



Criteria for grade to grade promotion and/or retention

Introduction

Retention and social promotion represent the two extremes on a scale of possible interventions for failing students. Research alludes to the idea that both social promotion and retention produce intended and unintended effects on student achievement (Denton, 2001; Hauser, 2000), but these are two extremes that really do not address the problem of failing students. Retention of students, in particular, is on the rise, yet research fails to support the efficacy of this practice (Denton, 2001; Hauser, 2000; Jimerson & Kaufman, 2003; Potter & Wall, 1992). In addition, other have deemed retention unjustifiable, discriminatory, and noxious (Abidin, Gollayday & Howerton as cited in Jimerson & Kaufman, 2003). Two studies confirm that the problem is more acute at the first grade (Potter & Wall, 1992) and again at the ninth grade (Denton, 2001; Potter & Wall, 1992). Overall, research indicates that school districts must endeavor to define alternative intervention methods to address the issues surrounding student failure, rather than utilizing perfunctory retention benchmarks or gratis social promotion.

Purpose of the brief

The first purpose of this brief is to examine the various criteria developed and utilized by school districts for grade to grade promotion in the K-12 public sector. The second is to examine alternatives to failing students other than retention or social promotion. The third is to initiate conversations among school superintendents leading to state or district wide policy definitions regarding retention and promotion.

Findings

- Research studies indicate that retention and social promotion are not long term effective methods in addressing student failure.
- Retention has more negative consequences than social promotion.
- Retention criteria in the K-6 grades primarily involve demonstrating proficiency in reading and math, as measured by a standardized testing format.
- Standardized testing should not be the sole measure in grade to grade promotion.
- Poor reading skills are the most common cause of student failure.
- Schools and districts should have well defined policies in place that address grade to grade promotion or retention.
- Early identification and intervention provide the best approach to addressing student failure.
- Individualized education plans are effective in addressing student failure.

Definition of terms

- Grade retention or mandatory retention requires students to repeat a grade upon demonstration that a student lacks mastery of skills and knowledge of materials (Denton, 2001). It is also known as non-promotion, flunking, being retained, being held back, and refers to the practice of requiring a student who has been in a given grade level for a full year to remain at that same grade level in the following year (Jimerson & Kaufman, 2003).
- Social or grade promotion is an alternative to students proceeding to the next grade level when they demonstrate mastery of material (Denton, 2001). It is the practice of passing students from grade to grade regardless of whether they have passed academic standards (American Federation of Teachers, 2001).

Methodology

A literature search using the Internet, phone conversations with school districts, examination of school district policies on promotion and retention, and an examination of ERIC documents and journal articles was conducted.

Literature review

Historically decisions on promotion and retention were based the results of one of three analyses (Hauser, 2000). The first analysis was to compare a student's performance to others in a class or a group which is norm referenced. The second was to use criterion referenced testing that compared the individual against a set of defined academic standards. The third was to analyze student performance through a self referenced approach. Promotion or retention would differ remarkably depending on which approach was used (Palardy, 2001).

In 1999, President Clinton challenged states and school districts to end social promotion without regard to what students had learned (Hauser, 2000). President Clinton called for students to be exposed to academic rigor and for the appropriate use of tests and other indicators of academic performance to determine promotion.

Holmes (cited in Hauser, 2000) did a meta-analysis of 63 controlled studies on retention. Fifty four studies yielded negative implications regarding long term student academic success, while only 9 yielded positive implications. The trend shown by several studies indicates that retainees fall behind the academic level of a student never retained (Davis & Potter, 1992; Deton, 2001; Hauser, 2000). Another meta-analysis on retention by Jimerson (as cited in Jimerson and Kaufman, 2003) indicate that, of 169 cases evaluated, only 5% of the cases yielded long term positive academic outcomes.

Not only is retention academically harmful, but has serious psychological effects, particularly at the ninth grade level where a more profound affect on self-esteem is experienced than at any other grade (Potter & Wall, 1992). Students' perspectives on grade retention are very strong. Sixth graders viewed it as the most single stressful life event, higher than the loss of a parent and going blind (Anderson, Jimerson & Whipple, 2002). Additionally, the greatest variation in student ages are also found at the ninth grade level according to a study by Potter and Wall (1992), which would seem to indicate retention, occurs more frequently in the ninth grade than any other grade. The numbers seem to decrease after grade eleven which may suggest that the majority of retained students drop out of school after the ninth grade (Potter & Wall, 1992). Retention actually accelerates dropout rates, particularly in schools with children coming from

low socioeconomic status (Hauser, 2000). According to Jimerson and Kaufman (2003), grade retention is one of the most robust predictors of school dropouts.

Research indicates that students who are retained are a homogeneous group of children with an array of challenges. Jimerson and Kaufman (2003) delineated the characteristics of retained children. They have generally lower achievement in reading and language. They miss school often. Their parents likely have lower IQs when compared to a matched group of promoted children and are less or not involved in the education of their children. They also display poor behavior problems. Retained children are less confident, less self-assured, less engaged, less popular, and less socially competent than their peers.

Retention and promotion seem to be influenced by sex, race, and socioeconomic status (Hauser, 2000). Retention rates are much higher for boys than girls: “The sex differentials gradually increase with age from 5 percentage points at ages 6 to 8, to 10 percentage points at ages 15 to 17” (Hauser, 2000, p. 18). Further, non-white male students are over-represented among the over-age students at the ninth grade level. Interestingly, Hauser indicates an increase in the proportion of over-aged white students, coming from high socioeconomic status, entering the first grade. This phenomenon of delaying entrance to the first grade was referred to as red-shirting (Bredenkamp and Shepard as cited in Potter & Wall, 1992). Red-shirting normally happens when parents feel that their children are immature and not ready for school.

Minority students have greater retention rates compared with Caucasian students. The problem of retention is prevalent among students from low socio-economic classes or among the poor (Harrington-Lueker, 1998). This is consistent with studies done by Lara-Cinisomo, Pebley, Vaiana, Maggio, Berends & Lucas (2004). Retained students also frequently come from single parent homes, experience frequent school changes, and many are English language learners. These socio-demographic differences require a careful implementation of effective interventions that help all students to be academically successful.

Besides the socio-demographic factors affecting retention, reading ability also has a great impact on social promotion or retention (Denton, 2001). Reading abilities are amplified by the presence of strong collaborations between teachers and parents. This collaboration may lead to early diagnosis of students’ strengths and weaknesses in reading. Teacher quality is a strong component that should help ease the problem of poor reading in schools. Reading specialists particularly in the elementary and middle schools are essential in teaching and training students how to read. If struggling students in reading get the right interventions on time, then these students are found not to be retained in any particular grade (Denton, 2001).

Cotton (n.d.) does not put the blame of failing students on the sociodemographic factors, but attributes these to ineffective schools. She stated that the problem of retention and social promotion is mainly a problem of inner city schools. These are schools whose student population is predominantly African American and Hispanic. Effective schools with strong leadership should make all students successful despite cumulative disadvantages associated with students’ background.

The overwhelming standard for promotion and retention is the use of grade level tests (Denton, 2001), but State policies regarding retention and promotion differ (Palardy, 2001). Telephone interviews conducted with chief academic officers of California, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Illinois, Oklahoma and Cincinnati indicated that states leave retention and social promotion to school districts and individual schools. Texas was an exception because it has a state comprehensive retention and social promotion policy but local decisions about the modalities are made at the school level. The high school diploma therefore means different things to different

states and school districts. Palardy advocated for minimum competencies and standards that are relative and encompassing idiosyncratic differences in students. Standards in education should not be absolute. His views are in sharp contrast to what is currently happening in an era of high stakes testing. Many states have statewide examinations that influence graduation from high school. Based on the success or failure in demonstrating proficiency on these tests, students may be delayed in their graduation. Palardy (2001) has ushered in a new idea. He suggested that what is lacking in the education landscape is giving a quality education to each student according to his or her abilities. Others viewed that poor academic achievement is a reflection of socioeconomic background particularly the mother's education level (Lara-Cinisomo, Pebley, Vaiana, Maggio, Berends & Lucas, 2004). The other socioeconomic factors that affect student achievement include neighborhood poverty, parental occupational status, and family income. This suggests that education should consider developing socioeconomic policies to address poor academic achievement

Despite the lack of evidence to support retention as an effective method to increase academic achievement, schools are retaining students. There are facts that are clear about retention rates (Denton, 2001, p. 4).

1. About 15-20 percent of all students repeat at least one grade between the ages of six to 17.
2. Seven million of today's elementary and secondary students will be retained at least once. Many will be retained more than once.
3. Poor and minority students are two or three times more likely than others to be retained.
4. Boys are twice likely to be retained than girls
5. The highest retention rates are in ninth grade, not early elementary school.
6. Several studies on retention in Baltimore, Chicago and Texas (Deton, 2001) indicated that:
 - a. Half the students retained were required to attend summer school even if they had repeated the grade twice.
 - b. Retained students consistently lagged behind their counter parts that had performed at similarly low levels, but were not retained. This was consistent with studies in North Carolina (Potter & Wall, 1992).
 - c. Gains typically made during retention years are short lived, and the students eventually fall behind again.

The major disadvantage is that retention requires a student to repeat for an entire year even if they may not be a year behind in other areas. This is costly to the tax payer. It is a duplication of services and is associated with decreased student motivation, increased dropout rates and truncated opportunities for learning (Holmes & Matthews in potter and Wall, 1992).

Criteria for retention and promotion

As already established in the literature review, there are few research studies which demonstrate an increase in student academic achievement by repeating a grade. Gains are sporadic and not maintained over time.

Results of high stakes tests are used in making decisions about which students will be promoted or retained in a grade, and which will receive a high school diploma as postulated by Huebert, Thurlow and Johnson (as cited in Johnson and Thurlow, 2003). High stakes testing refers to the use of the results of a single test to determine the future of a student or students (International Reading Association, 2003; Houston 2000). High stakes testing is part of

standards-based reform. According to the *Education Week* all states are currently testing grade by grade.

Consideration of the wisdom in using a single test score, such as in a high stakes testing environment, is needed mindful of the fact that student achievement is affected by many variables. More and more districts are utilizing a benchmark on a high stakes test to define grade to grade promotion (Linn, 2001). Lattimore (2001) also indicates that this phenomenon of requiring the achievement of a specific benchmark on a formal test for grade promotion and graduation continues to spreading in American schools (Lattimore, 2001). American schools are living in an era of accountability and high standards for all students as reflected in the No Child Left Behind Act (2001). The hallmark of the act, in regards to retention and promotion, is the idea of mandated state testing. The use of these tests for promotion has caused consternation in education as schools that fail to meet the benchmarks are regarded as failures (Hamel & Hamel, 2003; Randy, 2001). Yet there are many factors that shape children's academic performance. Linn (2001) indicated that students are being asked to perform on ambitious assessments rather than minimum competencies. Linn viewed the use of standardized tests as the sole measure for promotion as controversial in education.

There are several school districts in North Carolina and California that are retaining or promoting students on the basis of the benchmarks set by boards of education coupled with other considerations. The percentages of retained students are small according to Long Beach Unified School District.

Denton (2001) outlined several policy questions that need to be examined when dealing with promotion and retention. There should be policies that examine

- a) State test alignment with grade level,
- b) Use of test scores in decision making,
- c) Whether students are not unfairly penalized,
- d) Whether all schools assess students with the intention of identifying problems in order to give the right interventions,
- e) Requiring summer school for all students who fail to meet passing standards,
- f) Different teaching methods that should be used for failing students, and
- g) Whether students who attend summer school are monitored and provided with all the support to sustain gains and to avoid recurrence of the same problems.

School District Initiatives in North Carolina

Harnett County Schools

Harnett County Schools, besides using the state testing benchmarks, uses teacher judgment, grades, attendance, and age/maturity. Other recognized tests and participation in focused intervention are considered as part of the retention and promotion process. Students are required to score at or above a defined level on academic achievement tests to demonstrate efficiency.

Wake County Public Schools

Wake County schools have a policy that addresses promotion and intervention. The focus is to provide ongoing assistance to students and to provide basic skills critical for participating in and benefiting from high school curricula in core academic and vocational areas.

In grades K-12, placement of students is determined by the principal in consultation with the school review committee. Placement is based on mastery of knowledge and skills and consideration of social, emotional and physical needs of the student. At the 6-8 grade levels, promotion is determined by course completion in English/Language Arts, mathematics, and either science or social studies. Students are also required to pass at least 50% of the remaining courses taken. At grades 3, 5, and 8, students are required to meet statewide achievement standards for promotion. Failure to meet these requirements leads to interventions that include alternative learning models, modified homework, smaller classes, tutorial sessions, extended school days, after school assistance programs, remedial courses, Saturday school, modified instructional programs, parental involvement, and summer school.

At grades 9-12, students are required to meet statewide standards for graduation that include taking statewide tests. Interventions are provided to failing students which are the same as those for grades 3, 5, and 8.

Wayne County

This county's student accountability standards are geared to give an education that stresses mathematics and reading in order for students to benefit from a high school and vocational education program. Students are required to perform at or above a defined level on the North Carolina end of grade exam at Grade 3 (Elementary Gateway 1), Grade 5 (Elementary Gateway 2), and Grade 8 (Elementary Gateway 3). In between these grades, students take locally developed tests in writing to ensure students are making adequate progress in writing skills. Students scoring below the defined level are given a second chance within a reasonable space of time.

At 9-12 grade, high school diploma criteria requires students to meet existing local and state graduation requirements, passing end of course exit exams in essential skills (taken in spring), a passing score on a computer skills test, and completion of a North Carolina Course of Study. For courses that do not require an end of course examination, the student must pass a teacher prepared examination which accounts for 25% of the final course average. In cases where students do not pass a second and third administration of the examinations, students are given focused interventions that include alternative learning models, modified homework, smaller classes, tutorial sessions, extended school day, after school assistance programs, remedial courses, Saturday school, modified instructional programs, parental involvement and summer school.

The documentation that is required in all of these models is students work samples, other tests scores, information supplied by parents, and individual education plans. In case of waiver requests, the superintendent appoints a committee to review requests. The committee is made up of teachers and principals. The recommendations made are based on the documentation of student achievement presented by the teachers.

Winston-Salem/Forsyth County schools

Effective 2002, the districts required grades 3 and 8 to take statewide tests for promotion. The rationale was to identify students' learning problems. In both grade level examinations, students are required to score at or above the grade level proficiency score in reading and mathematics. The principal has the discretion to grant waivers and approve promotion. Students who do not meet promotion standards and do not qualify for waiver are retained. These students

receive a personal education plan. In addition they are expected to take summer school and a third administration of the test will be given at the completion of summer school.

Long Beach Unified school District - California

Devries and Cohn (1998) outlined California's Long Beach Unified School District approach. The LBUSD has a handbook that deals with K-12 retention benchmarks. The handbook was written as a result of input from the 72 superintendents in the district. The handbook covers the following: (a) board policy and administrative regulations, (b) grade level criteria for intervention and retention, (c) assessment instruments, (d) instructions for comprehensive data collection and documentation, (e) program options, and (F) guidance for dealing with parents and the public. Students who get two or more F's in any subject, and who fail to achieve the proficiency benchmarks in reading, language arts, and math will be retained or asked to repeat for a whole year.

Chicago Public Schools

This system requires students in grades 3, 6, 8, and 9 to attend a six to seven-week summer school program if they fail to meet minimum scores on the standardized tests. But according to a study of this system by Harrington-Lueker (1998), any academic gains which students are making appear to be minimal and temporary.

Texas model

Texas has a comprehensive model on retention and social promotion through the Texas Education Code (TEC § 28.0211) embodied in the Student Success Initiative.

Highlights

- K-12, 4.7 percent (184,214) students were retained in 2003.
- Males were more likely to be retained than females at each grade level.
- White students had the lowest retention rates (2.8%), African American (6.0%), Hispanic (6.1%), Native American (4.5%) and Pacific Islanders at 1.9%
- About 79% of students retained in the Texas public school system were from either Hispanic or African American communities.
- Retention rates of all groups remained constant in 2002 and 2003.
- Retained rates for students from economically disadvantaged students was 5.8%
- Retained students in the elementary schools were 2.9% while at the secondary level they were at 6.9%
- In the elementary school, retention rates were higher in the first grade compared to any other grade.
- At the secondary level, grade 9 had the highest retention rate.

A retention reduction grant was initiated in 1993 and was piloted in 54 school districts. The grants are for schools to offer optional extended year programs (OEYP). Only students who attend 90% of the optional extended year programs are promoted unless the parents requested otherwise. Basically failing students are given a chance to take three administrations of a test. Retained students are those who fail the test administration for the third time. Based on the individual student's highest score, students are retained or promoted. The focus of retention is on K-8 grades. If the student does not make it in the second administration of the test, district must establish a grade placement committee. The committee is comprised of the principal, teacher,

and counselor who meet with parents of students who need retention as instructed by the district superintendent. The parent or guardian is notified in good time to attend the meeting. The session is used to provide information about and effects of retention on future academic achievement. The promotion is based on statewide programs in English language arts, reading, mathematics, science and social studies. Retention criteria are embedded in § 101.2003 which specifies that reading tests at grade 3, reading and mathematics tests at grade 5, and reading and mathematics tests at grade 8 shall be administered by the end of each school year.

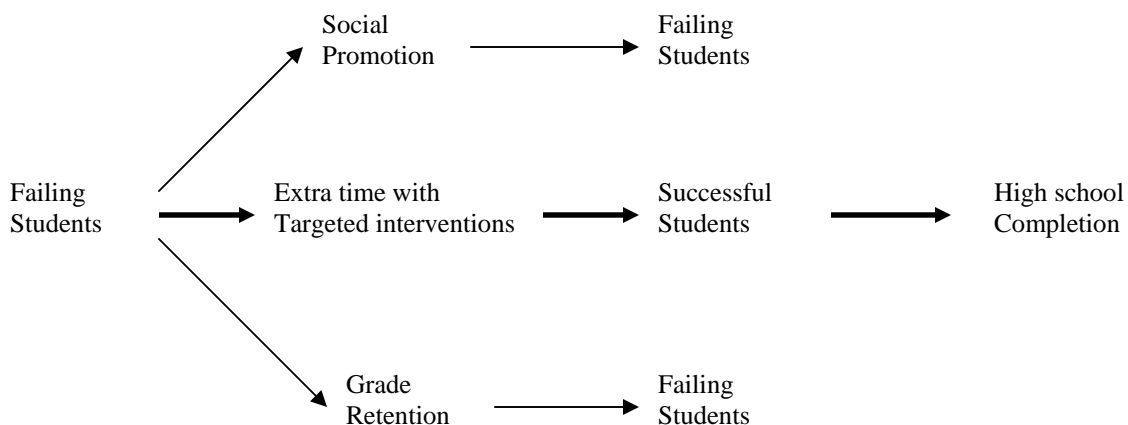
The tests offered in the subjects reflect the curriculum known as the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS). At the 3-8 grade level there are criterion referenced tests known Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS). At the third grade level students will have to pass the reading test in order to proceed to the fourth grade. Students at the fifth and eighth grade level have to pass reading tests beginning 2004-2005 and mathematics tests beginning 2006-2007. School districts are required to provide accelerated instruction to students who fail. At the high school level there are the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) tests. Both the TASS and TAKS are aligned to the state curriculum.

There are provisions for accelerated reading instruction and accelerated mathematics instruction. Teachers are provided professional training and diagnostic instruments for assessments. For instance there is the Texas Mathematics Academy for grade five and six teachers. The Texas legislature has put in money for the improvement of reading and mathematics instruction.

Recommendations

There should be alternatives for how to prevent student academic failure in schools. Social promotion or grade retention should be re-examined as the only alternatives for failing students. Research indicates that both approaches lead to a continuing failure of students. Research also indicates that more failing students could be successful with targeted interventions as shown in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Keys to preventing failure



Source: Denton 2001, p. 6

What makes a difference for failing students?

1. Teacher quality makes a difference. Teachers with a range of skills and competencies can diagnose the strengths and weaknesses of students, and design interventions more effectively. Knowing the content of the subject and being able to teach it to students with a wide range of abilities becomes critical in both the primary and secondary schools.
2. Schools should have reading specialists to improve the reading abilities of all students.
3. Schools should allow for flexible scheduling, as it provides more learning time and opportunities in academic areas where students need interventions. This flexible scheduling can be implemented during and after school hours. After school programs provide extra learning time and more tailored interventions.
4. Summer school is good only if it is planned well. High quality, focused summer programs can help struggling students.
5. High expectations for all students, early identification of learning problems, and timely and effective individualized help for all students are three ways of alleviating long term failures caused by either social promotions or retention.
6. Standardized tests with a combination of robust indicators of student strengths and weakness should be used in grade retention and promotion considerations.
7. Assessments should be done early enough in order to provide help to students who might need interventions.
8. Rudolph (n.d.) identified five strategies proposed to be effective in addressing the needs of underachieving children. These are: (a) intensifying learning, (b) providing professional development to ensure skilled teachers, (c) expanding learning options, (d) assessment to inform teachers, and (e) intervening early and often.

Conclusion

In conclusion, grade retention and social promotion are not educational panaceas for addressing the needs of failing students. As already established in this research brief, retention and promotion of failing students is academically and socially harmful as these students are prone to continue lagging behind, become demotivated about school, and may become drop-outs. In many instances, student deficiencies do not require repeating an entire grade for a whole year. The current practices of grade to grade promotion utilize standardized tests coupled with other indicators that measure students' academic performance. Schools and districts should formulate specific grade to grade promotion policies which define benchmark, interventions, and flexible scheduling that gives time for extra tutoring, remediation practices, and professional development for teachers, etc. All options should be exhausted before asking a student to repeat an entire year.

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