Research at a Glance

Jeff Craig, NYSMSA Director of Research and Technology

In the Fall 2005 In Transition, *this column described the research about retention. This edition's column explores some of the reasons behind the research-practice gap and then argues that the retention versus social promotion argument is a false dichotomy and that an alternative is necessary.*

The Research-Practice Gap

The research about retention is clear: it doesn't work and there is considerable evidence that suggests the process does harm to children who are retained. Few things in education are as clear as this, but millions of students are retained each year in spite of the research.

Why does retention remain such a widespread practice? An examination of the literature suggests that there is no single reason for the disconnect between research and practice. On the one hand, it is suggested that the decision to retain a child is made in ignorance of the research. On the other hand, it appears that the decision to retain is sometimes made with a conscious disregard of the research. What follows is a description of the various reasons offered to explain why retention remains such a prevalent practice.

Public ignorance of the research. Public understanding of retention and its implications is shallow. Educational research is typically inaccessible to the general public and is rarely referenced in the mass-market media outlets such as television or newspapers. Yet it takes a close examination of the research to conclude that retention is ill-advised. Unfamiliarity with the research can explain why some people continue to support the practice of retention. Retention has been going on for more than one hundred years, so retention is a common aspect of the educational experiences of many people. In our own educational experiences, we can recall students being retained. Without considering the research on retention, there would be little reason to suspect the practice does harm or damage.

Social promotion seems wrong. In general, the political policy makers and the general public are uncomfortable with the notion of social promotion. If social promotion is unacceptable, then, by extension, the opposite (retention) must be the better alternative. Because social promotion runs counter to cultural mores of earned advancement, the alternative of retention is advanced and applied all across the country. It seems to violate the "Puritan work ethic" if someone gets something (social promotion) for nothing (Parker, 2001). Social promotion itself isn't a good idea. It's just that retention, as an alternative to social promotion, is worse. Until one learns that retention doesn't work and that it causes harm to many children there is no reason to argue against it.

Unprepared workforce. Employers and the public are demanding that students demonstrate mastery of basic skills. Employers are also reporting that their workers don't have basic skills and that they must spend a great deal of money retraining their workers (Sharing Success, 2004). There are mounting concerns about the inability of the workforce in the United States to be ready for global competition. Similarly, claims of students who are ill-prepared for college permeate the media (Sharing Success). It just seems counterintuitive to pass on students who have not mastered the learning; common sense would seem to suggest that additional

time, in the form of another year, would help (Wheelock, 2000).

Political pressures. The political cries against social promotion are loud and persistent, and several U.S. Presidents and many governors are quite publicly indicting the practice (Holmes & Saturday, 2000). Governors are pledging to eliminate social promotion (Jimerson & Kaufman, 2003). In an increasing number of political races, social promotion is used as a political issue (Holmes & Saturday). In the politically charged environment of California, the legislature has passed laws about social promotion (Jimerson & Kaufman). At least ten more states have adopted policies against social promotion (Jimerson & Kaufman). As long as policy-makers make their decisions without regard to the research, retention will continue.

Teacher and administrator ignorance of the research. Teachers and administrators are often unfamiliar with the research and so they make retention recommendations in ignorance of the potential harm that can befall the retained student. In a survey of teachers from ten different schools, almost none of the teachers could name a single harmful effect of retention (Shepard & Smith, 1989). In that study, the same teachers who could not describe any harm that retention might cause reported that they would prefer to err on the side of retention rather than err on the side of social promotion (Shepard & Smith). This is evidence of a considerable disconnect between what the research says and what practitioners believe.

"Unscientific" research. The lack of double-blind or randomly assigned experiments might be a reason why the question continues to be raised. At least this might be true if one conceded that the strictly experimental form of research (as required in NCLB) was the only worthy form of research. But doing such research is unethical (Thompson & Kolb, 1999). Students cannot be randomly retained or promoted and then studied to see whether the retention worked. Instead, researchers use other methods to inform their conclusions: correlational studies, matched pairs, and meta-analyses. While these research methodologies are generally accepted and produced conclusions with excellent confidence intervals, double-blind and random assignment studies are impossible to conduct. Strict application of Positivist principles, as included in NCLB, imply that methods other than double-blind, random assignment are not rigorous enough to be used for decision making.

Lack of social promotion research. No statistics are kept that document the number of students who are socially promoted (Thompson & Kolb, 1999). Without these numbers, it is difficult to accurately describe the extent of social promotion. In one case, eighty-five school districts were surveyed and it was found that none of these districts had a written policy of social promotion; yet, social promotion was applied frequently (Thompson & Kolb). Studies that attempt to measure the success or failure of social promotion are difficult to find; instead, the conclusions about social promotion are extrapolated from studies that indicate the harmful effects of retention.

Abuse of the research. There are people who identify themselves as educators who promote retention as a fair, necessary practice. In one case, a former classroom teacher who now travels the country as a self-proclaimed retention "expert" encourages "additional learning time" for students who have not demonstrated mastery of content (Grant, 1997). Grant contends that retention is correction for educational misplacement.

The swinging pendulum. Some educators argue that the answers to many educational policy questions change from time to time, like the swinging of a pendulum. It is possible that the backlash against social promotion is just a swing in a particular direction of the pendulum (Parker, 2001). Blaming a metaphorical pendulum for shifts in policy is a trick that allows

people to avoid a close, perhaps difficult, confrontation with the research on retention.

The path of least resistance. To some, retention seems like an easy answer to the complex problem of raising achievement for students of all situations (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2004). Simply retaining a student does not require any new programs, new training, or new services. Students who repeat the same grade have another opportunity to learn the material. If the second time through the curriculum is the same as the first time, some policymakers maintain that students are more likely to succeed given the familiarity of the curriculum (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development). Retention itself is not a stand-alone program since retained students are blended in with other students. Therefore, retention is not really scrutinized as a separate program and is not really considered by policy-making groups and Boards of Education (Natriello, 1998).

Internal political pressures. Another reason that retention continues as a practice in schools has to do with the pressures exerted on principals and decision makers within schools. Schools are political places, and administrators must take into account the attitudes and perceptions of community members and the teachers in their schools. Administrators hear the public reactions to reports that graduates are ill-prepared and lacking basic skills (Natriello, 1998). Administrators also hear from teachers in their buildings who are frustrated over students who are not motivated or prepared (Natriello). Having students in classes who have been socially promoted can mean that a class might contain a wider range of experiences and abilities, which presses the need for differentiation of instruction. Administrators report that they have to balance the abilities of their teachers to differentiate and respond to the varied needs of students with the research about retention, and that they frequently decide to retain students as a result (Natriello).

The Missing Profession

There are many reasons why the practice of retention continues despite the overwhelming arguments against it. Many of those reasons have been described in the previous paragraphs. Some of the reasons have a greater impact; others might have a lesser impact. Yet, taken as a group, the totality of those reasons is substantial and seemingly strong enough to counter the weight of the research. In the absence of a concerted, large-scale public education campaign (unlikely to occur given the present political leadership) the disparity between research and practice is likely to persist.

The situation exists, in part, as a result of the professional vacuum in education. If education was more like medicine, there would be a greater emphasis on research and a greater expectation that research and best practice be applied in schools. Because this "guild power" is lacking in education, there is no valued or sacred science to teaching and education. Without such science, the public can disregard the research about retention and simply dismiss it. Not only can the public disregard the research because there is no perceived science in education, practitioners within the field of education can choose to disregard the research. This explains why so many teachers seek to retain students despite the overwhelming research to the contrary. If teachers don't value the research or act as if there is any science to education, there is no reason for the public to do so.

Education is not a profession and does not have the sacred research orientation that professionalization brings. Nor is it likely to have a "science of education" any time soon, despite what the Holmes Group predicted (Johnson, 1987). Research in the field of education certainly does exist, but a faithful application of research in education is lacking (Johnson). This suggests the solution to the retention versus social promotion debate does not, in fact, lie with the research. The research against retention exists; the public and practitio-

ners alike continue to ignore the research to a great extent. No, the solution lies in an emphasis on alternatives to both retention and social promotion.

A False Dichotomy

Frequently, retention is used in schools as the alternative to social promotion. As described previously, the argument is made that a student should not be promoted if she/he hasn't demonstrated mastery of required standards or if she/he has failed to do the work. It is an oversimplification, though, to say that it is an either/or situation.

This series (see the last edition of *In Transition*) began with a summarization of the research on retention: retention does not work and can cause harm to those who are retained. This article did not argue that social promotion is an effective strategy for increasing achievement. Indeed, no proponent of social promotion in and of itself could be found. If the choice is social promotion or retention, then social promotion must be the choice because it has not been shown to do the harm that retention often causes. The societal pressures against social promotion seem to be the reason that retention is so frequently applied. Until those societal pressures are significantly reduced, the widespread practice of retention is likely to continue. It is likely to continue, however, in the absence of alternatives. Those alternatives do exist and have been successfully employed as a third option. The decision doesn't have to be retention or social promotion: many alternatives exist that have proved effective. Some of those alternatives will be discussed here.

Training for teachers. Studies have shown that the quality of the teacher is the most important influence on student achievement (Darling-Hammond, 1998). Better teaching, argues Darling-Hammond, will enable students who have previously been unsuccessful to be successful: "Teaching that is developmentally, cognitively, and culturally responsive enables a greater range of students to succeed." If teachers were better prepared to work with students of differing abilities and achievement, retention would not be necessary. With better prepared teachers, students would meet with success in subsequent years.

Packing in additional instruction. Students who are struggling in a particular area can receive additional instruction in that area. Some schools are providing twice the amount of mathematics or language arts work to struggling students, a practice that has been shown to be effective (Woelfel, 2003). Packing a schedule with extra, targeted instruction allows students to proceed socially with their peers while attending to deficits. The downside to the additional instruction is that students might have to give up an elective to provide time in the schedule for the additional instruction. Some urban areas have telescoped two years of studies into three years to allow for additional instruction and still leave room for electives and studies in areas of interest (Woelfel).

Wrap around additional instruction. Another way to provide additional instruction is by using the time before and after school. In some schools, students arrive early to get a start on their day and receive additional instruction. In other schools, this takes place after school. Instruction can be focused on academic areas or readiness for instruction can be enhanced through study skills, mentor, or attendance supports.

Focus on the essential. If the focus of instruction can be narrowed for unsuccessful students, it is more likely that students can meet a lesser number of objectives (Parker, 2001). This does not mean that students don't meet the state-identified standards. It means that students focus more narrowly on the state standards (must know) and ignore the important to know and nice to know items in the curricula.

Learner-centered environments. Historically, schools have been oriented around teaching

rather than learning. If school environments were significantly altered to be more learner-centered, previously failing students can be successful (Thomas, 2000). Thomas describes a learner-centered environment as one in which high expectations for all students of all races and genders are juxtaposed with efforts to ensure that all students belong and are valued (2000).

Better assessment. Frequently, the lack of effective feedback is cited as a contributing factor to the lack of student success. Assessment that is better aligned to instructional objectives and assessment that is more formative than summative can help previously unsuccessful students become successful (Parker, 2001) (Darling-Hammond, 1998). Better assessment practices will result in more succinct feedback for students; students will therefore have a better sense of progress and how close they are to meeting the target (Parker). In addition to a greater application of formative assessments, assessments that are more performance-oriented can have a positive impact on student achievement (Darling-Hammond).

Relationships and belonging. It has been shown that students are more successful in schools that are designed to be smaller and more personal (Darling-Hammond, 2003). Students are more likely to feel like they belong if the school they attend is smaller. Large schools can approximate smaller size via team, house, and academy subdivisions. In addition to creating smaller school settings, schools can create structures that promote long-term relationships between students and staff; relationships have been shown to have a positive impact on student achievement (Darling-Hammond).

Conclusion

The resolution of the retention – social promotion debate lies with an emphasis on alternatives to both. Retention is ineffective and potentially harmful. Social promotion doesn't impact student achievement and is presently socially and politically unpopular. Therefore, there must be another option. There are, in fact, many alternatives and approaches that have been shown to help students who have been unsuccessful to meet with future success. Rather than emphasizing the debate between retention and social promotion, resources should be directed toward the deliberate and systematic implementation of the alternatives.

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