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ABSTRACT

The progress of 243 students repeating first grade in 1981-82 was compared with matched low achievers in the Austin (Texas) Independent School District. Mean achievement scores were obtained for each year between spring 1981 and spring 1986 for the two groups and compared to the national average. Regression analyses were used to compare the achievement progress of the two groups. In all, 183 of the first-grade retainees and 184 of the matched sample were retained between grades 4 and 7. Since almost 40% of the comparison group was eventually retained in some grade, separate analyses were made to compare those retained in grade 1 versus those retained in later grades. Those retained in grade 1 were more likely to be placed in special education later. In both reading and mathematics, those promoted showed higher gains than did retainees, and the differences broadened across the years. Additional adverse effects were not generally seen for retention in later grades. Results suggest that retention did not help students catch up to grade level. It is suggested that placement with special help is a better alternative than retention for most low achievers. (SLD)

PERSPECTIVES AFTER FIVE YEARS--HAS GRADE RETENTION PASSED OR FAILED?

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Perspectives After Five Years--Has Grade Retention Passed or Failed?

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Perspectives/Background

Promotion and retention policies have changed in many districts nationwide since 1980 in response to various aspects of the educational reform movement. In Austin ISD, major changes occurred at the elementary level in spring, 1981 and fall, 1987. Secondary changes took effect in 1986-87. The most recent changes are in response to Texas' version of educational reform--House Bill 72. Elementary students' promotion is now tied to mastery of the essential elements. Secondary students must now have an average of 70 in their courses and a maximum of five unexcused absences to earn credit. Students can be retained only once at grades 5 through 8. Alternative programs or instructional methods are to be utilized if students are "placed" in the next grade without meeting all promotion requirements.

Schools must continually face the question of how to best help low achievers. The effectiveness of retention in grade as a way to help students who fail to make adequate progress in grade-level material has been debated at the national and school district level for decades. The practice can be costly to students, parents, teachers, and school districts overall. Despite research which strongly suggests retention is not effective, on the average, for elementary students, the practice has actually become more common in recent years in the face of minimum competency requirements and mastery learning models. The general belief has also been that students should be retained as early as possible in their academic careers. Some research does support this practice.

The retention area is difficult to study with tight research designs. Long-term effects are of obvious importance but have been available infrequently. The Office of Research and Evaluation (ORE) within the Austin Independent School District (AISD) has followed students retained at the elementary level from 1979-80 on in a variety of ways. A summary of AISD and national results follows.

Short-Term Effects

One-year retainee gains. In AISD, retainees' average ITBS grade equivalent (GE) gains were greater in reading (.85) than in mathematics (.65) during the year repeated. The amount of achievement growth by individual retainees varied greatly, from actual losses in GE scores to gains of over two years.

Success study. About three in four of the teachers and parents of a sample of 121 AISD 1983-84 elementary retainees thought the child had been successful by the end of the grade repeated. However, ITBS reading results showed only half of these students gained .8 GE (the national average for low achievers) or more after a year of instruction. One fifth of the retainees were considered successful by only one or none of the three information sources.

Promoted versus retained low achievers. Both national and local research found that low achievers who were promoted made significantly greater gains than those retained after one year. (These studies generally matched students on as many factors as possible, but the comparisons are not perfect. In AISD, however, we found a wide variation in retention rates. This made it more likely that retained students were similar to promoted students in other schools.)

Attitudes and self-concept. A review of the research nationwide by Holmes and Mathews found that retention generally hurts students' self-esteem and attitude toward school (although some individual students might improve).

Long-Term Effects

Dropping out. National and AISD research has found retention and dropping out to be highly correlated. Students older than average for their grade level were found to be 2.7 times more likely to drop out than those on grade level in a recent AISD ORE study. Students with low grade point averages were also more likely to drop out than other students.

A recent study in California urban districts indicated that most of those retained in grades 1 and 2 failed to graduate. They found dropouts were five times more likely than nondropouts to have been retained.

While a causal link cannot be proven, a strong relationship has been found between dropping out and retention.

Patterns of achievement growth. The growth of retained students tends to increase in reading (from an average of six months to eight months for a year of instruction) during the grade repeated. However, reading gains decline once again when the students are promoted. This suggests that retention in itself is not enough; students need continued support once promoted.

The pattern in mathematics is the opposite. Students' growth declines (from almost eight to six months gains per year of instruction) during the year repeated. Growth increases once again when the students are promoted. This suggests students are not adequately challenged during the retention year, and their mathematics progress is hurt by retention.

Achievement follow-ups. Most students retained fail to show enough growth in subsequent years to keep up with even their new younger agemates. They may advance to the "middle" group for a year or two, but eventually most end up right back in the "low" group.

Comparisons after two and three years of the progress of elementary low achievers retained in AISD with similar students promoted generally shows significantly greater progress for those promoted. Differences are greater in mathematics than reading (but present in both areas).

Recent AISD Research

This study offers important new data related to whether retention benefits most low achievers and whether earlier retention is more beneficial. It also provides information on alternatives which may work better than retention for many students. Future research in AISD will focus on the success of these alternatives. My objective is to contribute to national research by providing information on the following questions from an Austin ISD perspective:

- Do first graders who are retained progress as well as low achievers who are promoted in terms of achievement? Are their special education placement rates lower than those promoted? What are the subsequent retention rates of the two groups?
- How does the progress of low achievers retained in first grade compare to that of low achievers retained later? How do both of these groups compare to those never retained subsequently?
- Is retention the best way to help most low achievers? What are the costs and benefits of retention in grade? What alternatives hold promise?

Methods

This study focused on the progress of 243 students repeating first grade in 1981-82 and matched low achievers. Students were matched on special education status, free lunch status, age, sex, ethnicity, plus reading and mathematics achievement. Spring, 1981 pretest scores on the ITBS were matched as closely as possible on an alternating basis (closest higher score then closest lower score) in each subject area (creating two matched groups). While the matched low achievers are a comparison rather than a control group, the fact that retention rates vary considerably across schools promotes the comparability of the groups. Despite a common retention policy considerable discretion is left to school staff.

Enrollment status, grade level assignment (promotion status), and special education placement for the two groups were checked in February, 1987. To be included in the achievement sample, students had to have valid ITBS Reading Total and/or Mathematics Total scores for spring, 1986. Mean achievement scores were determined for each year between spring, 1981 and spring, 1986 for the two groups and compared to the national average. Regression analyses were used to compare the achievement progress of the two groups.

When it was discovered that almost 40% of the comparison group was later retained, the comparison group was split into those never retained and those later retained. Regression analyses were rerun to compare the progress of those retained in grade 1 versus later elementary grades.

Results

Promotion status. About three fourths of the 243 students in the group retained and not retained in grade 1 were still enrolled as of February, 1987. If students were not retained after grade 1, the retainees should have been in grade 6 with the promoted students in grade 7. In reality, 12.5% of the retainees were retained subsequently (one was retained twice); 38.6% of the matched group was retained subsequently (two were retained twice).

FIGURE 1
1986-87 GRADE ASSIGNMENT OF STUDENTS RETAINED IN 1980-81 AND THEIR MATCHES

Grade in 1986-87	Retainees		Matches	
	#	%	#	%
4	1	.5%		
5	22	12.0%	2	1.1%
6	156	85.2%	69	37.5%
7	4	2.2%	113	61.4%
Total	183	100.0%	184	100.0%

Special education and later retention. Students retained in first grade appeared more likely to be subsequently placed in special education programs, 21% versus 10%, perhaps because retention had already been tried. Matched students were more likely to be subsequently retained (39% versus 13%).

FIGURE 2
CURRENT (FEBRUARY, 1987) STATUS OF LOW ACHIEVERS
RETAINED AND PROMOTED AS FIRST GRADERS IN 1980-81

CHARACTERISTICS	RETAINED %	PROMOTED %
Special Education	21.3%	10.3%
Ethnicity		
Black	33.9%	39.1%
Hispanic	55.2%	44.0%
Anglo/Other	10.9%	17.9%
Sex		
Male	58.5%	59.2%
Female	41.5%	40.8%
Low Income	73.0%	60.0%

Achievement status. Of the original groups, 186 first grade retainees and 189 promoted low achievers met the criteria to be in the achievement follow-up. Students had to have valid ITBS Reading Total and/or Mathematics Total scores for spring, 1986 and not be special education. Pretest scores for the two groups in reading and mathematics were found to be very close. Results (see Figures 3 and 4) revealed that:

- In reading, retainees gained .86 GE during the repeated year but gained less thereafter. In mathematics, retainees gained .63 GE during the repeated year with generally slightly greater gains thereafter. Growth rates were not high enough in either area to keep students up to the class average--even with younger classmates.

- In both reading and mathematics, the students promoted in first grade were found to show significantly ($p < .01$) higher scores than those retained by 1985-86. Differences in both areas were about .75 of a grade equivalent (GE) year by 1985-86.

- Both retainees and promoted low achievers still scored well below the national average for their age (with retainees further behind) and their grade (with both groups about 1.4 years below average).

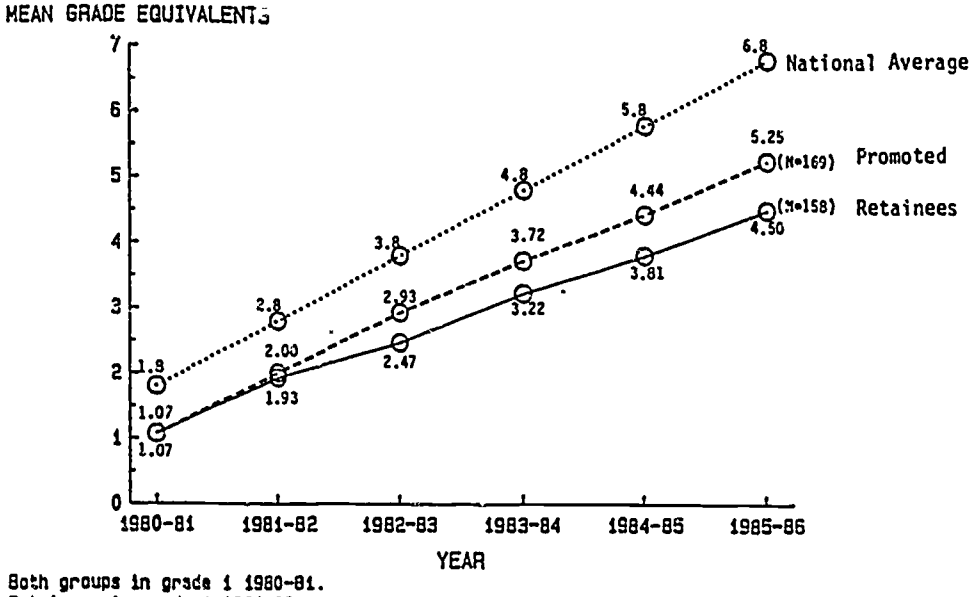
- The difference between the groups broadened across the years in both reading and mathematics (especially reading).

First Grade Versus Later Retentions

The fact that 39% of the students in the matched group were later retained allowed a comparison of the gains of--

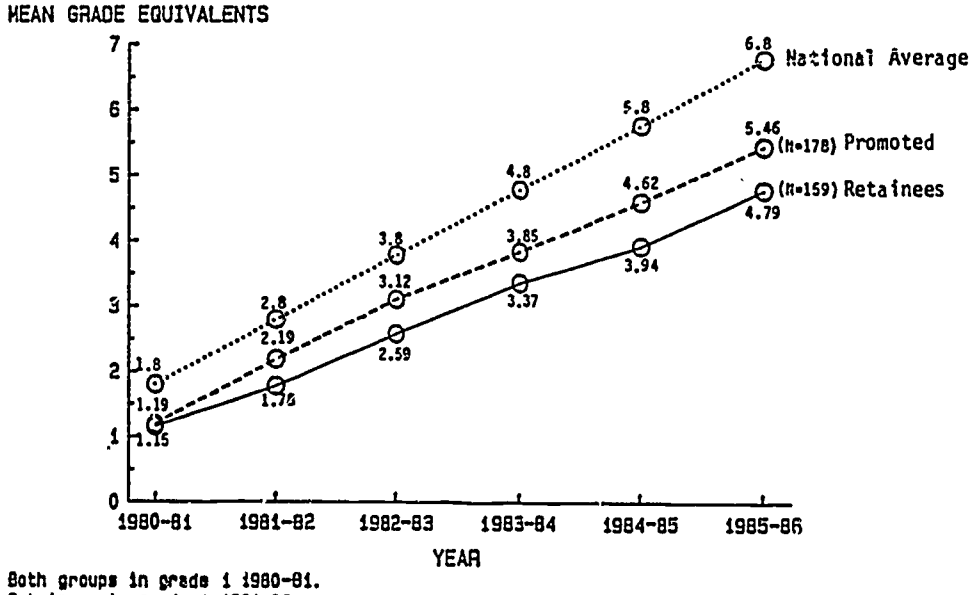
- Low achievers retained in grade 1;
- Low achievers retained later;
- Low achievers never retained.

FIGURE 3
ITBS READING TOTAL SCORES OF FIRST GRADERS REPEATING A GRADE IN 1981-82 AND MATCHED PROMOTED LOW ACHIEVERS



Both groups in grade 1 1980-81.
Retainees in grade 1 1981-82;
matches in grade 2.

FIGURE 4
ITBS MATHEMATICS TOTAL SCORES OF FIRST GRADERS REPEATING A GRADE IN 1981-82 AND MATCHED PROMOTED LOW ACHIEVERS



Both groups in grade 1 1980-81.
Retainees in grade 1 1981-82;
matches in grade 2.

Our data allowed a fairly good test of many practitioners' view that retention, if it is to be done, should be done as early as possible. Because the students were matched initially for achievement and a number of other characteristics, the low achievers retained in grade 1 and later should be very similar types of students.

Figure 5 shows the mean grade equivalent scores for the three groups. Regression analyses revealed no significant differences in the growth trends of those retained in grade 1 versus later grades. (Those never retained do appear to show better progress.) These results suggest it is generally not harmful to wait past grade 1 to retain low achieving students. (In AISD, first graders generally represent at least 50% of those retained at grades K-6.)

FIGURE 5
ITBS GE ACHIEVEMENT SCORES--FIRST GRADE LOW ACHIEVERS

READING	Retained Grade 1 N=158	Retained Later N=63	Never Retained N=106
1980-81	1.07	1.01	1.10
1981-82	1.93	1.71	2.18
1982-83	2.47	2.65	3.10
1983-84	3.22	3.31	3.96
1984-85	3.81	3.90	4.76
1985-86	4.50	4.63	5.62
MATH	N=159	N=64	N=114
1980-81	1.15	1.06	1.26
1981-82	1.78	2.00	2.29
1982-83	2.59	2.77	3.32
1983-84	3.37	3.48	4.04
1984-85	3.94	4.12	4.88
1985-86	4.79	4.84	5.80

These results suggest that retention does not meet its goals of helping students catch up to grade level and stay there. Retainees' growth rates are not improved in the long run so they fall behind their younger classmates. Those promoted showed better growth in both reading and mathematics than those retained in first grade. This is most dramatically shown for mathematics but also appears in reading. Both groups seem to occupy a low position relative to their classmates after first grade. The level of challenge in the material presented to each group may be a crucial variable. Factors such as teacher and student expectations and student learning strategies may also play a part. In addition to the lack of clear achievement benefits, retention is costly to the school system and the student (increasing their risk of dropping out). **This research supports the position that placement with special help is a better alternative for most low achievers than is retention.**

IMPACT ON THE SYSTEM--FINANCIAL AND OTHER COSTS

Given the fairly negative findings regarding the impact of retention on student achievement (see Figure 6), the financial cost of retention becomes an important consideration. Most (2,175) elementary and junior high students repeat a full year; 170 junior high participants in a new alternative program (Transitional Academic Program) were promoted after one semester. AISD spends approximately $3,500 per student to provide an extra full year of instruction ($1,750 for one semester). Senior high students repeat only courses they fail, so the amount of time lost varies. The 1,798 senior high students are therefore reflected conservatively in this cost estimate as repeating .20 of a year (two courses or $700). **Assuming these students will not drop out, the minimum overall cost of 4,118 retainees to AISD in 1986-87 will be $9,081,100.**

FIGURE 6
RETENTION COSTS AND BENEFITS

Costs for Most Students	
• Achievement growth rate in mathematics and reading does not improve long-term. Therefore, students fall behind again.	• Loss of peer group
• Loss of a year--an extra year is needed to graduate	• High risk of dropping out
• More negative attitudes toward school and self	• About $9,081,100 for 4,118 retainees for the school system

Benefits for a Few Students
• Better grasp of concepts, increased rate of learning
• More success experiences--better attitudes toward school and self-esteem
• Better TEAMS mastery

The key to success for very low achieving students appears to be providing a different approach to instruction. Options include:

- Compensatory reading and/or mathematics programs,
- Transition classes (K-1 or 1-2) or programs (7-8 or 8-9),
- Special education,
- Special curriculum groupings (across or within grades),
- Tutoring (by teachers, older students, parents, peers),
- Motivational instructional techniques,
- Extended school day, and
- Summer school.

Effects of compensatory programs have been studied nationwide for many years. Research on tutoring, motivational techniques, and summer school is also available. AISD is studying the effects of elementary transition classes and new secondary transition programs this year.

- Elementary transition classes are at the first and second grade levels. Students considered not ready for the regular curriculum at these grades are taught in a transition class part or all of the instructional day. Some are designed to remediate kindergarten or first grade material as needed and cover as much grade-level material as possible; retention is generally considered likely but not certain. The other type of class provides grade-level instruction in a modified form; promotion is likely but not certain in these classes.

- One secondary transition program, the Transitional Academic Program (TAP), allows students to enroll in eighth-or ninth-grade courses while they repeat seventh or eighth-grade courses. Students are transferred to alternative schools which offer a grades 7-12 curriculum. This allows students to be promoted mid-year and is designed to reduce dropout risk.

- A second secondary transition program, the Academic Incentive Program (AIP), is available to students who are two or more years below grade level in reading or mathematics or have a history of non-performance and failing grades for a majority of their courses. The program provides intensive remediation designed for rapid progress in English, reading, and mathematics. Time and subject requirements may be adjusted for other subjects. Promotion is based on a review of all grades earned.

- CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions	Recommendations
Most students do not benefit from being retained.	Retain fewer students. Provide special help for those placed or retained--transitional classes, compensatory programs, tutoring, cross-grade or within-grade grouping, intense remediation, etc.
The number of students retained can be reduced.	Special programs such as summer school, transitional classes, TAP, and AIP could help to reduce the number retained.
The effectiveness of interventions need further study.	Interventions should be designed in a way that allows research on their effectiveness whenever possible.

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A complete bibliography of AISD's reports on retention and promotion is available from the Office of Research and Evaluation.