

Education and Social Promotion: What is the Debate?

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I. Introduction

The debate surrounding social promotion and student retention has recently been placed in the public spotlight. In January 1999, President Clinton announced his new education agenda during the State of the Union address. At the top of that list, Clinton proposed adding a provision to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) that would encourage states and school districts to end social promotion. In the past year, four states-California, Delaware, South Carolina, and Wisconsin-have enacted policies that link student promotion to state examinations (Johnston, 1999). Governor George W. Bush of Texas also called for the end of social promotion in his January 1999 State of the State address. His proposal would require third- fifth- and eighth-grade students to pass state exams in reading and mathematics in order to be promoted to the next grade.

In preparation for the upcoming seminars, the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory (NCREL) has prepared this issue paper to review the following:

- The leading research on the social promotion/retention debate
- The current promotion system in use by the Chicago Public School system
- The no social promotion legislation that was recently enacted by the Illinois General Assembly

II. Social Promotion vs. Retention – Available Research

Since the 1970s, the educational community and the public have debated whether social promotion or retention can end low student achievement. The practice of passing students on to the next grade who have failed to master part or all of the grade-level curriculum is referred to as social promotion. Retention, on the other hand, requires students to repeat the same grade in order to master what has not been learned (IDRA, 1999). With public attention focused on the reforms in

Chicago, grade retention has wrestled attention away from social promotion. These events have also intensified the debate within the education community. A review of current literature reveals two consistent themes and mixed results regarding the effects of social promotion and retention:

1. Retention has a negative effect on student achievement, attitude toward schools, school attendance, and student drop out rates.
2. Social promotion has a negative effect on student achievement and it assures failure by not making sure that students are prepared.

1. Retention: Negative Effects and Mixed Results

Opponents of grade retention argue that it has a negative effect on student improvement, increases student drop-out rates, and causes students to develop a negative attitude toward school (Holmes, 1989; Reynolds, 1992; Roderick, 1995; Rumberger, 1987; Shepard & Smith, 1987, 1990). In fact, much of the available research also argues that retention is more likely to be administered to students who are male, poor, of a racial minority, attend school in an urban area, and/or are considered to be behavioral problems by their teachers. The three studies described below further describe the arguments against grade retention.

A 1987 study by Lorrie A. Shepard and Mary Lee Smith discusses the effects of retention on kindergarten students' achievement and affective outcomes at the end of first grade. The study analyzed 40 kindergarten students who had been retained at schools with a high retention rate. A control group of promoted students was established with children who matched on socioeconomic and achievement levels from schools that did not practice retention. Both groups were compared at the end of first grade on a number of outcome measures, including teacher ratings on reading achievement, math achievement, social maturity, learning self-concept, and the appropriateness of attention to school work as well as standardized test scores in reading and math. Finally, parents of the retained and promoted students were interviewed to determine each ". . . parent's perceptions of their child's readiness

when first entering kindergarten, the nature of screening and orientation to school, and perceptions of progress in kindergarten and first grade” (p. 351). Shepard and Smith also interviewed parents who refused to have their children repeat kindergarten and parents whose children repeated first grade.

The results of the study found little difference between retained and promoted students at the end of first grade. Teacher ratings of both groups’ attention levels, learner self-concept, math, reading, and social maturity showed no difference. There also was no difference in the reading scores of promoted and retained students on standardized test scores. However, the retained students did see a gain of one grade level in math as measured by the standardized tests. Parent interviews of both retained and promoted students illustrated that parents also do not believe there is an academic benefit to retaining their children. In addition, Smith and Shepard found that the parents of retained children saw a poorer attitude toward school from their children than the control group/promoted students. Based on the lack of differences between retained and promoted students, the authors concluded extra-year programs did not provide students with the intended assistance these programs were supposed to provide.

C.T. Holmes’ 1989 meta-analysis of 63 grade retention studies is considered one of the leading reviews of grade retention research. The Holmes review looked at studies that “. . . (a) presented the results of original research of the effects on pupils of retention in kindergarten, elementary, or junior high school grades; (b) contained sufficient data to allow for the calculation or estimation of an effect size; and (c) described an investigation with an identifiable comparison group” (p. 18). Of the 63 studies, 54 reported overall negative effects of retention, 9 reported positive effects. In the negative-effect studies, academic achievement was cited as the area harmed the most by retention.

Holmes’ review of the nine positive-effect studies included an analysis of the

characteristics of these studies. He found that positive-effect studies involved students from suburban settings, lower-middle to upper-middle class families, and IQ scores at or above 100. Additionally, few if any students were from racial minority groups. The retention programs used in the positive-effect studies had a high level of parental involvement and retainees were identified early and provided special assistance. Many of the programs also developed individual education plans for each child, and students were placed in classrooms with low student-teacher ratios. Holmes further noted that while these studies reported academic gains due to retention, any advances by the students during their second year in grade diminished over time.

Arthur J. Reynolds's (1992) study of the effects of early grade retention on reading and mathematics achievement, teacher ratings and perceived self-competence also resulted in criticisms of retention. Reynolds' study followed 1,255 low-income Chicago children who were a part of the Longitudinal Study of Children at Risk. The study used student scores on the Iowa Test for Basic Skills to track reading and mathematics achievement. Teacher and student interviews were employed to determine student adjustment and self-perceptions of school competence. Just over 20 percent (20.4%) of the group were retained at least once from kindergarten to third grade.

Reynolds found that retention had “. . . significant negative effects on reading and mathematics achievement but positive effects on teacher ratings and self-perceptions of competence” (p. 111). Reynolds did note that the positive effects on teacher ratings and self-perceptions were negligible, and the findings regarding self-perceptions were largely found with first grade students. Academically, the retained students never improved their performance to meet the levels of their promoted peers. He further concluded that for most students retention has either negative or negligible effects on achievement and teacher ratings, and that the negative effects appear to increase over time.

Proponents of retention, on the other hand, cite retention as a necessary measure to making sure students are equipped with the basic knowledge and skills to prepare them for the future. They further argue that retention has a positive effect on student achievement and attitude toward school. The two studies described below describe the arguments against social promotion.

2. Social Promotion: Negative Effects and Mixed Results

A 1994 study by Karl Alexander, Doris Entwisle, and Susan Dauber followed 775 students from the Baltimore City Public School System (BCPSS). Alexander, et al., used the Beginning School Study (BSS) as the basis for their study because it contained information on student academic performance and student personal development.

Students were randomly selected from 20 schools within BCPSS and were followed for eight years from arrival in the first grade in 1982. While students in the study were representative of all racial and economic groups, the authors note the majority were African-American and of a low socio-economic group. The researchers gathered data from school academic records, student test scores, and interviews with students, parents, and teachers. At the end of the study, 60 percent of the students (468) remained in the BCPSS. Thirty percent of the total group (238 of 775) had not been retained at the end of year eight. Of the students who remained in BCPSS, 53 percent (248 of 468) had been retained at least once.

Retained students' academic performance, pre- and post-retention, was evaluated by using test scores and report card grades. Retainees' post-retention performance also was evaluated against their performance before retention, the performance of academically similar students who were promoted, the performance of all never-retained students, and the performance of students who were promoted but retained at a later grade level (4-7). Using these criteria, the researchers argued that

students who are retained in the first grade (presumably students who struggle the most academically) are helped very little by retention. Students who are retained in the second or third grades are helped the most by retention. Additionally, the authors argue that academic self-image and attitudes toward school are not negatively affected by retention. In fact in student interviews, student attitudes about themselves and academics seemed to improve after retention, especially during the failed year.

In, a 1994 study, Denise Gottfredson, Carolyn Fink, and Nanette Grahman found retention has positive effects in their analysis of sixth- and seventh-grade student attitudes and attachments toward school based on whether they had been retained or promoted. Their study compared retained and promoted students with comparable academic achievement on the math and reading sections of the district's spring 1988 standardized achievement tests. Furthermore, at the end of each academic quarter teachers were asked to rate the disruption level and level of student attendance to work. The authors found that retained students showed a greater attachment toward school and exhibited fewer negative school behaviors than similar achieving students who had been promoted. The authors further argued that the retention of high-risk students could lead to a reduction of negative behaviors and a delay of behavioral problems later on. Additionally, they stated that while retained elementary school students may experience a difference in how their peers treat them there is no evidence that the difference is harmful or negative. In fact, their research suggested that retained students may "enjoy higher status than non-retained students in secondary school" (p. 768).

III. No Social Promotion in the Chicago Public Schools

As one of the nation's largest urban school districts, the Chicago Public School (CPS) system was once considered one of the nation's worst districts. But as evidenced by a mention in President Clinton's 1999 State of the Union address, Chicago is no longer cited as the model for failure and low standards. The CPS

policy ending social promotion has been specifically singled out as a model for the nation.

In August 1996, CPS instituted a promotion policy, *Bridging the Gap*, with a new set of performance standards. According to CPS's policy, students in the third, sixth, and eighth grades are required to attend summer school if they fail to meet the following conditions: (1) pass the minimum required standards in reading and mathematics on the Iowa Test for Basic Skills (ITBS); (2) receive a passing grade in reading and math; and (3) acquire fewer than 20 unexcused absences. In an effort to prepare students to retake the ITBS, summer school classes emphasize building skills in mathematics and reading. If students meet the minimum standard after the ITBS retest, they are promoted to the next grade. If not, students are retained in their current grade. Eighth graders who are 15 and do not meet the minimum ITBS standards are enrolled in alternative schools called transition centers. Students at the centers focus on remediation in mathematics and reading during their first semester. The second semester and summer school is spent earning high school credit. In 1998, the Chicago Public Schools introduced the Making the Grade program. If retained students could demonstrate sufficient progress in their classroom work and on the ITBS, students can be double promoted back to their peer-age grade. (Chicago Public Schools, 1998; Pick, 1998).

In 1997, approximately 41,000 students were required to participate in Chicago's summer school program. Of that number, approximately 16,000 students passed the ITBS following summer school, 17,000 students did not pass the ITBS and were retained, and 7,000 students did not complete the program and were automatically retained (Kelly, 1999).

Since its implementation, Chicago's promotion policy has encountered some severe criticism (House, 1998; Katz, 1999). Part of that criticism is due to the lack of outside research on Chicago's retention program. However, a new three-year study by the Consortium on Chicago School Research is underway and anxiously

awaited. The initial results of their statistical analysis are expected in the summer of 1999.

In June 1998, *Catalyst*, the leading independent education publication in Chicago, leveled charges that the latest gains in citywide ITBS scores were inflated due to the district's new retention policy. Reading gains were reported for students in five grades. *Catalyst* argued the results were due to the fact that students retained in the third, sixth, and eighth grades had received an extra year of instruction. Secondly, student gains in the fourth and seventh grade were thought to be the result of these classes having fewer low-achieving students than in past years (Duffrin, 1998). In response to these charges, the Consortium on Chicago School Research analyzed the retention patterns and achievement gains for the 1997 group of students in grades three, six, and eight to determine how retention affected the citywide ITBS results (Easton, Jacob, Luppescu, Roderick, 1998). The researchers found the promotion policy had not distorted the 1997 ITBS scores. By adjusting for the effects of retained students, the researchers found that 38 percent of students scored at or above national norms in math. This number is still above the 1997 score of 35.9%. Gains were also posted in reading with scores at or above national levels, and up from the 30.3 percent posted in 1997.

IV. *State of Illinois Social Promotion Policy*

School districts shall not promote students to the next higher grade level based upon age or any other social reasons not related to the academic performance of the students. On or before September 1, 1998, school boards shall adopt and enforce a policy on promotion, as they deem necessary to ensure that students meet local goals and objectives and can perform at the expected grade level prior to promotion. Decisions to promote or retain students in any classes shall be based on successful completion of the curriculum, attendance, performance based on Illinois Goals and Assessment Program tests and the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, or other testing or any other criteria established by the school board. Students determined by the local district to not qualify for promotion to the next higher grade shall be provided remedial assistance, which may include, but shall not be limited to, a summer bridge program of no less than 90 hours, tutorial sessions, increased or concentrated instructional time, modifications to instructional materials, and retention in grade. (Illinois P.A. 86-721; 89-610,§

5; 90-548, § 5-915.)

In August 1996, P.A. 89-610 was passed and signed into law to discourage social promotion in the state of Illinois. In February 1998, P.A. 90-548 amended the earlier law and completely prohibited social promotion in the state. While school boards were required to adopt policies on promotion by September 1, 1998, it should be noted that the legislation did not provide disincentives or incentives for districts to follow the law. Additionally, neither the Illinois State Board of Education nor any other state agency was named as the compliance agency for the new policy. The decision to promote or retain students in Illinois schools allows local boards to employ a variety of measures of assessment. These include state, district, or classroom assessments; student performance on the ITBS; or other testing criteria established by the local school board. In the event a student is retained, districts are required to provide remedial assistance.

V. Alternatives to Social Promotion and Retention

With no resolution to the debate between retention and social promotion advocates in sight, increased attention is being given to alternative strategies. A 1991 study by Nancy Karweit concluded “. . . neither retention or social promotion are satisfactory responses to the need to provide appropriate instruction for low-performing students” (p. iii). Research by Linda Darling-Hammond (1998), Anne Wheelock (1998), and the American Federation of Teachers (1997), supports the need to develop alternatives to social promotion and retention in the form of better teacher training and professional development, smaller class size, individualized student support, better student assessments, and flexibility in student instruction.

In response to the criticisms of retention strategies and the research on alternative strategies, a number of cities have added some level of early identification and intervention strategies to their promotion policies. Intervention strategies can include: diagnostic assessments, consultation by school teams, individualized education plans, additional instruction (tutoring, after school

programs, extended day), alternative instructional strategies, changes in teacher or classroom assignment, student support services, and parental involvement (Baltimore City Public School System, 1998). For example, the Boston Public School's promotion policy is supplemented with early identification and intervention strategies for at-risk students, and Texas Governor George W. Bush included similar preventative strategies in his promotion initiative, *Student Success* (See Appendix A for more information).

VI. Conclusions

While grade retention is currently the popular policy response to low student achievement, research indicates there are mixed results on the benefits and disadvantages to retention and social promotion.

Criticisms of retention include negative effects on student achievement, increases in student drop-out rates, and negative effects on student attitudes toward school.

Available research also argues that retention is more likely to be administered to students who are male, poor, of a racial minority, attend school in an urban area, and/or are considered to be behavioral problems by their teachers.

Early identification of at-risk students and pre-retention interventions are most commonly cited as the best alternatives to social promotion and grade retention.

The most commonly employed pre-retention intervention strategies are diagnostic assessments, consultation by school teams, individualized education plans, additional instruction (tutoring, after school programs, extended day), alternative instructional strategies, changes in teacher or classroom assignment, student support services, and parental involvement.

Appendix A

District/State Early Identification and Intervention Strategies

Boston Public Schools Policy

4. Parents must be notified of the name and phone number of the school staff member who will act as their administrative liaison.
5. If a teacher suspects a child is at risk of not meeting subject/grade-level standards, parents must be notified by mid-October in writing and the student must be referred to the appropriate designated staff person for support services.
6. Once a student has been identified, parents and the designated staffer consider a variety of options to resolve the student's problem (e.g., examining and altering instructional strategies/materials, tutoring, schedule/teacher change, referral to other support services).
7. If by the end of the first term the problem persists and students are at risk of retention, additional options will be considered. These include: referral to safety-net or alternative programs for more intensive services, access to additional instructional time (during day, extended day, or summer school), referral to special education. (Boston Public Schools, 1998)

Proposed Texas Promotion Initiative

(The Texas initiative focuses on reading proficiency)

1. Schools must perform a reading inventory on students in kindergarten, first, and second grade.
2. Students who perform below grade level are provided with "accelerated" instruction, which can include summer school, extended day programs, or tutorials.
3. Student participation is required, and the state provides a \$670 stipend to schools per student.
4. Teachers are offered the opportunity to participate in summer seminars, which focus on reading instruction and the science of reading.
5. A stipend of \$150/day is provided by the state (Office of the Governor, 1999)

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