

Good for Nothing In grade Retention



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There is no argument that we all care about our children and their future. But for some time now there has been much disagreement over how to best educate our children. Frustration has mounted as many children have not successfully gained minimum competencies.

Amidst this debate and innate desire to care for children lies the issue of retaining children in grade. Some proclaim retention as the champion over social promotion for the solution to kids not learning. But, alternatives to these two polar options are rarely considered. For the sake of our children and their futures, we should look at these alternatives.

The debate has surfaced again. First, in New York, Mayor Michael Bloomberg and the city's Panel on Education Policy recently approved a controversial policy to retain third grade students, an estimated 15,000 of the city's 70,000, who do not pass standardized tests began this spring (Hemphill, 2004; Herszenhorn, 2004). And second, in Chicago, the Board of Education voted to ease its strict promotion and retention policies following research that indicates its seven-year effort to end social promotion has not raised test scores or benefited students (Herszenhorn, 2004).

In addition, recent national conversations surrounding education have touted "research-based" practices as the golden ticket. Interestingly retention is one area where the research typically is ignored.

Reams of research have shown that retention does not work (Hemphill, 2004; Hauser, et al., 2000; McCollum, et al., 1999). When adults make the decision to retain a student, the student is harmed socially, academically, and emotionally. Retention places the burden of school reform on the students, not the adults who are responsible for their achievement and growth.

In Texas schools, almost one out of every 20 students is harmed by in-grade retention; three out of 50 Hispanic and African American students were retained in 2001-02 (TEA, 2004). Still, many school leaders and policymakers support this policy that puts children's well-being at risk.



What is the difference between social promotion and in-grade retention? Social promotion refers to the practice of passing students who have failed to master part or the entire grade-level curriculum on to the next grade with their age-grade peers. In-grade retention, on the other hand, requires students to repeat the same grade a second time in order to master what was not learned.

Beginning in the 2003-04 school year, Texas educators became obligated to retain students who do not meet passing requirements of the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) through the "Student Success Initiative" that was passed by legislators in 1999.

Data from the Texas Education Association (TEA) show that 177,340 students (4.6 percent) in kindergarten through grade 12 were retained in 2001-02. This is enough students to fill Texas Stadium more than 2.5 times. Of this number, roughly 59,812 were elementary school students (grades kindergarten through six).

African American students and Hispanic students had the highest rates of grade-level retention for all ethnic groups at 6.0 percent and 6.1 percent, respectively. Asian/Pacific Islander, Native American and White students' rates of retention were 2.0 percent, 4.8 percent, and 2.8 percent, respectively.



There are several problems with in-grade retention. Typically, students are retained for low achievement in one or two subjects. But they are required to retake an entire year's worth of coursework. Plus, they are usually placed in the same environment the second time that did not support their learning the first time around. Often, this results in punishing children for not learning what they have not been taught or taught well.

The research is very clear: the effects of retention are harmful. As early as the 1930s, studies reported the negative effects of retention on academic achievement. Retention harms students academically and socially. According to retention research, 50 percent of students who repeat a grade do no better the second time, and 25 percent actually do worse (McCollum, 1999; Mellow, 2004).

Retention is also strongly associated with dropping out of school in later years. A student who is retained once is 50 percent more likely to drop out than a non-retained student; two retentions increase that probability to 90 percent.

Students who are retained also show poor attendance rates, have increased behavior problems, suffer lower self-esteem and view retention as a punishment and a stigma, not a positive event to help them improve their academic performance.

In the wake of the *No Child Left Behind Act* nationally and the implementation of a more rigorous state assessment system in Texas, retention is expected to increase dramatically. Beginning in 2002-03, Texas students are required to pass the state reading test to advance to grade four. Students in grades five and eight will have to pass the reading and mathematics tests beginning in 2004-05 and 2007-08, respectively. Students will be given three opportunities to pass the tests. But, these "extra" chances are offered during a two-month period following the receipt of scores from the first round of testing.



In addition to the harmful effects of retention to children, retention hurts in other logistical and financial ways. A large number of retentions results in an increased need for teachers. To provide one teacher for every 25 retained students, Texas will need to hire and keep an additional 7,094 teachers. Using the average Texas teacher salary of \$39,232, taxpayers will have to spend an additional \$278 billion as a result of this state mandate.

An increase in retained students and their respective teachers also means more needed classroom space. Texas school systems may have to build an additional 3,296 classrooms to accommodate the students. Though limited state funding is now provided, no extra money is allocated for extra facilities to address the impact of retaining more pupils.

IDRA research estimates that every class of dropouts costs the state more than \$1.2 billion in lost income and support costs over the life of those individuals. This figure will increase with higher numbers of retentions.



Local schools, teachers and parents are the ones who best know their students and what academic decisions are best for them. Certainly they would not use a single exam to determine a child's future. That would be like a doctor making a decision for major surgery by only using a single blood test.

Decisions on whether to promote or retain children should be made by those directly involved with that child and should consider all the many indicators that will inform such decisions including grades, school participation, other indicators of academic performance and parent input.

In a recent article in *Education Week*, John Merrow eloquently advocates a re-designing of education, especially early education. He explains that policymakers and educators have attempted "middle-of-the road alternatives" to promotion and retention but have not come up with something that actually works. He suggests that what can work as a solution is the end of age segregation in the early grades.

"Schools separate children by age because it's convenient for the adults, not because six-year-olds are developmentally different from five-year-olds or seven-year-olds" (Merrow, 2004).

Grouping children by development makes sense and allows involved adults, like teachers and parents, to work together to get students to an agreed-upon goal.

IDRA released a policy brief in 1999, *Failing Our Children - Finding Alternatives to In-Grade Retention*, that describes numerous alternatives to retention. These include special needs testing, tutoring assistance from the teacher, peer tutoring, extended day programs, Saturday tutoring, extended year programs, summer school, parent involvement, and cooperative learning classrooms. (The policy brief is available free online at <http://www.idra.org/images/stories/ingrade.pdf>.)

IDRA's research showed that the "most effective practices for successful students and schools are those that require that all partners in education - administrators, teachers, parents, community members and students - focus on the academic success and well-being of all students" (McCollum, 1999).

Specific strategies cited in this and other research as effective alternatives to in-grade retention are:

- Enhance the professional development of teachers to ensure they have the knowledge and skills to teach a wider range of students to meet standards.
- Redesign school structures to support more intensive learning.
- Provide students the support and services they need in order to succeed when they are needed.
- Use classroom assessments that better inform teaching (Darling-Hammond, 1998).

Rather than choosing between two policies that are known to not work, why not choose something that makes sense and does not stigmatize a child as a failure.



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