Effectiveness of Grade Retention as an Academic Intervention Strategy

by

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Grade retention is a common intervention strategy often used when students fail to meet minimum standards on state assessments and or show a deficiency in social skills. The use of grade retention is a source of great debate among education professionals. Research on grade retention shows mixed results, citing both positive and negative effects. Studies citing positive effects show retention having a positive effect on teacher-perceived academic competence, peer-perceived academic competence, and peer acceptance. Large school districts using retention show improvement in test scores among the lowest-achieving students and low performing schools have decreased. Opposition to grade retention cites a lack of strong evidence showing the long-term benefits of retention, stating retention often leads to higher dropout rates and students falling further behind. Some research on grade retention initially shows positive results connected to retention, especially if a student is retained in the elementary years, but after two or three years, the positive results diminish and retention appears to lead to a myriad of problems. Those opposed to retention cite the enormous costs associated with retention, financially to school districts and emotionally to students. In this article, the author reviews: (a) the history of retention, (b) the positive results of retention, (c) the negative effects of retention, (d) intervention alternatives to retention.

Keywords: grade retention, social promotion, alternatives, interventions
Chapter I: Effectiveness of Grade Retention as an Academic Intervention Strategy

With 90% bipartisan backing and passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2001, accountability expectations for teachers and students reached new levels (Larsen & Akmal, 2007). The NCLB legislation required assessments aligned with state standards to be used to measure student achievement. Many states followed federal legislation in raising graduation requirements and increasingly used performance on these tests to evaluate schools to determine whether children move on to the next grade level (Wu, West, & Hughes, 2008). Passage of the NCLB Act, emphasizing mastery of minimum grade-level competencies as a condition of promotion, renewed discussion of grade retention in the public arena (Gleason, Kwok, & Hughes, 2007). With higher standards and requirements placed upon teachers, school districts, and students, debate surrounding grade retention and social promotion continues to surface in the public arena, in educational circles, and in the political realm. Since the mid-1990s, the idea of ending social promotion has become a central component of the standards-based reform movement that emphasizes setting content-based standards for students and holding both schools and students accountable for meeting them (Wu, et al., 2008). Former President Bill Clinton, during his 1998 State of the Union Address, stated, “When we promote a child from grade to grade who hasn’t mastered the work, we don’t do that child any favors. It is time to end social promotion” (Frey, 2005). Mayors from many of the country’s largest cities, including New York and Chicago, followed this ideal, taking steps to end social promotion in their city school districts.

Debate over grade retention and social promotion is nothing new. The pendulum has swung between favoring an end to grade retention to sometimes favoring an end to social promotion (Bali, Anagnostopoulos, & Roberts, 2005). Social promotion is commonly viewed as
half of a bimodal choice, with retention being the only other option (Frey, 2005). The core of the
debate between grade retention and social promotion is about how retention or social promotion
will affect a child in the long-term. Echoing Cairns and Cairns (1994), Jimerson and Ferguson
(2007) pointed out that retention is mostly used when students are behind academically, but
sometimes the rationale for retaining students includes immaturity and poor social skills. Key
players in the retention decision-making process typically involve teachers, parents, and
administrators. These key players often make up collaborative teams known as “Child Study
Teams” or “Student Support Teams”, which can also include players such as school
psychologists (Schnurr, Kundert, & Nickerson, 2009). Jimerson, Carlson, Rotert, Egeland, &
Sroufe (1997) concluded that teacher recommendations, classroom performance, social and or
emotional functioning, and performance on standardized assessments often influence retention
decisions. Retention is commonly used because retention is easy to implement (Hong & Yu,
2008). Even though retention is easy to implement, retention is an expensive intervention
strategy. In today’s economic climate, where many school districts are struggling to find the
funding to support even core programs, the financial question impacts whether to retain a student
or promote them. For every student retained, taxpayers have to pick up the tab for an extra year
of schooling. Expense, in and of itself, cannot be the deciding factor when deciding to retain or
promote a student. It is argued that if grade retention is effective and helpful to students, then the
cost of intervention must take a back seat in order to do what is in the best interest of helping
students succeed. With approximately 15% of students retained each year, it is important to
correctly determine whether to promote or retain a student (Jimerson, Pletcher et al., 2006).
Statement of Problem

During the 1990s and the 2000s, researchers examined the effects of grade retention, trying to understand both the positive and negative effects of using grade retention. Longitudinal studies and meta-analyses such as Jimerson and Ferguson’s (2007) longitudinal study or Jimerson’s (2001) meta-analysis on grade retention exist to help sort through this critical issue and help educators and parents respond appropriately to students who are behind grade-level expectations. Other researchers, such as Picklo and Christenson (2005), concluded that neither grade retention nor social promotion is the answer in helping students academically and or socially. With the cost of education increasing and higher accountability standards in place, many questions arise such as: What is the proper response educators should take when faced with a student who is behind academically and or socially? How do educators respond to political pressures or policies of their school district when dealing with low-achieving students? It is important to understand the grade level retention research to best answer how low-achieving students can be helped to succeed both academically and socially to the greatest degree possible.

Research Question

The research question guiding this review of literature is: Is grade retention an effective intervention strategy to be used by school districts in helping lower-achieving students? The purpose of this review is to (a) define and describe a commonly used intervention strategy called grade retention, (b) summarize research on the effectiveness of grade retention and results of usage on student achievement, (c) present a summary of findings, and (d) provide recommendations of intervention strategies to best help failing students.
Chapter II: Review of Literature

The following literature review explores the history of grade retention, looks at positive outcomes resulting from the use of grade retention and the negative results using grade retention. Focus is given to the social and academic impact of grade retention on students and the economic impact of grade retention on both students and society.

The History of Grade Retention

Grade retention, also referred to as retention, was defined by Jackson (1975) as “the practice of requiring a student who has been in a given grade level for a full school year to remain at that level for a subsequent school year” (p. 613). Retention in American schools, used as an intervention strategy with students who fail to achieve grade-level expectations, dates back to the mid-nineteenth century.

The use of retention began with the onset of graded classes beginning in the 1850s (Beebe-Frankenberger, Bocian, MacMillan, & Gresham, 2004). Also during this time, intelligence testing, i.e., standardized testing, began to make an impact on schools. Intelligence tests and other standardized assessments were used for segregating students and established one means for retention as an intervention tool to help low-achieving students. The original idea behind intelligence testing was to identify children in need of specialized education support, not for segregation. Grade retention was widely practiced in the nineteenth century, with Shepard and Smith (1989) estimating the number of students affected by retention at more than seventy percent. By the early 1900s, some estimates show nearly 50% of all students were retained at least once, and 20% of all students dropped out by the eighth grade (Frey, 2005). A study published in 1908 by the Government Printing Office showed an association between grade-level retention and dropping out of school and estimated nearly 80% of U.S. students who entered
school between 1900 and 1904 dropped out before the ninth grade (Owings & Kaplan, 2001).

Due to high retention rates, homogeneous groupings within classrooms were advocated during
the early to mid-1900s, allowing presentation of different material for high and low achieving students, and although not all educators saw homogeneous groupings as an improvement in education, a positive outcome of declining retentions from the 1930s through the 1960s resulted (Frey, 2005).

In the latter half of the twentieth century, interest in the efficacy and effects of retention spurred research on policy and on the associated attitudes and effects connected to the practice of retention (Frey, 2005). In recent years, the tremendous emphasis of accountability, such as the NCLB Act of 2001, placed on teachers, school districts, and students, raised expectations to greater levels and reignited debate on the use of grade retention as an academic intervention strategy. With a tremendous emphasis on state standardized test scores being the measurement of student success and thus moving on to the next grade level, nine states initiated legislation requiring students to pass tests of grade level competencies in order to be promoted to the next grade (Wu et al., 2008). Because of the use of high-stakes testing, holding schools, teachers, and students accountable, frequency of social promotion (defined as promoting to the next grade children who have not mastered curriculum content at their current grade) decreased and grade retention increased (Wu et al., 2008).

**Positive Outcomes Using Grade Retention**

Some research on grade retention describes positive outcomes; however, most effects appear to be short-term and are not necessarily academic in nature. For example, Gleason et al. (2007) conducted a longitudinal study designed to gather data and study the short-term effects of grade retention on peer relations and academic performance. Participants in the study were 350
first-grade children and consisted of 52.6% male students, 62% eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, 38% Hispanic, 37% Caucasian, 21% African American, and 3% Asian or Pacific Islander. Students were from 116 classrooms in 30 schools in one urban school district and two small city school districts in central and southeast Texas. Eligibility to participate in the study resulted from student scores being below the median score on a state-approved district-administered measure of literacy. Instruments such as Likert-scale teacher questionnaires, peer sociometric evaluations, teacher interviews, and individual student interviews were used to collect data. In the first year of the study when students were in first grade, research staff administered tests of reading and math achievement. The tests were readministered one year later. Teachers were mailed a questionnaire packet for each child in March of both years of the study.

Teacher questionnaires, using a Likert-type scale ranging from one to six, with one being almost never and six being almost always, measured the perception of the child’s emotional symptoms, conduct problems, and academic competencies. Questions included measured academic performance at grade level, grade-level reading and comprehension skills, grade-level ability to solve math problems, student engagement in the classroom, perseverance, reliability as a worker, setting and working towards goals, and turning in homework.

Individual student interviews were also conducted during the second half of the first year of the study and again one year later. A modified version of the class play method was used to assess peer’s perceptions of children’s academic, social, and behavioral competencies. Children were asked to name classmates who best fit several behavioral descriptors and were allowed to name as many or as few students as they wanted. Interview questions included who was best at homework, best at math, best at reading, and who was liked the most. Using a five-point scale
with pictures ranging from very sad to very happy faces, children were asked to indicate their liking for each child in the classroom.

The Woodcock-Johnson III Achievement Test was used to measure broad reading and math scores, using both age and grade standard scores. A comparable Spanish version of the Woodcock-Johnson test was used if children or their parents spoke Spanish to determine the child’s language proficiency in English and Spanish and selecting the appropriate test.

Analyzing the data examining all structural models by using maximum-likelihood estimation with robust standard errors and a mean-adjusted chi-square statistic test, Gleason et al. (2007) found retention had a significant positive effect on peer acceptance and on teacher-perceived and peer-perceived academic competence, suggesting students retained benefited from an extra year in grade in terms of classroom competencies and peer acceptance. This is important in light of the fact that as Gleason et al. (2007) pointed out, children who have problems developing and maintaining positive peer relationships are more likely to develop adjustment problems, which can lead to issues with aggression, withdrawal from school, delinquent activities, and mental health problems. Positive peer acceptance may result from a retained student's relatively greater physical size and knowledge of grade-level routines and tasks. Retention appears to have a positive effect on teacher-perceived academic competence and peer-perceived academic competence in the repeated year, possibly due in part to a student being experienced in that grade, being older, and better able to meet the academic and behavioral challenges. Retention does not appear to impede children academically or in their self-esteem in the early years, yet the experience apparently weakens a repeater’s attachment to school (Gleason et al., 2007).
Chicago Public Schools (CPS), one of the largest school districts in the country, pioneered a student retention policy starting in 1997 in response to ending social promotion, an idea supported by the past two presidents and supported by the majority of teachers and principals in CPS (Russo, 2005; Jacob, Stone, & Roderick, 2004). The purpose was to help educators focus more attention on lower-performing students and send a message to students that achievement matters (Stone & Engel, 2007). The criteria for retaining students were based on passing the reading and math sections of the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS). If a student failed to reach the cut-off scores in the third, sixth, or eighth grade, the grades the test was administered, the student in turn was required to attend a summer program called Summer Bridge. At the end of Summer Bridge, a student would retake the ITBS in August, and if they surpassed the cut-off score in reading and math, they were promoted to the next grade level. If not, the policy called for retaining that student if under the age of fifteen, and if over age fifteen, would be sent to an alternative school. Before finalizing a decision to retain a student, teacher and principal input were considered in determining whether a child was retained.

Since Chicago Public School’s retention policy was enacted, the dropout rate has decreased over the years from 16% to 13%, and elementary students meeting the norms on the ITBS in reading have increased from 36.9% to 43%. Students testing in the bottom quarter of the ITBS have dropped from 32% to 24.4% (Russo, 2005). Brian Jacob of Harvard and Lars Lefgren of Brigham Young provided more evidence to support the proponents of Chicago’s retention policy. The study revealed substantial gains academically among third graders who faced summer school and retention, but the threat of summer school and retention was insignificant for sixth graders (Russo, 2005).
The Consortium on Chicago School Research (CCSR), an independent research group, published numerous studies providing an extensive, empirical, longitudinal look at the effects of grade retention dating back to 1999. Methods used were surveys and personal interviews of teachers, principals, and students, to assess the effectiveness of the retention policy. The retention policy was popular among teachers, principals, and parents because the policy clearly defined expectations for student performance and was most popular among teachers and students, those most affected by the retention policy (Stone & Jacob, 2005). In a February 2004 report put together by the CCSR, findings revealed that the policy made gains in school accountability, student involvement, and teacher motivation in helping students learn the necessary skills to move on to the next grade level.

Teachers and principals felt the policy had positive effects on parental involvement. Almost 90 percent of principals and 75 percent of teachers surveyed agreed or strongly agreed the policy had made parents more concerned about their child’s progress. In the 1999 surveys, 85 percent of teachers and almost 90 percent of principals agreed that as a result of the policy “nearly all teachers [in this school] feel extra responsibility to help students meet standards.” More than 80 percent of teachers and principals agreed that the policy had made them more sensitive to individual student’s needs and problems. Teachers and principals also agreed that the policy has affected instruction positively. More than 80 percent of teachers and 87 percent of principals surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that the promotion standards had “focused the school’s instructional efforts in positive ways. (Jacob, Stone, & Roderick, 2004, p. 14)

As a result of ending social promotion, increased emphasis was put on basic reading and mathematics skills, which led to increased scores on the ITBS. The lesson of Chicago is that accountability can and does encourage teachers and principals to pay greater attention to the lowest-performing students in their classrooms. Accountability policies accompanied by significant investments in building teachers’ capacity and skills will likely meet with the greatest success (Stone & Jacob, 2005). Chicago Public School’s retention practice provides one of the best studies for seeing the effects of grade retention on student performance. Although much
scrutiny has been made of CPS’s decision to end social promotion and demand greater accountability from stakeholders in the education process, and knowing that such policies would likely lead to more students being retained, steady improvements were shown in improved test scores especially from students testing at the bottom quarter on the ITBS, parental involvement increased, the dropout rate decreased, and teachers appeared to focus more instruction time on core subject areas and help students more, all positive results of the CPS retention policy (Russo, 2005).

Negative Results Using Grade Retention

Results Regarding Students

A 1983 Gallop Poll pointed out that 75% of U.S. citizens felt children should not be promoted from grade to grade unless they demonstrated mastery of grade-level content, and a 1986 Gallop Poll showed 72% of Americans favored making requirements stricter for grade promotion (Shepard and Smith, 1989). According to a 2000 public agenda survey, more than two-thirds of all parents nationwide supported retention even if it meant their child would be held back (Russo, 2005).

Counter to the aforementioned positive results, some researchers argue retention appears to lead to a myriad of problems for both students and society. From the Fall of 1998 to the Spring of 2000, a full sample of more than 20,000 retained kindergartners from the United States Early Childhood Longitudinal Study Kindergarten cohort were repeatedly observed. Most students were observed in the fall and spring of their kindergarten year, and in the spring of the first year of their retention. The data set contained repeated observations of a nationally represented sample of children, their families, teachers, and schools (Hong & Raudenbush, 2005). Hong and Raudenbush compiled the data from these observations and found kindergarten
retention had no immediate benefit for students, but actually had a negative impact on students. Hong and Raudenbush (2005) stated, “…that children who were retained would have learned more had they been promoted” (p. 220). Instead, kindergarten retainees were left further behind, where at the end of the retained year the average loss in academic growth was equivalent to almost half a year’s expected growth. The reason for being further behind may be due to less exposure to meaningful intellectual challenges on a regular basis instead of simply repeating the same grade, impeding children’s cognitive development over the repetition year and constraining the learning potential of the retained kindergarteners (Hong & Raudenbush, 2005).

Another longitudinal study conducted by Wu et al. (2008) examined first grade students who scored below the median score on a state-approved literacy test and were matched one on one, one child being retained and another being promoted. The matched students had similar propensity scores, propensity scores being a predictor of the probability of being retained. This study concluded grade retention decreased the rate of growth for mathematical skills but had no significant effect on reading skills within the initial two years following retention; promoted first grader’s growth in math was greater than retained first graders. Retained students’ lower growth may be due to a lack of new instructional concepts (Wu et al., 2008). According to Roderick and Nagaoka (2005), using a growth curve analysis, little progress was seen in the first year of retention for third graders, and by the second year, no substantial positive effects were found in performance. Roderick and Nagaoka concluded that by sixth grade retention was associated with lower achievement growth actually causing negative growth one and two years after retention. Moreover, there is evidence that retaining students under Chicago’s promotional policy significantly increased the likelihood of placement in special education (Roderick & Nagaoka, p. 331).
A different longitudinal study conducted by Silberglitt, Appleton, Burns, & Jimerson (2006) revealed grade retention did not yield any advantages in reading trajectories from first to eighth grade. Retained students had lower levels of academic adjustment by the end of the eleventh grade, were more likely to drop out of school by age nineteen, were less likely to receive a diploma by age twenty, were less likely to be enrolled in post-secondary education, received lower education/employment status ratings, and were paid less per hour (Ferguson, Jimerson, & Dalton, 2001). A twelve-year, follow-up, longitudinal study using stratified, random sampling failed to uphold retention as a positive intervention strategy, and retained students were more likely to drop out of school than socially promoted peers (Jimerson & Ferguson, 2007).

Jimerson’s (2001) meta-analysis of grade retention concluded 5% of 169 analyses of academic achievement outcomes favored retained students and 47% favored low-achieving promoted peers. Any gains from retention disappeared over a relatively short period of time. The results of over 700 analyses from over 80 studies during the past 75 years did not support the use of retention to achieve academic achievement or enhance socioemotional and behavioral adjustment (Jimerson, Pletcher et al., 2006). Retained students were two to eleven times more likely to drop out of school and retention increases that risk by 20 to 50% (Jimerson, Pletcher et al., 2006). A United States Department of Education report (1997) revealed students who were retained in earlier grades were less likely to drop out than those retained in middle or high school, but still showed a higher degree of dropout probability than their peers who were promoted. The results of over 300 analyses of socioemotional and behavioral adjustment, from over 50 studies during the past 75 years again failed to support grade retention as an intervention
to enhance socioemotional and behavioral adjustment (Jimerson, Pletcher et al., 2006). Retention, in fact, can bring emotional and social problems upon a child.

As part of a larger project, Yamamoto and Byrnes (1987) administered a 20-item stress questionnaire entitled, “What Do You Think?” to 548 elementary children: 270 first graders (135 girls, 135 boys) in 15 classrooms in four schools; 108 third graders (48 girls, 60 boys) in six classrooms in three schools; and 170 sixth graders (78 girls, 92 boys) in six classrooms in three schools. For first graders, grade retention ranked as the ninth most stressful event listed. Third graders ranked grade retention as the fourth most stressful event, with losing a parent, going blind or getting lost more stressful than grade retention. Sixth graders ranked grade retention the third most stressful life event, with losing a parent and going blind the only life events more stressful than retention. Anderson, Jimerson, and Whipple (2005) replicated this study and found similar results, with grade retention equal in stress to going blind or losing a parent.

Martin (2009) examined the appropriateness of age in the classroom and found retention being one factor contributing to a wide age range within classrooms and retained students scored lower in self-efficacy, mastery orientation, valuing of school, persistence, positive intentions, academic buoyancy, homework completion, enjoyment of school, class participation, school attendance, and performance. Students retained in a grade were also higher in failure avoidance, uncertain control, self-handicapping, and disengagement. Older-for-cohort students were higher in disengagement, lower in positive intentions, lower in homework completion, and lower in literacy and numeracy performance (Martin, 2009).

Alexander, Entwisle, & Dauber (2003), in their book, *On the Success of Failure*, evaluated the academic and behavioral outcomes of students in first grade through high school as part of the Beginning School Study in Baltimore. The Beginning School Study began in the fall
1982 when students were just beginning first grade. The long-term Beginning School Study was not designed to specifically study retention but study young children’s academic and socioemotional development to see what helps or hinders typical urban youth as they go through school. However, the study turned out to be extremely useful for exploring the consequences of retention (Alexander et al., 2003). Being a long term study, the impact of retention was traced over multiple years.

Data was obtained directly from retained students and their promoted classmates, directly from teachers and parents, and from school system records. A stratified random sample of approximately 800 students was selected from a pool of children entering first grade in Baltimore City Public Schools. Twenty schools were chosen on a random basis for the study from strata defined by the school’s integration status, whether mostly white, African-American, or racially integrated, and by the community socioeconomic level, whether blue-collar or white-collar. After the schools were selected, samples of children were drawn in all 20 schools from students entering the first grade with parental consent obtained. The sampling included all first grade classrooms in the 20 schools, with the sample population 55% African-American, 67% qualifying for free or reduced lunch, 44% coming from a single-parent home, and 40% having mothers who lacked a high school diploma. The Beginning School Study first grade cohort consisted of a large, diverse, representative sample of children attending public schools in a high-poverty city (Alexander et al. 2003).

Examining the data, particularly looking at school performance and attitudes, retention had mainly positive effects for many Beginning School Study children, particularly for students retained just one time and children retained after first grade, but children retained multiple times and or retained in first grade were not helped. Multiple and first grade retention were likely
associated with severe problems that predate retention, leaving less favorable results (Alexander et al. 2003). Students retained in first grade tended to be placed in low-level tracks over their entire school career, with many assigned to special education classes, many placed in low first grade reading groups, and reading levels remained low throughout the course of the study. The pattern seemed to repeat when students retained in first grade entered the middle school years.

Despite the academic boost and associated improvements in attitude that result from doing better in school after retention, many of these children still do not finish high school. Given what we know about the long-term costs of high school dropout, this is a very serious consequence indeed…most one-time repeaters derive some benefit but afterward still lag behind their age mates and grade mates. Should grade retention be faulted for their continuing difficulties or credited for their progress? It is a question with no certain answer. (Alexander et al., 2003, p. 243)

Alexander et al. (2003) found that early-retained children in the Baltimore schools were more likely to drop out of school in adolescence, relative to matched promoted children, despite performing better in their classwork than promoted children. Two-thirds of Beginning School Study repeaters left school without degrees, and the percentages were higher still for double retainees and children held back toward the end of elementary school (Alexander et al., 2003, p. 257). Alexander et al. (2003) concluded: “Retention, so far as we can determine, does not impede…children academically or assault their self-esteem in the early years, yet something about the experience apparently weakened repeaters’ attachment to school” (p. ix). Alexander et al. (2003) concluded that some negative effects did not appear until several years after retention, and most negative effects were amplified over time.

**Economic Impact**

Looking at grade retention from an economic perspective, one can conclude grade retention is an expensive intervention strategy. Retention is a costly remediation tool for school districts and taxpayers. The per-pupil cost of educating a student ranges from a few thousand
dollars in lower-spending states to well over $10,000 in higher-spending states (Eide & Goldhaber, 2005). Citing Dawson (1998), Beebe-Frankenberger et al. (2004) revealed in the late 1990s an estimated 2.4 million students were retained. Multiplying the average per-pupil cost by the millions of students retained each year, the cost of retaining students is staggering. For example, if the average per-pupil cost is $5,000, a conservative estimate, and 7000 students are retained in a larger school district, such as Chicago Public Schools, the cost for retaining students for an extra year amounts to $35,000,000. A real-life example exemplifying the enormous cost of retaining students is the State of Florida. Citing a Florida Association of School Psychologists report from 2004, Jimerson, Pletcher et al. (2006) pointed out that at the end of the 2002-2003 school year, 192,713 Florida students were retained in kindergarten through third grade, which cost the state over one billion dollars. This estimate was based on the annual cost of education per student and did not factor in other collateral costs related to increased dropout rates and other deleterious long-term outcomes associated with grade retention (Eide & Showalter, 2001). The following table (Eide & Goldhaber) shows the average per-pupil cost in the lowest spending states and the highest spending states between the years of 1986 and 1999. Over a 13-year span between 1986 and 1999, the per-pupil average cost to educate students in the lowest spending states nearly doubled and in the highest spending nearly increased by 50%. Taking into consideration the average per-pupil state expenditure for education, retention proves to be an expensive intervention strategy.
Table 1. Cost of Retention to Taxpayer

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Low-Spending State</th>
<th>High-Spending State</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PPE</td>
<td>State</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
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<td>1987</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*aAll per-pupil expenditure (PPE) figures are in nominal dollars.

Note: Table 1 expenditure data source from the National Center for Education Statistics (1993, Table 164; 2000, Table 168; 2002, Table 168).

The economics of retention goes beyond just the per-pupil cost to school districts and taxpayers. Another aspect of the costs involved with retention is the opportunity cost to students. In this case, the student is giving up entering the labor market for a year to gain a year of education. Every year a student is retained, one more year goes by before being able to enter the labor market, so not only are school districts and taxpayers covering an extra year or more of school for retained students, but the student is potentially losing out financially by entering the labor market a year later than anticipated. An extra year in school means delayed entry into the workforce, likely translating into less money made and spent and less tax revenues for government operations. As many studies show, grade retention leads to a higher probability of dropping out of school. With an increase in the likelihood of dropping out of school and not earning a diploma, this can lead to many other social ills, such as adding costs to the welfare
system, increasing the likelihood of criminal activity, and incarceration (Kirsch et al., 1993, Rumberger, 1987, as cited in Jimerson & Ferguson, 2007; Temple & Reynolds, 2007). The cost of students dropping out of school is enormous for both the student and society. Dropouts tend to land less-paying jobs and are more likely to experience unemployment, incarceration, and extended periods of dependency on social services (Bowman, 2005). The cost of retention leads to great economic impact, which must be taken into consideration when decisions are being made whether to retain a student or promote them.

Conclusion

Evidence gathered over the past 30 years on the practice of retention suggests that retention is academically ineffective, expensive, and potentially detrimental to the social and emotional health of children (Frey, 2005). Every study is not perfect and has flaws and some studies are of higher quality than others, but no study has been found to completely dismiss the long-term, negative effects of retention (Bowman, 2005; Larsen & Akmal, 2007). Research examining the academic achievement of students who have been retained over time reveals that within two or three years, students’ achievement was no better than before retention, and their academic outcomes were poorer than their peers in the general population who were not retained (Dawson, 1998, as cited in Bowman, 2005). In follow-up analyses, the effects of grade retention were found to be negative irrespective of the grade in which a student was retained. Given the negative effects of grade retention after gender and age within cohort have been controlled, the data suggests that even if a child is young for his or her cohort or is male, it is best for the child to remain with the cohort rather than be retained in that grade for another year. With this in mind, students should be entered into school on time and should not be retained in the grade for another year (Martin, 2009). Meta-analyses have consistently found retention does not result in
long-term improvement in academic achievement, social functioning and/or emotional functioning, although there are occasional short-lived improvements in performance (Jackson, 1975; Jimerson, 2001; Gleason, et al., 2007).
Chapter III: Results and Analysis Relative to the Problem

The Effectiveness of Grade Retention

What makes investigating the effects of grade retention so difficult are the many variables in a child’s life, variables that are unknown to researchers such as hyperactivity, parental education level, family circumstances contributing to a student’s readiness to acquire and retain grade-level content, and peer acceptance, along with a myriad of other variables that have a tremendous impact in the life of a child. Of the major studies that do exist on the effects of grade retention, few show positive academic and social effects on students. Further, studies investigating the effects of grade retention unfortunately have methodological limitations, providing a weak basis for reaching conclusions about the impact of grade retention (Wu et al., 2008). Any positive effects resulting from grade retention appear to have a short lifespan, lasting upwards of two to three years mainly through the elementary years, then diminishing within two years or more after the repeat year. Most studies show long-term negative effects on a child and do not appear to provide the intervention outcomes desired by educators in providing sustained achievement progress for low-achieving students. Alexander et al. (2003) concluded that, at best, retention helps some children during elementary school; however, by middle school most are relegated to remedial courses and high school students who were retained during elementary school were at an elevated risk of dropping out without a degree. Knowing this, educators can either continue to use grade retention as an intervention strategy, going against the majority of research findings on this issue, or can look to better intervention alternatives that exist in education, with the likelihood of producing long-term positive results for students. Of the studies that did show positive gains for students who were retained, the probable cause for such positive gains are likely due to a repeat of familiar curriculum. Current findings suggest that
positive benefits erode as retained students encounter unfamiliar and more challenging curriculum (Wu et al., 2008). In light of the research on grade retention, educators need to look to better, proven intervention alternatives to grade retention. Unfortunately, low-achieving students and academic failure are a reality in education, so early identification of students who are at-risk for retention is critical.

**Intervention Alternatives to Grade Retention**

Neither grade retention nor social promotion provide long-term positive effects as an intervention strategy. In fact, according to Owings and Kaplan (2001), both retention and social promotion are expensive institutional and individual failures. What appears to be the key in this debate is trying to prevent academic failure before failure occurs. Intervention strategies do exist that can provide help to students academically, socially, and behaviorally. Once a student has been identified as a risk for failure, intervention efforts need to begin as soon as learning problems are identified (Picklo & Christenson, 2005). Frequent student assessments need to be implemented early in the school year for diagnosing students, and appropriate and timely instructional interventions need to be consistently available to all students. According to Picklo & Christenson (2005), four strategies to improve teaching and learning as alternatives to retention are:

1. Improve teacher professional development to ensure teachers are equipped to teach students with diverse needs;
2. Make organizational changes within schools to support more intensive learning;
3. Ensure targeted supports and services are in place and available for struggling students; and
4. Conduct classroom assessments that better inform teachers.
Empirical-based researched intervention programs need to be implemented to help low-achieving and failing students, such as intensive, high-quality, preschool programs (Temple & Reynolds, 2007), early reading programs, before and after school programs, basic skill-building classes during school breaks, and summer schools like Summer Bridge in Chicago. In some cases, intervention strategies can include looping and multi-age classrooms. Countries that often use looping have significantly lower retention rates compared to the United States (Jimerson, Pletcher et al., 2006). Other intervention strategies include positive parental involvement, individualized student educational programs, individualized tutoring to help students learn important, necessary skills, school-based mental health programs, and behavior and cognitive behavior modification (Ferguson, et al., 2001; Jimerson, Pletcher et al., 2006).

An often neglected area in the discussion of grade retention is the critical examination of the appropriateness of a student’s general academic program (Schnurr et al., 2009). Differentiated instruction is a common buzzword phrase in educational circles, but is an intervention approach used by classroom instructors to meet the varying needs of students to provide an academic program that is appropriate for each and every student. Differentiated instruction, referring to the idea of designing a personalized curriculum to meet the needs of each individual student, is an intervention strategy that can be implemented in classrooms to meet the needs of every student and provide extra support for students who need extra help. According to Owings and Kaplan (2001), research indicates six ways the learning environment can be personalized, thereby significantly reducing the need for retention and social promotion. These include:

1. Creating a positive school culture with clear and high expectations, a committed staff, professional teamwork, and principal leadership;
2. Providing early intervention to prevent school failure with early childhood programs and full day kindergarten using research-based curriculum and instruction;

3. Fostering continuity of teacher-learner relationships using looping, multi-age settings, and or cooperative learning;

4. Providing meaningful curriculum and instruction;

5. Providing extra help and extra time with before and after programs, tutoring, mentoring, advising, year-round schools, summer school, or alternative schools; and

6. Creating effective home-school partnerships between parents and teachers.

Another intervention system relatively new in educational circles is Response to Intervention (RTI). Although providing targeted supports for at-risk students is not a new concept in education, RTI is designed to provide high-quality differentiated instruction and targeted interventions matched to student need, monitoring progress frequently in order to make decisions about changes in instruction or goals, and applying child response data to important educational decisions, according to the National Association of State Directors of Special Education. High quality targeted interventions based upon research, such as RTI, need to be implemented in all school districts in order to provide ongoing support for low-achieving students.

Martin, Foels, Clanton, and Moon (2004) found an interesting association between a student’s season of birth and schooling outcomes. In particular, children born from June through August were more frequently retained or redshirted, performed lower on standardized achievement tests, and were more frequently diagnosed with specific learning disabilities. Research of students in England, South Carolina, and Wisconsin indicates that summer-born children are at an achievement disadvantage. 1,136 boys were studied at a private school in
England and by the fourth grade, autumn-born children tended to be in the top “stream,” whereas summer-born children (the youngest in their grade) tended to be in the bottom stream (Thompson, 1971, as cited in Martin, Foels, et al., 2004). In a 1987 study of all South Carolina children who had never repeated a grade or advanced a grade, the report found a 13% to 58% higher risk of failure for younger students (summer-born children) than older students, with the highest level of risk associated with the lower grades (Jones & Mandeville, 1990). A study of more than 8,000 students in Wisconsin indicated that nearly four times as many children were retained in first through third grade if they were summer versus fall born (Graue & DePerna, 2000, as cited in Martin, Foels, et al., 2004). Such achievement connections may result from the fact that students born during the summer months who are entered into school at the earliest possible time, in light of age cut-off dates for entering school, tend to be the youngest in class. Although not considered an academic intervention, if the association between season of birth and retention are valid like these authors suggest, summer-born students would likely be less at risk for retention if parents hold off entering their summer-born child at the earliest possible date and wait until the following school year when the child would be one of the oldest in class rather than the youngest.

As an alternative to (or, at least, in parallel to) “doing retention differently,” investment in other efforts at the levels of both scholarship and practice may yield more promising outcomes. These include efforts to prevent and/or avoid retention, as well as systematic efforts to develop individualized, classroom, and school strategies to address differing learning needs within students, as well as differing densities of these students across classrooms and schools (Stone & Engel, 2007, p. 630).
Chapter IV: Recommendations and Conclusion

Recommendations

Although extensive, longitudinal research appears to show grade retention as a failed intervention strategy for low-achieving students, social promotion without strong academic supports in place appears to not be a viable alternative. As Roderick stated in a 2004 CSSR press release that accompanied the 2004 CSSR report, “The bottom line is that, without substantial supports, neither social promotion nor retention will improve low-performing students’ learning gains. But retention puts these students at risk for other problems. The school system needs to provide early interventions to these students before they reach the third grade. And we need to provide more support to teachers as they manage the needs of these low-performing students in the later grades.” Research on both sides of this issue agree proven, research-based, intervention strategies need to be in place, whether a student is retained or promoted. Grade retention is not the only alternative to ending social promotion. Research-based intervention strategies exist and need to be utilized in helping low-achieving or failing students.

If schools are committed to helping all children achieve academic success and reach full potential, socially promoting a student who has not achieved grade-level expectations is not a good option, but retaining a child as the only form of intervention does not appear to be a viable option either. Support programs and interventions designed to address the factors that place students at risk for school failure need to be in place. With the largest share of retentions taking place in early elementary, and with reading being the primary academic problem for which students are retained, student assessments need to be used early and often in a students’ academic career that provide detailed information about a students’ academic progress. Assessments
should include what students know, what they can do, how they learn, and where they are having problems, so those needing special help can be identified early and support can be put in place early on in a student’s academic career (Karweit, 1999).

Areas for Further Research

Understanding the effectiveness of grade retention is a difficult task. Many complex variables influence the lives of students making it difficult to determine a definitive cause-effect relationship between grade retention and the consequences, both positive and negative, that appear to be linked to grade retention. Future research on the effectiveness of grade retention must be based on high-quality studies using methodically strong research designs. The effectiveness of grade retention needs to be studied long-term, using large, representative samples of students from all types of schools throughout the country, using teacher and administrator questionnaires, teacher and administrator interviews, and state-approved achievement tests, tracking students from the point of retention to the time they leave school.

The complexity of students’ lives should direct future research not only on the effects of grade retention, but to contributing factors that lead to low student performance, which often leads to grade retention. Understanding such factors can help school districts provide quality interventions to at-risk students in a timely fashion. Future studies need to match students on as many relevant factors as possible and provide same-age comparisons, where retained children are compared to promoted peers, and same-grade comparisons, where retained children are compared to children completing the grade for the first time, giving a more complete understanding on the effectiveness of grade retention. Data needs to be collected to provide short-term analysis on the effects of grade retention, but also needs to be collected over long periods of time to understand the effects of grade retention long-term.
Because of the numerous factors that contribute to low student performance, studying the effects of grade retention is challenging, but researchers need to approach future studies with one goal in mind, to gain a clear understanding of the effects of retention in order to best help students lead productive, successful lives in school and in society.

Summary and Conclusion

Both sides of this argument agree that without academic support and program interventions in place for students who are low-achieving students, both practices of social promotion and grade retention will likely end in failure. Research appears to show that promoting a low-achieving child is a much better option than retaining them, as long as intervention strategies are in place to provide academic support, and as needed, social support, for students who are on the threshold of being retained. Given the primary goal in education is to develop a child both academically and socially and if grade retention and social promotion are not succeeding at accomplishing this balanced goal, then liquidating the prevailing practices will be necessary in exchange for a more lasting solution to better education.

In light of the extra cost to taxpayers and the opportunity cost for students, grade retention must show substantial benefits in order to justify the cost not only to the taxpayer, but also the opportunity cost to the student. Alternatives to retention need to be explored and implemented. With numerous other research-based intervention strategies available, such interventions need to be in place in order to help students who are at risk of retention.

If retention is to be used as an intervention strategy for low-achieving students, it should be used as an absolute last resort, with all other intervention options exhausted first. If, after research-based interventions with a track record for success have still failed to bring low-achieving students to a level where they can move on to the next grade level, multiple sources of
information about a student need to be used in the decision-making process, including standardized tests, performance-based assessments, teacher recommendations, grades, parental input, administrative input, and so forth.

Research-based interventions with a proven track record for helping low-achieving students need to be implemented in schools so every student has the best possible chance for success not only in school, but in life.

References


