DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 300 421 TM 012 421

AUTHOR Baenen, Nancy R.; Hopkins, Patricia
TITLE New Directions: Alternatives to Retention, 1987-88.
INSTITUTION Austin Independent School District, Tex. Office of Research and Evaluation.
REPORT NO AISD-87.52
PUB DATE Jul 88
NOTE 42p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Achievement; Academic Failure; Elementary Secondary Education; Grade 1; Grade 2; Grade 8; *Grade Repetition; Hispanic Americans; Language Arts; *Low Achievement; Mathematics Instruction; Primary Education; Program Evaluation; *Remedial Programs; *School Holding Power; Student Placement; *Student Promotion; *Transitional Programs
IDENTIFIERS *Austin Independent School District TX; Iowa Tests of Basic Skills

ABSTRACT

The Austin (Texas) Independent School District's (AISD) programs that were developed as alternatives to retention in grade for low-achieving students were studied. The AISD had 19 elementary transition classes (all-day classes, language arts, and language arts/mathematics) in 17 schools for 282 first and second graders in 1987-88. The Transitional Academic Program (TAP) was evaluated and compared with an Academic Incentive Program (AIP). The TAP is designed for retainees and potential retainees at the secondary level (primarily eighth graders) and allows them to enroll in ninth grade work while repeating eighth grade courses that they had failed. The TAP has served 494 students since its beginning in fall, 1986. Data were collected primarily by analysis of achievement gains on the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills; surveys of elementary school principals, seven TAP administrators, and 100 TAP students were also conducted. Grade point averages (GPAs), percentages of students passing all coursework, dropout rates, and the number of classes failed for TAP students compared unfavorably with those repeating the full year. Low achievers who took part in the transitional first grade and who were then placed in grade 2 showed the best overall achievement. Dropout rates were lower and GPAs were higher for AIP students than for TAP students. Transition classes were beneficial at grades 1 and 2, but secondary transitional students did not fare well (perhaps since TAP students change schools often). Twenty-eight graphs and data tables are included. (SLD)

GLOSSARY

AIP (Academic Incentive Program): AIP is a one-semester program for retainees and potential retainees in junior high and middle schools, with priority given to eighth graders. Intense remediation in basic subject areas is provided for six periods a day, with students taking one elective the other period. Most students are served at home schools.

ELEMENTARY TRANSITION CLASSES: Generally at grades 1 and 2, these are designed for students who do not need to repeat the previous grade but who need curriculum and instructional strategies different from those traditionally used.

PLACEMENT: Students who do not meet promotion criteria but are achieving at their maximum ability are "placed" in the next grade level with alternative instructional provisions made for them.

PROMOTION: Students who master essential elements necessary to be successful at the next grade level are promoted.

RETENTION: Students who fail to master the essential elements necessary for success at the next grade level are retained, and repeat a grade level.

TAP (Transitional Academic Program): TAP is a one-semester program for retainees and potential retainees, with priority given to eighth graders. Students are allowed to enroll in ninth grade (high school) courses while repeating eighth grade courses failed. The program is provided at Rice and Robbins Secondary Schools. If promoted, students then go on to a home high school.

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NEW DIRECTIONS: ALTERNATIVES TO RETENTION, 1987-88
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

AUTHORS: Nancy Baenen, Patricia Hopkins

About half of all elementary retainees are first grade students. Retention rates rose dramatically for grades 7 and 8 in 1986-87 with the implementation of House Bill 72. AISD has therefore implemented programs to serve as alternatives to retention, including two evaluated this year:

- Elementary transition classes, designed for students in grades 1 and 2 who did not need to repeat a grade but who needed a non-traditional curriculum, and the
- Transitional Academic Program (TAP), for retainees and potential retainees (primarily eighth graders), to permit them to enroll in ninth grade courses while repeating failed eighth grade coursework.

The Academic Incentive Program (AIP), another alternative for retainees and potential retainees at the middle school/junior high level, is also described briefly and used to compare with TAP.

MAJOR FINDINGS

ELEMENTARY

1. In a study of four groups of low achievers, those who participated in the transitional first grade in 1986-87 and were then placed or promoted into grade 2 showed the best overall progress on ITBS scores. Transitional first graders subsequently retained did not progress more than regular first grade retainees (over two years).

2. AISD had 19 elementary transition classes in 17 schools serving 282 first and second graders in 1987-88, a major increase from the four known transition classes the year before.

SECONDARY

3. Grade point averages, percentages passing all coursework, dropout rates, and the number of classes failed for TAP students all compared unfavorably with full-year retainees.

4. Dropout rates were lower and grade point averages higher for students in AIP than for TAP students.

While nearly all students appear successfully to complete all alternatives studied, long-term results are not as positive. Adjustments to these models could lead to greater success. Long-term support may be needed for these high-risk students.

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OPEN LETTER TO AISD

The Office of Research and Evaluation (ORE) has investigated retention rates, the effects of elementary retention, and the best predictors of dropping out for many years. Results point to possible negative effects of retention for most students in terms of subsequent achievement and the risk of dropping out. This report takes a next step by investigating alternatives to retention at both the elementary and secondary levels.

AISD and other districts are just exploring options for these students. It is to AISD's credit that we are willing to move in new directions when the need is evident. It should be recognized that, as with nearly all retention-related research, comparison groups are used rather than randomly assigned control groups. Differences in the populations in the various programs may impact results in unknown ways. Still, results are suggestive and may seem surprising. Possible changes and refinements in AISD's approaches came to mind as we worked through the data; readers are invited to form their own opinions and ideas on solutions. Consider the following remarks as "mind teasers" to prompt discussion on this complex dilemma.

ELEMENTARY: Our impressions point to the vital role that supplemental help, expectations, continuity, level of hallenge, and coordination play in working with these low-achieving students. In terms of expectations, the view of program goals held by the teacher and campus administration affects the curriculum and approaches used; this in turn affects the outcome for each student in terms of promotion, placement, or retention. A remediation focus may mean a slower pace and smaller gains for participants (see also PLUS results, ORE Pub. No. 83.10). Our impression is that if a teacher begins with the attitude that students will be retained, they generally are, sometimes <u>regardless of progress actually made</u> in the program. It appears that:

- Most important is providing these students with special help as needed, whether they are retained or placed. Most of these students will probably require some extra help over their entire school careers--they are "high-maintenance" students.

- Developing more systematic approaches for instructing <u>placed</u> students could be quite beneficial. This is

especially appropriate in Priority Schools where on-grade-level instruction and heterogeneous grouping are being stressed. AISD could benefit from trying several approaches in various schools, working with ORE to set them up with structures that allow evaluation. An approach which appears promising involves grouping of students across grade levels in key subject areas (Slavin, 1987), so that they are instructed appropriately in all areas and not penalized with insufficient challenge in some areas (such as mathematics). Research done last year by ORE (Pub. No. 86.31) indicated it may not be detrimental to try placement into grade 2 with the option of retention for those who fail to show sufficient growth. Patterns of progress for low-achieving first graders retained in grade 2 rather than grade 1 were similar (although neither group made optimal progress). Trying placement (perhaps along with cross-grade grouping or another approach) might result in a lower overall retention rate.

- Elementary transition classes which hold the most promise are those which assume most students will be placed or promoted at the end of the year, and attempt to cover the essentials of on-grade-level instruction rather than focusing on remediation of the past year's work. What is still lacking in most cases, it appears, is a continuous program between the transition teachers and the receiving teachers which capitalizes on the areas where students have shown the most growth.

- Finally, at the elementary level, teachers still appear to have a "retention mentality." From survey results, it appears that two thirds (65%) believe retention is effective for students with serious achievement problems (ORE Pub. No. 87.49). The issue may well be that each teacher's definition of "serious" varies. Students who are retained at one school, therefore, might not be at another. While mandating strict standards is not advocated, some discussion of standards, more precise guidelines, and training on whom to retain and place (whether in a regular or transitional class) might be very helpful to school staff.

SECONDARY: Contrary to our expectations, full-year retainees actually showed lower dropout rates and better academic progress than students in either the TAP or AIP transitional programs. Dropout rates and grade point averages favor AIP over TAP students, although other variables do not. It is too early to abandon the transitional programs, but modifications

should be considered to make them more effective long-term. Why would full-year retainees and AIP students show better patterns of growth? Full-year retainees are somewhat less likely to be low income, which could mean a stronger value for education in the home. However, factors related to program differences also seem likely contributors. One important factor, for example, may be that retainees and AIP students change campuses less frequently than TAP students for the most part. Successful TAP students often are enrolled in three campuses across three semesters--a home junior high/middle school, the secondary TAP School, and a home high school. Most AIP and retained students, on the other hand, stay at their home middle school/junior high for the program and the semester following. The school changes necessitated by TAP may be simply too much for the students, who are already experiencing difficulty in school. Moving on to a high school midyear may be more difficult than in the fall, once other ninth graders have started adjusting and made friends. Some support for this view comes from the School Community Guidance Center (SCGC) evaluation; students who returned to a home school midyear after participation in SCGC had lower attendance than those moving on the following fall (ORE Pub. No. 87.53).

Another factor may be the nature of the students and school environments involved. Some national research suggests high-risk students do not cope well with change, have limited life-coping skills, and have a low sense of personal responsibility (O'Sullivan, 1988). Students surveyed reported liking the teachers and program at Rice and Robbins. However, the regular high schools to which they move are much larger in population and physical plant. While high schools do provide former TAP students with some support, it appears to be insufficient to compensate for differences in the school environments. The following changes might help.

- Changing the location or length of TAP. Moving TAP to home high schools would reduce the number of school moves necessary with TAP. Students appropriate for Robbins all through secondary school might still be placed there. Alternatively, TAP students might stay at one location for the full year.

- Stronger support at the high school level. Classes focusing on life-coping skills (as have been proposed in courses like WIN), mentors, counselor or teacher sponsors or support groups may all help. Increasing the personal touch and creating stronger links to school are consistent with dropout prevention efforts.

- Training. If TAP is moved, training and written

guidelines for school staff should be provided on eligibility, course grades, and promotion for these students at a minimum. Confusion on TAP eligibility and grade level assignments was evident this year.

The AIP program might also be strengthened through more follow-up and support for students once they leave the program. A greater percentage of AIP students might also be considered for an alternative school setting like Robbins. More of these students may need the self-paced program provided there.

In conclusion, determining how to best meet the needs of these low achievers is complex. The key appears to be what happens to students within alternative approaches and thereafter. Long-term support is probably needed.

NEW DIRECTIONS: ALTERNATIVES TO RETENTION, 1987-88
FINAL REPORT

IF RETENTION IS NOT EFFECTIVE WITH MANY LOW ACHIEVERS, WHAT IS?

Each year large numbers of AISD students repeat a grade or fail to earn enough credits to be promoted (3,216 students, for instance, in 1987-88). Past AISD and national research has raised serious questions about the effectiveness of retention in improving the achievement of most low achievers. It is easier, of course, to say retention is generally not working than to point to better alternatives. Once low achievers are placed or promoted instead of retained, what can be done to meet their special needs? The alternatives are numerous:

- Transition classes and programs,
- Compensatory reading and/or mathematics programs (e.g., Chapter 1, Chapter 1 Migrant, SCE, bilingual, Teach and Reach),
- Special curriculum groupings (across and within grades),
- Tutoring (by teachers, older students, parents, and peers),
- Effective or Priority School approaches,
- Motivational instructional techniques,
- Extended school day, and
- Summer school.

Other AISD Office of Research and Evaluation reports deal with the effectiveness of compensatory programs, Priority Schools, and tutoring (see reports on Chapter 1/Chapter 1 Migrant, Priority Schools, Title VII, and Chapter 2). This report addresses the nature and effectiveness of transitional programs currently in use in AISD.

Transition programs include:

- Elementary transition classes (generally at grades 1 and 2), and

- Secondary transition programs such as the Transitional Academic Program (TAP) and the Academic Incentive Program (AIP) for junior high and middle school students.

ARE ELEMENTARY TRANSITION CLASSES A VIABLE ALTERNATIVE TO TRADITIONAL RETENTION?

The following questions are important in addressing this key question:

- What are transition classes?
- To what extent are transition classes in use in AISD elementary schools?
- What is the instructional focus for transition classes?
- What are the goals of these programs?
- Are transitional programs effective?

One central point is that placement in a transition class is an alternative to traditional retention but may or may not prevent a student from spending two years in the same grade. Another is that at the elementary level first grade has the highest retention rate. Alternatives to retention at grades 1 and 2 therefore have high priority.

Most programs place students in a transition class if it is felt they cannot successfully complete the regular curriculum for the grade. The programs vary in the students selected, the curriculum and approaches used, and the factors examined later in deciding to retain, place, or promote. Some transition classes focus more on essentials of on-grade curriculum, while others provide more remediation.

Information was examined for transition classes in several ways:

- The number and nature of transition classes operating in AISD in 1987-88 (based on data collected from schools in the fall),
- Achievement progress of 1986-87 students in transition classes at Langford, Casis, and Oak Hill elementary schools, and
- Achievement progress of 1983-84 students in a transition class at Metz Elementary School.

ELEMENTARY TRANSITION CLASSES, 1987-88

A questionnaire was sent in November, 1987, to all elementary school principals to determine where transition classes were in use for the school year and their characteristics. Seventeen elementary schools reported having a total of 19 transition classes in the fall of 1987. This is an increase from the four known transition classes in 1986-87.

Transition classes in 1987-88 consisted of:

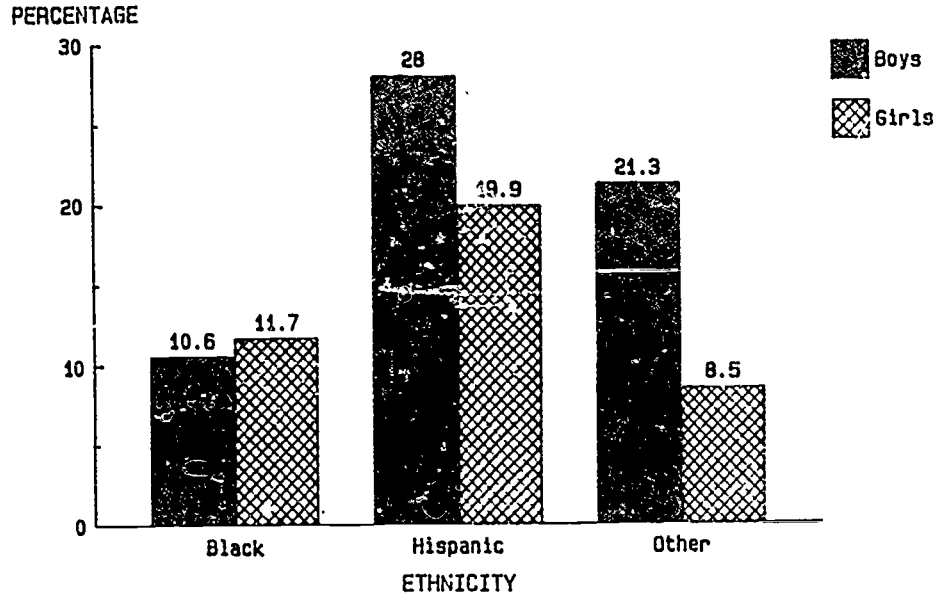
- All-day classes. There were 13 first grade classes and four second grade classes meeting all day. The average class size for all-day programs was 14 pupils.
- Language arts. One first grade transition class met for language arts only.
- Language arts/mathematics. There was one first grade transition class at Koc ek that was the equivalent of a language arts/mathematics class only.

Enrollment at the time of the November survey totalled 282 first and second graders.

Student Characteristics

First grade classes consisted of more than half Hispanic students (118 of 225 total), with 20% of the students being Black and 27.6% Anglo/Other. The 57 second graders were split fairly equally among Black students (18), Hispanics (17), and Others (22). More first grade boys than girls were placed in transition programs (63%), but the second grade group was evenly divided, 28 boys and 29 girls.

Figure 1. FALL, 1987, FIRST AND SECOND GRADE TRANSITION STUDENTS



Total Transition Students = 282.

First Grade Goals

The instructional focus for first grade transition classes in 1987-88 varied from school to school. In seven of the elementary schools surveyed, the focus was to provide kindergarten remediation with some first grade material. Six schools reported using modified instructional strategies with first grade materials, and one school checked both kindergarten remediation and teaching the elements of first grade as its goal on the questionnaire.

The Linguistically Oriented Multi-Sensory (LOMS) approach, an integrated way of teaching language arts skills, was used in 11 of the 13 first grade transitional classes.

A relationship exists between the stated aim of the curriculum as reported in the questionnaires and expectations at the schools for promotion of their first grade students. It was found that if a remedial kindergarten curriculum was given as the goal at a school, then the number of children expected to be promoted was substantially less than the number expected to be promoted from a school using a first grade curriculum.

Figure 2. FALL, 1987, PROMOTION EXPECTATIONS FOR TRANSITIONAL FIRST GRADERS, BY CURRICULUM

Curriculum	School	Enrolled	Expected to be Promoted	Expected Promotion Rate
Kindergarten remediation and as much first grade material as student progress allowed	1.Allison	7	0	
	2.Becker	16	0	
	3.Govalle	12	12	
	4.Oak Hill	16	1	
	5.Patton	16	3	
	6.Widen	15	4	
	7.Winn	12	0	
	Total	94	20	21%
All essential elements of first grade with modified instructional strategies	1.Brentwood	14	5	
	2.Brooke	28	20	
	3.Kocurek	12	0	
	4.Langford	17	6	
	5.Travis Hts.	36	33	
	6.Zavala	11	9	
	Total	118	73	62%
Both kindergarten remediation and essential elements of first grade	1.Allan	13	10	
	Total	13	10	77%

Expectations for promotion were also much greater for second grade transition classes than for those classes serving first graders.

Figure 3. FALL, 1987, PROMOTION EXPECTATIONS FOR TRANSITIONAL FIRST AND SECOND GRADERS

Class	Enrolled	Expected to Be Promoted
1st Grade	225	103 (45.8%)
2nd Grade	57	55 (96.5%)
TOTAL	282	158 (56.0%)

Criteria for Selection/Exit

The selection of children for transition classes for 1987-88 was done in the preceding spring in 10 of the schools, while six campuses reported identifying students for the program in both the spring and fall terms. One school waited until the fall to select its students for that semester.

The question on the survey calling for ranking of criteria used in selecting transitional students was complex; 10 of the 17 schools did not respond as desired. For the seven schools which did provide usable responses, Figure 3 summarizes the overall ranking of criteria used (with 1 as most important and 7 as least important).

Figure 4. CRITERIA FOR SELECTION OF STUDENTS

Ranking	Factor
Most Important	1. Inadequate listening skills, following directions, etc.
	2. Assessments designed by teachers (e.g., tests, observations)
	3. Physical immaturity (auditory, visual, eye-hand coordination, etc.)
	4. Need for oral language development
	5. Poor scores on achievement tests (MRT or ITBS)
	6. Social immaturity
Least Important	7. Emotional immaturity

To the question, "Can students exit the transitional class during the year to join a regular class at the grade level?", 12 schools answered yes, 4 said no, and 1 replied that the situation had not come up. Two schools qualified their answers by writing that students could leave the transitional program during the first six weeks of the fall semester only. Criteria cited for allowing a child to leave the program were parental decision and teacher assessment.

Parent Involvement

Most schools informed parents of the intended placement of students in the transitional program for 1987-88 by conferences held with teachers in the spring followed by a letter or the signing of permission forms. Thirteen of the 17 schools indicated that parents could refuse the placement.

EFFECTS OF 1986-87 ELEMENTARY TRANSITION CLASSES

Three schools in 1986-87 (of probably no more than six in all) served a total of 61 students in transition classes over the course of the year. Casis offered language arts and/or mathematics placement, and all-day programs were provided at Langford and Oak Hill. Casis upgraded its kindergarten program for the transition students, while the other two schools offered a modified first grade curriculum. All had strong teachers according to the principals.

Figure 5. 1986-87 FIRST GRADE TRANSITION CLASSES

	Casis	Langford	Oak Hill
Criteria:	MRT, mathematics diagnostics; teacher recommendation; lacked prerequisite skills.	ITBS less than 30%ile; behind academically, not socially.	Developmentally not ready for regular grade 1. Used Gesell identification criteria.
Number of Students*:	28	17	16
Curriculum:	Served in language arts and/or math. Students pulled for areas of need from other first grade classes in a.m. Upgraded kindergarten program in language-rich environment. Emphasis reading; strong teacher.	Geared down regular first grade curriculum and supplements; attended art, music, PE with others; strong teacher; program ran most of the day.	Regular first grade curriculum plus Super Kids. Used Math Their Way, Addison-Wesley, plus math cubes. Students stayed all day. Strong teacher.
Expectation:	Retention or promotion possible.	Retention or promotion possible.	Retention probable, promotion possible.
Status:	Retained: 21 (75%) Placed: 5 (18%) Promoted: 1 (4%) Left AISD: 1 (4%)	Retained: 7 (41%) Placed: 0 Promoted: 7 (41%) Left AISD: 3 (18%)	Retained: 10 (63%) Placed: 0 Promoted: 0 Left AISD: 6 (38%)

* The number of students differs from those published in ORE Pub. No. 86.31 because these are cumulative for the entire year.

Promotion/Placement

By fall, 1987, 51 of the 61 1986-87 transition students were still in AISD. Ten of the children (16%) had left AISD, and their promotion status is unknown. Of the 51 students remaining, 13 or 26% were promoted or placed in the next grade--

- 75% (38 students) were retained in grade 1 for another year.
- 10% (5 students) were placed in grade 2 for the fall, having failed to meet promotion criteria but with alternative instructional provisions made available to them.
- 16% (8 students) were promoted to second grade.

Achievement Gains (ITBS)

Achievement gains in the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS) scores are shown in Figures 6-9 for four groups of low achievers. The first two groups were in transition classes:

- 1986-87 transitional students who were retained in first grade at the end of their transitional year, and

- 1986-87 transitional students who were promoted or placed in second grade at the end of the year.

The other two groups were not in transition classes but experienced traditional retention in schools across the District:

- 1986-87 retained kindergarten students who were not placed in a transitional first grade, but who were placed or promoted into first grade following their year of retention; and

- 1986-87 regular first graders who were retained in first grade at the end of the year.

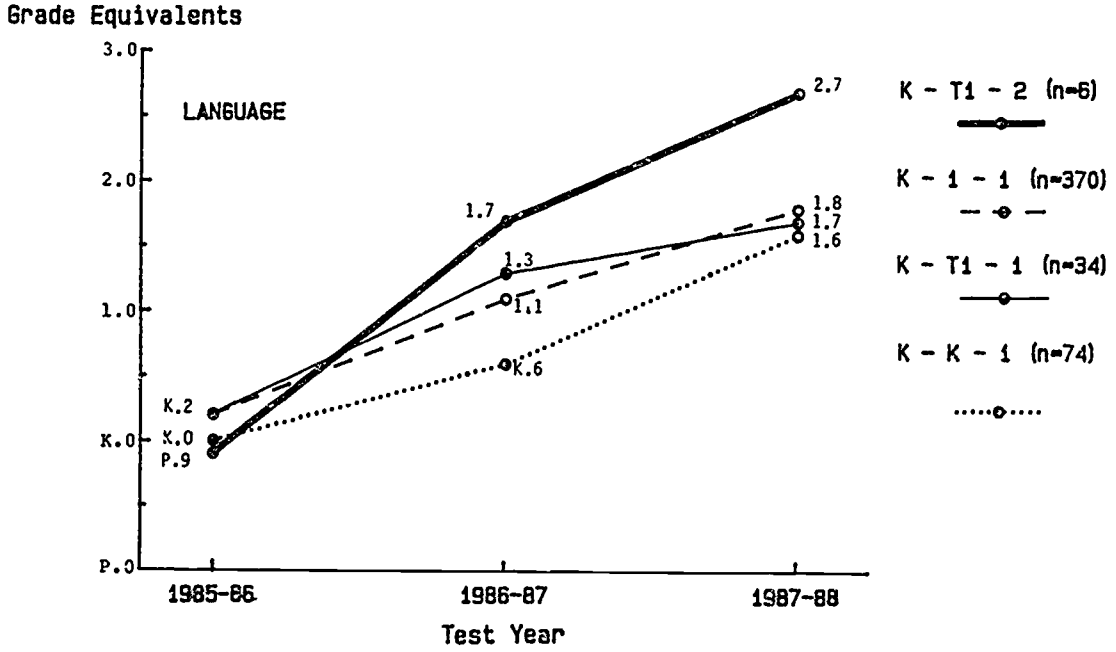
Figures 6, 7, 8 and 9 show ITBS scores for these students over three years--1985-86, 1986-87, and 1987-88.

Figure 6. ITBS GRADE EQUIVALENT (GE) GAINS FOR 1986-87 TRANSITION STUDENTS AND RETAINEES

Grade Pattern	n	GE 85-86	GAIN	GE 86-87	GAIN	GE 87-88
LANGUAGE						
1. K - T1 - 1	34	K.2	+1.1	1.3	+ .4	1.7
2. K - T1 - 2	6	P.9	+1.6	1.7	+1.0	2.7
3. K - K - 1	74	K.0	+ .6	K.6	+1.0	1.6
4. K - 1 - 1	370	K.2	+ .9	1.1	+ .7	1.8
READING						
1. K - T1 - 1	34	K.2*	+ .7	K.9	+ .8	1.7
2. K - T1 - 2	6	P.9*	+1.5	1.6	+1.1	2.7
3. K - K - 1	74	K.0*	+ .6	K.6	+ .8	1.4
4. K - 1 - 1	370	K.2*	+ .7	K.9	+ .8	1.7
*Based on Language Score						
MATHEMATICS						
1. K - T1 - 1	34	K.2	+1.0	1.2	+ .8	2.0
2. K - T1 - 2	6	K.1	+1.6	1.7	+ .9	2.6
3. K - K - 1	74	K.1	+ .6	K.7	+1.1	1.8
4. K - 1 - 1	370	K.2	+1.0	1.2	+ .8	2.0

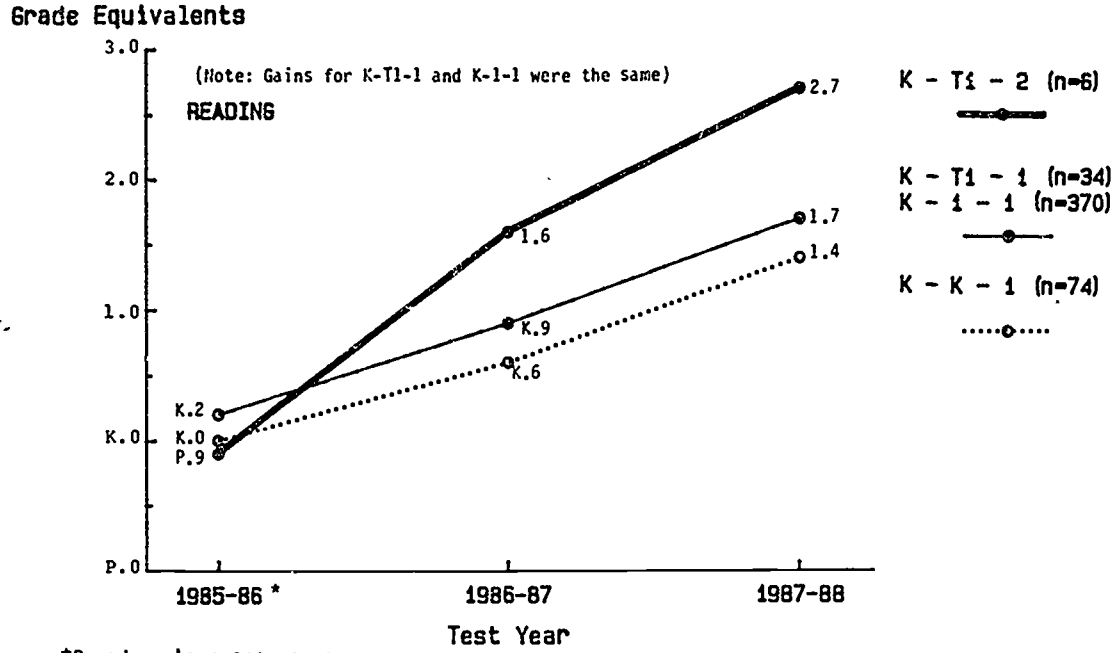
Note 1: GRADE PATTERNS: K=Kindergarten, T1=Transitional First Grade, 1=First Grade, 2=Second Grade.
Note 2: GRADE EQUIVALENTS: National norm for K is K.8, Grade 1=1.8, Grade 2=2.8. On the average, students are expected to gain a 1.0 GE for every year of instruction.

Figure 7. ITBS ACHIEVEMENT IN LANGUAGE FOR TRANSITION STUDENTS AND RETAINEES



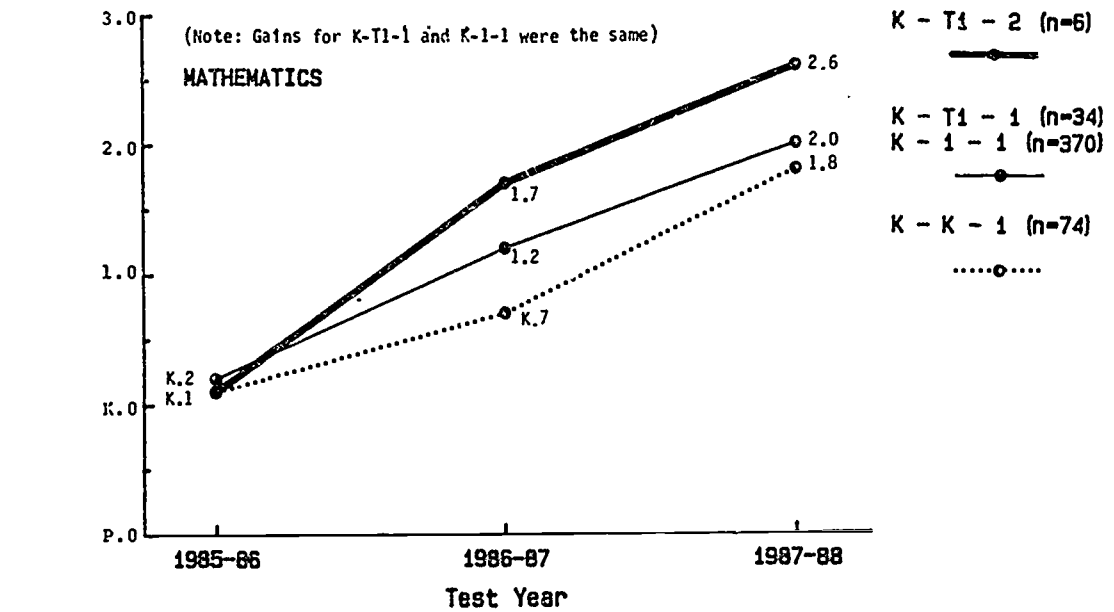
Note 1: GRADE PATTERNS: K=Kindergarten, T1=Transitional First Grade, 1=First Grade, 2=Second Grade.
Note 2: GRADE EQUIVALENTS: National norm for K is K.8, Grade 1=1.8, Grade 2=2.8. On the average, students are expected to gain a 1.0 GE every year.

Figure 8. ITBS ACHIEVEMENT IN READING FOR TRANSITION STUDENTS AND RETAINEES



*Based on Language score.
Note 1: GRADE PATTERNS: K=Kindergarten, T1=Transitional First Grade, 1=First Grade, 2=Second Grade.
Note 2: GRADE EQUIVALENTS: National norm for K is K.8, Grade 1=1.8, Grade 2=2.8. On the average, students are expected to gain a 1.0 GE every year.

Figure 9. ITBS ACHIEVEMENT IN MATHEMATICS FOR TRANSITION STUDENTS AND RETAINEES



Note 1: GRADE PATTERNS: K=Kindergarten, T1=Transitional First Grade, 1=First Grade, 2=Second Grade.
Note 2: GRADE EQUIVALENTS: National norm for K is K.8, Grade 1=1.8, Grade 2=2.8. On the average, students are expected to gain a 1.0 GE every year.

These data must be considered suggestive rather than conclusive because transitional sample sizes were small and students were not randomly assigned to groups. With very small numbers of students who are all taught by one or a small number of teachers, the impact on achievement of the skill of the teacher and the specific instructional practices employed cannot be separated from the retention or transition experience.

Of the four groups, students who participated in the transitional first grade and were then placed or promoted into grade 2 showed the best overall progress. Of the transitional students, those placed or promoted made better gains than those retained after the transition class year. Thus, it appears some students did benefit from the transition classes and were quite successful thereafter (scoring just below the national average at grade 2).

The other three groups, all retained at either grade K or 1, showed similarly small achievement gains over the three-year period studied. Gains were smaller during the year repeated in both language and mathematics. Reading gains were slightly larger during the retention year (note that the reading score for the kindergarten year was actually the language score).

These data suggest that:

- Retaining students at kindergarten is not more beneficial than at grade 1, and
- Transitional first grade, if followed by retention, is not more beneficial than regular first grade followed by retention.

It is difficult to say whether these students would have performed better if promoted.

EFFECTS OF THE 1983-84 ELEMENTARY TRANSITION CLASS AT METZ

Transition classes have been in use sporadically in the District for years. Metz Elementary School operated a first grade transition class in 1983-84 which was considered quite successful by school staff initially. Not an all-day program, the Metz language arts class was designed to bring struggling kindergarten students to first grade level and to keep them there, by providing remediation for whatever skills were lacking.

Focus and Goals

Kindergarten students in need of special help for the next year were identified by teachers in the spring of 1983, and first graders were assessed for the program after the start of school in the fall. Students were selected who lacked basic skills (not knowing colors, for example), and who typically had short attention spans and physical manipulative problems.

The goals for the language arts transitional program at Metz were to provide:

- An alternative approach, "whole person learning," using movement, small and repeated goals, positive reinforcement, kinesthetic activities with clay and sand, and

- An alternative curriculum, reading poetry and nursery rhymes aloud, using activities devised to lengthen attention spans, using oral and visual language development but concentrating intensively on basics.

It was hoped that the class would give the transitional first graders a positive, successful experience, and redress their lack of basic skills.

In sum, 18 students, seven girls and 11 (61%) boys, participated in the transitional class. There was one Black, six Anglo/Others, and 11 (61%) Hispanic students. Participating students came from the Metz and Barrington neighborhoods, as these were paired schools that year.

Two students were placed out of the program during the course of the school year (one to regular first grade language arts and one into special education), and the 16 others were retained in first grade at the end of the spring semester. The promotion rate, then, for this small class was low (under 6%). It is important to note, however, that of those remaining in AISD elementary schools as of spring, 1988, no student from this Metz transition class has been retained in any grade in subsequent years.

Achievement Gains (ITBS)

Data on the students participating in the Metz transition class were examined to see if the pattern of achievement growth varied from that seen with traditional retention. While nearly all of the students were retained after participating in the transition class, the transition class

did provide a more structured program tailored to students' needs before the retention year. The program was considered successful at the time.

District data over several years have shown that:

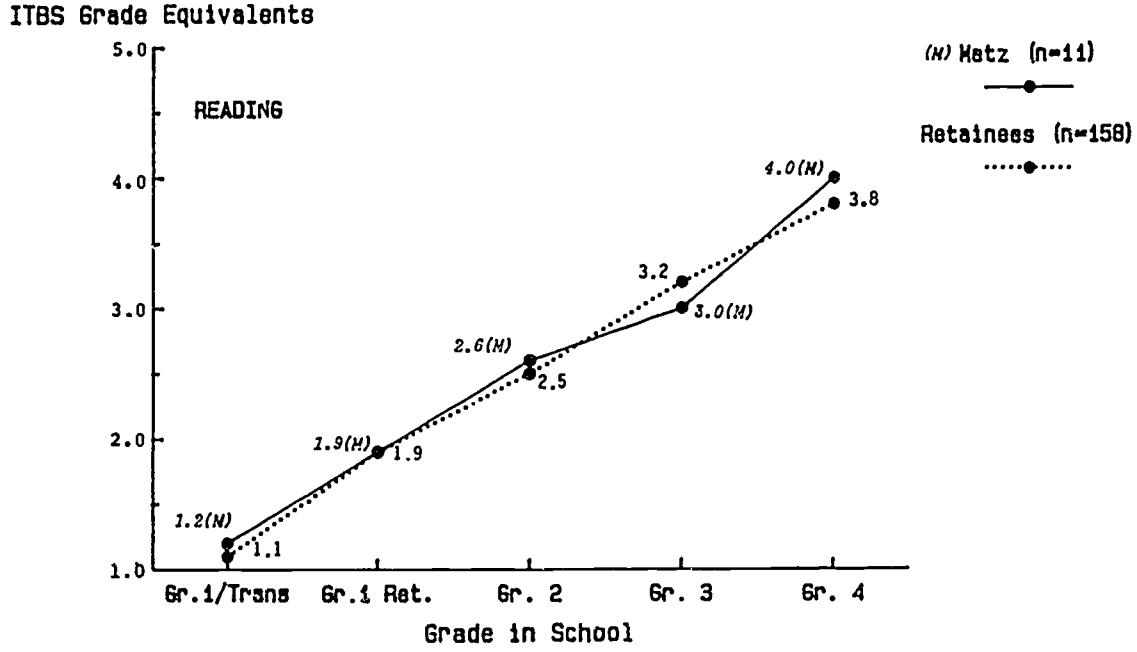
- Traditional retainees improve in reading gains during the grade repeated but decline in growth rates thereafter, and
- Traditional retainees decline in mathematics gains during the repeated grade but improve thereafter.

One hypothesis for why this occurs is that students are more often retained because of reading problems and receive more emphasis on this while retained. Once promoted, whatever special help was provided during the retention year was not sufficient to maintain desired growth. In mathematics, the opposite may occur. Students are not challenged with new material and may not need or receive as much special help while retained. Once promoted and presented with new material, their growth rate improves. (See Retention or Promotion, ORE Pub. No. 86.31).

Figures 10 and 11 show the achievement growth patterns in reading and mathematics for transition class participants at Metz from 1983-84 (the year they were in the transition class) to the current school year, 1987-88, and for regular first grade retainees (retained in 1981-82) from 1980-81 through 1984-85.

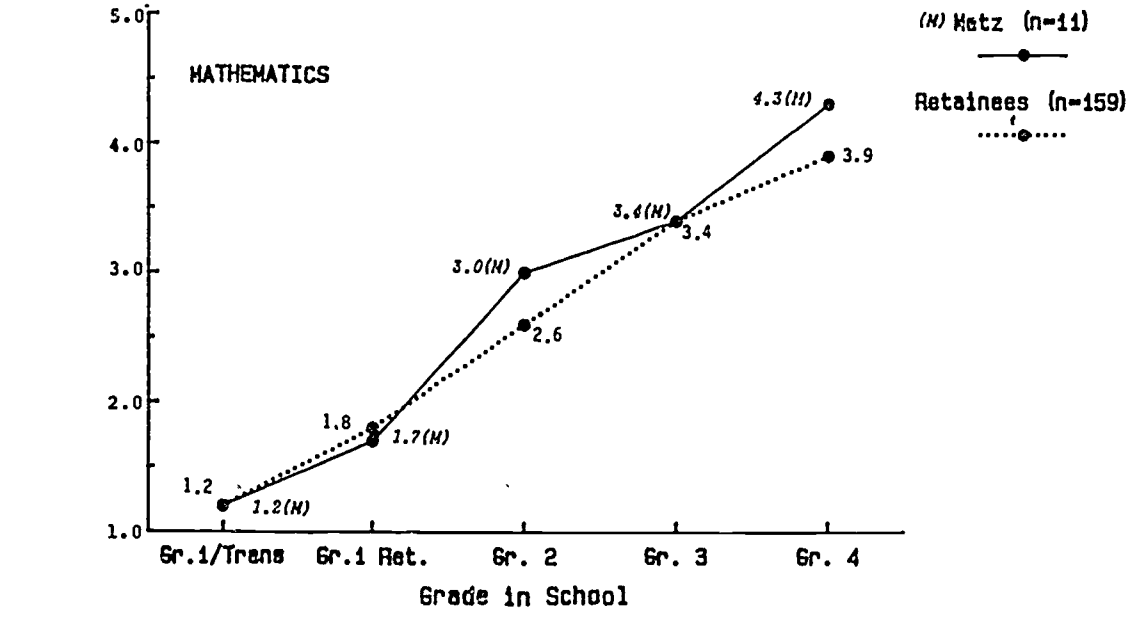
The patterns of growth are similar for both the Metz transition participants eventually retained in grade 1 and regular first grade retainees.

Figure 10. FIRST GRADERS RETAINED AND IN METZ TRANSITION CLASS--ITBS READING GE'S



Note: GRADE EQUIVALENT: National norm is 1.8 for Grade 1 through 4.8 for Grade 4. On the average, students are expected to gain a 1.0 GE for every year of instruction.

Figure 11. FIRST GRADERS RETAINED AND IN METZ TRANSITION CLASS--ITBS MATHEMATICS GE'S



Note: GRADE EQUIVALENT: National norm is 1.8 for Grade 1 through 4.8 for Grade 4. On the average, students are expected to gain a 1.0 GE for every year of instruction.

Further investigation of the Metz data reveals the following:

- Average grade equivalent (GE) gains during the transition class year were excellent in both reading (1.38) and mathematics (1.34) (see Figure 12). Gains dropped in both areas the next year when students were retained (to .78 in reading and .53 in mathematics).
- While most students showed gains of greater than 1.0 GE in both areas during the transition year, fewer students showed similar gains after that.
- Subsequent average gains in reading were quite low for grades 2 and 3, but approached 1.0 GE for grade 4.
- Subsequent average gains in mathematics fluctuated, with a large gain evident when students were promoted to grade 2, a small gain while they were in grade 3, and a gain of .97 GE for grade 4.

Figure 12. METZ TRANSITIONAL STUDENTS-- MEAN GE SCORES 1983-84 THROUGH 1987-88

	Gr.K 1983	GAIN	T1* 1984	GAIN	Gr.1 1985	GAIN	Gr.2 1986	GAIN	Gr.3 1987	GAIN	Gr.4 1988
READ	P.8	+1.38	1.15	+.78	1.93	+.66	2.59	+.45	3.04	+.93	3.97
MATH	P.9	+1.34	1.21	+.53	1.74	+1.27	3.01	+.34	3.35	+.97	4.32

*T1=Transitional First Grade.
Note 1: n=11.
Note 2: GRADE EQUIVALENT: National norm is 1.8 for Grade 1 through 4.8 for Grade 4. On the average, students are expected to gain a 1.0 GE for every year of instruction.

It appears the transition class at Metz was very effective in the short term, with most students showing gains greater than 1.0 GE for a year of instruction. These growth rates, however, were not sustained across time. The transition class participants therefore did not fare better than other first grade retainees in the long run.

IMPLICATIONS

While data on the Metz transition class in 1983-84 and the 1986-87 transition program must be considered suggestive and not definitive, they certainly provide food for thought.

Transition classes may be more effective if:

- They are designed as a two-year package, with modified curriculum in both the first, "transitional" year of placement in grade 1, and in the second year in which, if necessary, students are retained in grade 1;
- They are designed to lead to promotion, as in the case of second grade transitional students in 1987-88, (which is consistent with the on-grade-level philosophy currently being tried in the 16 priority schools);
- A higher percentage of students are promoted (those scoring close to grade level or attaining other set criteria);
- Students are provided with supplemental help throughout their school careers (a recognition that there are no quick fixes, and that these students will continue to need help to maintain reasonable growth rates). It is evident that most transitional students are "high maintenance" students.

Thus, based both on the 1983-84 and the 1986-87 results, it appears transition classes may produce larger gains initially than a regular first grade curriculum. For those not promoted at the end of the year, however, an alternative curriculum or some other way to build on transition class gains may be necessary to facilitate higher growth rates for these students. Providing continuity across years and an appropriately high level of challenge appear very important.

HOW EFFECTIVE IS SECONDARY'S TRANSITIONAL ACADEMIC PROGRAM (TAP)?

GOALS/INSTRUCTIONAL FOCUS

The Transitional Academic Program (TAP), in its second year in 1987-88, was designed to allow retained eighth grade students who qualified to enroll in ninth grade courses while repeating the courses they had previously failed. This enabled students to make quicker progress to ninth grade. The ultimate goal was to decrease the likelihood students would drop out.

TAP was intended to be a one-semester placement from a regular junior high or middle school to one of the participating TAP schools. If all course work were successfully completed, students could then be placed in home high schools.

During the semester in TAP, it was intended that students be able to take up to three of the four major academic prerequisites not completed during the preceding school year or semester. All completed course requirements would then be averaged with previously earned credits for consideration of promotion at the end of the semester in the TAP program.

Campus administrators were polled in spring, 1988, about special services provided TAP students entering their home high schools after a semester in the TAP program. Tours of the school, special orientation sessions, and special class assignments, particularly with other TAP students, were the most frequently provided services (mentioned by eight respondents). Group counseling and extra individual counseling were also available, services cited by seven administrators who were surveyed.

ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA FOR STUDENTS

Retainees and potential retainees were eligible for the TAP program. Students were generally expected to have failed no more than three courses in order to participate in TAP. Most were eighth graders.

The characteristics of the students served by TAP have changed somewhat with time. As discussed in the following section on student characteristics, for example, the median

age of TAP students has been declining. Also, TAP in spring, 1988, served a large number of students (60%) who were seventh graders at the end of the 1986-87 school year. Most of these students were placed into eighth grade in the Academic Incentive Program in fall, 1987, and then entered TAP in the spring. At least three students at Robbins, however, were completing seventh grade requirements while in the TAP program in spring, 1988.

ENROLLMENT/STUDENT CHARACTERISTICS

The TAP enrollment process is fairly complex and involves several steps. In the spring, schools send lists of students eligible for the program to the Division of Secondary Education. Once eligibility is verified, the alternative school principals select students for their schools. Families are then invited to participate.

In the fall, then, a subgroup of those identified actually enroll in TAP. Sometimes students are reassigned before the end of the semester to a more appropriate environment; sometimes students are added during the semester.

The evaluation reported here is based on rosters supplied by the schools at different times during the four semesters TAP has been in operation. Because enrollments varied slightly at any given point in time, comparisons of success and attendance rates should be considered the best estimates available rather than absolutes.

In both 1986-87 and 1987-88, the TAP program was housed at Rice Secondary School (which became Rice High School and Rice Middle School) and at Robbins Secondary School. Overall, 494 students have been served by TAP since its beginning in fall, 1986. Four groups of students have now participated.

Robbins has had the largest enrollment of TAP students, averaging 61% of all those served over the two-year period.

Figure 13. ENROLLMENT IN TAP

Location	Fall, 1986	Spring, 1987	Fall, 1987	Spring, 1988	Total
Rice Middle School	--	--	46	13	59
Rice High School	43	40	39	14	136
Robbins	105	87	59	48	299
TOTAL	148	127	144	75	494

Figure 14. CHARACTERISTICS OF TAP AND AIP STUDENTS AND RETAINEES COMPARED

Group	n	Sex M	Sex F	Ethnicity H	Ethnicity B	Ethnicity O	Median Age	Low Income
TAP Fall, 86	148	64%	36%	42%	34%	24%	16.7	44%
TAP Spring, 87	127	55%	45%	51%	26%	23%	16.2	50%
TAP Fall, 87	144	60%	40%	42%	27%	31%	15.8	52%
TAP Spring, 88	75	63%	37%	43%	33%	24%	15.5	56%
AIP Fall, 86	28	64%	36%	82%	14%	4%	17.0	71%
AIP Spring, 87	104	64%	37%	53%	22%	25%	15.9	51%
AIP Fall, 87	310	65%	35%	58%	22%	20%	15.6	57%
Retainees, 86-87	160	62%	38%	43%	27%	31%	16.6	33%

Ethnicity of TAP students parallels that of full-year retainees (42.5% of whom were Hispanic, 26.9% Black, and 30.6% Anglo/Other). AIP students were more likely to be Hispanic (58%, for instance, in fall, 1987). This compares to ethnicity for all students in AISD in fall, 1987, of 31.9% Hispanic, 20.1% Black, and 48% Other. Minority students, then, represented about three fourths of those in TAP, AIP, and conventionally retained, compared to 52% of all students in the District.

Figure 15. ETHNICITY OF TAP STUDENTS

	Fall 1986		Spring 1987		Fall 1987		Spring 1988	
ETHNICITY	#	(%)	#	(%)	#	(%)	#	(%)
Black	50	(34)	33	(26)	39	(27)	25	(33)
Hispanic	62	(42)	65	(51)	60	(42)	32	(43)
Other	36	(24)	29	(23)	45	(31)	18	(24)
TOTAL	148	(100)	127	(100)	144	(100)	75	(100)

Sex of TAP students has averaged about three-fifths male and two-fifths female for the two years of TAP's existence. This is comparable to the male/female ratio for full-year retainees and for AIP students.

Figure 16. SEX OF TAP STUDENTS

SEX	Fall, 1986 %	Spring, 1987 %	Fall, 1987 %	Spring, 1988 %	Total N	Total %
Female	36	45	40	37	196	40
Male	64	55	60	63	298	60
TOTAL	100	100	100	100	494	100

In terms of age, ninth graders would normally be expected to be 14-15 years old. The actual range for TAP students was 13-18 years old. The median age of AIP students varied from 17.0 to 15.6 years of age, close to the range for TAP students. The median age of TAP students has declined from the inception of the program (and compares to the median age of 16.6 for full-year retainees):

- 16.7 in fall, 1986;
- 16.2 in spring, 1987;
- 15.8 in fall, 1987; and
- 15.5 in spring, 1988.

In terms of income, 44-56% of those participating each semester in TAP were considered low income (based on eligibility for free or reduced lunch programs), compared to 33% for full-year retainees and 51-71% for AIP students. The percentage of TAP students from low-income families has increased each semester:

- 44% of TAP students in fall, 1986;
- 50% in spring, 1987;
- 52% in fall, 1987; and
- 56% of TAP students in spring, 1988.

In all, the TAP program has been drifting towards serving students who are younger and who have lower incomes than the earlier students.

EFFECTS OF THE TAP PROGRAM

Student Attitudes

Surveys were sent in November, 1987, to over a hundred students in the TAP program at all three campuses.

Most of the students were positive about their experience in TAP, as reflected in their agreement with the following statements:

- "I feel more confident about staying in school through graduation now that I am in TAP." (71%)
- "My attendance is better than last year now that I am in TAP." (63%)
- "I feel better prepared to pass classes at my home high school next semester." (58%)
- "Compared to last year, the TAP teachers and counselors in this school help me learn more." The percentage of those who agreed or strongly agreed was 71% at Robbins, 82% at Rice High School, and 79% at Rice Middle School.
- "Compared to last year, the TAP teachers and counselors in this school pay more attention to me as a person." (72%)
- "TAP has helped me improve my grades in subjects I failed before." (95%)

A majority (59%) of the TAP participants agreed that the eighth grade classes being repeated were easy. Asked if they wanted to stay another semester in their TAP school, the students at Robbins were 62% in favor of it. To the question of whether they were worried about going on to their home high schools, 43% at Robbins admitted to being worried, as did a third of the Rice High School students and 20% at Rice Middle School.

Promotion

Based on data supplied by the schools, the promotion or placement rate for TAP in fall, 1987, was 94%. Comparing only those listed on the rosters, the fall, 1987, success rate is higher than that for fall, 1986 (which was 90%). This is despite the fact that students enrolled this year had to repeat more eighth-grade classes on the average.

Figure 17. 1986-87 AND 1987-88 TAP SUCCESSES

	Total Enrolled	Promoted (%)	Retained	Left TAP	Unknown
Fall, 1986	148*	133 (89.9%)	1	13	1
Fall, 1987	144	136 (94.4%)	4	4	-

*Based on rosters. Fifteen students reported as returning to schools before rosters were compiled are not included.

Figure 18. FALL, 1987, TAP SUCCESSES BY CAMPUS

	Total Enrolled	Promoted (%)	Retained (%)	Left TAP (%)
Rice M. S.	46	46 (100%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Rice H. S.	39	33 (84.6%)	2 (5.1%)	4 (10.3%)
Robbins	59	57 (96.6%)	2 (3.4%)	0 (0%)
TOTAL	144	136 (94.4%)	4 (2.8%)	4 (2.8%)

The promotion rate for the spring, 1988, semester was 71%. Students who left TAP before semester's end (6 students or 8% of those enrolled) included four withdrawals, one transfer outside the District, and one student who returned to her junior high school, according to school reports.

Figure 19. SPRING, 1988, TAP SUCCESSES BY CAMPUS

	Total Enrolled	Promoted (%)	Retained (%)	Left TAP (%)
Rice M. S.	13	11 (84.6%)	2 (7.7%)	0 (0%)
Rice H. S.	14	6 (42.9%)	6 (7.1%)	2 (14.3%)
Robbins	48	36 (75.0%)	8 (16.7%)	4 (8.3%)
TOTAL	75	53 (70.7%)	16 (21.3%)	6 (8.0%)

Attendance

Absence rates were checked for students in TAP in the fall of 1986 and 1987 for the semesters preceding, during, and after program participation. Figure 20 shows the overall pattern for both groups.

Figure 20. ABSENCE RATES BEFORE, DURING, AND AFTER TAP

Group	n	Before	n	During	n	After
Fall, 1986*	124	12.0%	127	11.6%	127	20.5%
Fall, 1987+	140	13.1%	144	12.8%	144	12.8%

*For those who were promoted. +For all in TAP.

As this figure illustrates:

- Absence rates before and during participation in TAP were similar for both groups (averaging 12-13%).
- The pattern of fall, 1987, students once they left TAP looks more positive than last year's. Absence rates last year rose for TAP participants once they left the program; this year the rate remained the same.
- Of last year's TAP students attending Robbins, those who remained at Robbins the next semester did not show as steep an increase in absence rates once they left the program as did those who went on to high school.

Achievement Gains (ITBS)

Two special administrations of the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS) were given to TAP students enrolled in fall, 1987. By comparing the pretest scores from October with the posttest scores from January, 1988, achievement gains for students in the TAP program can be measured. Of the 144 students enrolled in TAP in the fall, 101 students had scores for most parts of the pre- and posttest.

Based on national norms, the expected growth between the pretest and the posttest would be three months. Actual grade equivalents (GE's) obtained by these students are shown in Figure 21. Overall, students gained over three GE months in mathematics and vocabulary but not in reading comprehension. Posttest scores (except for Anglo/Other in vocabulary) remained below the national average of 8.8 for eighth grade (based on spring norms).

The percentage of students making any gains between pre- and posttests was:

- 61.3% in Vocabulary.
- 58.8% in Reading Comprehension.
- 61.9% in Mathematics.

Figure 21. MEAN GRADE EQUIVALENT GAINS FOR THE ITBS FOR TAP STUDENTS, FALL, 1987

Group	N	Pre-Voc	Post-Voc	GAIN	N	Pre-Read	Post-Read	GAIN	N	Pre-Math	Post-Math	GAIN
All	93	7.9	8.2	+.3	98	7.2	7.4	+.2	97	7.4	7.8	+.4
Male	58	8.1	8.4	+.3	60	7.1	7.4	+.3	59	7.5	8.0	+.5
Female	35	7.5	7.8	+.3	38	7.3	7.4	+.1	38	7.1	7.5	+.4
Black	29	7.0	7.4	+.4	29	6.5	6.6	+.1	29	7.1	7.4	+.3
Hispanic	40	7.8	8.0	+.2	41	7.4	7.6	+.2	40	7.5	7.8	+.3
Other	24	9.1	9.4	+.3	28	7.5	7.9	+.4	28	7.3	8.1	+.8

Note 1: Pretest given in October; posttest in January.
Note 2: Voc=Vocabulary; Read=Reading Comprehension; Math=Mathematics.

Credits and Grades

Grades earned for TAP students were compared to those for students participating in the Academic Incentive Program (AIP) and to those for students repeating eighth grade for a full year. AIP was used as a comparison because it was another alternative to retention in use in AISD. Students who failed grade 8 and were retained for the full year in 1986-87 were used for comparison because TAP was considered an alternative to traditional retention.

A one-semester program for retainees and potential retainees, AIP was designed to provide intense remediation in language arts, reading, and mathematics. AIP operated six periods per day, with students in an elective the other period. Priority was given to eighth graders. One major difference between TAP and AIP is that AIP students generally stay at their home campus for the program.

The mean grade point averages (GPA) for 1986-87 TAP students in the semesters following their participation in the TAP program were less than passing. The averages obtained by junior high students in AIP, however, and by full-year retainees, who did not participate in either TAP or AIP, were passing.

Figure 22. HIGH SCHOOL GRADE POINT AVERAGES (GPA) FOR TAP STUDENTS AND AIP STUDENTS AFTER PARTICIPATION AND FOR FULL-YEAR RETAINEES

Program & Date	n	GPA in Spring, 87	n	GPA in Fall, 87
TAP Fall, 86	115	66.33	89	68.38
TAP Spring, 87	---	---	91	68.13
AIP Fall, 86	23	67.49	23	72.04
AIP Spring, 87	---	---	79	70.34
Retainees, 86-87	---	---	94	75.33

As can be seen from Figure 23, average credits earned per semester were higher in fall, 1987, for full-year retainees. Overall, however, first semester TAP students gained more credits for graduation than did the retainees.

Figure 23. MEAN HIGH SCHOOL CREDITS EARNED BY TAP STUDENTS AFTER PARTICIPATION AND BY FULL-YEAR RETAINEES

Group	n	Credits in Spring, 87	n	Credits in Fall, 87	Total Credits
TAP Fall, 86	125	1.2	92	1.2	2.4
TAP Spring, 87	---	---	91	1.3	1.3
Retainees, 86-87	---	---	78	1.7	1.7

Note: Minimum course load per semester is 2.5.

The difference between the average number of classes failed for students who had been in TAP or AIP and those who were full-year retainees is marked: 2.2 - 2.7 classes were on the average failed by TAP or AIP students in the semesters following their being in the alternative programs, while

retainees did much better, with an average number of failed classes of 1.4. (See Figure 24.)

Figure 24. AVERAGE NUMBER OF CLASSES FAILED FOR TAP AND AIP STUDENTS AND FULL-YEAR RETAINEES

Program & Date	n	Average # of Classes Failed Spring, 87	n	Average # of Classes Failed Fall, 87
TAP Fall, 86	126	2.6	93	2.7
TAP Spring, 87	---	---	92	2.6
AIP Fall, 86	23	2.7	23	2.2
AIP Spring, 87	---	---	80	2.3
Retainees, 86-87	---	---	99	1.4

The most noticeable difference between TAP and AIP students and regular retainees was in the percentage of students passing all their classes. Almost 50% of the retainees passed all their classes in fall, 1987, but only a little better than 20% of TAP students did, and AIP students' success rate varied from 26% to 30% (Figure 25).

Full-year retainees, then, showed the best academic progress based on grade point average, percentage of students passing all classes, and number of classes failed.

Figure 25. PERCENT PASSING ALL CLASSES FOR TAP AND AIP STUDENTS AND FULL-YEAR RETAINEES

Program & Date	n	% Passing All Classes Spring, 87	n	% Passing All Classes Fall, 87
TAP Fall, 86	126	26.2	93	23.7
TAP Spring, 87	---	----	92	21.7
AIP Fall, 86	23	21.7	23	30.4
AIP Spring, 87	---	----	80	26.3
Retainees, 86-87	---	----	99	49.5

Robbins vs. High Schools

TAP students were usually required to change campuses twice--once to attend the TAP program at a transitional school, and then, if successful there, to go on to their "home" or regularly assigned high schools. What difference, if any, did it make for those students who stayed on at Robbins after their semester in the TAP program? Did having a continuous year at the same school affect their attendance or grades?

Figure 26. COMPARISON OF FALL, 1986, TAP STUDENTS AT ROBBINS PROMOTED TO OTHER HIGH SCHOOLS WITH THOSE PROMOTED AND STAYING AT ROBBINS

Status	Absence Rate	Average GPA	Average # of Classes Failed	% of Students Passing All Classes
Left Robbins	15.4%	66.85	1.7	49.3%
Stayed at Robbins	15.3%	75.83	0.6	77.8%

Of the students at Robbins in fall, 1986, who were promoted, 36 (35%) stayed at Robbins in the following spring semester. (The other 67 TAP students from the fall semester who were promoted attended various other high schools in the spring.) Figure 26 shows that by fall, 1987, those who stayed at Robbins:

- Had about the same attendance rate, but
- Had higher GPA's, lower failure rates, and a higher percentage passing all their classes than those who went on to other schools.

Thus, staying at the same school all year appears to have been beneficial for these TAP students.

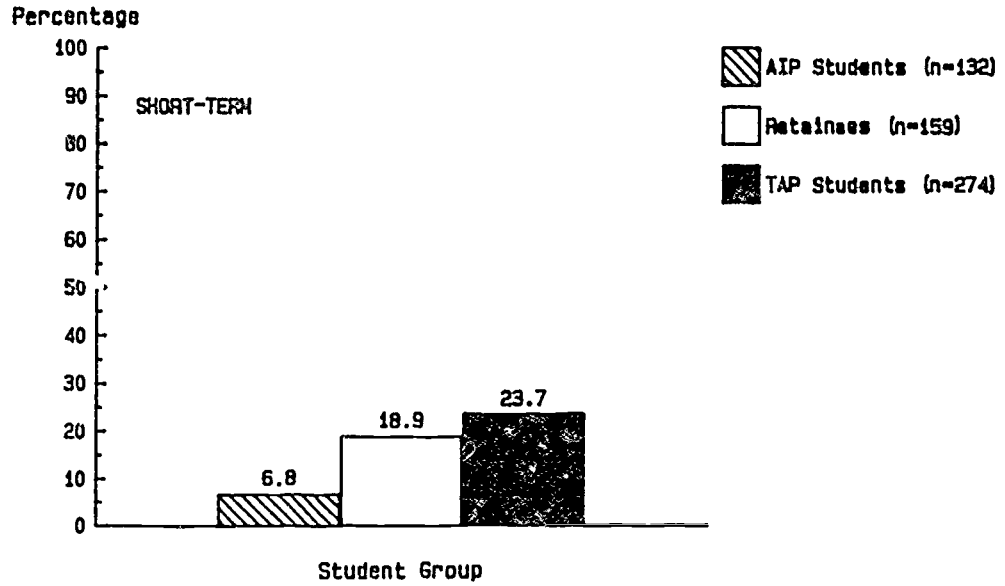
Dropouts

Overall, the dropout rate for TAP students, either short- or long-term, was much higher than for AIP participants and greater than for full-year retainees who did not participate in either the TAP or AIP programs.

As shown in Figure 27, the lowest short-term dropout rates, (as of October, 1987), were for AIP participants and all junior high students (including TAP and AIP participants). TAP short-term dropout rates were higher than for full-year retainees, AIP students, and all groups in junior high.

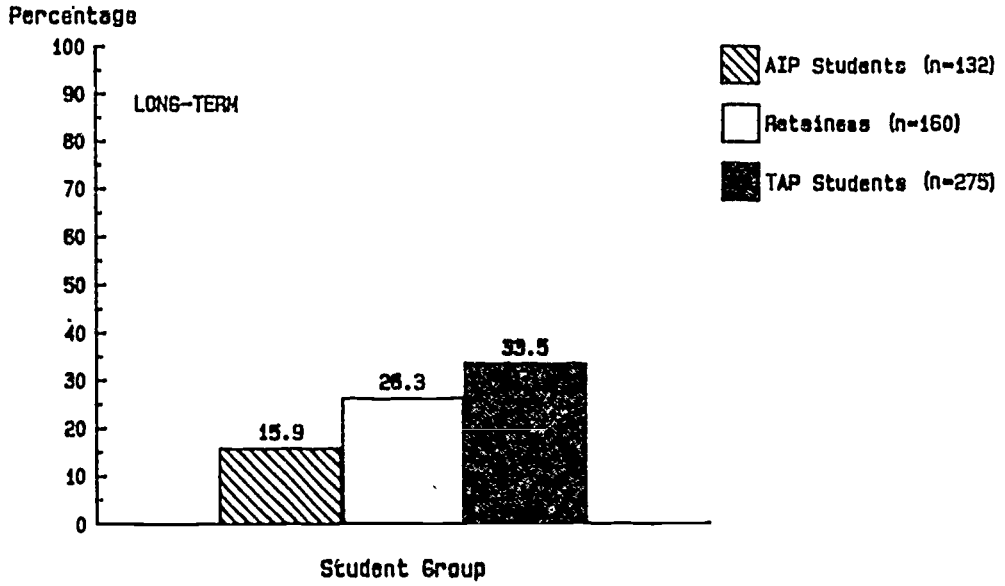
The long-term dropout rates for TAP, AIP and full-year retained students show the same pattern: As of March, 1988, one third of the TAP participants had dropped out. Dropout rates for full-year retainees (26%) and AIP students (16%) were lower.

Figure 27. SHORT-TERM DROPOUT RATES FOR 1986-87 AIP STUDENTS, ALL JR. HIGH STUDENTS, RETAINEES, AND TAP STUDENTS



Note: Dropout rate as of 10/87.
Dropout rate for all jr. high/middle school students was 9.6%.

Figure 28. LONG-TERM DROPOUT RATES FOR 1986-87 AIP STUDENTS, RETAINEES, AND TAP STUDENTS



Note: Dropout rate as of 3/88.

IMPLICATIONS

Both those in the Academic Incentive Program (AIP) and full-year retainees from 1986-87 appear to have fared much better than TAP participants--AIP students in terms of their dropout rates and grade point averages, and full-year retainees in their dropout rates, GPA's. and number of F's. TAP students do, however, earn slightly more credits towards graduation. The only known difference between those who repeated a full year and those who went into TAP is that TAP students are somewhat more likely to be low income.

One problem with the TAP program may be the fact that students generally change schools three times in three semester. AISD's TAP students must change from junior high to a transitional school, and then change again to a high school. The additional adjustments to changed school surroundings and requirements may well be too much for these students. National longitudinal research on this topic is scant. One national study using a similar delivery model (with students pulled from home campuses for a year and then returned) also found high subsequent dropout rates (Vito, 1988).

Secondary transitional students may need at least a year at one location and special help in adjusting once they are promoted to high school. Programs at both the middle school/junior high level and at the high school level may be needed--perhaps where they are in TAP part of the day and in regular classes the rest of the time. Placing eighth graders in grade 9 and offering some eighth grade courses is another delivery option to consider.

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Austin Independent School District

Department of Management Information

Dr. Glynn Ligon, Executive Director

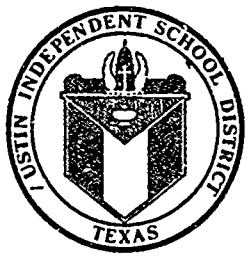
Office of Research and Evaluation

Dr. David A. Doss, Assistant Director

Systemwide Evaluation

Authors:
Nancy R. Baenen, Evaluator
Patricia Hopkins, Evaluation Associate

Contributing Staff:
Stacy Buffington, Programmer Analyst
Ruth Fairchild, Secretary



Cover Drawing by Laura Krause, Austin High School

Publication Number 87.52
July, 1988