GRADE RETENTION AND PROMOTION: INFORMATION AND STRATEGIES FOR EDUCATORS

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Despite a century of research that fails to support the effectiveness of grade retention, its use has increased over the past 25 years. Retention rates have increased dramatically with the recent movement for "school reform" (such as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001), which has emphasized grade-level performance standards, grade-level tests to determine promotion or retention, and the end of "social promotion" (i.e., the practice of promoting students with their same-age–peers although they have not mastered current grade-level content).

It is estimated that at least 2 million students are held back each year, and 30–50% of students are retained at least once before ninth grade. Although some may see retention as the answer to the current emphasis on "standards and accountability" in education, research indicates that neither grade retention nor social promotion alone is an effective strategy for improving educational success.

A common misperception is that giving a student the gift of another year in the same grade will allow the child time to mature (academically and socially). However, grade retention has been associated with numerous deleterious outcomes.

Considering the negative outcomes associated with grade retention, it is particularly disconcerting that the highest retention rates are found among poor, minority, inner-city youth.

While research does not support the use of retention, evidence from research and practice highlights the importance of seeking effective alternatives that will promote the social and cognitive competence of children and enhance educational outcomes.

Evidence From Retention Research

While there are some commonly held misperceptions regarding retention, the following highlights some of the important research outcomes. This information provides teachers with a better understanding of the potential effects of retention on their students.

Student Characteristics

Some groups of students are more likely to be retained than others. Those at highest risk for retention are children with one or more of the following characteristics:

- Black or Hispanic males.
- Late birthday, delayed development, and/or attention problems.
- Live in poverty or in a single-parent household.
- Frequent school changes and/or chronic absenteeism.
- Low parental educational attainment and/or parental involvement in their education.
- Behavior problems and/or display aggression or immaturity.
- Difficulties with peer relations and/or low self-confidence/self-esteem.
- Reading problems (including English Language Learners).

Effects of Retention

Temporary gains. Initial academic improvements may occur during the year the student is retained. However, many research studies show that achievement gains decline within 2–3 years of retention. This means that over time children who are retained either do not do better, or sometimes do worse, than similarly low-achieving groups of children who were not retained. Without specific targeted interventions, most retained students do not catch up.

Negative impact on achievement and adjustment. Research consistently indicates that grade retention is associated with negative outcomes in all areas of student achievement (e.g., reading, math, and oral and written language) and social and emotional adjustment (e.g., peer relationships, self-esteem, problem behaviors, and attendance). Additionally, sixth-grade students have rated grade retention as one of the *most* stressful life events.

Negative long-term effects. There is no evidence of a positive effect on either long-term school achievement or adjustment. Furthermore, by adolescence, experiencing grade retention is predictive of health-compromising behaviors such as emotional distress, low self-esteem, poor peer relations, cigarette use, alcohol and drug abuse, early onset of sexual activity, suicidal intentions, and violent behaviors.

Retention and drop out. Students who were retained are much more likely to drop out of school. A recent systematic review of research exploring dropping out of high school indicates that grade retention is one of the single most powerful predictors of high school drop out, with retained students being 5–11 times more likely to drop out. The probability increases for students who are retained more than once.

Consequences during adulthood. In addition to lower levels of academic adjustment in eleventh grade and a greater likelihood of dropping out of high school, retained students are also less likely to receive a diploma by age 20. Adults who repeated a grade are more likely than adults who did not repeat a grade to be unemployed, living on public assistance, or in prison.

Individual Considerations

While there may be individual children who benefit from retention, there is currently no systematic means to predict accurately which children will benefit from being retained. Under certain circumstances, retention is less likely to yield negative effects.

Students who have difficulty in school because of lack of opportunity for instruction rather than lack of ability may be helped by retention. However, this assumes that the lack of opportunity is related to attendance/health or mobility problems that have been resolved and that the student is no more than one year older than classmates.

Considering that research during the past century has failed to support the practice of grade retention, educational professionals must carefully examine the evidence supporting why retention would help a particular student more than promotion to the next grade.

Alternative Intervention Strategies

In contrast to the negative effects associated with grade retention, research also provides evidence supporting other educational interventions to promote the cognitive and social competence of students. Considering the diverse needs of retained students, it is anticipated that systematic evidence-based interventions will facilitate the academic and socio-emotional development of students at risk for school failure.

There is no single silver bullet intervention that will effectively address the specific needs of low-achieving students. While a comprehensive review of preventive and remedial instructional approaches is beyond the scope of this handout, see Algozzine, Ysseldyke, and Elliott (2002) for a review of research-based tactics for effective instruction, and see Shinn, Walker, and Stoner (2002) for a more extensive discussion of interventions for academic and behavior problems (see "Resources"). It is important to note that the literature indicates that effective practices for students at risk tend not to be qualitatively different from the best practices of general education.

What follows are examples of evidence-based alternatives to grade retention and social promotion:

- Parent involvement in their children's schools and education through frequent contact with teachers, supervision of homework, and continual communication about school activities to promote learning.
- Age-appropriate and culturally sensitive instructional strategies to accelerate progress in the classroom.
- Early developmental programs and preschool programs to enhance language and social skills. Implementing prevention and early intervention programs is more promising than waiting for learning difficulties to accumulate. Effective preschool and kindergarten programs develop language and pre-reading skills using structured, well-organized, and comprehensive approaches. Research suggests that optimally programs follow students and their parents beyond kindergarten and provide support services through the primary grades.
- Systematic assessment strategies, including continuous progress monitoring and formative evaluation, to enable ongoing modification of instructional efforts; effective programs frequently assess student progress and modify instructional strategies accordingly.
- Early reading programs: developmentally appropriate, intensive, direct instruction strategies have been effective in promoting the reading skills of low-performing students.
- School-based mental health programs to promote the social and emotional adjustment of children; for

instance, addressing behavior problems has been found to be effective in facilitating academic performance.

- Behavior management and cognitive-behavior modification strategies to reduce classroom behavior problems.
- Student support teams with appropriate professionals to assess and identify specific learning or behavior problems, design interventions to address those problems, and evaluate the efficacy of those interventions; effective programs tend to accommodate instruction to individual needs and maximize direct instruction.
- Extended year, extended day, and summer school programs that focus on facilitating the development of academic skills.
- Tutoring and mentoring programs with peer, cross-age, or adult tutors focusing on promoting specific academic or social skills.
- Comprehensive school-wide programs to promote the psychosocial and academic skills of all students; too often remedial and special education services are poorly integrated with the regular education program and, therefore, collaboration and consistency between regular, remedial, and special education are essential.

How Teachers Can Help

Because research fails to support retention and social promotion, it is imperative that schools implement more effective strategies that enable at-risk students to succeed. It is important for teachers, other educational professionals, and parents to collaborate to promote children's learning and adjustment.

Identifying school problems early can help to develop skills in children before children begin to feel like failures. Addressing problems early improves chances for success. Teachers can help by:

- Implementing effective research-based teaching strategies (as described above) that enhance student success.
- Identifying learning and behavior problems early to help avoid the cumulative effects of ongoing difficulties; it is important that students receive appropriate support services before becoming entrenched in a cycle of failure.
- Discussing concerns and ideas with parents and other educational professionals at the school; communication with parents is important so that the teacher is not the only adult working with the child to promote academic and social skills.

- Providing structured activities and guidance for parents or other adults to work with the child to help develop necessary skills.
- Seeking assistance from other educational professionals who may be part of a multi-disciplinary student support team; that is, teachers cannot be expected to solve all classroom or learning problems alone, and collaborating with other educational professionals (such as school psychologists, social workers, or administrators) provides additional resources and expertise to help address the unique needs of individual students.

Summary

Neither grade retention nor social promotion is an effective remedy to address the needs of children experiencing academic, emotional, or behavioral difficulties. Teachers committed to helping all children achieve academic success and reach their full potential must discard ineffective practices (such as grade retention and social promotion) in favor of "promotion plus" specific interventions designed to address the factors that place students at risk for school failure.

Teachers are encouraged to actively collaborate with other educational professionals and parents to develop and implement effective alternatives to retention and social promotion. Incorporating evidence-based interventions and instructional strategies into school policies and practices will enhance academic and adjustment outcomes for all students.

Resources

Algozzine, B., Ysseldyke, J. E., & Elliot, J. (2002). *Strategies and tactics for effective instruction.* Longmont, CO: Sopris West. ISBN: 1570351198.

Jimerson, S. R. (1999). On the failure of failure: Examining the association of early grade retention and late adolescent education and employment outcomes. *Journal of School Psychology, 37*, 243–272.

Jimerson, S. R. (2001). Meta-analysis of grade retention research: Implications for practice in the 21st century. *School Psychology Review, 30*, 420–437.

Jimerson, S. R., Anderson, G., & Whipple, A. (2002). Winning the battle and losing the war: Examining the relation between grade retention and dropping out of high school. *Psychology in the Schools, 39*, 441–457

Jimerson, S. R., & Kaufman, A. M. (2003). Reading, writing, and retention: A primer on grade retention research. *The Reading Teacher, 56*, 622–635.

McCoy, A. R., & Reynolds, A. J. (1999). Grade retention and school performance: An extended

investigation. *Journal of School Psychology, 37*, 273–298.

Shinn, M. R., Walker, H. M., & Stoner, G. (Eds.) (2002). *Interventions for academic and behavior problems II: Preventive and remedial approaches.* Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists. ISBN: 0-932955-87-8.

Websites

The National Association of School Psychologists— *www.nasponline.org*

The Beyond Grade Retention and Social Promotion— *www.education.ucsb.edu/jimerson/retention*

The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) offers a wide variety of free or low cost online resources to parents, teachers, and others working with children and youth through the NASP website *www.nasponline.org* and the NASP Center for Children & Families website *www.naspcenter.org.* Or use the direct links below to access information that can help you improve outcomes for the children and youth in your care.

About School Psychology—Downloadable brochures, FAQs, and facts about training, practice, and career choices for the profession. *www.nasponline.org/about_nasp/spsych.html*

Crisis Resources—Handouts, fact sheets, and links regarding crisis prevention/intervention, coping with trauma, suicide prevention, and school safety. *www.nasponline.org/crisisresources*

Culturally Competent Practice—Materials and resources promoting culturally competent assessment and intervention, minority recruitment, and issues related to cultural diversity and tolerance. *www.nasponline.org/culturalcompetence*

En Español—Parent handouts and materials translated into Spanish. *www.naspcenter.org/espanol/*

IDEA Information—Information, resources, and advocacy tools regarding IDEA policy and practical implementation. *www.nasponline.org/advocacy/IDEAinformation.html*

Information for Educators—Handouts, articles, and other resources on a variety of topics. *www.naspcenter.org/teachers/teachers.html*

Information for Parents—Handouts and other resources a variety of topics. *www.naspcenter.org/parents/parents.html*

Links to State Associations—Easy access to state association websites. *www.nasponline.org/information/links_state_orgs.html*

NASP Books & Publications Store—Review tables of contents and chapters of NASP bestsellers. *www.nasponline.org/bestsellers* Order online. *www.nasponline.org/store*

Position Papers—Official NASP policy positions on key issues. *www.nasponline.org/information/position_paper.html*

Success in School/Skills for Life—Parent handouts that can be posted on your school's website. *www.naspcenter.org/resourcekit*