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GRADE RETENTION AND SCHOOL PERFORMANCE

Throughout the United States, communities are calling for greater public school accountability. The movement to adopt a single assessment as a measure of a school's success has intensified the debate over the best educational strategies for underachieving students. Nationwide, there has been a call to end social promotion (the practice of allowing students who don't meet certain performance standards to advance to the next grade level). Consequently, grade retention has steadily increased, with approximately 7-9 percent of children in the United States being retained each year.

Educators agree that reading is an essential skill, influencing all subsequent knowledge acquisition, and that if students can't read, they will be at risk for future academic failure. In Florida, state statute mandates that students be retained at grade 3 if they have not demonstrated proficiency on the reading portion of the FCAT.*

The purpose of this brief is to review research that has explored whether grade retention is an effective educational strategy for under-achieving students. This research has focused on the following three areas:

- **Upon what factors should the decision to retain students be based?**
- **Does grade retention benefit under-achieving students?**
- **How can educators best address the needs of under-achieving students?**

Upon what factors should the decision to retain students be based ?

Although Florida statute stipulates the eligibility criteria for promotion from grade 3 to 4, Miami-Dade County Public Schools (M-DCPS) sets the policy for promotion at all other grade levels. Promotion and retention decisions are made at all of our schools every year. Therefore, it is important to review the factors upon which these decisions should be based.

Test scores can be invaluable tools for making informed decisions about students' academic abilities and have an important role to play in any retention decision. Recent literature has cautioned, however, that a single test score is not enough information upon which to base such an important decision.

Furthermore, when retention decisions are based on one test score, classroom learning is often reduced to test-coaching seminars, where students fail to acquire the critical thinking skills needed to fully understand the subject matter. When the criterion for student achievement is limited to a single score, other important indicators of progress are ignored.

*Note: Certain exemptions apply and students are provided with additional opportunities to demonstrate mastery of reading skills before retention is mandated.

Educators strongly suggest that the decision to retain a student be based on multiple assessments. Other factors, such as teacher recommendations and previous academic performance, should also be considered. Most importantly, before the decision to retain a child is made, educators must assess the opportunities the child will have to receive strong, individualized remedial assistance (Hartke, 1999; Olson, 1999; Plake, 2002).

Does grade retention benefit under-achieving students?

Numerous research studies have compared retained students and low-achieving, but promoted students and have found no academic or social advantages to retaining low-achieving students.

- Low-achieving, but promoted students consistently outperform retained students on standardized tests measuring reading and mathematics achievement (Jimerson and Kaufman, 2003; McCoy and Reynolds, 1999).
- Grade retention is the single, most powerful predictor of dropping out of school. Some studies show that being retained increases the risk of dropping out by 20-50 percent. This increased likelihood of dropping out is evident, regardless of the grade level at which the student is retained (Jimerson and Kaufman, 2003).
- Retained students are more likely to be enrolled in alternative education programs, less likely to enroll in postsecondary education, and more likely to receive lower employment compensation when they enter the work force (Jimerson and Kaufman, 2003; McCoy and Reynolds, 1999).
- Retained students tend to display poorer social adjustment, more negative attitudes towards school, and more problem behaviors. They are also more likely to exhibit problem behaviors and to have more difficulties with peers (Jimerson and Kaufman, 2003).
- Students perceive grade retention as a highly stressful life event. One study found that sixth graders rated only “loss of a parent” or “going blind” as more stressful than grade retention. A second study, conducted to replicate these findings, reported that sixth graders rated grade retention as more stressful than “loss of a parent” or “going blind” (Jimerson and Kaufman, 2003).

How can educators best address the needs of under-achieving students?

Educators suggest two approaches to addressing the needs of academically under-achieving students:

- Prevention: Academically at-risk students should be identified prior to grade retention. An aggressive prevention program, introduced prior to academic failure, should promote scholastic and social competence.
- Intervention: In cases where retention is unavoidable, aggressive remediation should be offered to retained students. The academic experience should not simply be a repetition of the services the student received the first time around, but should be innovative, comprehensive, and intensive.

Following are some prevention and intervention strategies that schools around the country have adopted (Reynolds, Barnhart, and Martin, 1999; Thrust for Educational Leadership, 1999):

- Intensive Instruction. Intensive instruction programs include summer school, before and after care instruction, tutoring, and homework clubs. Successful intensive instruction programs must offer targeted assistance and personalized assignments. Instruction can be provided by classroom teachers, instructional aides, paraprofessionals, mentors, or trained volunteers, but it is critical that the instruction be provided to students in small group settings or on a one-on-one basis. Research shows that these programs are more likely to produce results if they are linked to the work students are doing in their regular classroom.

- Ongoing Assessment. Ongoing assessment of students' progress helps teachers determine which instructional strategies are working. Teachers can use assessment results to guide instruction and to develop individualized intervention strategies. Because student progress is monitored on a regular basis, this system allows teachers to identify academically at-risk students sooner and follow-up with targeted instruction.
- Looping. Looping is the multi-year assignment of teachers to students. For example, a teacher in a three-year loop would stay with the same students as they progress through grades 1, 2, and 3. After the teacher's third year with these students, he or she would loop back to grade 1, pick up a new class of students, and stay with them for three years. Looping is gaining nationwide momentum in public education at the early grade levels and its proponents cite many academic and social benefits, including:
 - Teachers get to know students on an individual basis.
 - Teachers have more time to analyze children's learning needs and to apply individualized instructional strategies.
 - The familiarity of the learning environment creates stability and routine for students.
 - Teachers have more opportunities to interact with parents. Parents are more likely to increase their levels of involvement with their children's education.
- Support Groups. For middle and senior high school students who are not meeting grade level standards, many schools have found that support groups are a helpful outlet for discussing academic, as well as social, difficulties without the negative stigma often associated with counseling. Support groups address socioemotional issues closely associated with grade retention, such as attitude towards school, engagement in the schooling process, classroom adjustment, and self-concept.
- Parent Involvement Programs. Since research shows that the level of parents' involvement in their children's education is a predictor of grade retention, many schools have developed programs to increase parent involvement. Parent education and refresher courses help parents understand the curriculum their children are expected to master and enable them to provide homework assistance. Parent-teacher-student conferences that set academic goals and require parents to sign a "contract" increase parents' feelings of responsibility for their children's education.

Grade Retention in M-DCPS

In M-DCPS, 8.4 percent of students in grades 1-12 were retained at the conclusion of the 2002-03 school year (up from 5.0 percent the previous year). The percent of retained M-DCPS students increased at all grade levels, except at grades 9 and 11, from the 2001-02 to 2002-03 school years. Because the state's new retention policy for grade three students took effect in 2002-03, the largest increase in the percent of retained students was seen at grade three (from 2.6 percent in 2001-02 to 23.6 percent in 2002-03).

To assist retained students, as well as students who are at-risk for retention, many M-DCPS schools implement intensive after-school and Saturday tutorial programs. These programs attempt to strengthen the reading and mathematics skills of lower performing students. Some of the district's schools have entered into partnerships with local community organizations and universities to provide low performing students with extra assistance in reading and

mathematics. The district also addressed the retention issue by using summer school to provide additional reading and mathematics instruction to low achieving students. In response to the state's mandate that grade three students be retained if they do not demonstrate proficiency on the reading portion of the FCAT, the 2003 summer school session targeted the lowest performing grade two students and retained grade three students. Two weeks of intensive training were offered in June 2003 to grade 12 students who needed additional reading or mathematics assistance to pass the FCAT and meet the state's graduation requirement.

Conclusion

Grade retention has increased in public schools throughout the United States, mainly in response to the outcry for greater school accountability, as measured by gains in students' standardized reading and mathematics test scores. Decisions regarding retention should be based on many factors, including multiple test scores, teacher recommendations, and previous academic performance. Research has shown, however, that grade retention fails to improve academic achievement, leads to poorer social adjustment, and actually exacerbates the drop out problem. When possible, school districts should focus on early identification of academically at-risk students and implement aggressive prevention programs. In cases where retention is unavoidable, comprehensive and innovative remediation services should be provided. Prevention and intervention strategies that have been successfully implemented include intensive instruction, ongoing assessment, looping, support groups, and parent involvement programs. In response to increasing retention rates, many M-DCPS schools have implemented intensive after-school and Saturday tutorial programs and have entered into partnerships with community organizations and universities to provide low performing students with extra assistance in reading and mathematics. Summer school also provided opportunities for low performing M-DCPS students to strengthen their reading and mathematics skills.

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