



A Center Policy & Practice Analysis Brief . . .

Grade Retention: What's the Prevailing Policy and What Needs to be Done?



This Center is co-directed by Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor and operates under the auspices of the School Mental Health Project, Dept. of Psychology, UCLA.
Center for Mental Health in Schools, Box 951563, Los Angeles, CA 90095-1563
(310) 825-3634 Fax: (310) 206-5895; E-mail: smhp@ucla.edu Website: <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu>

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Please reference this document as follows: Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA. (2008 Update).
Los Angeles, CA: Author

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UCLA Dept. of Psychology
P.O. Box 951563
Los Angeles, CA 90095-1563

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Preface

What should be done with students not meeting expected achievement standards?

This is a long-standing problem in our “age-graded” school system. And, it continues to be one of the most contentious issues in public education.

In response to the last two reauthorizations of the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act, grade retention has emerged as the prevailing policy in most states and localities. As currently practiced, this policy seems to be generating many of the negative outcomes critics have warned about over the years. Besides failing to correct learning problems, grade retention is associated with increases in behavior, attitudinal, and emotional problems.

What’s the alternative? Social promotion? After seeing how that policy played out in the last half of the 20th century, few would argue for it.

Neither grade retention nor social promotion are recipes for narrowing the achievement gap or reducing dropouts. It is time for policy that doesn’t “wait for failure;” it’s time for a policy that doesn’t react in ways that end up being more punitive than corrective.

This brief provides a quick overview of issues related to grade retention and then frames directions for policy and practice in ways that go beyond retention and social promotion. As with all Center briefs, it is meant to highlight the topic and provide a tool for discussion by school policy makers and practitioners.*

*For more on this topic, see the Center’s Online Clearinghouse Quick Find on *Social Promotion* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/p1104_02.htm

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Grade Retention: What's the Prevailing Policy and What Needs to be Done?

With the last two reauthorizations of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, states have come under increasing pressure to hold students to “higher standards.” One impact has been to accelerate the already growing movement away from social promotion to a policy of grade retention for those not meeting delineated standards.

Grade retention is not mandated by federal law. Rather, as is clear from the 2001 reauthorization (the *No Child Left Behind Act*), federal law sets minimum requirements for statewide accountability systems, and states use these as guidelines for defining “Adequate Yearly Progress” and designing testing and high school exit exams. One result is individual state and school district policies that require grade retention and mandate exam passage for high school graduation (see Appendix A).

What are the Numbers?

Available data provide only a suggestion of the impact of grade retention policies. With specific respect to retention rates, no national data base exists. (The collection of such data is not mandated by federal law; indirect indicators and census data are used to derive estimates.)

Studies in the 1990s (e.g., Thompson & Cunningham, 2000) suggest that as many as 15% of students in the USA were being held back each year, with one third of all students retained at least once by the time they reached high school. While reports from states vary, findings from North Carolina probably are representative. In 2003, statewide data indicated that rates of retention in the early grades rose steadily from 1992 through 2002, with the retention rate for children in kindergarten through third grade (K-3) more than doubling, from 2.7% in 1991–1992 to 5.5% in 2001–2002. This means that 22,343 children were retained in kindergarten, first, second or third grade in 2001–2002 (Partners in Research Forum, 2003).

Many students, averaging 13 percent overall and as high as 50 percent for black males, are retained, and rates have increased since 1970.

David & Cuban, 2006

A report from the National Center for Education Statistics in 2006 concludes that: “Between 1995 and 2004, the percentage of youth ages 16-19 who had ever been retained decreased; high school dropouts were more likely than high school completers to have been retained in a grade at some point in their school career.” In highlighting the findings, this unit of the U.S. Department of Education states:

“The decrease in retention varied by the youth’s current enrollment status: the decrease was particularly pronounced among youth who were enrolled in high school (decreasing from 20 percent of enrolled youth in 1995 to 12 percent of enrolled youth in 2004) and among youth who had dropped out of high school (decreasing from 34 percent of dropouts in 1995 to 21 percent of dropouts in 2004). The percentage of youth who had been retained in kindergarten through grade 5 decreased from 11 percent of youth in 1995 to 5 percent of youth in 2004, while the percentage retained in grades 6-12

was not measurably different between the two years (7 percent in 1995 and 5 percent in 2004). Youth were more likely to have been retained in grades K-5 than in grades 6-12 in 1995, but in 1999 and 2004, there were no measurable differences by grade level.”

In contrast to the NCES report, contemporary accounts of the number of students not performing up to expectations and, therefore, being held back (e.g., in grades 3 and 9) and not passing high school exit exams suggest retentions are on the rise.

Who’s Held Back?

A sampling from three different reports:

“Nationally, by high school, the retention rate for boys is about ten percentage points higher than for girls. In the early grades, retention rates are similar among whites, African Americans, and Hispanics, but by high school, the rate is about 15 percentage points higher for African Americans and Hispanics than for whites. Transitions are peak times for retention. Students are most commonly retained at the end of the year after the transition into elementary school, into middle or junior high school, and into high school” (Thompson & Cunningham, 2000).

“Some groups of children are more likely to be retained than others. Those at highest risk for retention are male; African American or Hispanic; have a late birthday, delayed development and/or attention problems; live in poverty or in a single-parent household; have parents with low educational attainment; have parents that are less involved in their education; or have changed schools frequently. Students who have behavior problems and display aggression or immaturity are more likely to be retained. Students with reading problems, including English Language Learners, are also more likely to be retained” (National Association of School Psychologists, 2003).

“Youth who had dropped out of high school in each of the years observed were more likely to have ever been retained than youth who were enrolled in high school or youth who had completed high school. In 2004, for example, 21 percent of youth who had dropped out had ever been retained, compared with 12 percent of those still enrolled and 4 percent of high school completers. Furthermore, of those youth that had dropped out of school, a greater percentage had been retained in grades 6-12 (17 percent) than in grades K-5 (10 percent). In addition to variation by enrollment status, the percentage of youth who had ever been retained varied by sex, race/ethnicity, and family income in 2004. For example, in 2004, a greater percentage of males than females (13 vs. 6 percent) and of Blacks than Whites (16 vs. 8 percent) had ever been retained. Youth whose families were in the lowest income quarter were also more likely to have been retained than youth whose families were in the middle or highest income quarters” (NCES, 2006).

Impact of Test Accountability

Report after report has emphasized that the type of test score accountability federal law now demands results in increasing numbers of grade retentions, the redirection of low-scorers into special education, increasing numbers of expulsions, dropouts, and students unable to graduate from high school, and more (e.g., Allensworth, 2004; Amrein & Berliner, 2002; Bryk, 2003; Darling-Hammond, 2004; Denton, 2001; Haney, 2000; Nagaoka & Roderick, 2004; Neill, Guisbond, Schaeffer, et al., 2004). These negative outcomes for students not only are a consequence of poor test performance, too often they also are a strategy adopted by schools to artificially enhance a school and district's achievement test averages.

For example, one strategy has been to retain low-scoring students in ninth grade for years as a way to keep them from being tested in the tenth grade. In one study, it was reported that after being retained three years in ninth grade many finally dropped out (Werner, 2003). Another approach has been to retain students in third grade so that fourth grade scores would be higher and third grade scores would improve because the repeating students would have improved academically (or, at least they would be more familiar with the tests).

A few researchers have suggested that initial rises in retention rates and dropouts will level off after a few years (e.g., Carnoy and Loeb, 2002). Only time and longitudinal studies will clarify whether this prediction is validated.

At this point, most researchers indicate that in terms of student educational indicators grade retention as it is presently practiced hurts more than it helps. We suggest the picture will be even bleaker when mental health indicators are included in cost-benefit analyses.

Moving the Policy Discussion Beyond Social Promotion or Grade Retention

Discussions of the pros and cons of grade retention and social promotion are dominated by concerns about the negative effects of each approach. These are real concerns. However, the back and forth debate misses the mark.

The point was clearly made in the 1999 guide from the U.S. Department of Education:

The issue of ending social promotion has too often been posed as a debate over the relative benefits and disadvantages of promotion versus repeating a grade (retention). Yet we know that neither strategy is appropriate for students who are not meeting high academic standards. Students who are promoted without regard to their achievement tend to fall even further behind their classmates as they move through school, and those who do not drop out usually finish without having the knowledge and skills expected of high school graduates. At the same time, research shows that holding students back to repeat a grade without changing instructional strategies is ineffective.

The achievement of retained students, after repeating a grade, still lags behind the achievement of their peers, and retention also greatly increases the likelihood that a student will drop out of school. Being held back twice makes dropping out a virtual certainty. Retention disproportionately affects minority and economically disadvantaged students.

Most reports stress a body of research that indicates neither retention nor social promotion alone fosters achievement and both can have a negative impact on student behavior, attitudes, and attendance.

Neither retention nor social promotion as widely practiced are good strategies.

It is clear, then, that neither retention nor social promotion as widely practiced are good strategies for enabling students to have an equal opportunity to succeed at school. It is obvious that moving students ahead into situations where they are likely to fall further and further behind academically is unacceptable. At the same time, it is equally obvious that holding the student back without substantively addressing barriers to that student's learning is unconscionable.

Again, as stated in the 1999 Guide from the U.S. Department of Education:

To pass students along in school when they are unprepared or retain them without addressing their needs denies students access to opportunities at the next level of schooling, in postsecondary education, and in the workplace. Both policies send a message to students that little is expected from them, that they have little worth, and that they do not warrant the time and effort it would take to help them be successful in school. The cost of these policies extends beyond individual students to society as a whole. Employers have little confidence in a high school diploma as proof that graduates are prepared with the requisite skills. Colleges and businesses spend resources providing remedial training for students and employees. Lack of education and skills is highly associated with poverty, crime, and violence among youth and young adults.

Given current practices, policy debates about grade retention and social promotion have a hollow ring to them. Furthermore, they tend to reflect too limited an analysis of both the cause of the problems and what needs to be done. Thus, we join with those who have long argued that the discussion needs to move beyond arguing about the cost-benefits of social promotion and grade retention to the more fundamental matter of addressing the barriers that lead to poor learning at school.

Not Waiting for Failure

Those concerned about promoting healthy development and preventing problems and, as necessary, intervening as early as feasible have long lamented the “waiting for failure” approach that has dominated school policy. Various reports and guides have outlined strategies to counter the need for grade retention. There is a great deal to be commended in the intervention strategies that have been suggested. (See Appendix B for examples of guides from the U.S. Department of Education and others.)

However, as too often has been the case with efforts to respond to student’s learning, behavior, and emotional problems, interventions have not been conceived in ways that adequately address barriers to learning and teaching. Several reports from our Center have clarified “what’s missing” (e.g., Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2004a). These analyses of current policy and practice lead to the following conceptualization for school improvements to counter the need for social promotion or grade retention.

School-Wide

First, school policy must be expanded to ensure that efforts to address barriers to learning and teaching are pursued as a primary and essential component of school improvement. Such a component is defined as a comprehensive system of learning supports designed to *enable* learning by addressing barriers. Moreover, this enabling component is framed in policy and practice as fully integrated with the instructional and management components at a school and district-wide. (For more on this, see Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2005a.)

A major facet of not waiting for failure is to develop a continuum of interconnected intervention systems consisting of

- *systems for promotion of healthy development and prevention of problems*
- *systems for intervening early to address problems as soon after onset as is feasible*
- *systems for assisting those with chronic and severe problems.*

In general, students who do not pass a grade the first time around are unlikely to do much better the second time around, all else being equal (which it usually is).

David & Cuban, 2006

This continuum is intended to encompass school-community efforts to enable academic, social, emotional, and physical development and address learning, behavior, and emotional problems at every school.

For any school and community, the continuum encompasses many activities, programs, and services. These are not presented as a lengthy list of specifics. Rather, they are clustered into a delimited, set of overlapping arenas, each of which reflects the intervention’s general “content” focus (see Exhibit 1).

Exhibit 1

Operationalizing the Continuum of Interventions

In translating the continuum into a comprehensive intervention framework for school, pioneering school initiatives have operationalized six arenas of intervention *content* (see Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2004b). In doing so, these trailblazers have moved from a “laundry-list” of interventions to a defined set of general categories that captures the multifaceted work schools need to pursue in comprehensively addressing barriers to learning. The categories are:

- *Classroom-focused enabling* – enhancing regular classroom strategies to enable learning (e.g., improving instruction for students with mild-moderate learning and behavior problems and re-engaging those who have become disengaged from learning at school)
- *Support for transitions* (e.g., assisting students and families as they negotiate school and grade changes, daily transitions)
- *Home involvement with school* – strengthening families and home and school connections
- *Crisis response and prevention* – responding to, and where feasible, preventing school and personal crises
- *Community involvement and support* (e.g., outreach to develop greater community involvement and support, including enhanced use of volunteers)
- *Student and family assistance* – facilitating student and family access to effective services and special assistance as needed.

Combining the *scope* outlined by the continuum and the above six *content* arenas generates a matrix framework. Such a framework helps convey a big picture of a comprehensive, systemic approach. It currently is being used as a unifying intervention framework and as an analytic tool for mapping and analyzing what schools are and are not doing. This, then, provides a well-founded basis for setting priorities to guide school improvement planning in ways that can counter grade retention.

		Scope of Intervention		
		Systems for Promoting Healthy Development & Preventing Problems	Systems for Early Intervention (Early after problem onset)	Systems of Care
Organizing around the Content/ “curriculum” (for addressing barriers to learning & promoting healthy development)	Classroom-Focused Enabling			
	Crisis/ Emergency Assistance & Prevention			
	Support for transitions			
	Home Involvement in Schooling			
	Community Outreach/ Volunteers			
	Student and Family Assistance			
		Accommodations for differences & disabilities	Specialized assistance & other intensified interventions (e.g., Special Education & School-Based Behavioral Health)	

* Note that specific school-wide and classroom-based activities related to positive behavior support, “prereferral” interventions, and the eight components of Center for Prevention and Disease Control’s Coordinated School Health Program are embedded into the six content (“curriculum”) areas.

In the Classroom

With specific respect to classroom instruction, every effort feasible should be used to ensure an optimal teaching environment (e.g., setting, processes). As a first step, *personalized instruction* is initiated. This encompasses a focus on ensuring the situation and processes are personalized in ways that effectively address both motivational and developmental considerations (i.e., enhance the student's perception that the processes, content, and outcomes are a good match with his or her interests and capabilities). Then, if needed, a second step is implemented to address needs for *special assistance*. (See Exhibit 2.)

Exhibit 2

Enhancing Classroom Instruction

Step 1 Personalization (as differentiated from individualization) – In personalizing instruction, the emphasis is on the learner's perception of how well the processes, content, and outcomes "fit" or are a good match with his or her interests and capabilities.

The initial focus is on *motivation*. Thus:

Step 1a – involves use of motivation-oriented strategies to (re)engage the student in the process of classroom instruction. This involves drawing on the broad science-base related to human motivation, with special attention paid to the research on intrinsic motivation and psychological reactance, to enhance student perceptions of significant options and choice and involvement in decision making.

The next concern is for *developmental capabilities*. Thus:

Step 1b – involves use of teaching strategies that account for current knowledge and skills. In this respect, the emphasis in Title I on extra instructional time (e.g., in the form of tutoring, designated as "Supplemental Services") provides a set of resources that can be used for these purposes.

Step 2 – Specialized Assistance – If needed, use of special assistance strategies to address any major barriers to learning and teaching, with an emphasis on the principle of using the least intervention needed (i.e., doing what is needed, but no more than that). In this respect, the range of strategies that have been referred to for many years as "Prereferral Interventions" and the programs and services that constitute student/learning supports are of considerable importance – especially as federal policy emphasizes the concept of *Response to Intervention*.

Note: Prereferral interventions involve identifying problems experienced by students in the regular classroom, identifying the source of the problems (student, teacher, curriculum, environment, etc.), and taking steps to resolve the problems within the regular classroom.

Enmeshed in all this are practices that create a classroom climate that not only enhances motivation to learn and perform, but also avoid decreasing motivation and/or producing avoidance motivation. Such practices include:

- regular use of informal and formal conferences with students to discuss options, make decisions, explore learners' perceptions, and mutually evaluate progress;

- a broad range of options from which learners can make choices with regard to (a) types of learning content, activities, and desired outcomes and (b) how decision making and learning will be facilitated (supported, guided);
- active decision making by learners in making choices and in evaluating how well the chosen options match their motivation and capability;
- establishment of program plans and mutual agreements about the ongoing relationships between the learners and the program personnel;
- regular reevaluations of decisions, reformulation of plans, and renegotiation of agreements based on mutual evaluations of progress, problems, and learners' perceptions of how well instruction matches his or her interests and capabilities;
- provision for multi-age and ungraded classes and "looping."

Teachers also must learn how to approach special assistance in a sequential and hierarchical manner. First, they must be prepared to use a variety of reteaching strategies that accommodate individual needs and differences in order to enhance the likelihood of learning. They also must be prepared to teach prerequisite knowledge, skills, and attitudes a student may not yet have learned. Finally, they must be prepared to play a role, along with student support staff, in addressing major barriers that may be interfering with student learning and performance.

Three factors are essential in ensuring teachers are able to employ strategies that can counter grade retention:

- > a focus in their professional development on learning how to implement the type of approach described above
- > ensuring classrooms are designed in ways that assure time for teachers to implement what they have learned (e.g., schools must promote the type of collaborative classrooms and grouping strategies that have the effect of turning big classes into smaller units)
- > developing a comprehensive school-wide focus on addressing barriers to learning and teaching.

The bottom line is that until schools do all they should to enable student performance and learning, policies such as grade retention will further victimize those who have already been victimized by a system that is not only non-supportive, but hostile.

(For more on the above matters, see Adelman & Taylor, 2006a, b and the many documents from our Center that delineate approaches to addressing barriers to learning and teaching.)

Concluding Comments

Clearly, grade retention is not a solution to the problem of ensuring all students have an equal opportunity to succeed at school. What is needed are policies and practices that stress addressing barriers to learning and teaching as an essential and high level focus in every school improvement planning guide. The intent must be to develop a comprehensive, multifaceted, and cohesive approach. This, of course, represents a major systemic change and requires shifts in prevailing policy, new frameworks for practice, sufficient resources to develop an effective structural foundation, and ongoing capacity building for such changes.

To do less is to maintain a policy of grade retention, with all the negative consequences that have been so amply documented.

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Appendix A

State Policies for Promotion/Retention

In 2005, Kyle Zinth updated the Education Commission of the States' overview of student promotion/retention policies (see <http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/65/51/6551.htm>).

In brief, that report indicates:

“States take a variety of approaches in determining grade promotion or retention of students:

- Specifying requirements in legislation: six states
- Directing state authorities to establish policies: 11 states
- Directing local authorities to establish policies or consider specific criteria: 15 states
- Authorizing state authorities to establish policies: three states
- Authorizing local authorities to implement specific policies or consider certain criteria: 10 states
- Explicitly making decisions local: seven states
- No policy: 17 states

States directing their respective state boards or local authorities to implement policies frequently provide a legislative framework. A number of states also have multiple policies, which can be targeted towards different subjects, grades or districts.

Promotion Gates

Some state policies contain what can be referred to as ‘promotion gate’ policies. Promotion gates can be understood as a performance threshold that a student is expected to meet prior to grade promotion. For example, a state may decide to test 3rd grade students to determine proficiency in reading, and require students failing to meet the prescribed proficiency to be retained, or promoted contingent upon receiving remediation and demonstrating proficiency.

Twelve states specify in legislation or direct their state boards or local authorities to implement promotion gate policies. [These policies are summarized in a Table in the report.]

Assessments

Eighteen states have policies that specify an assessment to be used in determining student eligibility for promotion or retention; 12 states specify state tests; three specify locally determined tests; and two specify a combination of state and local assessments. Wisconsin specifies that state assessments be used unless a district or charter school adopts their own assessment.

An additional three states, Minnesota, Ohio, and Virginia, have policies that authorize — but don't require — districts to use state assessments to determine student eligibility for promotion or retention. Illinois directs districts to promote students based on their performance on "Illinois Goals and Assessment Program tests, the Iowa Test of Basic Skills or other testing or criteria established by the school board." California directs districts to establish promotion policies that identify students through either the state's assessment or through "other indicators of academic achievement designated by the district."

Examples of Other State Action

Seven states authorize districts to require students not demonstrating proficiency to participate in either summer school or some other form of remediation prior to promotion. Five states authorize local authorities to use student attendance during the school year as a factor in determining eligibility for promotion or retention. Nevada directs the board of trustees of each school district to determine a minimum number of required attendance days for a student to obtain credit or to be promoted to the next higher grade. Locally adopted attendance policies in Ohio must prohibit promotion if the student has been absent without excuse for more than 10% of the required attendance days of the current school year and has failed two or more of the required curriculum subject areas."

Appendix B

Guides for Practices to Counter the Need for Grade Retention

From: U.S. Department of Education (1999),
Taking Responsibility for Ending Social Promotion: A Guide for Educators and State and Local Leaders – <http://www.ed.gov/pubs/socialpromotion/index.html>

Comprehensive approaches require:

- >Taking Responsibility (e.g., set out explicit expectations for all stakeholders, including families and communities; set high standards of learning for all students)
 - Create reliable measures of achievement against standards
 - Concentrate on providing high-quality curriculum and instruction for all students
 - Include families
 - Involve community stakeholders
- >Starting Early (e.g., emphasize early childhood literacy)
 - Provide opportunities for preschool
 - Emphasize early childhood and family literacy
- >Strengthening Learning Opportunities in the Classroom (e.g., focus on providing high-quality curriculum and instruction; provide professional development that deepens teachers' content knowledge and improves instructional strategies to engage all children in learning)
 - Identify and intervene early with students at risk of falling behind
 - Ensure that there is a well-prepared teacher in every classroom
 - Use research-based practices
 - Reduce class size
 - Accommodate students with special needs
 - Keep students and teachers together for more than one year and use other effective student grouping practices.
- >Extending Learning Time (e.g., through before- and after-school programs, tutoring, homework centers, and year-round schooling)
 - Establish after-school and before school programs
 - Provide summer school for students not meeting standards
 - Move toward year-round schooling
- >Helping Students Who Still Do Not Meet Standards
 - Develop effective transition programs for students unprepared for promotion
 - Prevent dropouts and help students realize postsecondary opportunities
- >Holding Schools Accountable for Performance and Helping Them Improve
 - Require public reporting of school performance
 - Intervene in low-performing schools
 - Reward school improvement

From: Linda Darling-Hammond (1998)

“Avoiding Both Grade Retention and Social Promotion”

The Education Digest . Prakken Publications: Ann Arbor (64:3, pp. 48-53).

In this article, Darling-Hammond stresses that strategies must include intervention and supplementary programs that provide instruction that is directly linked to what students are doing in the classroom, do not take away from the core curriculum, and are a normal part of the school routine. These include: (a) remedial reading & math classes, (b) early intervention programs, (c) mandatory summer school, (d) intersession programs, (e) Saturday school, (f) differentiated instructional strategies, (g) expanding class size reduction, (h) one-on-one tutoring, (i) before and after school programs, (j) extended learning day, and (k) preparatory academies.

In addition, she stresses:

>Professional Development: Teachers need an in-depth understanding of subject matter, students’ diverse approaches to learning, and multiple teaching strategies if they are to enable students to succeed. Schools must hire well prepared teachers, provide mentors for novice teachers, provide systematic supports for ongoing professional development, provide opportunities to plan, learn effective teaching strategies, examine curriculum, observe effective teaching practices, and to give and receive coaching.

>Redesigning School Structures: Studies in the United States have found that small schools and those that personalize instruction by keeping the same teachers with the same students for extended periods of time have fewer behavior problems and higher achievement than large schools with highly departmentalized structures in which the students move from one teacher to another. Multi-grade classrooms in which the students stay with the same teacher and a cohort of peers for more than one year may help eliminate the need for grade retention. Another approach to redesigning school structures to support intensive learning is language immersion classes in which students receive instruction in reading in a ‘block schedule’ format.

>Targeted Services: Schools must improve practices to identify students with special learning needs, improve fragmented and ineffective service-delivery models, and examine approaches to train teachers to work with special-needs students. It is important to identify students early in order to provide appropriate instructional strategies. Many students who are identified as failing in the early grades struggle with reading. Literacy programs such as Reading Recovery and Success for All allow for one-on-one assistance and helps teachers develop techniques to improve their ability to teach reading.

>Classroom Assessments: Assessments that give detailed information about students’ levels of performance and their approaches to learning can determine how students can be helped most successfully. Along with standardized test data, educators need to use assessments that engage students in performance tasks such as essays examinations, oral presentations, problem-solving exercises, research projects, and teacher observations to determine student’s academic needs, gaps in learning, and to develop individualized academic action plans.

From Designs for Change (1998)

Rethinking Retention to Help All Students Succeed: A Resource Guide.

<http://www.designsforchange.org/pdfs/rethink.pdf>

This brief lays out eight strategies based on existing research and current successful school practices.

Strategy 1 - Basic School Restructuring – High achievement requires a fundamental restructuring of the school’s policies, practices, and social organization, as well as its relationship to its community. Successful schools restructure their time according to “Five Essential Supports for School Improvement.” These are Leadership Focused on School Improvement, Family-Community Partnerships Support Learning, School Environment/Culture Supports Learning, Staff Development, and Collaboration.

Strategy 2 - Immediate Intensive Help for Students Who Do Not Master Critical Skills and Knowledge the First Time – Staff develops a school-wide “culture of high standards” and every student receives the support needed to “meet standards” for grade promotion. Offer every student effective help early and often during the school year, rather than after students fail. Provide this help in the regular classroom during the regular school day. Assume that all students will need extra help. Student groupings should be flexible, and low-achieving students should not be put into permanent pullout classes or entirely separate classrooms. Attend to students’ academic and social needs and involve families as partners providing help to children and in problem-solving. Students who need help also are given extra assistance through such strategies as after school tutoring, Saturday schools, summer school, and homework help-lines.

Strategy 3 - High Quality Early Childhood Education – Provide adequate student-teacher ratios, facilities, and instructional materials; commit to an instructional strategy for early childhood education that has been shown, through research, to lead to short-term and long-term educational benefits; provide adequate training and support for teachers in carrying out the program’s instructional strategy; build on children’s strengths and build up areas where they are weaker; enable children to demonstrate different modes of knowing and learning and different ways of representing what they know; assess students’ progress and achievements in ongoing, strategic, and purposeful ways with results used to benefit the children in adapting curriculum and teaching to meet the developmental and learning needs of children; address the range of children’s needs that help them benefit from school, including health, nutrition, and emotional and social well-being; communicate regularly with the families of students in the language they speak; involve families in the classroom and in learning at home.

Strategy 4 - Effective Reading Instruction in All Grades – The best results in teaching children to read in the primary grades result from a balanced approach, which combines a literacy-rich environment with multiple opportunities to read with understanding and to enjoy reading; a structured program for explicitly teaching word analysis skills (including phonics), comprehension skills, and spelling skills; multiple opportunities to write, speak, and listen that are an integral part of reading activities; reading skill and strategy instruction that is woven into the process of student reading and writing. For students who master the basics of reading in primary grades, but fall behind in their reading competence as they move through school, important practices include: shared objectives for the reading and writing development of students, as well as shared understanding about how to teach reading so that reading instruction is coherent and consistent across these grades; explicitly teaching reading strategies for comprehension and word identification; explicitly teaching the structure of stories and the ways that different types of written materials are organized; providing opportunities for students to choose literature and topics they find interesting and meaningful; giving students opportunities to tie reading to drama and art, to relate reading experiences to their lives, and to discuss and share reading experiences; providing activities before, during and after reading that teach and activate students’ knowledge from their past experience and from other materials that they have read; and teaching students to consciously read for a specific purpose, to actively determine what they want to get out of what they are reading.

Strategy 5. Smaller Learning Communities That Use Effective Educational Practices – Small schools that effectively educate students who are at risk of school failure are not academically selective. Nor do they separate out low-achieving students into a separate program or building. Key to success is that a school, whatever its size, carries out educational practices that can lead to higher achievement (Strategy 1) and that the school helps all students master critical skills (Strategy 4). However, research indicates that small schools

are, on the average, significantly more effective in avoiding student failure because teachers can build strong personal bonds with students, press students to excel, and provide appropriate extra help. And it is much easier for teachers to collaborate and communicate, build trust among each other, and reach out to families.

Strategy 6. Family and Community Involvement Focused on Educational Improvement – Schools can help families be productively involved by: maintaining regular two-way communication between school and family, teaching families how to aid their children at home, encouraging families and community to be involved as volunteers at school, linking with community agencies to provide a range of educational and social services, and encouraging family involvement in school decision making.

Strategy 7. Connecting Students with Real Futures – School-to-work is a high school reform strategy that grounds student learning in both a rich academic curriculum and active workplace or community projects. This strategy is an effort to address three key problems that plague high schools: one, the disengagement of students in any high school curriculum track from learning, expressed in an “as if I care” student attitude toward required assignments; two, the disconnection between youth and adults, expressed in poor communication and weak relationships; and, three, segregation of students into a traditional vocational education track, experienced as a dead-end preparation for non-existent jobs. School-to-work is designed to detrack high schools, engage all students in meaningful and challenging work, and to prepare them to make informed and capable choices about future work and education. Key practices are: using real-world contexts to teach rigorous academics, with an emphasis on higher order thinking skills; expanding academic instruction to include problem-solving and other crosscutting competencies vital to further study and future careers; extending learning beyond the classroom through work internships, field-based investigations, and community projects linked to academics; providing students with adult mentors and coaches for project work; emphasizing high-quality student products through regular exhibitions, portfolios, and other assessments, informed by real-world students; offering regular opportunities for students to explore their interests and develop personal plans for future learning and work.

Strategy 8. Promotion with Extra Help – When the seven strategies described above are consciously carried out at the same time, the number of students who fail to meet grade-level standards will be minimized, and the decision about whether to promote or retain a student will come up much less often.

Research indicates that low-achieving students do better academically and are less likely to drop out later on, if they are promoted but provided extra, rather than being retained. This approach is not the same as “social promotion”; it requires that the school identify a students’ problems and provide intensive extra help. Teachers, trained tutors, and students themselves can provide different kinds of extra help throughout the school year to those students who need it. In order to target help to the particular needs of an individual student, teachers may need to modify and adapt the curriculum. Peer tutoring and peer sharing in which older and younger students or higher-achieving and lower-achieving students read and talk together proves to be an effective learning experience for both students in the pair.

Related to the strategy of “promotion with extra help” are two methods for minimizing the need to make the promotion-retention decision, through the way that the school staff are organized:

- **Multi-Age Grouping.** In a school with multi-age grouping, combined classes are created, such as a kindergarten-first grade class; a first-, second-, and third-grade class; a third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade class. Thus, for example, a student in a first-, second-, and third grade class stays in that classroom for three years, and the decision to promote or retain does not come up at the end of each year.
- **Looping.** In a school that employs “looping,” the same teacher or the same team of teachers remains with a group of students for two, three, or four years. The student group remains intact as long as they are working with these teachers. The focus is not on labeling students as being in a certain grade, but on achieving grade level standards for all students over a multi-year period.

It should be emphasized that multi-age grouping and looping are not, in themselves, solutions to the retention-social promotion dilemma, unless the school staff is carrying out the effective instructional practices described under the other strategies above. For example, students must receive immediate intensive help if they are not mastering the skills appropriate for their grade level, in a multi-age classroom.