



A Series of Information Resources on

Retention and Social Promotion

Decisions about grade retention and social promotion raise serious dilemmas for all concerned. Policy has spiraled back and forth, with the current emphasis on retention. Researchers tend to conclude that both practices are unsatisfactory.

This series is designed to provide information that helps answer basic questions frequently asked in debates over retention vs. social promotion. Also described are alternative practices designed to move policy in new directions.

Grade Retention in Elementary Schools: Policies, Practices, Results, and Proposed New Directions

Our focus in this document is on:

- (1) What is grade retention? social promotion?
 - (2) How many students are affected?
 - (3) What policies support retention?
 - (4) What factors lead to retention?
 - (5) What are some consequences of being retained?
 - (6) What alternatives have been proposed?
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*The information presented here was culled from the literature and drafted by Jessica Krier as part of her work with the national Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA

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What is Grade Retention? Social Promotion?

Grade retention or repetition is used with K-12 students who are struggling in school (e.g., have not met a test performance standard). Course repetition occurs with secondary school students who have failed a specific course. The intended objective is to ensure the student has learned appropriately before moving on.

Social promotion occurs when students who are struggling in school are moved on with their same-age peers. Those who support this policy argue that grade retention produces more harm than good and that the benefits keeping such students with their age group outweigh the costs. This is seen as especially the case when students are on the margins of success but are struggling to understand some basic material.

Both policies have been widely criticized. A widespread problem is that they often are not adequately accompanied by a system of learning supports designed to prevent such failure and to assist students encountering barriers to learning.

How Many Students Are Affected?

Retention rates have gone up in the past 25 years. The National Center for Education Statistics reports that, in 2007, 5.7% (1.3 million) of all elementary school students were retained at their grade level (Planty et al., 2009). In the past, retention has been greatest in kindergarten and first grade, decreasing throughout elementary school. Current testing policies are increasing the numbers retained in third grade. Those retained tend to be males, minorities, low in socio-economic status, and have low parental involvement in their education and lives (Frey, 2005; White, 2010).

What Policies Support Retention?

Under the *No Child Left Behind Act*, the federal government requires adequate yearly progress (AYP) for schools to continue to receive funding and to avoid being designated as “in need of improvement” (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). School improvement is assessed through standardized student testing. One effect of this policy has been a trend for teachers and administrators to retain unsuccessful students with the aim that these students will score higher the next time they are tested.

In addition, eleven states have a *Promotional Gates* policy. This calls for testing near the end of the year in the elementary grades to determine if a student should be retained or promoted (Education Commission of the States, 2005; 2012). Some states leave decisions about using Promotional Gates up to individual school districts.

Promotional Gate in Chicago, IL

The Chicago Public School district decided to implement its Promotional Gate policy in the third grade. In the first year of implementation, twenty percent of third graders were held back, as compared to one or two percent during the previous school year (Roderick & Nagaoka, 2005). This resulted in increased class sizes and demand for quality teachers and financially strained many elementary schools.

What Factors Lead to Retention?

A common assumption is that students who are retained just need more time to develop and learn. This assumption ignores the many other factors that interfere with successful learning at school. It also contributes to situations where students just encounter the same learning experiences from the previous year and do not receive other supportive interventions (Peterson & Hughs, 2011; Picklo & Christenson, 2005).

In addition to individual developmental and motivational considerations, a variety of family conditions are reported as contributing factors. These include problems stemming from inadequate financial resources, language other than English spoken at home, parents lacking basic literacy skills, abusive caretaking, and much more. Schooling deficits also play a role (Brooks-Bey, 2011; Dombek & Connor, 2012).

With respect to whether to retain a student, teachers often make the final decision. Some research suggests that when administrators are involved, students are held back less often (Schwager & Balow, 1990).

At some schools, special tests are used in making retention decisions (e.g., *Light's Retention Scale*). These assessment instruments have been criticized as having poor validity.

What are Some Consequences of Being Retained?

Research indicates that students who are held back do not succeed at a higher rate than kids who are socially promoted. In fact, they often learn less than socially promoted students within the next year.

In the short term, socially promoted students learn what is equivalent to a half of a year more than retained students in the same grade (Hong & Raudenbush, 2005). Some studies do show a slight gain in academic achievement right after completing a retention year, but it doesn't last (Moser, West & Hughes, 2012). Most studies show that retention has no long term

academic benefits in terms of the amount of content students learn (Roderick & Nagaoka, 2005; Westbury, 1994). Some researchers suggest that retention may even be academically harmful in the long term (Moser et al., 2012). For instance, students retained in elementary school have less perceived competence and less persistence related to their schooling (Pierson & Connell, 1992).

“If I was passed on then I would have had someone to look up to. It was terrible, especially because of the kids, they were very harsh. They would ask me why I was still in third grade. They would ask questions and ... I didn't know what to say to them”
(Adult reflecting back, 2010)

And retention can have a big effect on student's social and mental well-being. Students can feel traumatized and out of place when they are held back. Retained students reported feeling punished, sad, bad, and upset (Byrnes & Yamamoto, 1985). A not atypical reaction from an adult retained in elementary school is that the experience made her feel dumb, caused her to lose friends, and did not help her at all.

Elementary school students ranked academic retention as one of the top five most stressful things that could happen to them, just under losing a parent, parental fighting, getting lost, and being caught stealing (Anderson, Jimerson & Whipple, 2005).

Some might argue that students who are socially promoted also have just as difficult a time socially, mentally and emotionally in the next grade. Researchers report that this is not the case. Socially promoted students have been found to have higher emotional health than those who are retained (Jimerson, Carlson, Rotert, Egeland & Sourfe, 1997). They also have significantly higher overall self-esteem, academic self-concept, and homework completion by the time that they reach high school than students retained in elementary school (Martin, 2011).

Because retention can affect motivation to learn and succeed, its impact extends beyond the school. Less perceived competence in school work can transfer to lower confidence in other aspects of life, and create a coping style of quitting when things are not simple or quick. Grade retention is the number one predictor of student attrition. Students retained between kindergarten and fourth grade were found five times more likely to drop out of school than those not retained (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1992; Rumberger, 1995). And even when retained students do finish high school, they earning power is less than their socially promoted peers (Jimerson, 1999).

A few studies report positive benefit of retention in elementary school. Some of these studies have been analyzed as methodologically flawed (e.g., no control or comparison groups). Others are instructive because the students weren't simply retained, they were provided additional supports, such as intense tutoring (Stock Knoll, 2003).

What Alternatives Have Been Proposed?

A variety of alternatives to retention have been proposed (e.g., Adelman & Taylor, 1998; 2006; National Association of School Psychologists, 2003; Thomas, 2000). For example, the National Association of School Psychologists (2003) has formulated an intervention plan to help students succeed and avoid retention. It encompasses the following facets, which are intended to be implemented separately or together depending on a school's resources, time, and capability.

- 1) *Encouraging parental involvement in education.*
- 2) *Encouraging the use of early education programs and preschool so that students are Kindergarten ready.*
- 3) *Offering extended day, extended year and summer school programs for students who are struggling.*
- 4) *Continuously monitoring student progress so that instruction can be modified and individualized.*
- 5) *Implementing looping and multiage classrooms*

More broadly, our Center's research suggests the need is for schools and communities to weave together resources and develop a *unified and comprehensive system of learning supports* (Adelman & Taylor, 2006; Center for Mental Health in Schools, 2008). In terms of content, we emphasize clustering the essential needs identified by schools and communities into the following six major intervention arenas:

- (1) **Regular classroom strategies to enable learning** – teachers collaborate with other teachers and student support staff to ensure learning is personalized for all students and especially those manifesting mild-moderate learning and behavior problems. There is a focus on enhancing the range of learning options, extending learning opportunities, and providing learning supports, accommodations, and special assistance as needed and within the context of implementing “Response to Intervention.” Special attention is given to re-engaging those who have become disengaged from learning at school.
- (2) **Supports for transitions** – programs and systems designed to assist students and families as they negotiate hurdles to enrollment, adjust to school, grade, and program changes, make daily transitions before, during, and after school, access and effectively use supports and extended learning opportunities, and so forth.
- (3) **Home involvement and engagement** – programs and systems designed to increase and strengthen the home and its connections with school.
- (4) **Community involvement and engagement** – programs and systems designed to increase and strengthen outreach to develop greater community involvement and support from a wide range of entities. This includes agency collaborations and use of volunteers to extend learning opportunities and help students-in-need.
- (5) **Crisis response and prevention** – programs and systems designed to respond to, and where feasible, prevent school and personal crises and trauma, including creating a caring and safe learning environment and countering the impact of out-of-school traumatic events.
- (6) **Student and family assistance** – programs and systems designed to facilitate student and family access to effective services and special assistance on campus and in the community as needed.

Finally, all involved in school improvement recognize the need to ensure a focus on a full continuum of interventions encompassing: (1) promoting healthy development and preventing problems, (2) responding early after problem onset, and (3) treating chronic and severe problems.

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