



Research at a Glance

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Retention and Social Promotion: The Implications for Standards- Focused, Middle-Level Schools and Programs

The Era of Accountability

The era of higher standards and increased testing in middle-level schools and programs has refueled the debate between the seemingly incongruous practices of retention and social promotion. “Accountability” has become the mantra of policy makers and the mainstream media. Middle schools are now being held more accountable than ever for the success of students and middle schools are now being publicly labeled via accountability systems and rating scales. Indeed, newspapers regularly report charts that compare local schools using test scores. The State Education Department annually issues School Report Cards that compare certain indices among schools. Schools and districts are now labeled “in need of improvement.” The pressure is on all schools to meet the minimums on the accountability indices and to make Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) for total populations and disaggregated subgroups (minorities, economically disadvantaged, and special education subgroups). If a single disaggregated subgroup does not meet the expected levels, then the entire school (and school district) is labeled. The accountability spotlight is shining brighter now on our middle schools than ever before.

This movement toward “accountability” in public education has reached inside the schools and touched individual students. Students must “be accountable” for earning credits and passing

an ever-increasing amount of standardized assessments. Students must be “held accountable” for their learning, typically as measured on high stakes exams. In a standards-based environment, in which meeting a standard is the goal, students are frequently being “held accountable” by being retained until they have met particular grade-level or assessment requirements. Demands that students be held accountable can be heard from many corners. Bill Clinton called for it in more than one State of the Union Address (Thomas, 2000). George Bush made similar statements as Governor of Texas, statements that were then codified into the No Child Left Behind Act (Holmes & Saturday, 2000).

Because standardized test scores have become synonymous for the standards themselves, test scores become the sole measure for determining whether a student is meeting expectations and standards (Wheelock, 2000). In many cases, whether a student is promoted to the next grade becomes dependent on a score on a standardized test. It used to be that the decision whether to promote a student solely based on a test score was in the hands of the school. Now many states are legislating that promotion to the next grade level be dependent on a test score (Jimerson & Kaufman, 2003). As the number of tests that students must take increases year after year, greater numbers of students are not scoring at the levels set as minimums for grade promotion.

The fact that more and more students are not scoring high enough on standardized tests has focused attention on the retention versus social promotion argument. The number of students in

this predicament is considerable: hundreds of thousands of students are being retained due to insufficient test scores (Wheelock, 2000).

There is a certain face-validity to the idea that the repetition of a grade level in school will result in greater achievement, the mastery of unmastered material, and higher test scores. This is the argument that is often heard in the media and the legislatures (Jimerson & Kaufman, 2003). Thus, the retention versus social promotion argument is as clamorous as ever. This is not a new argument; references to the argument stretch back through the past century (Anderson, et al, 2002). This is another occasion for the metaphor of the swinging pendulum to be used. During the 1970's, social promotion was the generally-accepted practice, which was supported by the converging research of the 1980's that argued against retention (Thompson & Kolb, 1999). In the 1990's, however, public sentiment shifted against social promotion and toward the retention of students (Wheelock, 2000). Now, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, the public cry for accountability is weighing in on the issue. The sides in this debate do not seem to be drawn between educators and the public; the argument rages within the education world itself. In fact, "Perhaps no topic in public education suffers from a greater divide between the views of researchers and the view of practitioners and the public" (Jimerson & Kaufman). So, what are the arguments?

Holding Students Accountable Means Ending Social Promotion

On the surface, it's hard to argue that students who have not yet learned material should be passed on to the next grade level where new and probably more complex and difficult material will be encountered. Promoting students who are not prepared just doesn't make sense, argue the critics of social promotion. Students must be held back (retained) until they have proved themselves ready for the increased rigor of subsequent years. Social-promotion disclaim-

ers state that social promotion not only hides individual failure, it hides the failures of schools to properly educate their students. According to Sharing Success (2004), a litany of problems is identified by critics of social promotion:

- ◆ Students learn that achievement isn't important.
- ◆ Parents are misled about their child's academic progress and preparation.
- ◆ Business and colleges must spend millions of dollars to teach skills that should have been learned in high school.
- ◆ Society includes an increasing number of citizens unprepared to lead productive lives.

Another argument that opponents of social promotion advance is that students who are retained will learn the hard lesson of life: that hard work and pain may be necessary in the short-term to realize long-term gains (Sharing Success, 2004). Students will be more frustrated in the future when they can't succeed without basic skills, the argument goes, than they feel frustrated about being held back for a year (Thompson & Kolb, 1999).

Anecdotally, this author can report that teachers in multiple schools feel that it just isn't right to advance a student who hasn't done the work. Colleagues report that it isn't fair to the students who do their work and it isn't fair to teach the failing student that she/he can just go on to the next grade without doing what was asked.

Faced with these simple and considerable arguments, why do many researchers question the practice of holding students accountable that practitioners and the media proclaim?

Retention: It Just Doesn't Work

The reasons against social promotion detailed above are compelling, especially given the basic principles of fairness, hard work, and honesty that social promotion seems to eschew.

Yet a careful examination of the track record of students who have been retained does not yield information that supports the practice. In fact, the research is clear: retention does not work and might actually harm some students.

Retention is a widespread practice. By some estimates, more than 2.4 million students are retained each year in the United States (Anderson et al, 2002). Another measure suggests that between fifteen and nineteen percent of students are retained every year (Holmes & Saturday, 2000). This is far greater than the rates in many other countries, including Germany, Japan, and the United Kingdom (Holmes & Saturday).

Retention is expensive. There is a cost associated with retention for schools. This cost is passed on to the community and state through the additional per pupil expenditures. Some estimates point to costs that exceed \$14 billion per year ((Jimerson & Kaufman, 2003). Because students who are enrolled in urban districts are more likely to be retained than their suburban counterparts, the financial burden is greater on the school districts that are already experiencing fiscal crises and underfunded budgets (Wheelock, 2000).

Retention is strongly connected with dropout rates and, in fact, is the best single predictor of dropping out. Studies have shown that students who have been retained are between two and eleven times more likely to drop out than promoted students (Anderson, et al). Some students have been retained more than once, and for these students the research is startling: the risk of dropping out is increased by ninety percent (Holmes & Saturday, 2000). This holds true even when retained subjects are carefully matched with low performing, promoted students.

Dozens of studies have been examined and it has been shown that retention is not only

correlated with dropping out, it has been identified as an early predictor of later dropping out from school (Jimerson & Kaufman, 2003). Students who have been held back are more likely to drop out than underachieving students (Wheelock, 2000). Overall, retention has been identified as the single most effective predictor of dropping out (Jimerson & Kaufman).

Retention is applied unfairly. Additionally, the students who have been shown to benefit the least from retention are the very students to whom the practice is applied. Boys are retained more frequently than girls and minority students are retained more often than white students (Anderson et al, 2002). African American boys are more likely to be retained than their Caucasian American classmates. When one considers that African American males score lower than any minority group on standardized tests, the connection is easy to see (Rodney & Crafter, 1999).

Retention is tough on those who are retained. Although a few studies have found that students who have been retained feel better about themselves (Thompson & Kolb, 1999), most studies have shown that students who have been retained suffer lower self-esteem and lower rates of attendance (Anderson et al, 2002). Even the threat of being retained is harmful to students. Surveys that were originally conducted during the 1980's and were later repeated in 2001 showed that the fear of being retained is a significant fear of sixth graders, greater even than the fear of losing a parent or going blind (Anderson et al, 2002).

Being retained has been shown to send negative messages to students, including a message of failure or being unwanted (Holmes & Saturday, 2000). Students might feel frustrated and become disinterested in their education and discouraged about their future when retained (Holmes & Saturday). While this

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frustration might manifest itself in the dropout rate (see above discussion), it also has implications for those who remain in school and on the students who share their classrooms with them. It has been shown that older students are seventy percent more likely to be extreme behavior problems in school (Holmes & Saturday). The misbehavior and lower motivation impacts the students who share the schools with the retained students, resulting in an environment of depressed expectations for all (Wheelock, 2000).

Retention is ineffective. If the practice of retention helped students in the long run, despite all of the negative consequences outlined above, perhaps it could be supported as an effective practice in our nation's schools. Such is not the case, however. Students who are retained do worse than similar, low-achieving students who are promoted (Wheelock, 2000). Repeated meta-analyses have shown that retention negatively impacts achievement (Holmes & Saturday, 2000). Holmes & Saturday, in response to critics who argued that the research on retention was poorly done, revisited studies on retention and academic achievement and included only the well-matched studies. In the studies with the matched pairs, retained students were shown to do even more poorly than the earlier, whole-group research had shown (Holmes & Saturday).

While some reluctant retention advocates once conceded that the practice of retention could be effective when applied to younger children, recent research contradicts this argument and actually suggests that being retained at a lower grade level is actually worse than later retention (Jimerson & Kaufman, 2003). First graders who have been retained did not read better than low-performers who had been promoted to second grade (Holmes & Saturday, 2000). Students who were retained in first grade do worse, academically and emotionally, than their peers (Thompson & Kolb, 1999). This has been shown to be true for kindergarteners, also (Thompson & Kolb).

Some research has shown that standardized test scores in school do improve when the practice of retention is applied. The research that does point to a positive impact is based on district and system-wide scores – and students who are retained do not sit for subsequent standardized tests (Holmes & Saturday, 2000). So, this kind of research shows that retention can have a positive impact on the scores of a school; it does not show that retention has a positive impact on individuals.

Yet the Debate Rages On

It seems paradoxical that the practice of retention should remain so widespread in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary. Even the rare, favorable studies about retention identify a positive impact that disappears after a year or two. Retention is costly, ineffective, and potentially harmful. Yet millions of students are retained every year. What is a good middle-level program or school to do? The best answer is that neither retention nor social promotion is preferred. A third option, perhaps a well-developed AIS continuum, must emerge in middle schools and be proved successful before the debate will die down. The research is clear about retention, though: it doesn't work and often harms students. The practice of retention should be discontinued.

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