A LITERATURE REVIEW OF WHAT ARE VIABLE ALTERNATIVES TO RETENTION OF FAILING STUDENTS IN AN ERA OF INCREASED ACCOUNTABILITY AND DECREASED FUNDING

by

Jason A. Micheau

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS IN EDUCATION AT NORTHERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY

December 30, 2009

APPROVED BY: Derek L. Anderson, Ed.D.
DATE: December 31, 2009
DEDICATION

I dedicate this paper to my parents and role models, Jeannie and Ivan
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my family, especially my wife Angela, who has dealt with me being gone on the weekends and putting in long hours in the evenings.
Table of Contents

Abstract ............................................................................................................................. 5
Chapter I: Introduction ..................................................................................................... 6
Statement of Problem ...................................................................................................... 10
Research Question(s) ..................................................................................................... 10
Definition of Terms ........................................................................................................ 10
Chapter II: Review of Literature .................................................................................... 12
  History of Retention ..................................................................................................... 12
  Effects of Retention ..................................................................................................... 14
  Financial Costs .............................................................................................................. 15
  Effects of High-Stakes Testing ..................................................................................... 16
Chapter III: Results and Analysis Relative to the Problem .............................................. 19
Chapter IV: Recommendations and Conclusion ............................................................. 25
  Recommendation ....................................................................................................... 25
  Areas for Further Research .......................................................................................... 28
  Summary and Conclusion ............................................................................................ 29
References ....................................................................................................................... 32
Abstract

This paper addresses alternatives to retention of failing students, while taking into account the increased accountability and funding issues schools currently face. This paper discusses the negative aspects associated with the retention of students, and provides alternatives to the practice of retention. The purpose of this review is to look at changing how we currently treat at-risk students and those who need remediation. The findings of this paper support ending the practice of retention, and implementing programs with greater benefits to the students.
Chapter I: Introduction

The education system in the United States has seen its share of change throughout the years. High school students have had the emphasis of their graduation requirements change numerous times throughout the years. A major push for change was driven by the Soviet Union launching Sputnik into space. The National Defense Education Act (NDEA) of 1958 was our government’s response to losing the initial space race. This legislation focused studies into the area of studies to math, science, and physical education. The motivating factor of NDEA was the fear the United States schools had fallen behind others, primarily the Soviets. The push was to create more engineers who would work in defense related fields helping to reestablish America’s perceived dominance in the classroom and military.

The next shift in education came in 1983 due to the findings in “A Nation at Risk.” This study called for increased standards for high school students and for educators to help students achieve their fullest potential. The authors reported that our country was falling behind others, not only in the classroom, but also in industry and commerce. A Nation at Risk (1983) stated that in order for the United States to function effectively, our citizens must be able to reach some common understandings on complex issues, often done quickly and with conflicting or incomplete evidence. It called for sweeping changes in what our high school graduates knew and tasks they were able to perform upon entering the workforce.

The most recent of the changes came with the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, when President George W. Bush signed the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2002. NCLB called for new significant accountability measures for all public schools. The desired goal of NCLB is to have all students proficient in reading and math by 2014 (NCLB, 2001). Reaching proficiency is the task of the states and the curriculum and
testing set up varies greatly from one to another. In Michigan, the legislature has utilized the Michigan Education Assessment Program (MEAP) and the Michigan Merit Exam (MME) to help determine progress towards the 100% proficient goal in 2014. Michigan has also established a rigorous curriculum to help achieve the goals of NCLB by creating the Michigan Merit Curriculum (MMC). The MMC calls for demanding high school graduation requirements for students entering 8th grade in 2006. The graduating class of 2011 in Michigan will be the initial class to be put through the rigors of the new four year program.

We have seen throughout different periods in our nation’s history, a call for greater expectations of our students, shifts in what is considered to be necessary curriculum, and different means of evaluating how successful of schools are at achieving and implementing these goals. Funding these directives of change from either the federal or state governments has put a severe strain on the amount of money schools receive and how they allocate the monies to various programs. Many states are dealing with budget issues and finding areas to reduce expenditures. In some cases, these cuts are coming in the area of public education. A driving force in Michigan’s school budget problems has come from the passage of Proposal A in 1994. Proposal A shifted the burden of school funding away from property taxes to leaning more heavily on sales tax, which was increased from 4% to 6%. While the economy was booming there were no funding concerns in the state. Since the economy has taken a drastic turn, for a number of years now, the state has not received enough revenue and has had a difficult time maintaining current funding levels, let alone providing any significant increase to schools. Even if states were able to maintain their current level of funding from year-to-year, the increased costs they have experienced in special education and employee benefits (health insurance and retirement) have forced them to make cuts in other areas.
When looking at the increased expectations, standards, rigidity in the curriculum being presented to students, and funding issues in public education, a couple of questions come to mind. How are we meeting the needs of at-risk students? How are we assisting students as they fail to meet grade level or graduation requirements? Students who failed a class used to be able to make it up the following year or semester. With states going to stricter graduation requirements, some of these opportunities are no longer present. Students, who were routinely passed along at the end of the year, are now more likely to find themselves being retained in the same grade after not meeting the necessary standards (Reardon & Galindo, 2002). The evidence suggests retaining students another year in the same grade with the hope that they will get the material they missed the previous year is not beneficial to the student, and is an increased expense to the district (Bowman, 2005; Eide & Goldhaber, 2005; Jimerson, 2001b; Roderick & Nagaoka, 2005; Smith, 2004).

How can we better utilize our resources to help struggling students on the verge of having to repeat the same grade? What are options schools have to retaining the student who has failed a grade? Questions like these need to be addressed by school leaders throughout the United States as we are dealing with limited, and dwindling, resources, and increased accountability for the product we send out into the world. With all the high-stakes testing and the NCLB policy requiring schools to have all students at 100 percent proficiency by 2014, much pressure is going to be applied to having students mastering concepts and performing well on proficiency tests all over the United States. Schools not meeting achievement levels may realize the impending consequences from the state and federal government. Better methods must be utilized in helping all students find success. One must hope a better way is available to help struggling students succeed. A change in the current practice of retaining students is long overdue.
Statement of the Problem

National and state directives have increased expectations and accountability for schools, while funding issues have created problems for those most needing some sort of remediation. The most common form of remediation for students failing to meet the desired expectations continues to be retention. The majority of students take the same classes, often taught by the same teachers in the same manner and style as the first year, with the expectation of experiencing success in their second year. The majority of research and data has indicated retention is not a successful tool in helping a struggling student achieve academic success. The billions of dollars spent annually by schools in the United States on retaining students need to be better utilized on programs that can do away with the need to retain students altogether. Our current practices need to change.

Research Question(s)

What are viable alternatives to retention of failing students in an era of increased accountability and decreased funding?

Definition of Terms

Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) - individual state's measure of progress toward the goal of 100 percent of students achieving to state academic standards in at least reading/language arts and math.

Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 - extensive statute which funds primary and secondary education, while explicitly forbidding the establishment of a national curriculum.
National Defense Education Act (NDEA) of 1958 - provided funding for equipment, materials, research, and college scholarships intended to improve the nation’s competence in math, science, and modern foreign languages.

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) - the main federal law affecting education from kindergarten through high school. It is built on four principles: accountability for results, more choices for parents, greater local control and flexibility, and an emphasis on doing what works based on scientific research.
Chapter II: Review of Literature

History of Retention

Schools have been in place in the United States since the 1600’s, but the objectives of what is done and expected in schools, has changed greatly. The colony of Massachusetts set up a system of public schools in 1647. A main objective of schools at this time was to teach children to be able to read the Bible to thwart away the devil, the “Old Deluder Law” (Frey, 2005). One must believe students struggled with mastery of concepts then as they do now, but retention was not used as a remediation tool for those who failed to achieve until some 200 years later (Frey, 2005). Picklo and Christenson (2005) defined retention as “the practice of requiring a student who has been in a grade level for a full school year to remain in that level for a subsequent school year” (p. 259).

The instruction of students in the current grade level setting we utilize today was not a common practice until the 1860s. Kenneady (2005) pointed out this was done to accommodate the needs of the adults and schools, not taking into account the needs of the student. Up to this point, a failing student would simply leave school to work on the family’s behalf (Frey, 2005). Students were required at this time to master certain content to merit being promoted to the next grade (Owings & Kaplan, 2001). Bowman (2005) found that students are retained for an abundance of reasons. Reasons include: immaturity (Light & Morrison, 1990), belief an extra year of schooling will produce successful academic outcomes (Natale, 1991), allow underachieving students more time to develop adequate academic skills (Owings & Kaplan, 2001), failure to meet criteria for end of year promotion (Dawson, 1998), and nonattendance and frequent unexcused absences (Light & Morrison, 1990). The practice of retention has been in
place for many years, but research on the success and effects of retention have only come to light during the past few decades.

New York and Chicago conducted large scale retention programs in the 1980s and 1990s. The program in New York was called Promotional Gates. Promotional Gates was established in 1981 by Frank Macciarola, chancellor of New York City schools, using city-wide reading tests as the basis of retention. The first year of the program saw 25,000 students, 80 percent minority, in grades 4 and 7, one out of every five students, not meet the criteria on the test (House, 1998). Any student who failed the test was required to attend summer school sessions. Students who failed the test after the summer school session were retained and placed into classes where focused on teaching reading skills. New York City schools celebrated their own statistics which showed marked improvement by those students in summer school, but independent evaluators pointed out significant flaws in the statistical analysis used by the school (House, 1998). It was found that no measurable improvement was made by any students in the Promotional Gates program, and students who were passed on before the inception of the program performed just as well as those retained in the program (House, 1998; Smith 2004).

The program in Chicago, Chicago Public School Reform, was very similar to the Promotional Gates in New York. Students were required to pass state assessments in reading and mathematics in grades three, six, and eight. Whereas New York based the requirement of summer school on a single assessment test, Chicago used a number of criteria for summer school placement. Students had to meet criteria for test cut-off scores, including no more than 20 days unexcused absences and passing grades in reading and mathematics (House, 1998; Picklo & Christenson, 2005). Chicago saw a great number of low-income minorities (80% to 90%) fall into the identified category (House, 1998), just as New York did. The program in Chicago
experienced great gains in reading by students in each grade level after the summer school session. In the summer of 1997, schools claimed third graders made gains of 4.4 months, sixth graders 7.0 months, and eighth graders 9.9 months for those who failed the test in the preceding spring (House, 1998). These accounts have not been verified by an independent party; they are claimed only in school press releases.

**Effects of Retention**

The desired benefits of retaining students are acceptable to parents because of their intentions, but the benefits are seldom realized or at most, short lived in reality. The majority of studies suggest retention does far more harm than good to the student. An analysis of 63 empirical studies during 1989 found 54 of them to have negative effects (Kelley, 1999). The studies were carried out in a wide assortment of districts around the nation. Eide and Goldhaber (2005) also reviewed the 63 reports on retention dating back to 1925 and found that students on average, who were retained, were worse off than their promoted peers. Jimerson (2001a) noted, “Past research reviews and meta-analyses have concluded that cumulative evidence does not support the use of grade retention as an academic intervention” (p. 421). The meta-analysis Jimerson conducted compared promoted students with those who were retained. The controlled studies, 25 of them, matched students based upon IQ, achievement, socioeconomic status, gender and grades (Jimerson, 2001a).

A few studies have reported positive academic outcomes from retention. Xia and Glennie (2005) discovered that any gains made by the retained student diminish after several years, where they eventually fall academically behind their peers again. Using a meta-analysis, Jimerson (2001a) found only 9 of the 63 studies to have established any positive outcomes from retention. The consensus of research reviewed for this paper corroborates these findings. Any
and all production of successful academic outcomes by retention is short lived (House, 1998; Jimerson, 2001b; Robertson, 1997).

The consequences to the student being retained reach far and wide. Byrnes and Yamamoto found in 1985, that the stigma associated with being retained, compelled students to choose “wetting in class” rather than be retained (Frey, 2005). The pronouncement of such a humiliating act over being retained, illustrate the perceived negative implications student’s have of retention. Bowman (2005) deduced that retaining students will not have any future positive effect on academic performance (Dawson, 1998; Jimerson, 2001), but will definitely contribute to low self-esteem (Thomas, 1992). Retention has been found to drive down a student’s overall self-worth (Lane, Medford, & Knorr, 2005). Common realities students deal with as a result of being retained is those of being teased, bullied, feeling isolated. Dropout rate is a statistic with significant ties to retention. Students who are retained were 20 to 30 percent more likely to drop out of high school in a controlled1992 study (Kelley, 1999). The Association of California Urban School Districts carried out a study in 1985, finding that students retained twice in their academic careers had a near 100 percent drop out probability (Kelley, 1999; Robertson, 1997).

Financial Costs

The financial costs to districts practicing large scale retention policies can be enormous. New York City utilized a retention program called Promotional Gates during the 1980s. This program drove class size up to 43 students per room in some instances, and required the hiring of 1,100 new teachers at a cost of $40 to $70 million per year (Kenneady, 2004; Roderick & Nagaoka, 2005; Smith, 2004). A similar program to Promotional gates was run in Chicago beginning in 1996. The cost to run their program was in excess of $100 million per year (House, 1998).
Retention of students is conservatively estimated to cost the United States about $10 billion per year on average (Holmes, 2006; Thompson & Cunningham, 2000; McCollum, Cortez, Maroney, & Montes, 1999). Other estimates show a larger overall cost. Jimerson and Ferguson (2007) place it at over $14 billion, Eide and Goldhaber (2005) at $17.8 billion, and Xia and Glennie (2005) at an astonishing $18 billion per year. If more parents and community leaders were up to speed on the unintended consequences of retaining students, we would be hearing charges from the masses to give better opportunities and resources to our children.

*Effects of High-Stakes Testing*

President George W. Bush signed the NCLB legislation into law in 2002, with the ultimate goal of increasing student achievement to 100% proficiency in Mathematics and English by 2014. One way of monitoring the success towards meeting the requirements was the creation of more statewide and end of year assessments (Mintz, Ojeda, & Williamson, 2006). Overall graduation rates are one piece of the assessment process that help to determine whether schools are making Adequate Yearly Process (AYP). Mintz et al. (2006) have found the definition of a successful high school graduate, typically a student who completes high school in four years, has become stricter under the scrutiny of NCLB in many states.

Research on the effects high-stakes testing have had on dropping out of school is more prevalent than research comparing high-stakes testing to retention rates. The practice of requiring students to pass a high-stakes test to advance to the next grade, or graduate, is based on the assumption that the possible threat of being retained will lead to higher student performance (Roderick & Nagaoka, 2005). Those in favor of using testing to gauge academic performance point to a diploma having little or no value if all that is required to graduate is to sit in a
classroom for 12 years (Reardon & Galindo, 2002). The perceived need for testing was put in place to help do away with the process of social promotion of students.

Roderick and Nagaoka (2005) found opponents viewed the decision to retain a student solely on the lack of performance on a singular standardized test to be an extremely polarizing practice. Educational organizations such as the National Association of School Psychologists and the American Educational Research Association have taken strong stances against this practice of using singular performance tests as a deciding factor in retention of students (Roderick & Nagaoka, 2005). Reardon and Galindo (2002) found the effects of performing poorly on the tests were affecting those students who were minorities and of low socioeconomic status, those who were already at risk of becoming retained or dropping out of school.

The United States has a retention rate in the neighborhood of 15 to 19 percent; whereas, the following countries have a zero percent retention rate: Norway, Japan, Denmark, Sweden, and the United Kingdom (Holmes, 2006). Are we to believe these countries have unique students, teacher, and schools who do not share the same struggles as we do in the United States? If the answer is no, then they must be doing something different, and we should complete a major overhaul in how we educate students, or to better utilize the resources, as limited as they may be, to gain better results.

About 85 years of data exists on the practice of retention (Eide & Goldhaber, 2005). The majority of the data showed no educational benefit in retaining students, and adverse affect to their self-esteem (Bowman, 2005; Dawson, 1998; Jimerson, 2001; Thomas, 1992). Two large scale retention programs, in New York and Chicago, both utilized a form of high-stakes state assessment as a deciding factor on what students entered the program. The financial cost to these districts ranged from $40-70 million in New York (Kennedy, 2004; Roderick & Nagaoka,
2005; Smith, 2004), to $110 million per year in Chicago (House, 1998). Xia and Glennie (2005) estimate the cost of retention in the United States to $18 billion per year. With strained budgets and data showing retention being ineffective, districts need to focus their attention on other avenues to help struggling students.
Chapter III: Results and Analysis Relative to the Problem

As previously presented, most scholarly articles find the retention of students to hold little benefit and are viewed to be detrimental to the students as a whole (Kinlaw, 2005). Alternatives to retention do exist and are applied to students based upon their varying needs and resources available to local districts. Some of these alternatives hold much more promise and potential to make positive changes in the lives of struggling students.

The most common, and easiest applied, alternative to retaining failing students is the practice of social promotion. Social promotion was first recognized as a practice in the early 1960s (Owings & Kaplan, 2001). Picklo and Christenson (2005) defined social promotion as the practice of allowing students who have failed to meet performance and academic standards to pass onto the next grade with their peers instead of completing, or satisfying, the needed requirements. Most teachers apply this practice due to pressures from administrators and principals (Banicky & Rodney, 2000). This alternative is viewed as a less destructive option to the individual’s self-esteem (Roderick & Nagaoka, 2005). Data comparing the practice of social promotion to retention is sparse due to districts not keeping statistics of how many students are passed on using the process of social promotion. While most data suggest an insignificant difference between the two practices, any benefit in the process has been attributed to those students who were socially promoted (Picklo & Christenson, 2005).

In a Chicago Longitudinal Study, Frey (2005) found that participants who were socially promoted made gains in reading (8 mos.) and math (7 mos.) over their retained peers. The charge of ending the practice of social promotion was brought about during the 1998 State of the Union Address. President William Jefferson Clinton 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 the practice of social promotion” (Frey, 2005, p. 340).

A standard alternative many schools use to help curtail retaining students is the practice of a required attendance of a summer school program. Chicago Public Schools instituted a mandatory summer school program in 1996. Any 3rd-, 6th-, or 8th-grade student who was one to two years below grade level in reading or math was required to attend summer school and retake the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (Kelley, 1999). The summer school teachers were presented with a specific schedule to follow and designed lesson plans from the district. The approach was followed by other districts including Washington DC, Milwaukee, Denver, Long Beach, CA, and the 89,000-student district in Georgia (Kelley, 1999). Smith (2004) found the majority of students in the Chicago study failed the Iowa Test of Basic skills following their summer school sessions. While the majority failed the test and were retained, 70% of the students made some gains while enrolled throughout the summer program (Kelley, 1999). Although the overall level of the gains was not measured, it should be noted that only 30% of those enrolled showed no gains on the Iowa Test of Basic skills after their summer session. Kelley (1999) found in the second year of the study that 16,000 of the 41,000 students assigned summer school passed and were promoted, 17,700 did not pass and were retained, and 7,000 students did not complete the program and were automatically retained. Students getting caught up during a six to eight-week summer session may be unrealistic for some students to make significant gains. Caution must be taken if the sole basis for summer school is for students to pass a test and be promoted at the completion of the program. Smith (2004) explained the benefits to be temporary and illusory if the curriculum is aimed primarily are teaching to the test.
In the Escanaba Middle School, where I work, students are selected for summer school based upon the number of F’s received on their report cards and on teacher recommendations. The program focuses instruction in mathematics and English. It is a six to eight-week program aimed at “catching up” students to their peers with some intensive practice and tutoring with classroom teachers. My experience with those students attending our summer school program has been primarily positive. The gains of skills worked on during the summer session have typically carried over into the beginning of the following school year. I have been shown many progress reports and report cards from former students, showing grades that are markedly better than those of the previous year. I have also had conversations with 8th-grade teachers, parents, and administrators as to the progress of some former students. As some students fall back into the same poor habits that created the lag between themselves and their peers, the gains and hard work applied during the summer seem to diminish as the year continues. Summer school remediation as a stand-alone alternative shows research that is mixed at best (Kelley, 1999).

Alternatives to retention requiring a greater shift in standard operating procedures all encompass one main practice, identifying students with needs as early as possible. Frey (2005), McCollum et al. (1999), Picklo and Christenson (2005), Protheroe (2007), and Woelfel (2003) all stress the importance of early intervention, frequent assessment, and setting up plans similar to the Individualized Education Plans special education students receive.

The Half-Grade approach is a program utilizing the aforementioned criteria in St. Paul, MN. The Excel program in St. Paul promotes at-risk students in third, fifth, and eighth grades to grades 3.5, 5.5, and 8.5 (Woelfel, 2003). Program requirements have the students taking two years of summer school wrapped around a year of intensive coursework in math, reading, and writing. Assessment of this program by the Center for Applied Research and Educational
Improvement shows “clear signs that the approach can accelerate the learning of students in reading and math” (Woelfel, 2003, p. 52). The youngest grade group of 3.5 showed the largest gains. The students in a “half grade” class (3.5) were typically able to rejoin their peers in the following school year (5). Teams are set up in these schools to quickly intervene and work with these at-risk students before retention becomes a possibility.

If we are to end the practice of retention, we need to provide greater resources to the people working with them every day, the teachers. The resources are not necessarily monetarily, technology, or structurally based, but rather aimed at getting teachers appropriate professional development to help narrow achievement gaps. Teachers are required to take part in professional development activities every year, and Picklo and Christenson (2005) want to ensure teachers are given the skills and most up to date knowledge in addressing students with learning disabilities and diverse needs. McCollum et al. (1999) described the professional development needs to be applicable to the individual needs of the teacher, where they deal with standards and assessment. Protheroe (2007) discussed using differentiated instruction to meeting the needs of students with varied learning styles.

The Delta-Schoolcraft Intermediate School District (DSISD) has held differentiated instruction workshops over the last few years with the majority of participants being in the math and science secondary areas. If driven by the local districts, the offering of these workshops could encompass all core classes and grade levels. Districts could ensure the multiple professional development opportunities, district wide, carried out through the year in are based on differentiated instruction. This would introduce a larger group of teachers to new techniques and assessment tools that could be implemented immediately into the classroom. Improving the quality of teachers by providing meaningful and improved professional development (Picklo &
Christenson, 2005) will create better teacher preparedness (Bowman, 2005). The quicker information can get to the teachers, the sooner they can implement it into their instruction, and the fewer gaps we may see in student achievement. The practice of differentiated instruction has enabled teachers to increase their effectiveness and shorten some of the learning gap among students (Bowman, 2005; Protheroe, 2007; Woelfel, 2003).

After-school programs have been around for many years, but they are becoming a popular program again in working with students who are struggling academically. One such program is the Exemplary Center for Reading Instruction (ECRI) out of Salt Lake City, UT. The program utilizes teachers as tutors, who make attempts to reach all students through a variety of differentiated instruction teaching methods. The effectiveness of the teacher has been found to be a major factor in the effectiveness in the after-school program (Owings & Kaplan, 2001). Research in Tennessee showed ECRI students in grades two through seven significantly outperformed those in a control group in reading and comprehension on the Stanford Achievement test (Kelley, 1999). Schools in North Carolina witnessed a 20 percent drop in retention by using the ECRI program (Kelley).

Alternatives to retention do exist, and many of them do not require large a deviation from how schools currently operate. Most teachers are required to take college credit or attend professional development activities to maintain certification, which need to be made relevant to improve their classroom instruction. Teachers also need to be introduced to, and become familiar with, new early intervention strategies where struggling students have individual plans set up with frequent assessments. We need to utilize current after school and summer programs to supplement instruction during the normal school day. Schools need to realize there is not an
individual program by itself that will erase the need for retention. It will take a combination of programs and efforts from all the stakeholders, to help lessen the need for student retention.
Chapter IV: Recommendations and Conclusion

*Recommendation*

The issue of how to assist, or help, struggling or failing students is not a localized problem unique to individual districts. The problem is felt in every district, in every state, across our entire nation. The districts with the most success in reducing the need for retention of students have applied some common practices: use of early intervention programs, tailoring education plans to individual student needs, getting teachers relevant professional development, and extending services for remediation after school and into the summer.

The earlier we are able to identify students who need more help in mastering skills, the quicker we can get them the services they need to be more successful. This practice could hold, or shorten, the learning gap struggling students experience by identifying the problem before the gap becomes too wide. For those students already entering school at a disadvantage to their peers, this process may enable them to find success early on, and create a positive experience of school and learning. Schools would not necessarily have to add staff, which would increase costs in a time of already constrained budgets. Rather it would require schools to shift and focus resources to the earlier grades. Identifying the students can be done by looking at classroom performance, getting input from parents/guardians, or be based on teacher (current or former) recommendation. Once students are identified, they can begin receiving services to help them better learn the material and keep, or catch, up with their peers. A possible reason why this practice is not more of a commonplace in schools is the potential to increase the number of students who receive special education services. This could overwhelm some budgets who are already dealing with rising special education costs.

Identifying the struggling students would allow schools to tailor education plans, similar
to special education Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), to meet the individual needs of the student. In theory, every student should have their own plan of study to follow. Not every student learns at the same rate or by the same method. Setting up plans for students to follow based upon their needs, could fill holes they may have otherwise experienced in content areas. Giving students more opportunities to master mathematics or reading early on, will go a long way in them finding more success in the later grades than they may have otherwise.

Implementing appropriate plans how to identify struggling students and tailoring unique learning experiences will require teachers to be given new knowledge and techniques in both areas. Teachers receive some form of professional development every year, with some experiences more valuable than others. Teachers need appropriate and focused experiences that are going to be applied to their teaching experiences. Professional development should center on teaching to different learning styles and using differentiated instruction. The expectation should be on the teacher to adapt what they are doing to meet the needs of all the students, not expecting all the students to conform to one teaching style.

As good as some teachers are, and as willing as they may be to change and adapt lessons, some students are going to require more to succeed. The use of after school and summer programs to assist struggling students can be vital in their immediate and future success. After school programs can benefit students by reinforcing what is being taught daily in class, or for remediation of skills needed for success. The after school program in our building, Escanaba Middle School, is staffed by a teacher and paraprofessional for 45 minutes every day. The main focus is placed in mathematics and English, but assistance in other classes is given if needed. After school programs need to have low student to teacher ratios to increase the likelihood of students receiving important one on one time with instructors or tutors. Schools should recruit
and involve community and student volunteers to help tutor students in needed areas. The Escanaba Middle School has utilized community members through Big Brothers/Big Sisters, and high school students from our National Honor Society to help fill the need of tutors for our students. The after school program is only used for those students requiring more support to get work done, it is not used as a detention program to punish students with behavior issues.

For those students who have struggled to show progress in mastery of grade level content and need a more in depth review of material, summer school can be beneficial. Summer school would benefit students who are not at grade level in certain areas, not viewed as proficient on state assessments, or have not mastered grade level content expectations. Being in this program would allow for more detailed instruction to be given over a longer period of time. As was discussed in the paper, one cannot just teach to the test. As Smith (2004) noted in the Chicago summer program, the majority of students failed the Iowa Test of Basic Skills after being in their summer program. But it needs to be noted that 70% of students made some gains from being enrolled in the same program (Kelley, 1999). Skills, content, strategies, and techniques need to be introduced, or reintroduced, to the students. Summer school should not be viewed, or used, as a sort of punitive punishment for students who refused to do work during the normal school year, yet have the necessary skills and knowledge to pass the class. If students are forced to attend as a form of punishment, it would increase the number of students in the program, and take the focus and resources away from those students who truly need the review of the materials. This would also create more funding issues for schools when budgets are already stretched to their limits. Summer school needs to be treated as an opportunity for students to have success and develop the skills and knowledge necessary for the future.
For the struggling student to experience success and reduce the need for retention, all of these practices should be implemented. These practices are not stand alone endeavors. They need to be utilized hand in hand with one another throughout each grade level. This may mean a complete change in standard operating procedures for schools, but I imagine it would require a simple shifting of resources.

**Areas of Further Research**

Future studies in alternatives to retention in an era of increased accountability and decreased funding need to be completed. More research needs to be done on the current programs viewed to be successful. I would continue the studies in the schools and levels where the currently are, and expand these to other districts and states experiencing similar issues. As the studies continue and more research is gathered on the effectiveness of alternatives to retention, schools will be able to better determine what alternatives would best be applied to their individual situation and meet the needs of their students. Factors to look at in determining the level of success of the programs could be: changes in graduation and dropout rates, results on state assessment tests applied to NCLB, a school’s AYP results, and looking at the number of students who are considered to be failing.

Many of the alternatives to retention have come about in recent years, and there is not sufficient evidence to support a district or state adopting one alternative over another based upon research to date. Some of the alternatives may be used at the same time as others, providing an all encompassing strategy to reduce the need of retaining students. Utilizing this kind of process will not likely produce an acceptable lone strategy to combat the need for retention. But if the ultimate goal is to reduce the rate, or need, of retaining students, then the process of getting there may not be as important as the end result.
Summary and Conclusion

From the launching of Sputnik to the signing of NCLB, schools have been given the charge to change what is expected from the average high school graduate numerous times throughout history depending upon the current climate. These charges from the federal and state governments have increased the accountability of districts and schools to these entities. The changes have also increased the number of students who are not meeting graduation requirements. This problem has forced schools to look more closely at how they attempt to meet the individual needs of every student, and to set up plans to assist those struggling to meet the increased graduation requirements.

Another issue schools are currently dealing with is deceased funding from state governments. The federal and state expectations have increased regarding what schools need to do and report, but lately we have had to do it with less and less money every year. This means having to address the needs of struggling students with less staff and resources than what is needed. Situations like this have forced schools to become more creative in how and where resources are spent, and where they come from. Some schools have been given donations by businesses in the community to keep programs, extracurricular and academic, running. Still others have received donations from Parent Teacher Organizations (PTOs) when budgeted money is unavailable. This is not the ideal way to ensure the availability of vital programs, but in light of recent financial difficulty it may become more of the norm.

The past and current practice of retaining student in the same grade for failing to meet criteria for advancement has been utilized for years. The popular belief is that by retaining a student in a grade is going to allow them to learn the material they have not yet mastered. They will be better prepared for the upcoming grades by being better prepared, more knowledgeable,
and more mature. This thought process and rationale is typically supported by parents of struggling students, because it is viewed as having the best interest of the student in mind.

The intent of retention, in most cases, was to benefit the struggling student and give them a better chance at success in school and life. Research shows the end result of retention has almost nothing but negative effects on the student (Bowman, 2005; Eide & Goldhaber, 2005; Frey, 2005; Kelley, 1999). Any gains made by a retained student are typically lost within a couple of years (House, 1998; Jimerson, 2001b; Robertson, 1997; Xia & Glennie, 2005). The social stigma of being retained reduces the sense of self-worth for students (Lane, Medford, & Knorr, 2005). It leads to those students being teased, bullied, and feeling isolated from their peers. The graduation rate of retained students is significantly lower than their promoted peers (Kelley, 1999). If a student is retained more than one time, the likelihood of them dropping out nears 100 percent (Kelley, 1999; Robertson, 1997).

The negative aspects of retention are not solely held by the student; rather they are shared with the schools as well. Retaining students drives up the number of students per classroom and strains already limited resources. Some estimate the total cost of retaining students in the United States up to $18 billion a year (Xia & Glennie, 2005). This money could be better used to help prevent the need for retaining students.

Many alternatives to retention of students are being studied and implemented. The easiest of the programs to implement is social promotion. Social promotion is the practice of advancing a student on to the next grade even though they have not mastered the required curriculum. This practice provides students with a greater likelihood of academic and social success compared to their retained peer (Frey, 2005). The other programs require changing current education practices. Some of the changes are minor, requiring shifting of staff and
resources. Others may require a major overhaul to the system and additional funds to create and run the program. Whatever alternative is chosen by a district, implementation when the problem first presents itself is most important. Addressing the problem early, either by grade level or concept will increase the opportunity for student success.

Viable options to retention do exist. We cannot continue to do a disservice to our children by using methods that we know do not work. We need to leave behind the days of the ineffective practice of retaining students, and move forward with these promising alternatives molded to the needs of the individual student. These alternatives need to provide students, current and future, with the tools to succeed, where others have been left to fail.
References


Robertson, A. S. (1997). *When retention is recommended, what should parents do?* Champaign, IL: Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education. (ERIC Document Reproductive Service No. ED 408102)


