



Miami-Dade County Public Schools

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INFORMATION CAPSULE

Research Services

Vol. 0413
February 2005

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COMPARISON OF THIRD GRADE RETENTION AMONG SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT ZONE AND OTHER SCHOOLS

AT A GLANCE

A comparison of the grade 3 retention rates at SIZ schools and a set of matched schools indicates that, although both groups of schools retained a lower percent of grade 3 students in 2003-04 than they had in 2002-03, SIZ schools continued to retain a higher percent of students than comparison schools. Comparison schools had the largest decrease in retention rate from 2002-03 to 2003-04, followed by SIZ schools and all M-DCPS elementary schools combined. Schools must continue to target academically at-risk students by implementing comprehensive prevention and remediation programs and employing strategies that have been shown to address the needs of under-achieving students, such as intensive instruction, ongoing assessment, looping, and parent involvement programs.

Grade retention is frequently referred to in the educational research literature as a popular practice that lacks empirical support (Institute for Education & Social Policy Steinhardt School of Education, New York University; National Center for Schools and Communities at Fordham, 2004). Over the years, research has failed to demonstrate that retaining students improves academic performance in any appreciable way. In fact, the opposite is frequently found to be the case (Duffrin 2004). In addition, the consensus remains that retention increases the likelihood of dropping out of school regardless of the grade in which the student is retained (Johnson 2001).

Despite the lack of empirical research support for grade retention, Florida statute mandates that grade 3 students demonstrate proficiency on the FCAT Reading before they can be promoted to grade 4. A total of 6,388 or 23.1 percent of M-DCPS third grade students were retained in 2002-03. The number of third grade students retained declined to 5,127 or 16.4 percent in 2003-04. A decrease in the percent of grade 3 students retained at a school may indicate the school is successfully implementing comprehensive prevention and remediation programs. This information capsule compares the retention rates of grade 3 students in School Improvement Zone (SIZ) schools with the retention rates of grade 3 students at a group of comparison schools. Comparison schools are schools with demographics similar to those of SIZ schools (for example, minority membership and prevalence of free- and/or reduced-price lunch), but with higher school grades assigned by the state for the 2003-04 school year. On a scale from 1 to 5, with 1 representing an "F" and 5 representing

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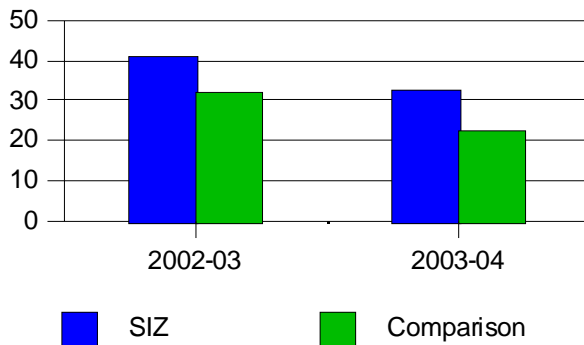
an “A,” SIZ schools’ average grade was 2.18 or a “D” and comparison schools’ average grade was a 3.55 or a “B+.”

Tables 1 and 2 present the number and percent of grade 3 students retained in 2002-03 and 2003-04 at each SIZ and comparison school, based on school membership, as well as the increase or decrease in the percent of students retained at each school. The overall number and percent of retained grade 3 students at all M-DCPS elementary schools, SIZ schools, and comparison schools are also provided.

Highlights of the table include:

- In both 2002-03 and 2003-04, SIZ and comparison schools retained a higher percent of grade 3 students, compared to the district’s elementary schools overall.
- For the past two years, the percent of grade 3 students retained at SIZ schools was higher than the percent of grade 3 students retained at comparison schools. In 2002-03, 40.6 percent of grade 3 students were retained at SIZ schools and 32.1 percent of grade 3 students were retained at comparison schools. In 2003-04, 32.6 percent of grade 3 students were retained at SIZ schools and 22.4 percent of grade 3 students were retained at comparison schools.

Grade 3 Retentions



- All groups of schools decreased their grade 3 retention rates in 2003-04, compared to 2002-03. The percent of retained students at SIZ schools decreased by 8.0 percent. Comparison schools showed the largest decrease (9.7

percent) and all M-DCPS elementary schools combined showed the smallest decrease (6.7 percent).

- From 2002-03 to 2003-04, the percent of grade 3 students being retained decreased at 68.4 percent of SIZ schools and at 86.7 percent of comparison schools.
- Depending on the individual school, between 18.5 percent and 60.9 percent of SIZ schools’ third grade classes were retained in 2003-04. Comparison schools retained between 12.7 percent and 35.2 percent of their third grade students.
- Although retention rates actually increased at 6 of the 19 (31.6 percent) SIZ (elementary) schools, the largest decreases in retention rates from 2002-03 to 2003-04 occurred at Morningside (-30%), Thena Crowder (-23%), Holmes (-21%), and Laura Saunders (-20%).
- The largest decreases in retention rates for comparison (elementary) schools occurred at Earlington Heights (-33%), Arcola Lake (-23%), and North County (-20%).

Educators have suggested implementing the following strategies to assist retained students, as well as students who are at-risk for retention (Reynolds, Barnhart, and Martin, 1999; Thrust for Educational Leadership, 1999):

- Intensive Instruction. Intensive instruction programs include robust and enriched summer school programs, before and after school 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 a demanding curriculum students are expected to learn 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.
 - Experienced, skillful, highly qualified master teachers should be used in looping strategies.
- Parent Involvement Programs. Since research shows that the level of parent 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.

The Florida Department of Education has published resources to assist parents of struggling third grade students. The documents can be accessed at <http://www.firn.edu/doe/commhome/progress/proghome.htm>.

Conclusion

Both SIZ schools and comparison schools retained a lower percent of grade 3 students in 2003-04 than they had in 2002-03. SIZ schools continued to retain a higher percent of third grade students than comparison schools. Several schools in the SIZ and the comparison group show promise for replicating programs that may be successful in reducing third grade retention. All schools must continue their efforts to reduce retention rates by targeting students who are at-risk for retention and enrolling them in comprehensive prevention and instructional support programs. Although there is little empirical evidence to support the practice in public education, grade retention remains one of the district's most compelling challenges affecting 27,652 K-12 students in 2003-04.

Sources: "Beyond Social Promotion and Retention." *Thrust for Educational Leadership*, v28, n 3, p26-27,36, January-February 1999.

Duffrin, E. "Student Retention: Popular Despite the Research," *Catalyst Chicago*, May 2004.

Institute for Education & Social Policy, Steinhardt School of Education New York University and National Center of Schools and Communities Fordham University, "First, Do No Harm: A Response to the Proposed New York City Third Grade Retention Policy," March 2004.

Johnson, D. "Critical Issue: Beyond Social Promotion and Retention-Five Strategies to Help Students Succeed," North Central Regional Laboratory, 2001.

Reynolds, J.C., Barnhart, B., Martin, B. N. "Looping: A Solution to the Retention vs. Local Promotion Dilemma?" *ERS Spectrum*, v17, n2, p16-20, Spring 1999.

Table 1
Grade 3 Retention Rates
School Improvement Zone Schools*

	2002-03		2003-04		%
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Diff.
Bunche Park Elementary	14	23.7	28	35.0	+11.3
Paul Dunbar Elementary	38	42.7	46	44.7	+2.0
Edison Park Elementary	38	46.3	44	40.0	-6.3
Florida City Elementary	49	32.7	30	18.5	-14.2
Holmes Elementary	57	60.6	75	39.9	-20.7
Thena Crowder Elementary	16	47.1	9	23.7	-23.4
Lakeview Elementary	14	30.4	28	32.2	+1.8
Leisure City K-8 Center	78	36.4	53	23.7	-12.7
Laura Saunders Elementary	94	50.8	58	30.4	-20.4
Little River Elementary	47	37.9	66	41.3	+3.4
Touissant Louverture Elementary	30	34.9	28	25.7	-9.2
Morningside Elementary	55	51.4	29	21.2	-30.2
Myrtle Grove Elementary	36	35.3	37	32.5	-2.8
Norland Elementary	37	28.9	45	30.4	+1.5
Opa-locka Elementary	35	43.2	28	30.1	-13.1
Santa Clara Elementary	55	50.0	61	38.1	-11.9
Shadowlawn Elementary	31	42.5	26	27.4	-15.1
Dr. H.W. Mack/West Little River Elementary	19	20.7	32	31.4	+10.7
Phyllis Wheatley Elementary	28	63.6	56	60.9	-2.7
Total SIZ Schools	771	40.6	779	32.6	-8.0
Total M-DCPS Grade 3 (All Schools)	6,388	23.1	5,127	16.4	-6.7

* Includes SIZ schools with grade 3 membership, as of June 2003 and June 2004.

NOTE: Percentages have been calculated using 2002-03 and 2003-04 third grade membership at each school. The same number of dropouts may produce different percentages given third grade membership varied from 2002-03 to 2003-04.

**Table 2
Grade 3 Retention Rates
Comparison Schools**

	2002-03		2003-04		%
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Diff.
Arcola Lake Elementary	38	37.6	18	15.1	-22.5
Bel-Aire Elementary	25	27.2	24	20.5	-6.7
Van E. Blanton Elementary	20	19.2	15	12.7	-6.5
Broadmoor Elementary	41	40.6	33	28.9	-11.7
Charles R. Drew Elementary	33	28.9	48	31.2	+2.3
Earlington Heights Elementary	35	48.6	15	15.2	-33.4
Fulford Elementary	39	33.1	43	25.9	-7.2
Lorah Park Elementary	15	21.1	16	21.1	0
Natural Bridge Elementary	54	34.2	42	23.7	-10.5
North County Elementary	37	40.7	28	20.9	-19.8
North Miami Elementary	51	28.3	43	21.8	-6.5
Oak Grove Elementary	39	23.4	33	18.2	-5.2
Olinda Elementary	12	23.1	7	13.7	-9.4
Orchard Villa Elementary	37	40.2	37	35.2	-5.0
Kelsey L. Pharr Elementary	34	44.2	26	24.8	-19.4
Total Comparison Schools	510	32.1	428	22.4	-9.7

Total M-DCPS Grade 3 (All Schools)	6,388	23.1	5,127	16.4	-6.7
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NOTE: Percentages have been calculated using 2002-03 and 2003-04 third grade membership at each school. The same number of dropouts may produce different percentages given third grade membership varied from 2002-03 to 2003-04.