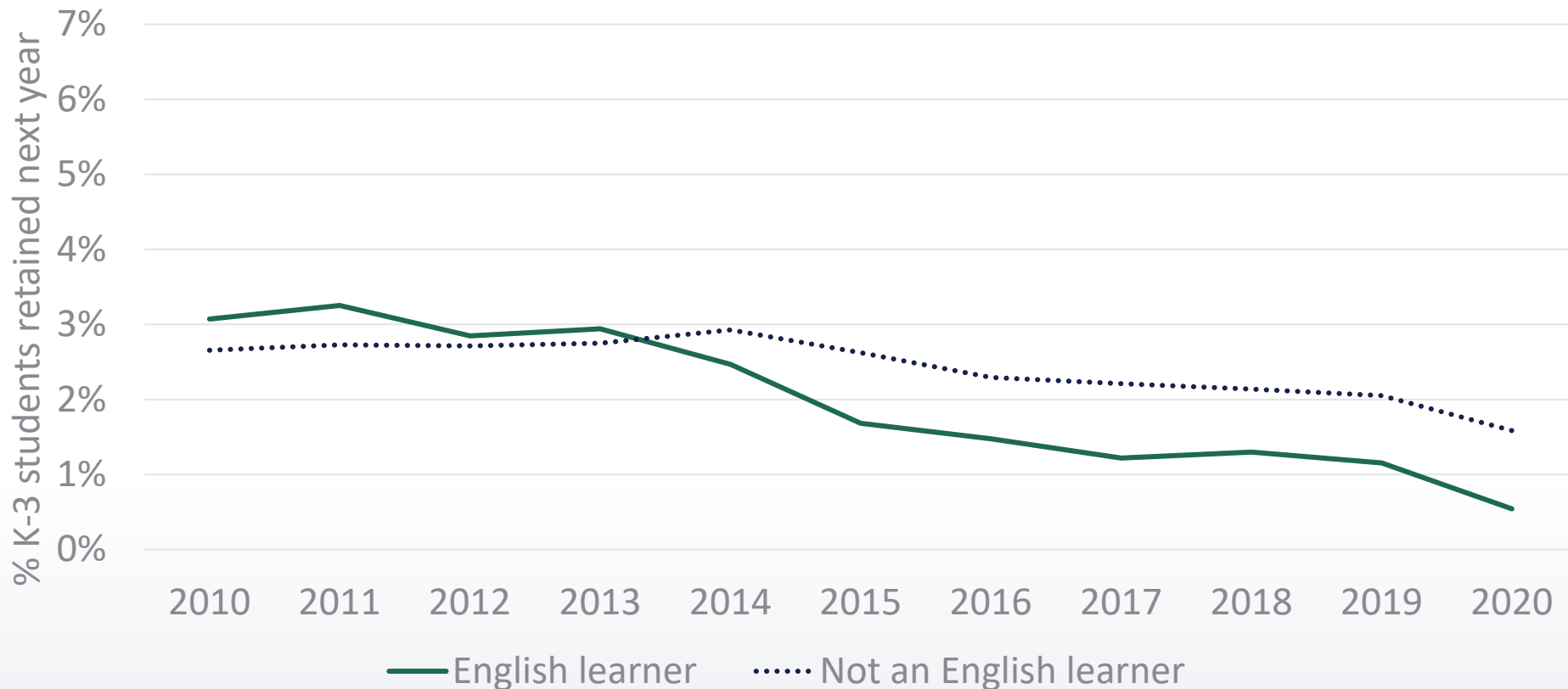
K-3 retention rates by econ. disadvantage





# Early grade retention rates have decreased more rapidly for English learners receiving ESL services.

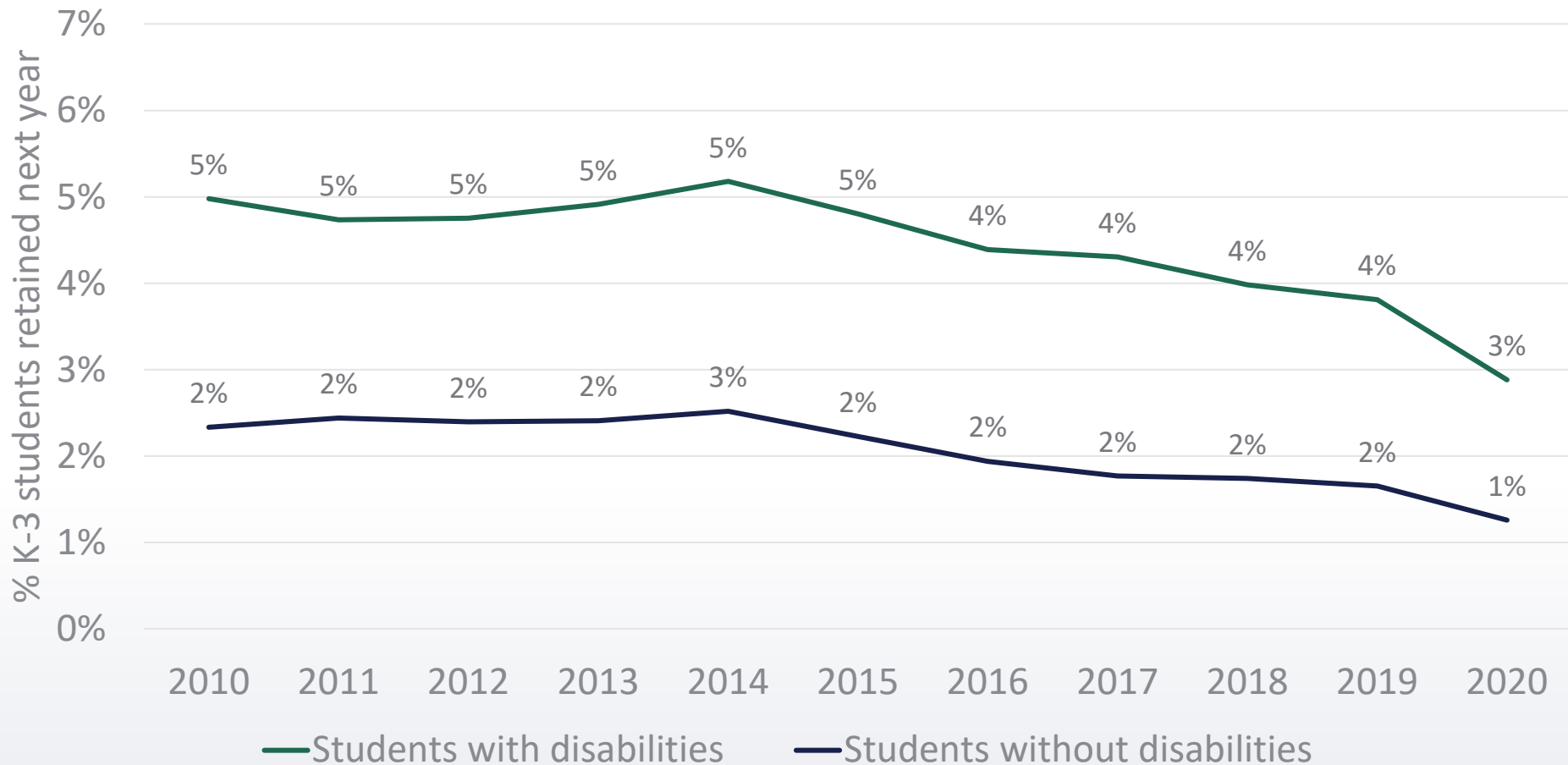
## K-3 retention rates by English learner status



From 2010 to 2020, the number of K-3 English learners statewide increased by 50% from 16,670 in 2010 to 24,849 in 2020.

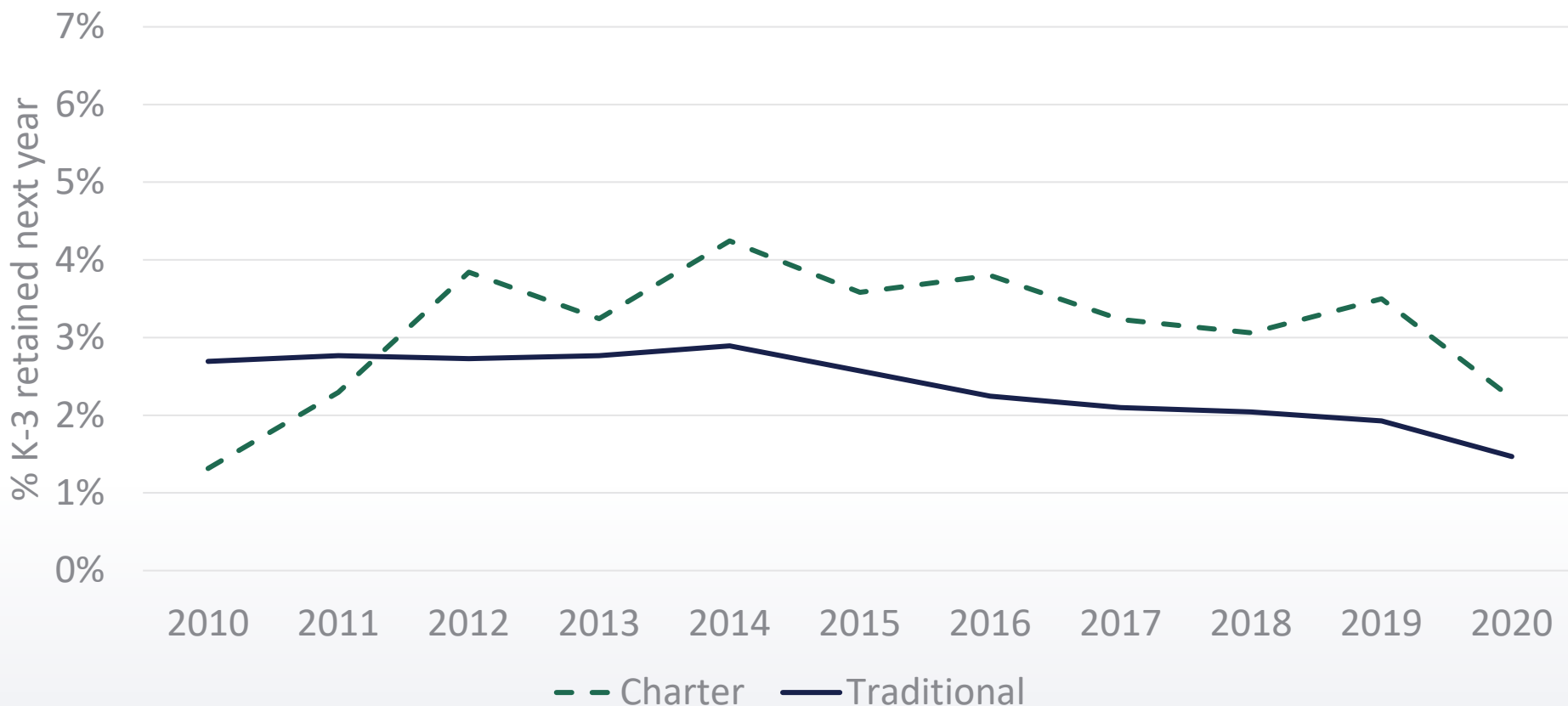
Students with disabilities consistently have higher retention rates in the early grades than students without disabilities.

K-3 retention rates by disability status



Across most years of data, charter schools have had slightly higher retention rates than traditional public schools.

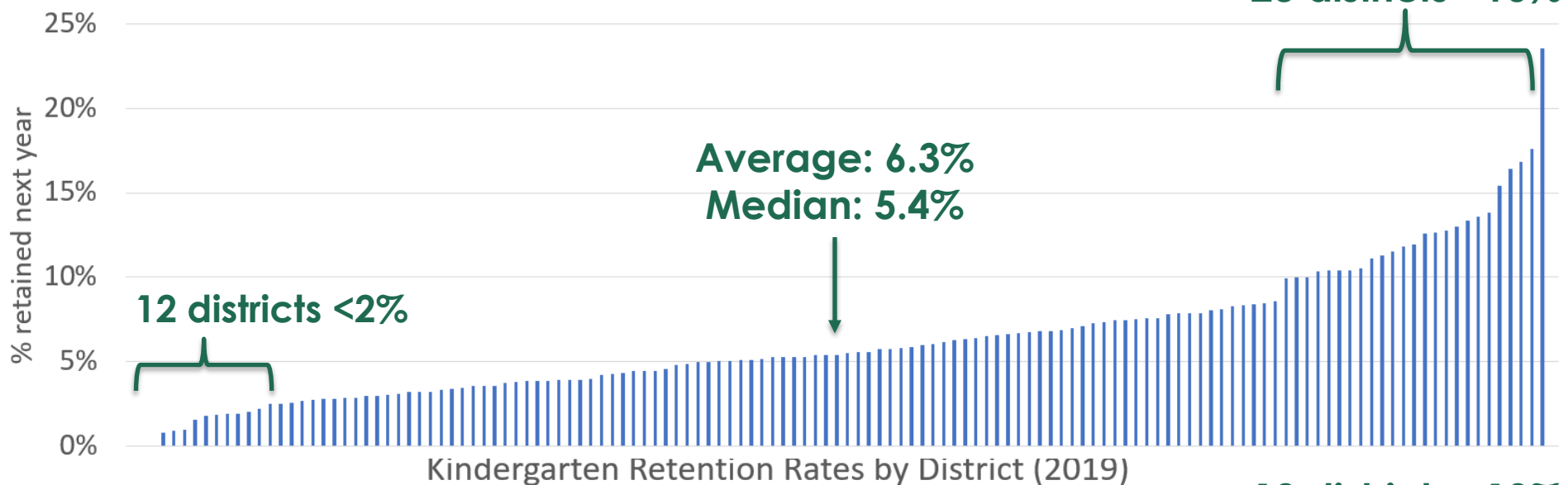
K-3 retention rate by school type



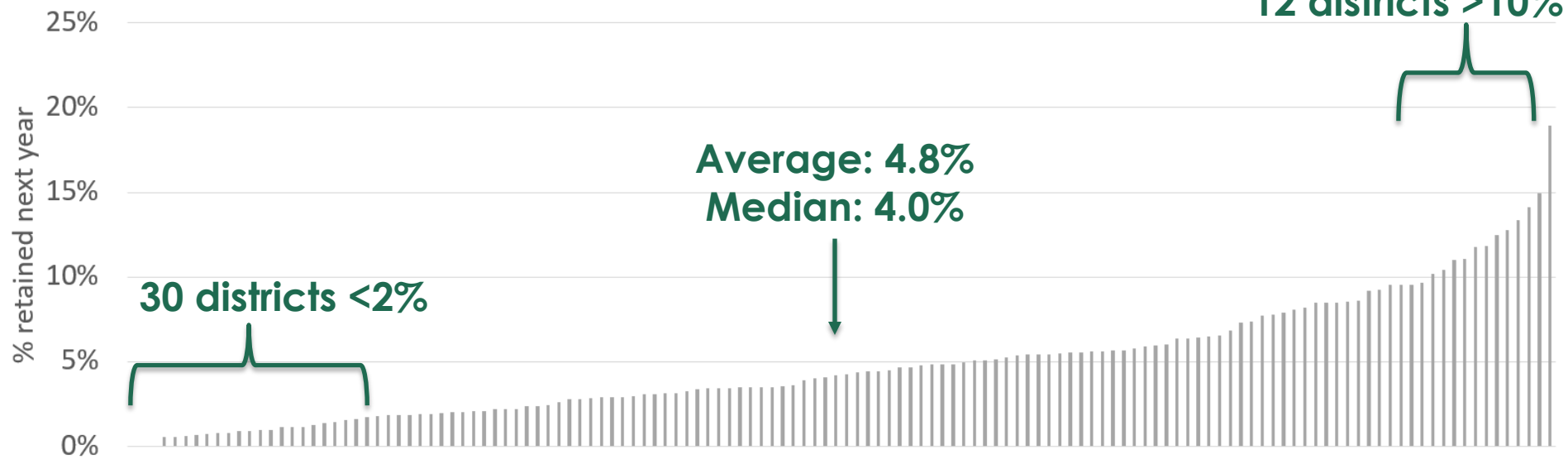
From 2010 to 2020, the number of K-3 students enrolled in charter schools statewide increased from 1095 in 2010 to 12,975 in 2020.

Kindergarten retention rates vary across districts, although most districts have lower retention rates in recent years.

Kindergarten Retention Rates by District (2010)

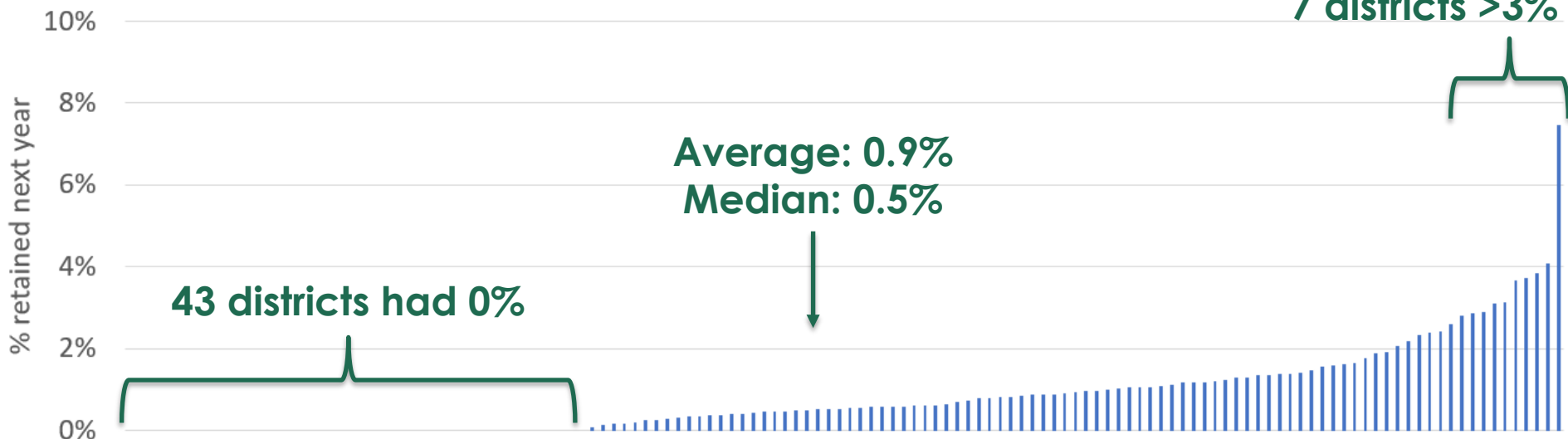


Kindergarten Retention Rates by District (2019)

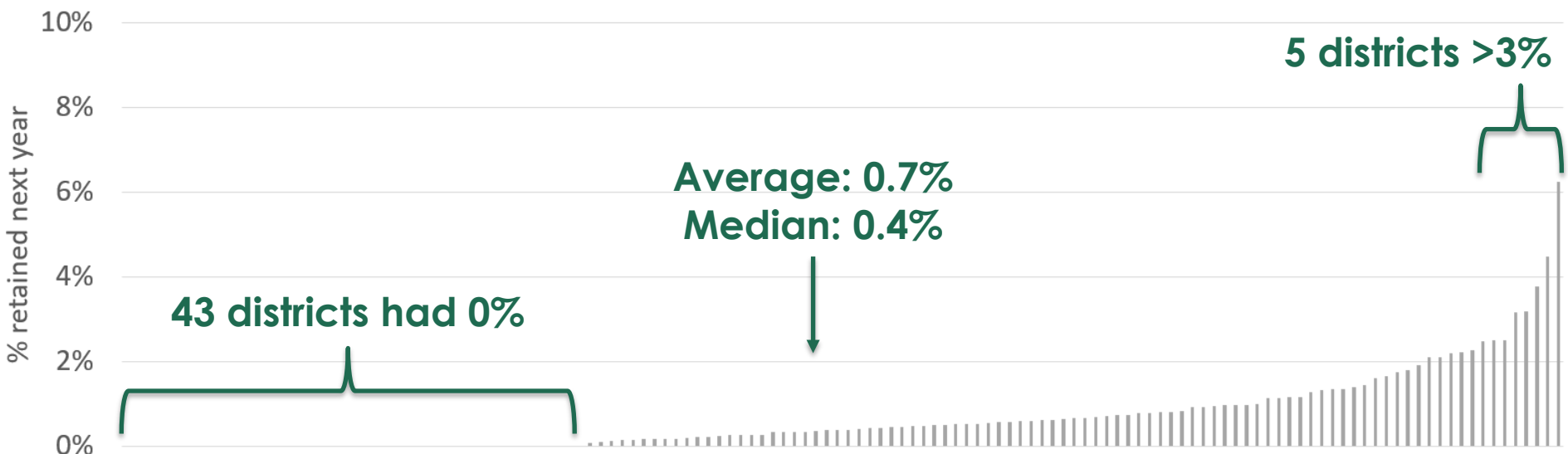


Third grade retention rates have also decreased, with about 30% of districts retaining no third grade students.

Third grade Retention Rates by District (2010)



Third grade Retention Rates by District (2019)



# Third grade reading proficiency and retention rates

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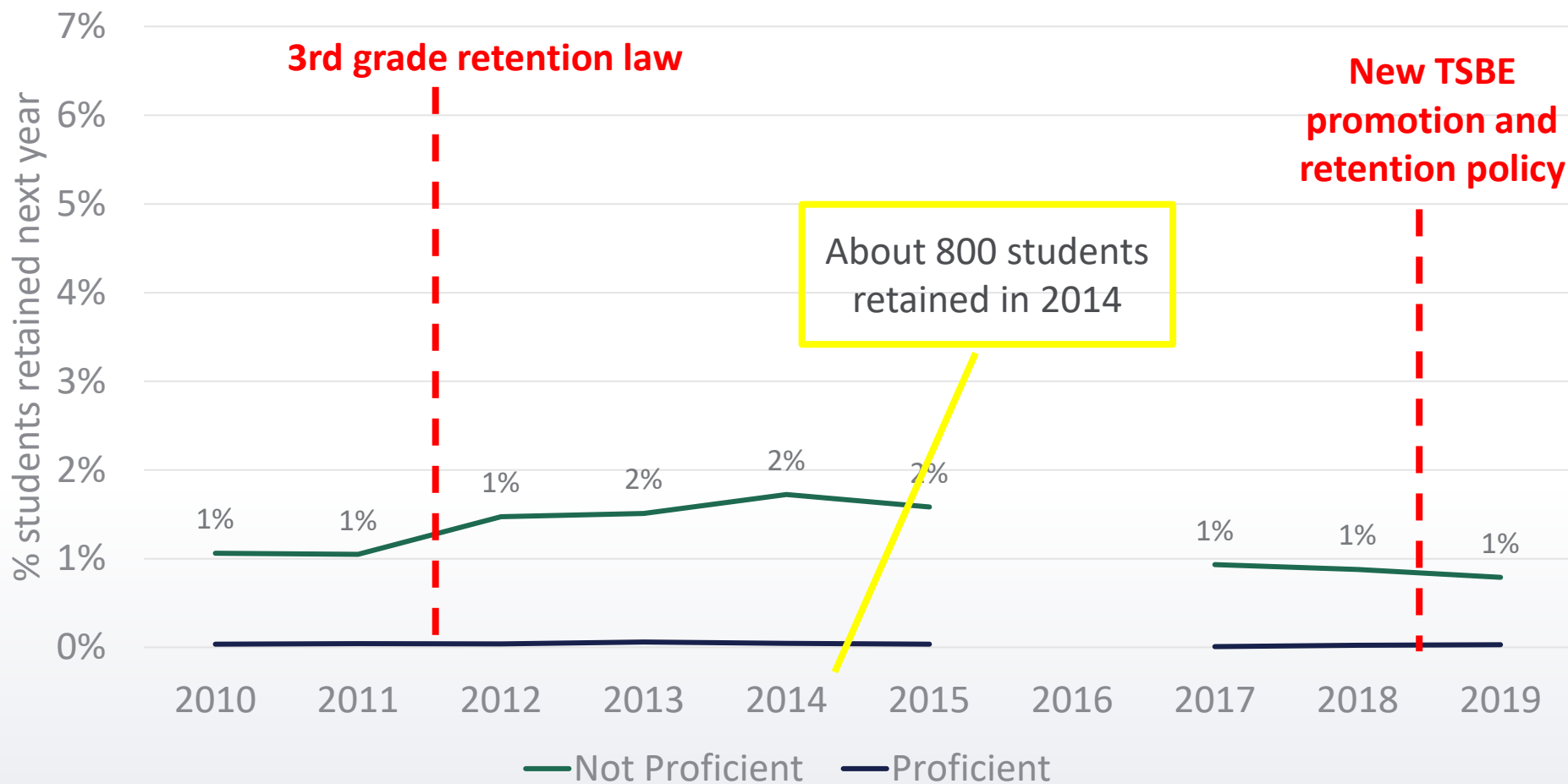
- Historical trends in retention rates for third grade students
- Variation across student characteristics

Since 2010, more than half of third graders annually have performed below proficient on the state's third grade reading assessment.

Year	Percent of 3 <sup>rd</sup> graders below proficient in reading	Number of 3 <sup>rd</sup> graders below proficient in reading
2010	58%	42,269
2011	57%	39,469
2012	54%	37,227
2013	51%	36,351
2014	57%	40,487
2015	58%	43,514
2017	66%	49,465
2018	64%	46,610
2019	64%	45,993

Retention rates among 3<sup>rd</sup> grade students not proficient in reading increased slightly after the law change but have remained low across all years.

3<sup>rd</sup> grade retention rate by reading proficiency



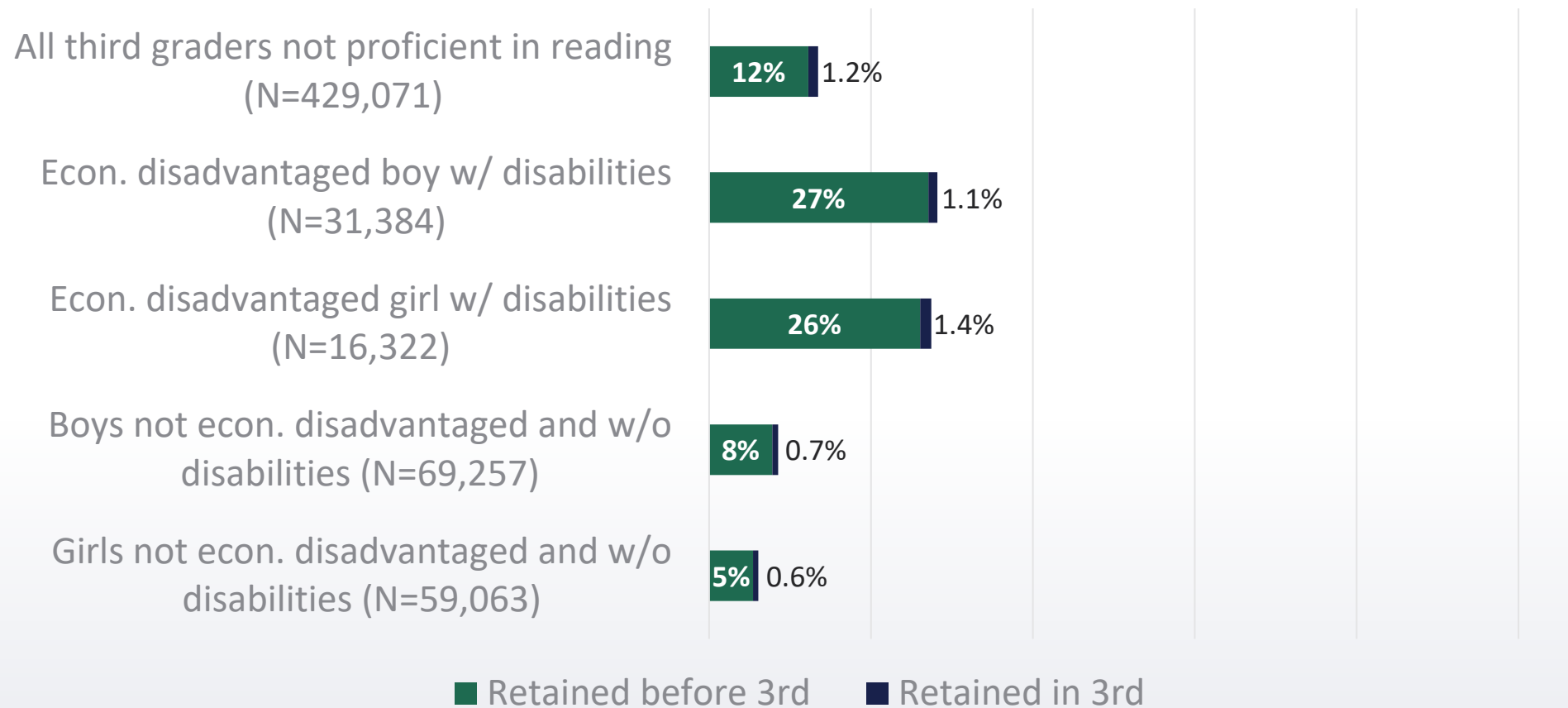
No comparison available for 2016 and 2020 because testing was canceled those years.



# Differences across student characteristics compound over time so that certain students are much more likely to be retained before 3<sup>rd</sup> grade.

## 3<sup>rd</sup> grade retention rates for students not proficient in reading

0% 20% 40% 60% 80% 100%



# Conclusions and Next Steps

## Summary of Findings

1. K-3 retention rates are mostly decreasing over time
2. K-3 retention rates are highest for students with disabilities, relatively younger students, boys, and economically disadvantaged students
3. 3<sup>rd</sup> grade retention rates are much higher for students who perform below proficient on reading but only a small proportion of those students are retained each year.

## Next Phase of Analysis

- Examining effects of retention policy (such as additional interventions)
- Examining outcomes of retained students

### Potential outcomes:

- Reading achievement
- High school progression
- Attendance
- Disciplinary infractions
- Disability identification

# Additional Analyses

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# How we define early grades retention

**Defining retention:** a student is counted as retained if their current minimum grade is the same as the next year's maximum grade

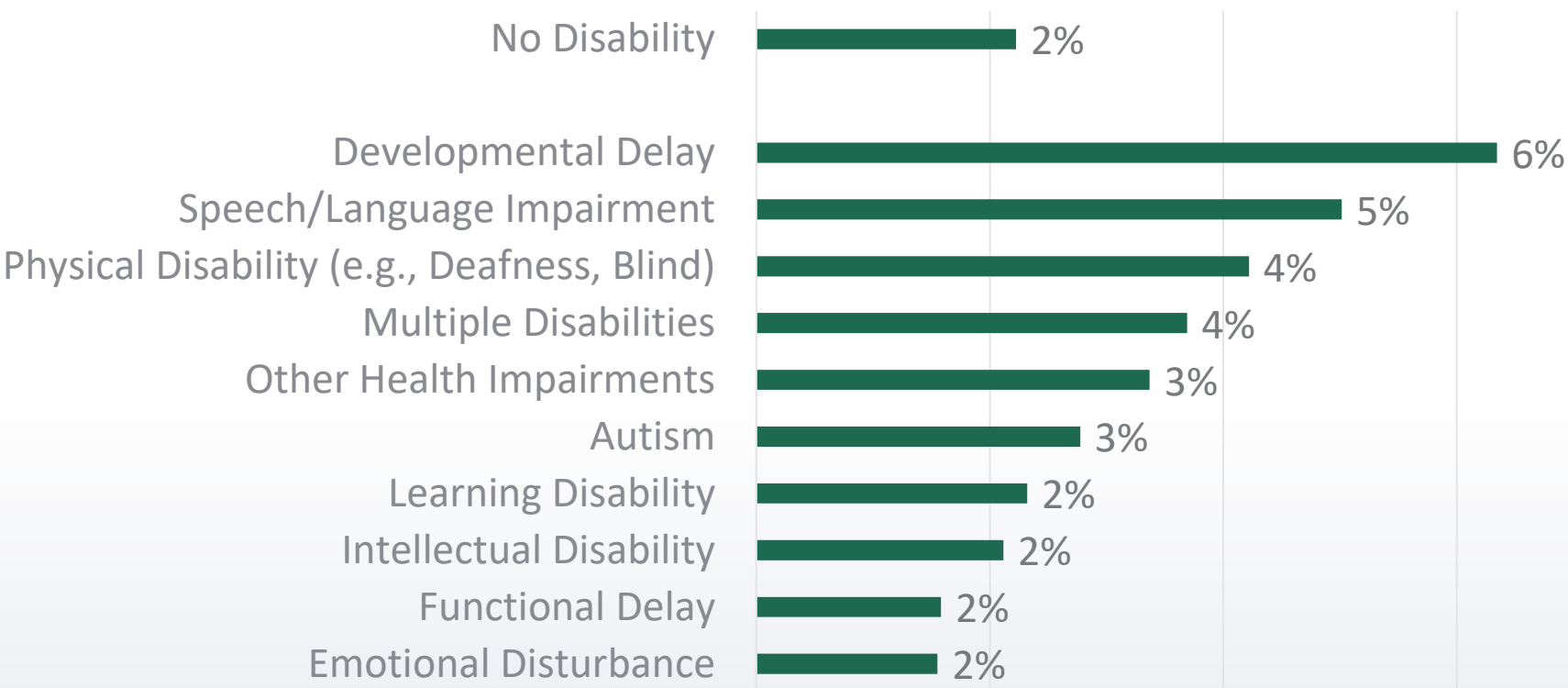
Student	Year	Min. grade	Max. grade	Retained?
Taylor	2017-18	Kinder.	Kinder.	No
Taylor	2018-19	First	First	
Nina	2017-18	Kinder.	Kinder.	No
Nina	2018-19	Kinder.	First	
Parker	2017-18	Kinder.	Kinder.	
Parker	2018-19	Kinder.	Kinder.	Yes

# Students with certain identified disabilities have much higher retention rates than students without disabilities.

## K-3 retention rate by disability type

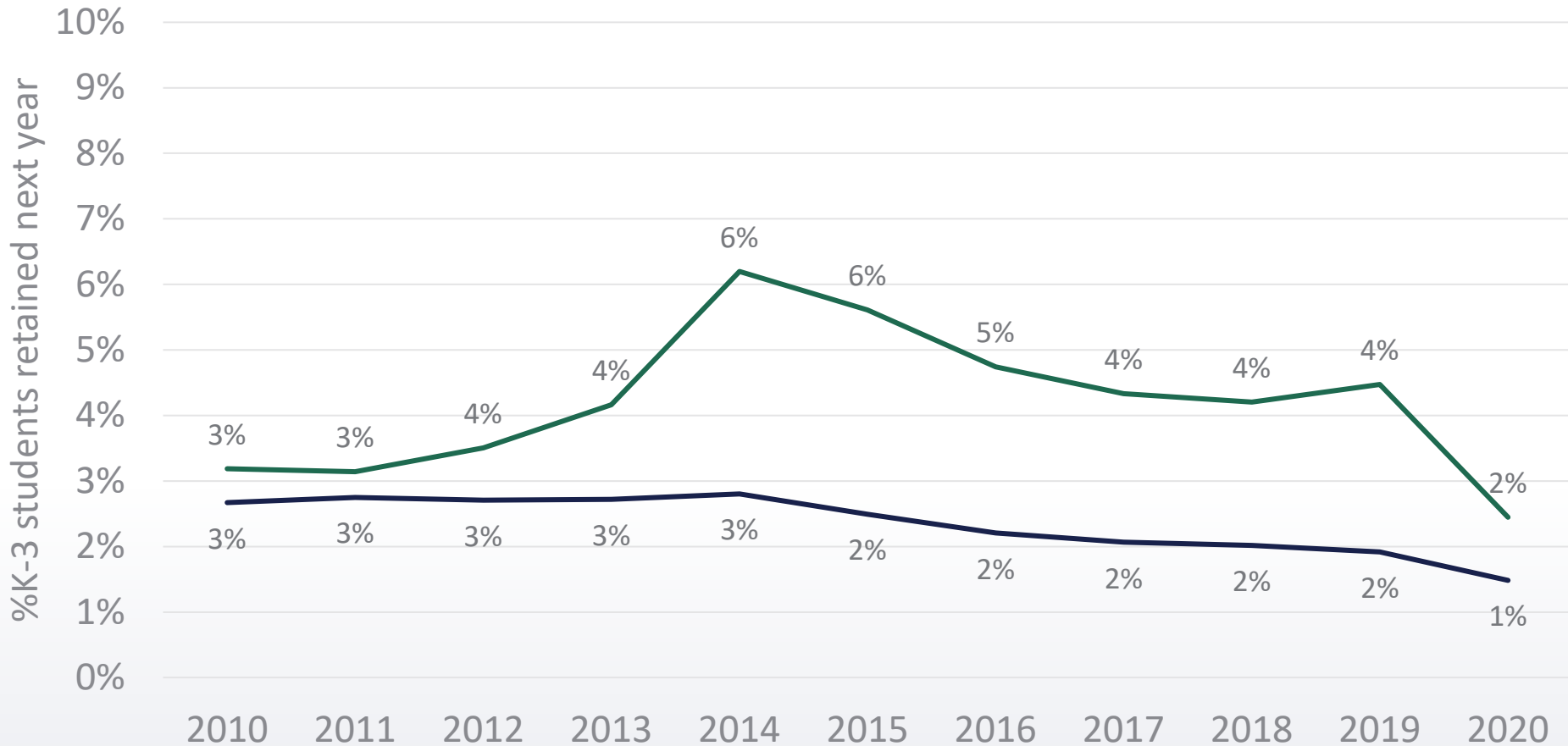
% K-3 retained next year

0% 2% 4% 6% 8%



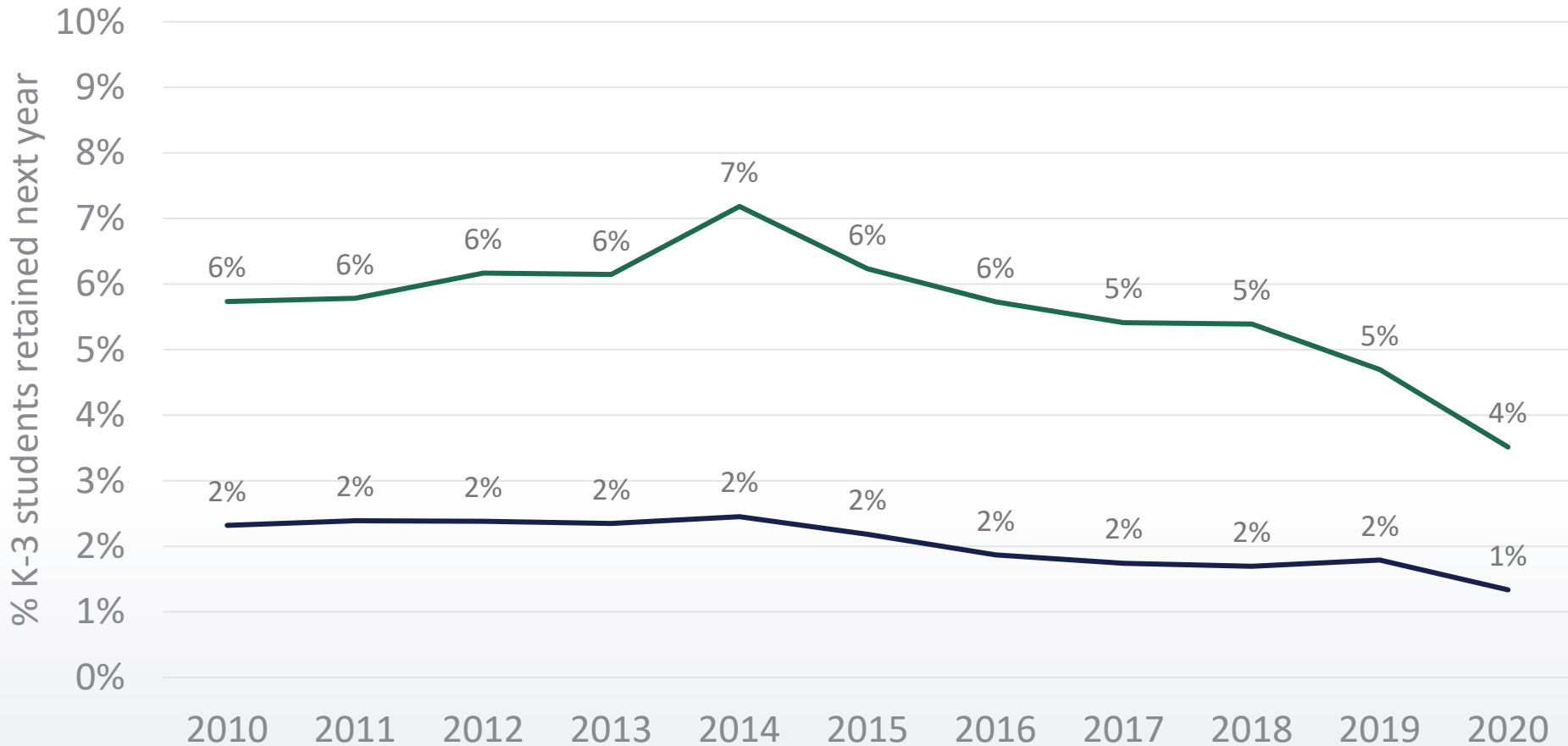
# K-3 retention rates by disciplinary record

## K-3 Retention Rates by Disciplinary Record



# K-3 retention rates by disciplinary record

## K-3 Retention Rates by Chronic Absenteeism

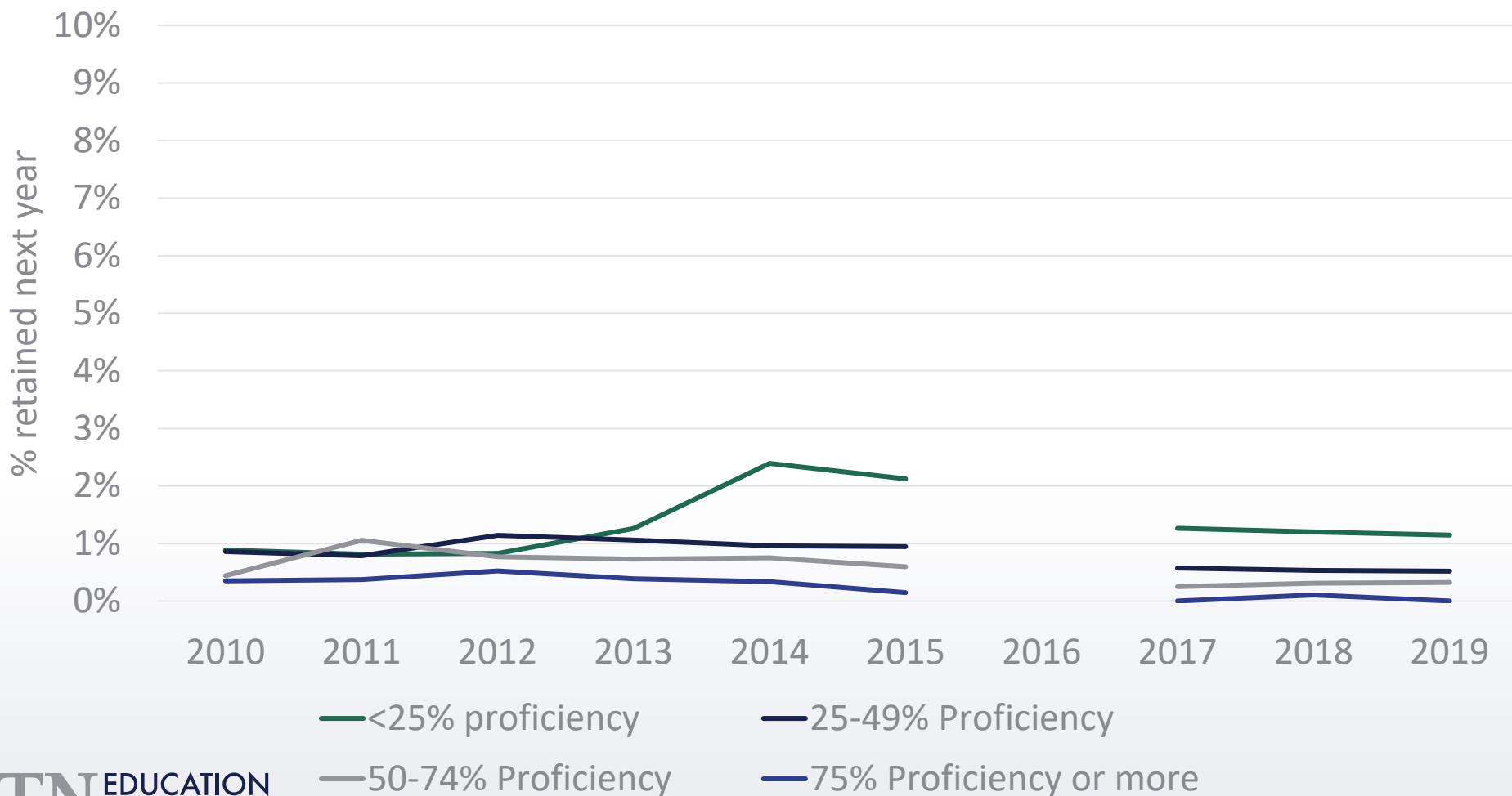


— Chronically absent — Not chronically absent

Students are identified as chronically absent if they missed more than 10% of instructional days in their first year in a grade.

Third grade retention rates are highest among schools that have the lowest percent of third grade students scoring proficient.

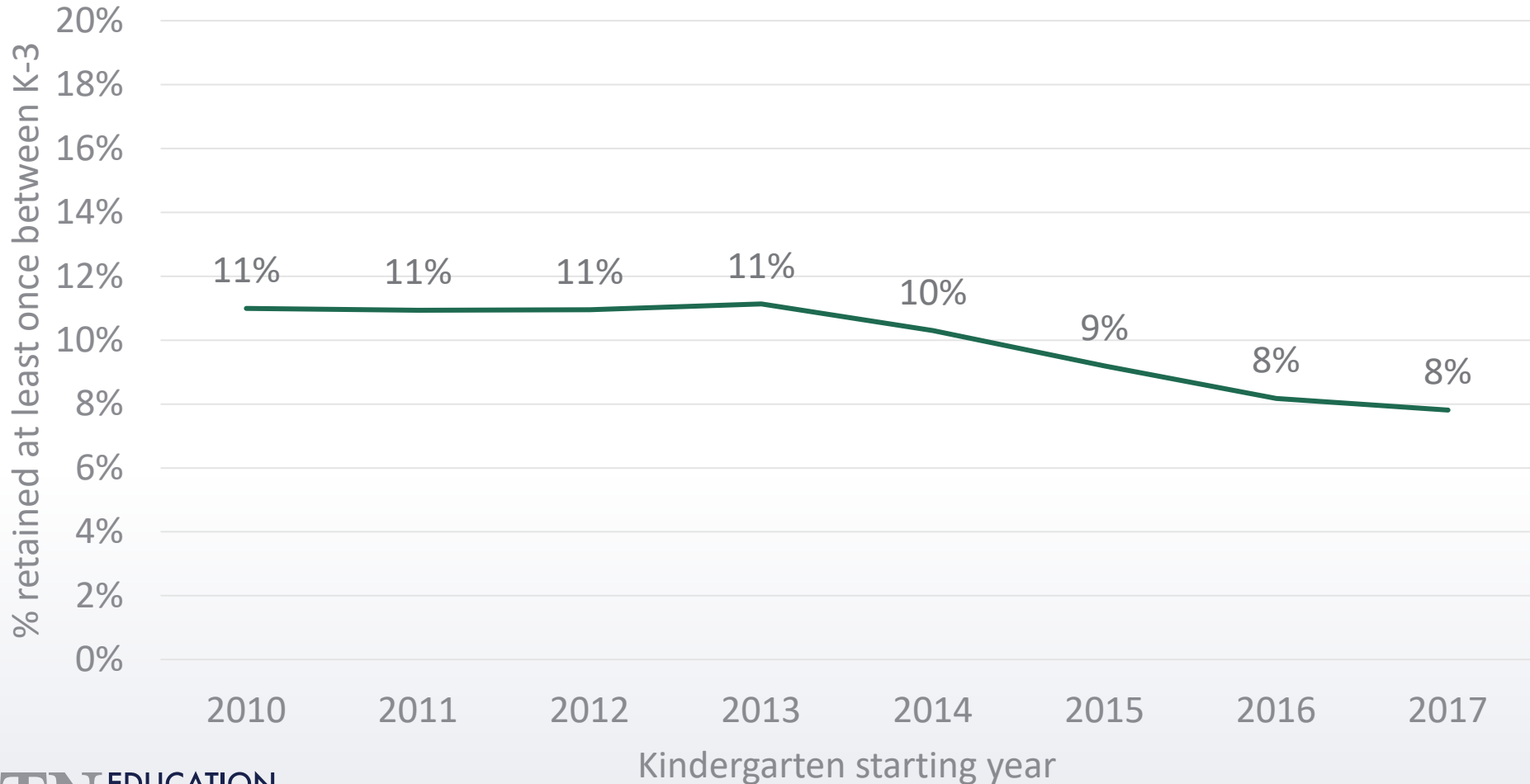
3rd grade retention rates by school proficiency





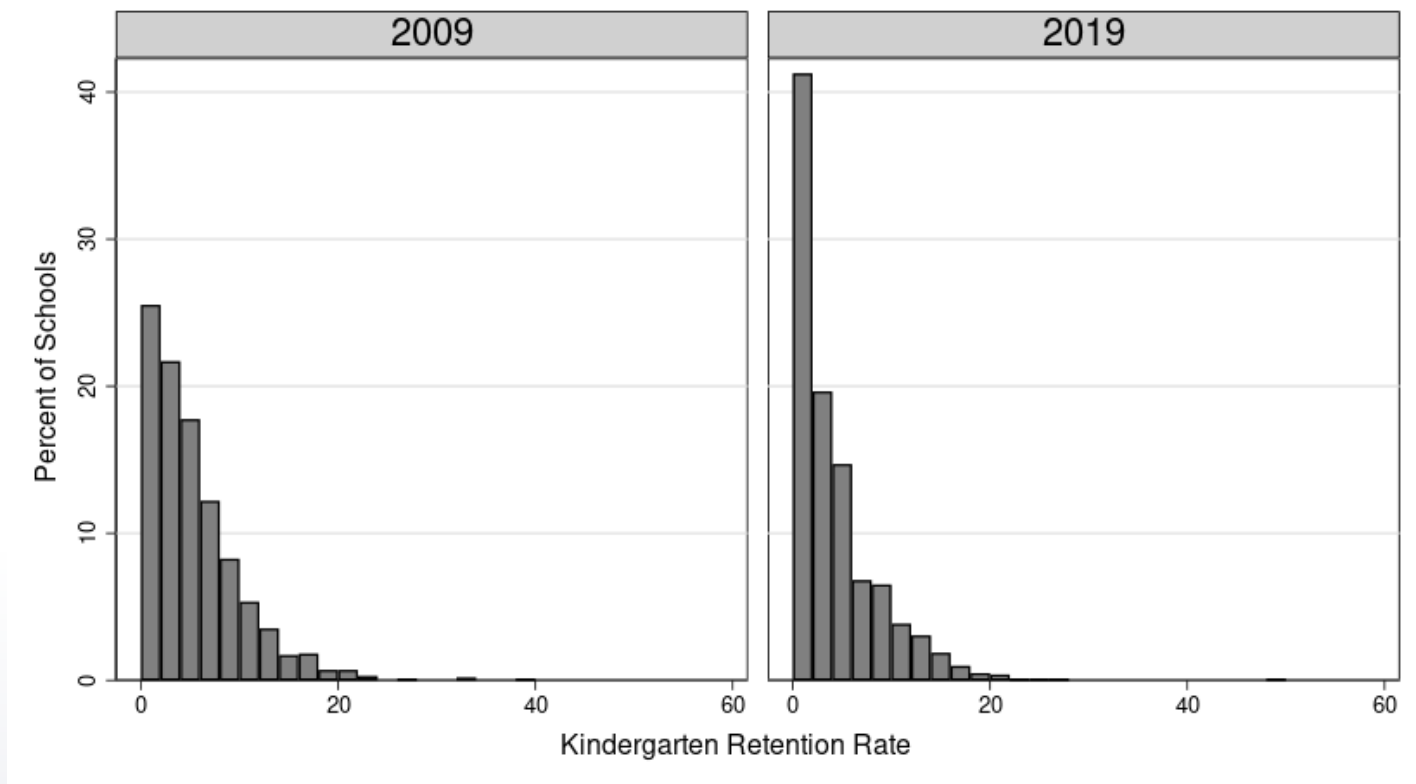
# Cohort retention rate: percent of students retained at least once between Kindergarten and third grade

## Cohort retention rate



Early grade retention rates vary across schools and districts, although rates across time are trending down almost everywhere

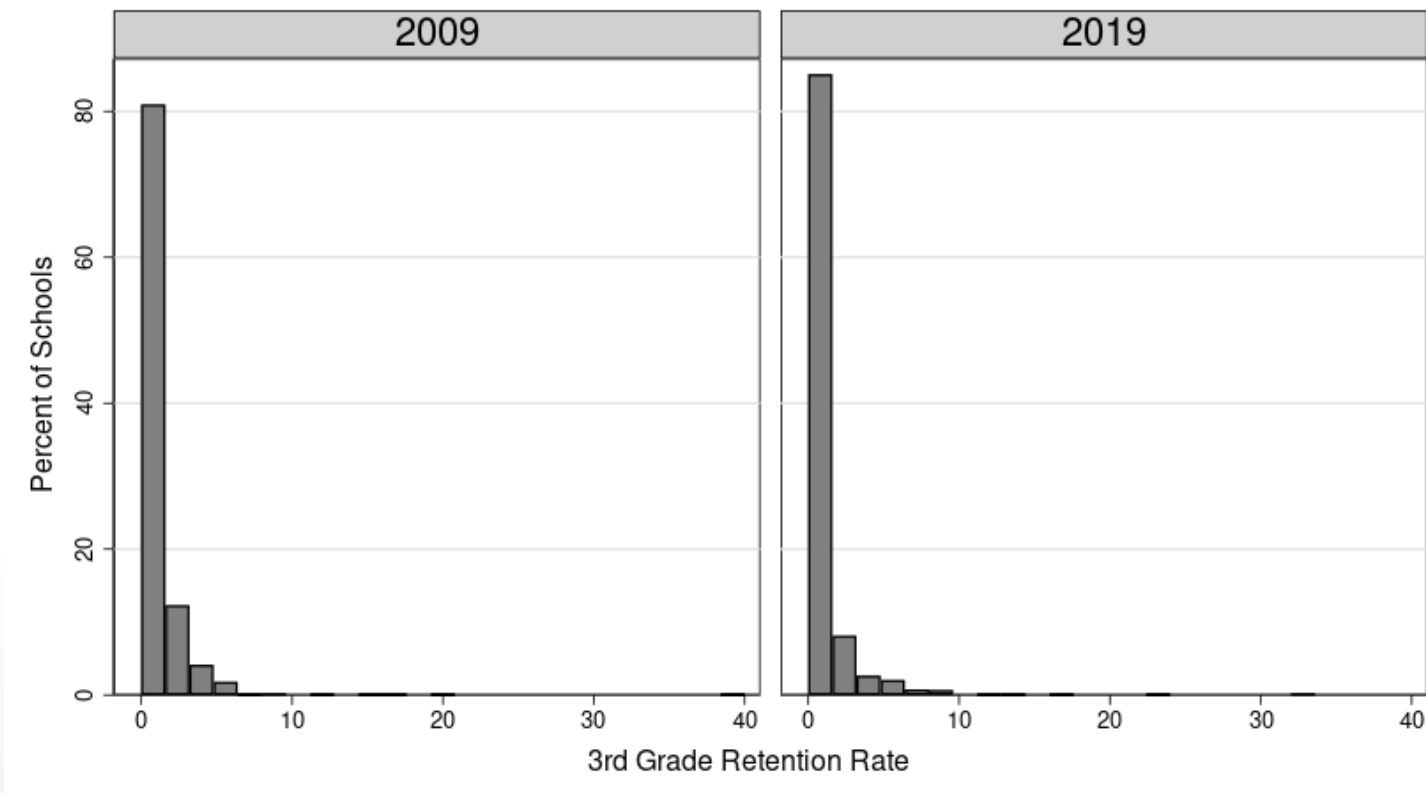
## School-level **Kindergarten** retention rates



62% of all schools had a lower Kindergarten retention rate in 2019 than 2009.

Early grade retention rates vary across schools and districts, although rates across time are trending down almost everywhere

## School-level **Third grade** retention rates



85% of all schools either had no change or had a lower 3<sup>rd</sup> grade retention rate in 2019 than 2009.

In Florida, retention rates increased in first few years after policy change and then stabilized around 4-5%

	<b>Florida's third grade retention policy</b>
Policy	Students scoring below certain level on FL reading test retained in third grade with exemptions for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• English learners</li><li>• Students with disabilities</li><li>• Students retained twice previously</li><li>• Students demonstrating proficiency through alternative</li></ul>
First year of policy change	2002-2003
Retention rates in years following change	2002-03: 13.5% 2003-04: 10.5% 2004-05: 8.8% 2005-06: 4.2% 2006-07: 5.5%