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Keeping History from Repeating Itself: Involving Parents About Retention Decisions to Support Student Achievement

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Introduction

Collaborative ventures between families and schools can result in children being successful both academically and in life (Henderson & Berla, 1994; Jackson & Davis, 2000; Mapp, 1997). The most successful predictor of student achievement is an encouraging home environment, high expectations from parents, and parental involvement (Epstein, 2001; Zellmann & Waterman, 1998). Furthermore, Epstein's (2001) Framework for a Comprehensive Program of Partnership lists six types of linkages between school, family, and community that suggest collaboration between school and home is more likely to result in benefit for a child than "separate spheres of influence" (Epstein, 1995, p. 702).

What effect might parental/familial involvement have when a student develops a pattern of poor academic achievement? How do schools involve parents when the issue of retention arises? What role do parents play in retention decisions at the middle level? Considerable research has been focused on retention in the early grades and its consequences (Darling-Hammond, 1998; Parker, 2001; Grissom & Shepard, 1989); however, not much has examined retention at the middle level. Extant literature and our earlier, preliminary study on elementary and middle school retention indicate that while retention is largely in disfavor among educators (Alexander, Entwistle, & Dauber, 2003; Jimerson, 2001; Natriello, 1998), it is still pervasive in American schools (Hauser, 2001). However, middle level schools that seek to involve parents, early and often, in conversations about their daughters' and sons' maturity and academic progress increase the likelihood that students will advance successfully from one grade to the next. The lack of literature regarding those relationships has spurred this research. This paper examines the roles and relationships that exist between parents and schools when children are identified as at-risk for grade retention or are retained. Within the paper, three main questions will be discussed: (1) What does retention look like at the middle level? (2) How do schools effectively involve parents in the retention decision making process? And (3) what effect does this have on the decision to retain?

The Viability of Retention

Of the kindergartners who enrolled in schools in the U.S. this fall, as many as 50% may expect to be retained in grade at least once before they graduate or drop out of school (Alexander, Entwisle, & Dauber, 2003; Thomas, 2000). Public opinion has tended to adopt the intuitive view that retention is a justifiable consequence when an evaluation of student aptitudes shows that some students seriously lag behind their classmates

(Darling-Hammond, 1998; Natriello, 1998). Although retaining a student in grade may seem a harsh consequence, social promotion leaves a bad taste in the mouths of those who demand standards. “It just goes against the grain of our pragmatic, up-by-the-bootstraps culture where the Puritan work ethic still reigns and people still frown on getting something for nothing” (Parker, 2001, p. 13).

Research conducted over the past 20 years has provided compelling evidence that retention rarely attains the outcomes sought (Darling-Hammond, 1998; Parker, 2001; Grissom & Shepard, 1989). Although some research studies (Alexander, Entwistle, & Dauber, 2003; Dworkin, Lorence, Toenjes, Perez, & Thomas, 1999) seek to separate retention from the reputation it has received as being the cause of decline in student performance, they do acknowledge that retention is associated with numerous factors that eventually lead to student dropout. That notwithstanding, students still tend to equate repeating a grade with being slow or bad. “Even small children perceive that being held back is a stigma” (Darling-Hammond, 1998, p. 18). Immediate gains in achievement among those retained tend to be transient. Research suggests that students who are retained in kindergarten gain no more than one month of academic skill on the second try (Moore, 2000); any academic gains that appear to accrue when a child is retained tend to be erased within two years (Parker, 2001). “The only major difference between students who were retained vs. like students who were socially promoted is the emotional stigma carried by the former for the rest of their lives” (Parker, 2001, p. 13).

Retention in grade is a predictable precursor of dropping out of school (Darling-Hammond, 1998; Kurtz, 2002; Jimerson, 2001). For African-American males, repeating a grade is the single strongest predictor of leaving school before graduation (Whipple, 2002). To compensate for the negative effects of a student being made to repeat a grade, the repeat year would have to produce achievement gains of 30 months (Larsen, 2002).

One might expect that retention would be applied evenhandedly, with no social, economic, or ethnic group disproportionately identified to repeat a grade. However, boys are more often recommended for retention than girls; the youngest in a given grade are more likely to be retained than their peers born a few months earlier; and students whose own parents struggled to find success in school are retained with greater frequency than students whose parents were successful in school (Grissom & Shepard, 1989; Parker, 2001). Studies of students who were retained in grade repeatedly have demonstrated that those who are most often identified for retention are also least likely to enjoy social and economic capital (Harrington-Lueker, 1998; Jimerson, 2001). Despite extensive research conducted over the last two decades that demonstrates compellingly that retaining students in grade is, at best, a flawed practice, many schools in the U.S. continue to view retention as a testament to holding students accountable.

Although many educators believe that retention is more often effective when a student can repeat kindergarten or first grade (Larsen, 2002), the practice is not uncommon as late as middle school and even high school. In a study of national retention rates by Alexander, Entwistle, & Dauber (2003), they noted that in the 1980s, first grade retentions generally occurred at double or triple the rate in grades 2-5; however, by grade 6, the proportion of students repeating a grade again began to climb. During the 1990s, the trend to retain moved generally downward, except at the ninth grade, where "… they soar, often surpassing even the heretofore peak rates from first grade” (p. 7). This propensity to retain is exacerbated in high poverty schools where up to half of all students may repeat one or more grades prior to high school (Education Week, 1998).

A study that focused on achievement of sixth and eighth grade students in Chicago (Roderick & Engle, 2001) found that an effective impetus toward effort and achievement came from parental influence. Tracking more than 100 low-achieving African American and Latino students, the study examined how intrinsic and extrinsic motivators influenced students' determination to earn a passing score on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, a key indicator used by the school system in deciding advancement or retention. In broad terms, the study concluded that “the social context of learning—how teachers, parents, and peers interact with students in relation to the [retention] policy—may be the most important factor in determining how students respond to the incentive” (Roderick & Engle, 2001, p. 201). The study found that students tended to develop the strongest sense of intrinsic motivation to study when the teacher created a climate of high expectations in the classroom and

when these expectations were supported through encouragement at home. The study also found that, even in instances where teachers had not established a climate of intrinsic motivation to support student achievement, encouragement from parents and other sources outside the classroom increased the probability that the student would demonstrate the effort and motivation to be successful. Roderick & Engle concluded that those students who are most at-risk of failure are least motivated to put forth the effort needed to attain the prescribed standard for promotion. "These students face the greatest task and at the same time often have the fewest resources to accomplish that task" (p. 217).

Methods

Because we sought to understand the nuances of what our participants expressed about retention and the nature of parent involvement in decisions that accompanied a decision to have a student repeat a grade, we used qualitative methods for this study. Interviews with educators and parents employed open-ended questions. Throughout the course of the study, we followed a constant-comparative approach. As we interviewed teachers, building administrators, and parents, we persistently probed extant research on retention and compared later interviews to earlier data. Retention studies to date have tended to focus on the practice as it is applied in the elementary grades or examine the long-range effects of retention in terms of high school drop out or employment. Therefore, while these earlier studies helped guide our current inquiry, we recognized that questions aimed at learning about middle school practices would help fill an important gap. Furthermore, we have encountered numerous middle schools whose practices include retention, despite the literature that argues against it.

An initial study (Larsen, 2002) focused on five school districts in western and eastern Washington. In that qualitative study, interviews with 20 educators, including teachers, principals, and central office administrators, probed retention practices at the elementary and middle levels. That study also examined ethical questions that educators consider when they participate in decisions in which a student's promotion to the next grade hangs in the balance. A consistent theme emerging from the interviews corroborated earlier research (Barksdale-Ladd & Thomas, 2000; Dutro, Collins, & Collins, 2002; Smith, Heinecke, & Noble, 1999) that suggests school district policies tend not to be informed by available research about the practice and efficacy of retention. The current study extends available research by examining to what extent retention is part of the middle school setting and how the input and perception of parents contribute to discussions about retention.

Schools in the Study

The current study is the second phase of our research. This research relies on intensive, open-ended interviews with educators and parents in seven middle schools, five in Washington (Fir Park, Mountainview, Puget Sound, Riverside, and Skyview Middle Schools) and two in northern California (Mount Diablo and San Joaquin Middle Schools). All of the schools had a sizeable population of students on free and reduced-price lunch, ranging from more than 30% to 90%. Each school had a student population of diverse ethnic backgrounds, from 25% to 75% minority enrollment. However, the common denominator was not ethnicity; rather, it was socioeconomic status. Consistent with earlier research (Darling-Hammond, 1998; Grissom & Shepard, 1989; Jimerson, 2001), we were informed that virtually all the students who had been retained came from families in the lowest ranges of income.

Participants

In the initial stage of the inquiry, we contacted middle schools to inquire whether or not they had retained any students. Building principals were called to determine selection into the study. Principals were asked if they had retained any students in the last three years. An affirmative response included their school into the study. Schools that did not retain but had administrators and teachers with experience regarding retention were also included to provide a varied perspective on retention. Schools were selected purposively, on the basis of existing partnerships or relationships with the universities of the investigators.

Once principals acknowledged that retention occurred at their middle school and agreed to participate, they were also asked to identify teachers and counselors who were involved in the retention process. Those teach-

ers and counselors were then targeted for interviews. Parents were contacted only after the release of their names and approval of the district/principal and only after telephone contact by the school. Thus, we individually interviewed teachers, counselors, site administrators (principals and assistant principals) about their experiences with and perceptions of retention policy and practice. On two occasions, we simultaneously interviewed two participants because they worked closely together. Eleven teachers, five counselors, and seven building administrators reflected on their roles in retention processes and decisions.

During interviews, educators were asked how parents participated in discussions that considered whether a given student should repeat a grade. Subsequently, we attempted to contact parents of retained students for their perspectives. It was hard to determine whether parents were reluctant to meet with us to discuss circumstances and perceptions that accompanied discussions as to whether their daughter or son should be promoted or retained. Many simply did not respond to telephone queries from the school. Several declined and, thus far, only four parents have agreed to talk with us. We assigned pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality of participants and to shield the identity of schools and the communities in which they are located. A total of 27 interviews provided the data for this study.

Interview Protocol

Each interview relied on a detailed interview guide. Questions addressed to educators focused on issues such as factors that point to the need to retain a student; the efficacy of having a student repeat a grade; perceptions about promotion and retention policies; the process of retention decisions; alternatives to retention; ethical issues that accompany decisions to retain or promote students; and whether retention achieves the outcomes sought. As we interviewed parents for the study, we added questions about the participants' experiences, including the nature of their involvement in discussions with teachers, counselors, and site administrators; whether they felt that retention effectively addressed the deficiencies that had prompted the discussions; and whether their own educational backgrounds and experiences had helped to shape their expectations. Interviews were transcribed verbatim following the interviews to ensure accuracy of response. Documentation from school districts (board policies) and school retention paperwork (letters to parents, student improvement plan forms and contracts, notification letters, retention factor checklists, etc.) was also gathered for the purpose of providing a deeper understanding of the retention process.

The Process of Retention

As early as October, a letter arrives at the home of seventh grade student, Vanessa Johnson (a pseudonym), addressed to her parents. The opening lines of the letter read:

> Dear Mr. & Mrs. Johnson,
>
> At this time we want you to be aware that your child has the potential of being retained in his/her present grade level. Please call as soon as possible to meet with your student's teachers.

Thus, the process for consideration of whether or not a student will advance from one grade level to the next level begins. At middle schools in both California and Washington, teachers are asked to identify students who are "at-risk" for academic low achievement in their schools as early as possible.

At all seven middle schools studied, teachers and administrators noted that the sooner the process of identification begins, the easier it is to track a student's progress and performance throughout the rest of the school year. "The sooner we know who they are, the sooner we can provide the support to help them become successful," commented Lynne Altmann, principal at Mountainview Middle School. However, of the seven middle schools we studied, three had policies in place that did not allow for retaining students and instead required other interventions to take place. In essence, the schools in our study could be characterized as either retaining or not retaining, but that would be overly simplistic. Some schools whose policies allowed retention sometimes moved students to alternative placements that allowed them to move forward; and some schools

that, on paper, did not retain sometimes moved students to alternative programs that were de facto retentions. Both sets of schools did identify students in need of improvement and at-risk for academic low achievement. For now, we will organize the data by schools whose policies allowed retention and those schools whose policies did not.

It would be difficult to address the issue of retention without also considering the students who, while not retained, are in the category of being at-risk for retention. The difference between the schools who retain and the schools who do not retain is primarily how those students are approached. At the beginning of each year, large numbers of students are identified as being at-risk for low academic achievement. Our data show that those who are able to take advantage of the support and interventions offered or their personal history move onward and those who are not are most often retained.

Criteria for Categorization as At-Risk for Retention

In order to be categorized as "at-risk," students must have attained certain criteria in their coursework. At four of the seven middle schools in our study, students who had two or more Fs in their core courses (language arts, reading, math, science, or social studies) at midpoint and/or end of the first grading term were identified as at-risk for retention. Student effort and attendance were factored in and these might either help or hinder a student's progress toward moving off the at-risk-for-retention list. To further add to the mix, a battery of test data was also factored in, and, in those four schools, students whose test scores demonstrated they could do the work generally were not retained. While we saw slightly different processes at each school, all followed similar record-keeping systems regarding student achievement and attainment of grade level standard.

Once categorized as at-risk, explained Marge Williams, counselor at Riverside Middle School:

> Each child's progress is tracked each year from the time they enter middle school to the time they leave. This database shows which ones are at-risk for retention at their grade level [list is multiple pages with 30-40 names on a page]. I have them identified as either general education students, special ed. students, or ELL students. These columns are for the students' projected ages in eighth grade, the number of conferences we have had with their parents, the dates when they occurred, and whether or not the parent attended. We have a column to indicate if they have been retained before or not as well. So, I try to begin this process as early as possible so we know the relevant information on each child.

Following this initial identification, students and their parents are notified of the low achievement status of the students and a staffing is scheduled involving teachers from the grade level team, school counselor(s), the student, the parent and, on occasion, the principal. For some students, that staffing occurs in September because their previous year's record has followed them to the next grade—but only for seventh and eighth graders. For many parents, this notification occurs at the first set of parent-teacher-student conferences that usually occur in the first week of October. This does not usually surprise parents when it happens early in the year. One teacher, Julie Wilkinson, noted, "Unless the parents have been avoiding communication from the school, they generally know it's coming. The kids aren't surprised either… their teachers have been talking to them about it since the first few weeks of school."

The Plan of Improvement

Depending on the school, the title of the plan for improvement of student achievement varies. However, in all the schools—even those that did not retain—a plan of improvement was developed. The plan might be developed at an early meeting of parents, student, teachers, and counselors; or it might occur during the actual parent-teacher conference at the end of the first grading period. These plans include the expectations the school holds for the student, the kinds of support the school will provide, the necessary student behaviors to avoid retention, and what the parents should do to support the student's success. As Principal Pittman of Fir Park illustrated,

> We used a form that was kind of a contract that said, “This is what we as the school will do. This is what we need to have the student agree to do. This is what the parent should agree to do.”

In this plan, then, students agree to a variety of interventions and behaviors that are designed to help them succeed. Interviews and documentation showed this form of contract was present in all the districts that retained students and was seen as being of benefit to the student. "The individual contract is real similar to an IEP. I think that's…[pauses] that's a strong tool," stated Jack Wellman, a 30-year veteran teacher.

Improvement Plan Intervention Options

The individual student plan includes interventions school personnel believe will help support attainment of targets set for the student. These interventions include: tracers, a form of progress report that could be utilized on a daily, weekly, or biweekly schedule; before- and after-school homework tutorials in any subjects—not just those that students were failing—by teachers or, in some cases, instructional aides; progress meetings of students, parents, teachers, and counselors; counseling on issues of home life or study skills; intercessional school, which takes place during holiday breaks of the school year (winter and spring breaks); and as a final option, summer school. In the case of Fir Park Middle School, a school in a district that allows for retention but uses many safety nets to avoid it, measures to alter the repeated year exist. Student schedules are modified so that they have reduced-enrollment classes (10-15 students) with teachers in the courses they have failed, or they are allowed to attend alternative middle school programs. The student might have the option of shifting to an alternative program within the school that permits the student to take a reduced class load augmented by supervised independent study. Principal Pittman explained,

> The reason for the alternative was we know there are some kids that just don't make it in the classroom. But a second piece was that if a student fails and starts repeating a grade, and they're getting support and it's still not working, why would you keep going for another year like that? So they then move into the alternative setting.

At the end of the year, Fir Park students have a choice. They can opt to either go on to high school or to attend the alternative high school. Eighth grade students who are candidates for retention are placed in a transition or, as Pittman describes it, "a halfway class" where high school teachers teach a period or two of English or math at Fir Park; then the students go to the high school for some elective courses "just to get the message to the kids, 'You're not quite there yet … you need to be showing us that you can go.'"

Implementation of the Plan

After grade level team teachers, the student, and the parent(s) sign the improvement plan, all the players are now obligated to follow through. The onus, however, rests on the shoulders of the student. The language of the improvement plan from three middle schools makes this clear: "I have been notified that I am at-risk of not being promoted to the next level. I understand that I must meet the requirements outlined in the exit standards .... I will take responsibility for my learning and my attendance." Now, the student must complete the work in accordance with the plan or truly be at-risk for retention. "For those kids riding the fence, that really just kind of need a wakeup call, that we're dead serious about this—those are the kids… we will get. And that's more than we had before," explained Principal Montfort of Skyview Middle School. If the student completes his/her work and does improve, after two consecutive improved quarters, he/she is taken off the improvement plan. However, Jack Wellman of Mountainview cautioned,

> The problem we run into is that as we move through the school year, we see the same students that we have started [on the plan] in the fall still being at-risk each of the other quarters. And ultimately when they do that … when they hit the last quarter… it's an obligation on our part to retain them, by district policy—whether it's going to be successful for them or not.

Each month from the point that students are first assigned a student improvement plan until the end of the year, building principals or counselors (depending on who handles and tracks the retention process) meet with grade level teams to determine which students remain on the at-risk-for-retention list. From December through March, student midterm and term grades are monitored and reviewed. Staff meetings with parents continue, and successes and modifications of the improvement plan are documented. Further interventions are

recommended as needed and added to the plan.

In the spring at the end of the third quarter, Washington middle schools hold their second formal parent-student-teacher conferences and parents of students who are at-risk for retention, the student, and teachers discuss student progress. By the end of the year, the number of students at-risk for retention has dropped from more than 100 to somewhere between 15 and 30. Principals then review with counselors and teachers to see if any students are ineligible for retention because of linguistic issues, IEPs, maturation (age in eighth grade), prior retention, or other mitigating factors. "I drive my teachers crazy," chuckled Mrs. Altmann. "Every month, there I am to ask them if all the kids on the list are still on the list." This prompted another teacher to poignantly observe, "It's almost as if filling out those forms and making sure we have all the proper procedures followed is more important than the actual things we do for the students." Those students are eliminated from the list.

Finally, in May or June, a last meeting occurs with the parents and student to inform parents of the decision to retain a student. At that time, the form indicating the student has not met the "standards for automatic promotion" is completed with the decision either to retain or promote the student and the reasons for the decision. The principal, teacher, parents or guardians, and counselor(s) all sign the form. All signatories have the option of disagreeing with the recommendation of the group. At varying times, parents, teachers, counselors, or principals have disagreed with the decision. If parents disagree, they have the right to appeal to the district administration for review and repeal of the retention decision. Repeal, however, is not automatic. Teachers or counselors who do not agree with the committee decision must, in effect, convince the principal either to promote or retain. In the event that they cannot convince the principal of their view, they are allowed to sign the promotion/retention form as being in non-agreement. When the principal does not agree with the decision to retain (and no principal was willing to retain over the recommendations of the parents and teachers), a similar persuasive argument process occurs.

Responses to Low Achievement in Non-Retaining Schools

In the other three schools, situations varied but retention was not part of the program. At Mount Diablo Middle School in California, retention is not likely to occur because of the school district's policy to allow students passing two or more classes to advance. "You took, let's say, P.E. and woodshop. You passed P.E. and woodshop all year and got As in those, you'd be able to walk," says Gavin Collosandro, a teacher at Mount Diablo. San Joaquin—a two-year middle school—goes one step farther. Their policy is to promote students once they have reached the seventh and eighth grades and, in fact, to discourage parents who request retention for their children from doing so. Students are assessed along a continuum that includes grade point average, test scores, social interaction, and parental input. Ken Nettles, principal of San Joaquin, explains:

> So there's a large number of different things you can look at. And if one area demonstrates that they have the ability, then that's enough to move them forward… So there's a lot of different areas you can look to and say, "Where is this child performing?" And even if all those scores are low but socially they're ready to move forward, then that's still an indicator that they need to move forward.

In Washington, Puget Sound Middle School does not retain students. Although their district policy does not speak to retention, it does have a regulation allowing for retention, but only at the behest of the parent.

> A student shall be retained or advanced outside of normal grade progression only if such action would seem of benefit to the student. The question of retention or advancement shall be considered carefully by the student's teacher(s), counselor, and principal. The reasons for retention or advancement shall be documented (Puget Sound School District, 1985).

However, the decision to retain will not be shared with the student "prior to the parental conference" (Puget Sound School District, 1985).

All three of these schools also have students whose achievement raises concerns as to whether they have mas-

tered curricular content for a given grade. However, educators in these schools expressed awareness of research that advises against retention and concern for the efficacy of this practice.

In the End, Who Is Retained?

Although school personnel may consider a variety of relevant circumstances in their evaluation of a given student, attainment of academic standards for a given grade level is the primary consideration in decisions about promotion and retention in that school district (Larsen, 2002). Participants in this study universally noted that the single indicator that retention is warranted tended to be a student's grades. Lack of attendance, which often affects grades, also factored into the decision. The issue of "holding students accountable" for a lack of work or disrespectful attitude was pervasive, but the inconsistency with which it was applied created problems. Tom Lacoste, a counselor, questioned the practice:

> There's no teeth in it. Kids know that the number of kids retained is pretty small. They know that their friends the previous year were on the list, didn't do anything, and still passed. The decision to retain is so arbitrary and sometimes punitive. There is a gap between what the student improvement plan states and what actually happens. Either the policy has to be followed or not followed; but currently, who gets retained and who doesn't get retained is arbitrary.

The number of students on the retention list is also problematic. What do schools do when there are 25 students on the list at the end of the year? "Our principal/counselor tells us that's too many students to be retained," confirmed several teachers from varied middle schools. "There's a number that's not too high and not too low," says Alice Gardner, a seventh grade teacher. The actual number of retained students at each school usually resided between 6 and 15, "but two dozen, that's too many!" expressed counselor, Elaine Rich.

Jack Wellman complains the decision to retain is not consistent:

> There are some discrepancies among teachers as they look for patterns of lack of success. For example, the student who is very bright who chooses to do little or no work and has attendance issues. Should that student be retained or not? Teachers see it in different ways and to different degrees.

The actual number of students retained was a reflection of the convergence of several potential factors: the student improvement plan, support of the child from home, changed levels of motivation of the student, prior retention history, or a willingness to gamble with the odds. "A very small number of kids are actually retained because they see what's coming down the pike. I say, 'Why didn't you guys do this all year?'" explained Mrs. Altmann, smiling. But a number of teachers were also troubled by this promotion rate. Christie Sharp, clearly unhappy with the process, explained,

> You can see that the child doesn't have the skills to move on.... You can see that they're probably not going to be successful in the next grade, but you don't have a place to keep them. And when it comes down to crunch time, the [grade level] team finds reasons to retain one kid and not another. Sometimes it's because they feel this kid needs to be taught a lesson, sometimes the kid just needs more time, sometimes the kid hasn't been in school most of the year and you just struggle with the decision—why this kid and not this one? The kids can't be retained again because they've already been retained, but they don't have the skills. As a teacher, it's always a dilemma.

School counselors in several buildings agreed with this assessment. Becky Bowman reflected the sentiments of her colleagues: "The kids know that only so many students will be retained—and some of them are willing to play those odds. But it's our job as counselors to advocate for the students in these decisions."

The transition from elementary to middle school is often the point where the first red flag is raised. No longer are students in self-contained classrooms with a single teacher who knows them like a parent. Now, they face the increased rigors of middle level curriculum, a flexible schedule, and bodily changes over which they have no control. "The changes that kids undergo—you don't know if the academic achievement drop is because of

the jump from elementary to middle or because they don't know the material," Bowman added.

The question of who is retained, then, comes down to a set of often arbitrary and inconsistently applied standards. Teachers know that grades do not necessarily reflect growth, that lack of attendance may not reflect a lack of attainment of standards, and that students know the odds are in their favor, and finally, that there is an acceptable number of retentions and an unacceptable number of retentions that is not recorded in policy. The level of frustration felt by teachers and administrators leads to highly inconsistent applications of policy.

The Collision of Theory and Practice

Without exception our participants said, "We know retention doesn't work. We've read the literature and seen it first hand." Counselors, administrators, and teachers across all the schools, and even the parents, agreed that their major concern was that the retention would not have much effect, that it would not make a difference in the student's academic achievement. Their conclusion? The only time retention is conceivable for a student is when the student needs the "gift of time" to mature physically, socially, and/or emotionally. The academics seem to be secondary to this. All our participants said that the only time they saw retention benefit the student was when the student was very immature and needed time to grow. Furthermore, retaining a student was a sure way to "guarantee failure" if the child and the parent were not accepting of the decision. This leaves teachers frustrated and disquieted. They are caught between the research, everyday practice, and board policy. Funding and staffing levels mean that whatever new approaches are chosen must be externally funded and done while making all the efforts to meet reform requirements. Currently, Mountainview, Riverside, and Skyview teachers and administrators are frustrated by this contradictory practice. At Fir Park, Mr. Pittman, with the greatest variety of interventions of any of the schools in our study, remains dissatisfied as well. Terry Wise, a former principal and teacher, commented on his yearning for something more effective:

> What are our options? We don't have many choices for the student—what is different the next year when we retain them? We hope the next year is different. Sometimes we move them from one team to another. We don't have enough interventions to help the kid. Some students are retained for their behavior, but mostly it has to do with their motivation levels. Is motivation going to change when we make them do it again? I don't think so.

Parental Input and Roles

While parents are always invited into the decision-making process from the beginning, it is not by any means an easy process for either teachers or students. We were able to garner insight as to parental responses to the process from teachers, but have, thus far, been unable to acquire such a clear picture from the parents due to a low participation rate. The four parents who spoke to us generally reinforced what we had learned from teachers. They were "unhappy with the decision at first, but knew it was coming." As Verna Koenig, parent of a retained seventh grader, remarked, "I knew at the beginning of the year, but Chrissy thought that she would still slide through.... She did summer school in sixth and seventh grade; and when the school recommended retention, I asked for it, too." In Chrissy's case, her mother was very supportive of the decision, but also had concerns. "I worried about the teasing she might get. I didn't want her to have hurt feelings, and she was real mad at me, too." Mrs. Koenig noted that she didn't think retention did any good because Chrissy's repeated year "was a disaster. She was going to show me that it didn't work."

Mrs. Gonzales had a different experience with her son, Ernesto, who is repeating seventh grade this year. She feels he has benefited from being retained, but "he was very small and he couldn't focus. The counselors and teachers told me it would help him to do it again." At first she was disappointed at the recommendation early in the year. She hoped he would "pick it up" but by the spring conference had reconciled to the decision. Although it is too early this year to tell if Ernesto has gained from repeating the year, the school has not yet contacted her about any problems.

Still, teachers and administrators sometimes have a hard time discerning where parents really stand. "To be

real honest, I believe sometimes the parents are receptive to just get us off their backs," noted Principal Altmann. Some parents put their faith in the school's recommendations. Alice Gardner commented, "Parents think it's all in our hands here at the school. They'll come to us and say, 'What should I do?' Maybe they didn't agree 100% [with the decision to retain]… but they weren't necessarily against it either." But another situation also existed among parents and their children. As Alex Pittman wryly noted,

> The kids weren't cooperating at home and obviously weren't studying. And so when the kid's grades were failing, the parents asked that their kids be retained as a punishment. They really… they were trying to show their kids that they'd better cooperate with the parent to move on rather than talking from a learning point of view where there may be some good generated by repeating something.

The Conflict of Values and Expectations

A pervasive theme of values and expectations threaded through our interviews with educators. At the heart of this theme was the notion that, while school personnel might have a clear sense of how academic effort, purpose, and rigor are related to student success, many parents and students do not share these priorities. Indeed, as research studies (Epstein, 2001; Jackson & Davis, 2000; Mapp, 1997) have shown, parents and teachers often view parental involvement in school very differently. Although some of the participants were inclined to take a "step up to the plate and do your job" attitude toward families in which students were experiencing failure in school, others sought to reconcile the evident disparity between students whose basic needs—including food, shelter, and safety—are being met and students whose daily lives are marked by poverty, turmoil, and doubt.

By education and inclination, educators tend to embrace an ethic of caring (Noddings, 1995, 1999; Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2001). "Students are at the center of the educational process and need to be nurtured and encouraged, a concept that likely goes against the grain of those attempting to make 'achievement' the top priority" (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2001, p. 16). Time and again in our study, teachers noted the challenges students faced and the factors that they knew affected student achievement, as well as the pressure to hold students accountable.

Three principals in the study noted that educators have conflicting ethical responses to the reality that poverty and privation tend to influence academic attainment. Both Altmann and Pittman, in essence, agreed that there are many reasons for teachers and administrators to say, "Well, these kids don't have anybody pushing them at home, so we'll just kind of make them feel good." However, Pittman emphasized that such an attempt at empathy fails to acknowledge that benchmarks for promotion and, eventually, graduation will apply equally to students whose parents support high expectations and to students whose parents are incapable of modeling those expectations. Over the past several years, he and the staff at Fir Park have adopted criteria for promotion from one grade to the next. Mr. Pittman said,

> What I've tried to infuse at Fir Park is, "We can't deal with what we don't have control over." And so we need to be aware if there is something at home, but we can't fix that. We don't even try. We're here for academics and continuity for kids, and we just kind of let that piece go as much as possible. Everywhere I've been, teachers have always fixated on that [lack of a supporting home environment] as a reason not to demand excellence from kids, and their classes aren't as rigorous.

While it might be argued that the promotion standards at Fir Park merely ease staff members' unsettled consciences about the need to apply state-mandated requirements to all students, the strategy may, in fact, represent a middle path (Kidder, 1995) between conflicting demands. The participants in our study consistently reported that in many, if not all, cases in which retention is considered an option, the factors weighing in favor of retaining a student have their origins outside the walls of the school. The family is living in poverty; drug abuse by one or more adults in the home renders a nurturing environment for an adolescent improbable; this month's apartment will be supplanted by another next month as a single parent works two jobs to match a miniscule income with mounting bills. As they view such circumstances through a perspective of "caring,"

and at the same time believe that certain standards should be considered unassailable, the participants are torn between competing ideologies.

In Altmann's and Pittman's cases, determining what the school can and cannot control helps the teachers and counselors in their buildings focus on the priority of learning. “We deal with what we can deal with, and that's learning in the classroom,” Mr. Pittman said. According to his perspective, when a student fails, the finger of blame ultimately points at what the school did or did not do. “We didn't have something in place to support them,” he said. “We know every kid is capable if we do it right.”

Ken Nettles, the principal at San Joaquin Middle School—a school that does not retain—tends to take a less charitable view of the factors that lead to retention. The environment in which the student lives serves as a predictable antecedent to a parent-teacher-counselor-principal discussion about retention. The parents “already know that their kid isn't doing well. And they know that they're probably responsible for it, either because of their gene pool or because they haven't taken the time to do it [support the expectations of the school].”

However, Principal Nettles is reluctant to blame the student. More often than not, a student's academic performance, whether measured as success or failure, is a matter of history repeating itself. “It's just back to that cycle. You come from parents that aren't bright; chances are that you're not going to be bright. It just keeps going.” While 37% of his students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, many reflect the affluence of the gated driveways that dot the community surrounding the middle school. He rarely has to weigh whether one of these students should be retained. “You do deal with a spoiled-brat syndrome with them. And you deal with drug issues with them,” he observed. The majority of parents who enjoy a comfortable existence not only value education, they also instill that priority in their middle-school age children. By contrast, students who become the focus of concern for retention seldom enjoy such an advantage. Although he gives vent to a deep-seated frustration with parents who seem either inept at or unwilling to accept their role as parent, Mr. Nettles acknowledges that he and his colleagues feel ethically bound to act as a sort of “catcher in the rye,” a safety net that might turn aside inevitable failure. “We're going to pick up the role of parenting for them,” he declared.

Conclusion

We began the current study guided by three central questions: (1) What does retention look like at the middle level? (2) How do schools effectively involve parents in the retention decision-making process? And (3) what effect does this parental input have on the decision to retain?

The interviews we conducted in middle schools in Washington and California illustrate that while some schools continue to include retention as a strategy for students who do not measure up to standards for promotion, other schools have discontinued the practice. One might surmise that educators both in schools that retain and in schools that do not would be ready to defend their practice. However, we found that teachers, counselors, and principals express serious concerns about the efficacy of retaining a student but also find merely promoting the student to the next grade unsatisfying. As one participant noted, “We're damned if we do [retain], and we're damned if we don't.” If there is a theme of confidence in any of the practices about which participants talked, that theme emerged around practices that offer an alternative to retention. Practitioners who know the research that warns against the unwanted consequences that tend to emanate from retention, but who also feel that social promotion merely delays inevitable failure, seem to find a sort of “middle path” (Kidder, 1995) in alternatives such as we found at Fir Park. However, we suspect that, even though these alternatives may offer a way for the school and the student to dodge the “retention bullet,” removing a low-achieving student from his or her grade level setting may, in fact, be a form of retention.

The role of parents in discussions that precede a decision about retention played out consistently across all seven schools in the study. Several of our participants noted that a parent might advocate retaining his/her middle school student as a punishment for failing to show initiative or cooperation. Such a proposal by a parent is likely to reflect other draconian, but largely ineffective, disciplinary strategies the parent already has

attempted. Participants in the study universally expressed a disinclination to place the school in the role of "enforcer" when the evident motive of the parent was to add the school's clout to an ineffective arsenal of parenting strategies.

When the school initiates the conversation about traits that point to risk of retention, parents are rarely taken by surprise. The staff members who have participated in discussions with parents emphasized the importance of communicating with parents, early and often, starting long before a decision about repeating a grade must be made.

However, the most compellingly consistent refrain that we heard across all of our interviews was the almost invariable likelihood that the student's family will already be affected by poverty, lack of educational attainment by the parents, disruption within the family, and other indicators that frequently foreshadow low academic achievement. Retention represents but another chapter in the history of a family that is surviving at the margins of society. The current study confirms what previous research has shown: the practice of retention is applied disproportionately to those students who already lack social and economic capital.

We remain unsettled as to whether retention should be considered for any student. The current standards-driven initiatives at the state and federal levels seem to require that schools incorporate strategies that hold students and parents accountable. Our study suggests that, when the factors that point to retention include immaturity, the repeated year may truly offer a "gift of time"; however, one can only tell this after the student has been retained. By then, the die has been cast.

As principals, counselors, and teachers involve parents in discussions about achievement, promotion, and retention, some of the parents, at least initially, may respond to the school's initiative as "picking on my child." However, our study finds that early communication with parents is crucial in winning parent support for whatever outcomes result in the spring. A wake-up call in late September or early October may prompt both greater effort from the student and increased press for academic focus from home. The most promising scenario we encountered combines that early communication with frequent monitoring by school personnel and a plan of intervention aimed at boosting the student's academic competence.

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