



Miami-Dade County Public Schools

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# INFORMATION CAPSULE

## Research Services

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Christie Blazer, Supervisor

## ALTERNATIVES TO RETENTION

### At A Glance

*Many school districts use retention as a strategy for improving the performance of students who do not meet grade level standards; however, studies have consistently found that retention has a negative impact on students' academic achievement, emotional development, and social behavior. In fact, retention has been called one of the clearest examples of non-communication between research and practice. Studies have also indicated that the most frequently discussed alternative to retention, social promotion, provides few if any benefits to struggling students and often results in learning deficits that grow larger with each passing year. This Information Capsule summarizes alternative programs and strategies that can be implemented to more adequately address the needs of academic underachievers. A brief history of retention rates in M-DCPS is provided, along with a summary of the percent of the district's students retained by grade level and ethnicity.*

For decades, educators have used retention as a strategy to improve the performance of students who are unable to meet grade level standards. It has been estimated that 5 to 9 percent of students nationwide are retained every year, translating into over two million children annually (Jimerson et al., 2005; Xia & Glennie, 2005).

The highest retention rates are found among poor and minority children, with boys twice as likely to be retained as girls (Picklo & Christenson, 2005; Denton, 2001; National Association of School Psychologists, 1998). McCollum (1998) reported that Black and Hispanic students were retained at twice the rate of White students. She also found that forty percent of retained students were from the lowest socioeconomic quartile, while only 8.5 percent were from the highest quartile. In addition, children most likely to be considered for retention tend to have low grades, poor classroom conduct, limited English language skills, attention problems, frequent absences, high rates of mobility, or parents who are not involved in their education (Picklo & Christenson, 2005; National Association of School Psychologists, 1998; Robertson, 1997; Barton et al., n.d.).

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Assessment, Research, and Data Analysis  
1500 Biscayne Boulevard, Suite 225, Miami, Florida 33132  
(305) 995-7503 Fax (305) 995-7521

Despite the widespread use of retention, studies have consistently found it to be an ineffective, often harmful intervention (Jimerson et al., 2005; Kenneady, 2004; National Association of School Psychologists, 2003; Denton, 2001; Fager & Richen, 1999; McCollum et al., 1999). The National Dropout Prevention Center (2000) stated that the “evidence of the negative effect of retention on students’ emotional development, social behavior, academic achievement, and dropping out continues to be overwhelming.” The American Federation of Teachers (1997) referred to the “serious problems and significant costs” associated with retention, adding that “even when accompanied by extensive support systems, [retention] is a costly and disruptive procedure.” Sakowicz (1996) claimed that “of all the major issues in education, grade retention represents one of the clearest examples of non-communication between research and practice.”

Studies have reached the following conclusions on the effects of retention:

- Retention rarely leads to significant gains in academic achievement (Holmes, 2006; Owings & Kaplan, 2001; Fager & Richen, 1999; U.S. Department of Education, 1999; McCollum, 1998). Jimerson (2001) conducted a meta-analysis of 20 studies that examined the academic achievement outcomes of retained students compared to control groups of promoted students matched on variables such as achievement, socioeconomic status, and gender. Forty-seven percent of the analyses favored the promoted students, 48 percent reported no significant differences between retained and promoted students, and 5 percent favored the retained students, with less than two percent of studies favoring retained students when outcomes were examined beyond the repeated year. Other studies have concluded that in some cases, small initial gains in retained students’ achievement are realized, but usually disappear and sometimes even reverse during later years (Jimerson, 2001; Johnson & Rudolph, 2001; National Association of School Psychologists, 1998). Allington & Cunningham (1996) reported that four or five years following retention, retained students were among the lowest achievers in their grade levels.
- Studies have found that retention is strongly associated with dropping out of school in later years, even after controlling for factors such as academic performance, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, and family background (Picklo & Christenson, 2005; Johnson & Rudolph, 2001; McCollum, 1998; Allington & Cunningham, 1996). Researchers have suggested that retention increases the risk of dropping out by 20 to 50 percent (Xia & Glennie, 2005; Jimerson, 2001). Rumberger (1995) identified retention as the single most powerful predictor of dropping out and calculated that middle school students were 11 times more likely to drop out of school if they had been retained.
- Retained students, on average, have been found to have lower attendance rates, more negative attitudes towards school, and perform lower on measures of social adjustment (Picklo & Christenson, 2005; Denton, 2001; Reynolds et al., 1999; McCollum, 1998; Robertson, 1997).
- The threat of retention has not been found to motivate students to work harder. Most students view retention as a punishment for failing to learn, not as a positive action designed to help them achieve academic success (Xia & Glennie, 2005; McCollum, 1998).
- Providing large numbers of students with one or more extra years of schooling is expensive. Researchers agree that it is more cost effective to increase the funding for educational resources that will help remediate and support students than to provide them with an extra year in school (Holmes, 2006; Thomas, 2000; McCollum et al., 1999; Reynolds et al., 1999).

### **Social Promotion**

The most frequently discussed alternative to retention is social promotion, or the practice of promoting students to the next grade level even when they have not mastered the material at their current grade level. Researchers have concluded, however, that social promotion is not a viable alternative to retention for the following reasons:

- Many socially promoted students lack the cognitive skills needed to comprehend instruction at the next grade level and, as a result, continue to perform at low levels. Their learning deficits grow larger each year, making it more and more difficult to catch up (Owings & Kaplan, 2001; Thomas, 2000).
- Students become frustrated because they are not able to keep up with their classmates (Picklo & Christenson, 2005).
- Social promotion teaches students that effort and achievement are not important and that they do not have to work hard in school (Picklo & Christenson, 2005; American Federation of Teachers, 1997).
- Social promotion requires teachers to work with underprepared students while trying to teach students who are meeting grade level standards (Picklo & Christenson, 2005; American Federation of Teachers, 1997).
- Social promotion gives parents the mistaken impression that their children are making satisfactory progress (Picklo & Christenson, 2005).
- Promoting students when they have not developed critical study and job-related skills does not adequately prepare them for college and future employment (Denton, 2001; U.S. Department of Education, 1999). In fact, colleges and businesses spend billions of dollars each year on remedial education and training to enhance the skills of young adults who leave school without the appropriate skills (U.S. Department of Education, 1999).

### **When Retention is the Only Option**

Researchers recommend that retention be used sparingly and not until other intervention efforts have been tried and found to be ineffective. Sometimes, however, there is no feasible alternative to retention. In these cases, students must receive intensive remediation and assistance to strengthen their academic skills (Fager & Richen, 1999; McCollum et al., 1999; Robertson, 1997). The U.S. Department of Education (1999) stated that both social promotion and retention without extra assistance send “a

message to students that little is expected from them, that they have little worth, and they do not warrant the time and effort it would take to help them be successful in school.”

Researchers have urged educators to acknowledge that school and classroom practices may have contributed to a student’s failure (Kenedy, 2004; Darling-Hammond, 1998; Sakowicz, 1996). They have suggested that retention not be a repetition of the same curriculum with the same instructional delivery, but a significantly different educational experience. Retained students should be placed in classrooms with lower teacher-student ratios using different instructional approaches and, when possible, assigned to different teachers. In some cases, it is beneficial to move retained students to other schools (Fager & Richen, 1999; Robertson, 1997).

Retention may help some students more than others, but studies have not been able to accurately predict which retained children will benefit most from the experience. The National Association of School Psychologists (2003) reported that retention is less likely to produce negative outcomes under the following circumstances:

- Students are less likely to have negative retention experiences when they have fewer achievement problems; positive self-concepts; good peer relationships; and the age-appropriate social, emotional and behavioral skills.
- Students who are struggling because they did not have ample opportunities for instruction, rather than because they lacked ability, are more likely to benefit from retention. The lack of opportunity, however, must be related to attendance, mobility, or health problems that have been resolved and the student must be no more than one year older than his or her classmates.

### **Alternatives to Retention and Social Promotion**

Educators often believe they must choose between one of two alternatives to help low-performing students: retention or social promotion.

Since studies indicate that both policies have failed to improve student performance, researchers have suggested that educators move beyond the social promotion versus retention debate and find alternatives that more effectively address the needs of academic underachievers (Jimerson et al., 2006; National Association of School Psychologists, 2003; Banicky & Foss, 1999; Fager & Richen, 1999; Petracco, 1999; U.S. Department of Education, 1999; Barton et al., n.d.). Thomas (2000) stated that it is a “serious disservice to American education that, far too long, academic placements of low-performing students were couched in terms of a simplistic, end-of-the-year formalistic choice between retention or promotion . . . after students have encountered academic difficulties or have experienced failure, instead of reducing failure before it emerges.”

Studies have indicated that a variety of interventions are needed to address the needs of low-achieving students (Jimerson et al., 2005; Denton, 2001; U.S. Department of Education, 1999). Wheelock (1998) suggested that school districts select programs that consider the unique conditions at their schools, their available resources, and the specific needs of their students. According to Darling-Hammond (1998), these interventions must be “readily and routinely available to all students as soon as they need help, must be linked directly to the current work they are doing in the classroom and must offer them help from individuals who understand both the content and skills the teacher is trying to pursue and the nature of the difficulty the student is experiencing.” In addition, school districts should ensure there is continuity of practice from teacher to teacher and grade to grade and that information regarding students’ status is communicated across elementary, middle, and high school levels (Jimerson et al., 2005; Fager & Richen, 1999).

A review of the research has identified the following alternative programs and strategies that can be implemented to improve struggling students’ academic performance and decrease the incidence of retention.

- **Identify Learning Problems Early.** Researchers agree that the easiest way to reduce retention rates is to prevent academic failure before it occurs. They recommend that school staff identify student learning problems

as early as possible in the school year and intervene immediately to provide low-performing students with the extra help they need (Holmes, 2006; McMurrer, 2006; Jimerson et al., 2005; Picklo & Christenson, 2005; Denton, 2001; Johnson & Rudolph, 2001; Owings & Kaplan, 2001; Fager & Richen, 1999; McCollum et al., 1999; U.S. Department of Education, 1999; American Federation of Teachers, 1997).

- **Intensify Learning.** Making assignments easier does not boost schools’ performance rankings or increase students’ levels of achievement. Schools with large numbers of struggling students must continue to provide challenging learning experiences for all students (Johnson & Rudolph, 2001). Since reading problems have been found to be one of the most common causes of student failure, it is especially important that schools provide strong reading programs that offer developmentally appropriate and intensive instruction (Jimerson et al., 2005; National Association of School Psychologists, 2003; Denton, 2001; Owings & Kaplan, 2001; Davenport et al., 1998).
- **Provide Students with Individualized Support Services.** Intervention programs that directly address at-risk students’ academic and social needs on a one-on-one basis can help to reduce their rates of failure (Jimerson et al., 2006; Davenport et al., 1998). Examples of support services include:
  - Some schools create personal education plans for their struggling students. Plans are developed by intervention teams that meet with students on an individual basis to set learning goals and detail the instructional activities that will best meet their academic needs. Intervention teams are responsible for regular monitoring of student progress and ensuring that both students and staff adhere to the provisions of the education plan (McMurrer, 2006; Johnson & Rudolph, 2001; Banicky & Foss, 1999; Fager & Richen, 1999).
  - Students who are at risk of failing can be assigned counselors who assume responsibility for their total educational experience. The counselors become

familiar with the student's academic strengths and weaknesses, as well as his or her family situation, and they use this information to help the student make educational decisions (Owings & Kaplan, 2001; Fager & Richen, 1999; Robertson, 1997).

- School-based mental health programs that focus on improving students' social and emotional skills and reducing incidents of disruptive behavior can increase students' chances of educational success (Jimerson et al., 2006).
- Some schools with large at-risk populations have become full-service schools that provide educational, psychological, social, and health services to students (National Association of School Psychologists, 2003; Owings & Kaplan, 2001).
- **Create a Positive School Culture.** Schools that have reduced retention rates by raising the performance levels of low-achieving students have reported implementing the following strategies:
  - Explicit standards are set at each grade level. These standards clearly specify what students should know and be able to do and include periodic benchmarks to help measure progress (Owings & Kaplan, 2001; Cawelti, 1999; U.S. Department of Education, 1999; Westchester Institute for Human Services Research, 1999). The American Federation of Teachers (1997) stated that "clear universal standards will ensure fair and objective methods for determining success, provide teachers with the authority to demand academic excellence, make academic expectations accessible to all students, teachers, and parents, and provide a consistent basis for assessment and for making successful promotion and retention decisions."
  - A culture of high expectations is created for all students. Studies have shown that teachers' expectations have an impact on students' expectations of themselves as

well as on their actual achievement. Researchers agree that high expectations are fundamental to students' success (Denton, 2001; Owings & Kaplan, 2001).

- Extra academic support is not an added service provided only to struggling students, but is offered to every student throughout the school year. School staff assume that all students need extra help to succeed and assistance is made available in a variety of ways (Wheelock, 1998).
- Teachers have extended contact with their students. Research suggests that students are more successful when schools are structured to create close, sustained relationships between teachers and their students (Darling-Hammond, 1998; Wheelock, 1998).
- The school's principal maintains a caring school environment, encourages teacher collaboration, monitors student progress, and participates visibly in daily school activities. He or she conveys the message that students can learn from their mistakes without punishment or embarrassment (Owings & Kaplan, 2001; Cawelti, 1999).
- Sufficient resources are allocated to provide the extra academic support that students may need (National Dropout Prevention Center, 2000; Banicky & Foss, 1999).
- **Extended Learning Time.** Some research has suggested that extending students' learning time improves academic performance and reduces the need for retention (National Association of School Psychologists, 2003; Denton, 2001; Banicky & Foss, 1999; U.S. Department of Education, 1999; Westchester Institute for Human Services Research, 1999; Wheelock, 1998). Although studies on the effectiveness of extended time programs have produced mixed results, there are growing indications that carefully structured experiences, targeted to students' individual needs, can help low-performing students meet grade level standards (McMurrer, 2006; Denton, 2001).

- **Summer School.** For students who do not meet grade level standards during the school year, a high-quality summer school program offers an opportunity to develop the needed academic skills before the beginning of the next school year. Most researchers agree that summer school alone won't lead to significant increases in students' performance levels, but it can be an effective strategy when combined with other interventions (Jimerson et al., 2006; Owings & Kaplan, 2001; Banicky & Foss, 1999; Kelly, 1999; U.S. Department of Education, 1999; Harrington-Lueker, 1998).

Denton (2001) stated that the most important feature of successful summer schools is the use of instructional methods that are different than those that failed students during the school year. He recommended that students who need summer school to meet their grade level requirements receive continued attention throughout the following school year so they don't fall behind once again.

Wheelock (1998), however, contended that waiting until summer to address academic problems discourages teachers from addressing poor performance during the school year and creates tolerance for lower levels of achievement. She described summer school programs as "less a second chance than a low-track, dead-end placement, the last step before dropping out."

- **After-School Programs.** After-school and Saturday programs give students extra opportunities to practice the skills they acquired during school hours without missing regular classroom time. These programs should be a supplement to, not a repeat of, regular classroom instruction. Successful programs allow time for collaboration between school-day teachers and after-school/Saturday teachers so they can assess students' needs and design appropriate methods of instruction (Jimerson et al., 2006; McMurrer, 2006; Denton, 2001; Owings &

Kaplan, 2001; Phi Delta Kappa International, 2000; Banicky & Foss, 1999; Kelly, 1999; Robertson, 1997).

- **Tutoring.** Studies have suggested that providing students with extended learning time through one-on-one tutoring with teachers, peers, or older students is an effective way to increase academic competencies. Because tutoring is individualized, it can focus on students' specific academic needs and adapt to their unique learning styles (Jimerson et al., 2005; National Association of School Psychologists, 2003; Johnson & Rudolph, 2001; Owings & Kaplan, 2001; Phi Delta Kappa International, 2000; Fager & Richen, 1999; Kelly, 1999; U.S. Department of Education, 1999; Robertson, 1997).
- **Double-Dosing.** Several researchers have suggested that one way to use extended time effectively is to provide students with an extra period in the problem subject area (double-dosing). The double-dose of academic subjects is most easily implemented through the use of block scheduling (McMurrer, 2006; Johnson & Rudolph, 2001).
- **Year-Round Schooling.** The term "year-round schooling" can be misleading since it does not mean that students attend school for the entire year. It usually refers to a schedule in which students still attend school for 180 days each year, but the year is stretched out over a 12-month period and includes several shorter breaks during the year instead of one long summer break. Although the research on year-round schooling has produced mixed results, those in favor of this schedule claim it allows learning to occur continuously and reduces the need for reviewing previously taught material at the beginning of every school year (Owings & Kaplan, 2001; Banicky & Foss, 1999; U.S. Department of Education, 1999).
- **Innovative Grouping Strategies.** Innovative grouping strategies provide opportunities to offer students personalized attention and

adapt instruction to meet their diverse needs (Owings & Kaplan, 2001; National Dropout Prevention Center, 2000; Banicky & Foss, 1999; McCollum et al., 1999; Westchester Institute for Human Services Research, 1999; Davenport et al., 1998). Flexible grouping options include:

- **Looping.** Looping allows teachers and students to stay together for two or more grade levels. Looping does not label students as being in a certain grade, but allows them to achieve grade level standards over a multi-year period (Johnson & Rudolph, 2001; Davenport et al., 1998). Implemented primarily at the elementary level, advantages of looping include (Owings & Kaplan, 2001; Reynolds et al., 1999; U.S. Department of Education, 1999):
  - ▶ teachers get to know their students on an individual basis and can better understand and meet their learning needs;
  - ▶ students are provided with a strong support system and a fixed routine, which have been found to be especially beneficial for students from unstable family backgrounds;
  - ▶ students can engage in more actual learning since no time is needed for transitional activities or extensive reviews at the beginning of each school year;
  - ▶ closer relationships develop between teachers and students' families over the course of several years; and
  - ▶ teachers are able to postpone high-stakes decisions about retention or promotion because they are able to assess students over a longer period of time.

Several studies have found that students in looping classrooms outperform their non-looping peers on achievement tests. Students in looping classrooms have also reported having better attitudes toward school (Johnson & Rudolph, 2001; Banicky & Foss, 1999). Davenport, Delgado, Meisels, and Moore (1998) concluded that looping alone will not lead to higher student performance levels, but

may help to reduce the incidence of retention when used in combination with other effective schoolwide interventions.

- **Multi-Age Classrooms.** Multi-age classrooms group students of different ages together, without dividing them into different grade levels. In multi-age classrooms, utilized primarily at the early grade levels, students remain with the same teacher for more than one year. Students learn at their own rate and advance to the next level when they have mastered the required skills, instead of being promoted once a year (Jimerson et al., 2006; McMurrer, 2006; Johnson & Rudolph, 2001; Banicky & Foss, 1999; U.S. Department of Education, 1999; Robertson, 1997).

Researchers have suggested that multi-age classrooms enhance student learning because they encourage interaction and cooperation between children of different ages, often in the form of peer tutoring. Younger students benefit by receiving help from more advanced classmates, while older students learn to take responsibility for helping younger students (Phi Delta Kappa International, 2000; Banicky & Foss, 1999). Mellow (2004) contended that grouping students by developmental level is a more effective practice than grouping students by age. He stated that "schools separate children by age because it's convenient for adults, not because 6-year-olds are developmentally different from 5-year-olds or 7-year-olds."

Since students in multi-age classrooms remain with the same teacher for more than one year, these classes offer the same benefits as looping. In addition, multi-age classrooms are designed to better accommodate variations in learning pace and style than single-age classrooms (Johnson & Rudolph, 2001; Darling-Hammond, 1998).

- **Cooperative Learning Groups.** Cooperative learning groups are formed by grouping students into small teams to master material initially presented by the

teacher. Cooperative learning groups can be created in multi-age or single-age classrooms. Small groups of students with varying levels of ability complete coursework together, collaborate on projects, and share responsibility for success or failure. Research suggests that cooperative learning groups have the greatest impact on low-achieving students (Owings & Kaplan, 2001; U.S. Department of Education, 1999).

- **Smaller Class Sizes.** Reducing class sizes is another grouping strategy that gives teachers the opportunity to work more closely with struggling students (McMurrer, 2006; Johnson & Rudolph, 2001; Phi Delta Kappa International, 2000). However, research has indicated that class size must be reduced significantly in order to have a positive impact on student performance. (Depending on the study, significant increases in student achievement were not observed until class sizes were reduced to less than 15 or no more than 20 students.) Studies have also suggested that reductions in class size have the greatest impact at the early elementary grade levels and on economically disadvantaged and minority students (Banicky & Foss, 1999; U.S. Department of Education, 1999; Robertson, 1997).
- **Smaller Learning Communities.** Some school districts have reconfigured large impersonal high schools into smaller learning academies or schools-within-schools. Smaller learning environments are better able to tailor instruction to students' individual needs and foster a sense of community (Banicky & Foss, 1999; U.S. Department of Education, 1999). Studies have indicated that small schools appear to have a positive impact on student achievement and may therefore reduce the incidence of retention (Banicky & Foss, 1999; Fine & Somerville, 1998). Davenport, Delgado, Meisels, and Moore (1998) reported, however, that smaller learning communities do not have a positive impact on low-achieving students when they are separated from

other students and placed in different programs or buildings.

At the secondary level, school districts are experimenting with other innovative grouping strategies, including:

- **Freshman academies.** These classrooms are designed for students who have been identified by middle school teachers as likely to struggle in high school. Students are placed in classrooms with fewer classmates and are assigned an academic advisor who monitors their performance on a regular basis (Education Trust, 2005).
- **Regrouping students after each grading period.** All students across each grade level are administered the same subject area tests at the conclusion of each grading period. They are then regrouped into classes of students with similar ability levels and provided additional instruction, as needed. Students are tested and regrouped at the conclusion of each grading period (Denton, 2001).
- **Longer class periods.** When the length of classes is extended, teachers have the opportunity to work with the same group of students for longer periods of time. Research indicates that teachers are more effective when they know students well and understand how they learn (Darling-Hammond, 1998).
- **Credit recovery programs.** These programs allow students to earn credit for previously-failed courses. Targeted instruction is provided in the courses students failed while they remain mainstreamed in the rest of their classes. Online credit recovery programs allow students to take courses at their own pace and at convenient times. After passing the required assessments, students receive course credit (Graham, 2006; Loewen & Fryer, 2006).
- **Flexible credit plans.** Flexible credit plans allow struggling students to take up

to five years to complete the coursework needed for graduation (Woelfel, 2005).

- **Attract and Retain Highly Qualified Teachers.** Researchers agree that one of the most effective strategies for preventing retention is to place competent, motivated teachers in every classroom. Effective teachers are those who have mastered the content knowledge in the subjects they teach and utilize a range of teaching skills adapted to diverse learners. They recognize learning difficulties and either address them directly or refer students to appropriate specialists (Denton, 2001; Owings & Kaplan, 2001; U.S. Department of Education, 1999; Westchester Institute for Human Services Research, 1999; Darling-Hammond, 1998).
- **Provide Teachers with Professional Development.** Professional development should give teachers the knowledge and skills they need to meet the instructional needs of a wide range of students, including their low-performing students, and teach them how to accurately diagnose students' learning difficulties. In addition, schools must provide time for teachers to study and plan together, observe other teachers, and give and receive coaching (McMurrer, 2006; Jimerson et al., 2005; Phillips, 2005; Johnson & Rudolph, 2001; National Dropout Prevention Center, 2000; Banicky & Foss, 1999; Fager & Richen, 1999; McCollum et al., 1999; U.S. Department of Education, 1999; Westchester Institute for Human Services Research, 1999; Darling-Hammond, 1998; American Federation of Teachers, 1997).
- **Test Students Regularly with a Variety of Assessment Tools.** Students should be administered a variety of tests at regular intervals, beginning early in the school year, so that educators can identify students in need of additional support before they fail (Education Trust, 2005; National Association of School Psychologists, 2003; Denton, 2001; Johnson & Rudolph, 2001; National Dropout Prevention Center, 2000; Darling-Hammond, 1998).

Researchers agree that retention decisions should never be made on the basis of a single

test score. Thomas (2000) stated that "a score on a single test only provides a snapshot of student performance at a given point in time." Standardized test scores also lack the depth needed to identify specific learning difficulties (Kenneady, 2004; Fager & Richen, 1999; McCollum et al., 1999; U.S. Department of Education, 1999; Westchester Institute for Human Services Research, 1999).

Multiple assessments provide educators with a more accurate picture of student learning. The use of a variety of assessment tools ensures that students who don't perform well on one type of test have other opportunities to demonstrate their abilities. Examples of alternative methods of assessment include portfolios, essay exams, oral presentations, problem-solving exercises, and research projects (Johnson & Rudolph, 2001; Thomas, 2000; Fager & Richen, 1999; McCollum et al., 1999; Darling-Hammond, 1998).

- **Provide All Students with Pre-Kindergarten Education.** Preschool programs can be part of a comprehensive approach to preventing early school failure. These programs should include a strong language development and literacy component; reinforce children's strengths and provide extra assistance in areas where they are weaker; and address the full range of children's needs, including health, nutrition, and emotional and social well-being (McMurrer, 2006; National Association of School Psychologists, 2003; U.S. Department of Education, 1999; Davenport et al., 1998; American Federation of Teachers, 1997; Barton et al., n.d.).

Research indicates that students' educational success is enhanced when they participate in high-quality preschool experiences (McMurrer, 2006). Although attending a preschool program appears to have long-term educational benefits for children, Owings and Kaplan (2001) warned that it is usually not enough in and of itself to prevent early school failure for at-risk children.

- **Delay Kindergarten Entry.** In order to reduce future retention rates, some school districts have tried to equalize the readiness level of incoming students by delaying entrance into

kindergarten by one year. The decision to delay entry is based on factors such as the cognitive development, age, or maturity level of the student (Petracco, 1999; Barton et al., n.d.). While strongly supported by some educators as a way to ensure school readiness, delayed entry is a controversial strategy and research has produced mixed findings on its efficacy. Some studies have reported that students whose kindergarten entry was delayed were less likely to be retained in later grades, while others have found that delayed entry had no significant impact on future levels of achievement. One study concluded that students who were older than their classmates because of delayed entry had more behavior problems in later grades than their appropriate-aged classmates (Crosser, 2002; Reynolds et al., 1999).

Similarly, transition classrooms, often referred to as pre-first grade classes, are designed to provide struggling students with an extra year between kindergarten and first grade (although transition classrooms can be created between any two grade levels in the K-12 spectrum). These classrooms operate under the assumption that students just need extra time to develop the appropriate skills. In general, research indicates that transitional classrooms are not an effective strategy for reducing retention rates (Carlson & Galle, 2004; Banicky & Foss, 1999; Petracco, 1999). McCollum (1998) pointed out that transition classrooms give students “a larger dose of what failed to work the first time . . . ignoring the possibility that the educational program, the instructional approach, or the teacher played a part in the child’s failure.”

- **Enroll At-Risk Students in Alternative Schools and Programs.** Fager and Richen (1999) noted that there will always be some students who do not succeed in the traditional school environment in the amount of allocated time. Alternative schools or programs within schools offer a second chance to students who are at risk of failure. There are many different types of alternative schools and programs, but most share the following features: additional time provided to meet grade-level standards, lower teacher-student

ratios, family involvement, and counseling services (Owings & Kaplan, 2001; Banicky & Foss, 1999; U.S. Department of Education, 1999).

- **Combine School-Based and Work-Based Learning.** Many schools combine school-based and work-based learning to increase students’ awareness of their postsecondary opportunities. Students often become more invested in their education when they understand how it relates to college and employment. School-based and work-based learning can be combined through internships, community projects, and opportunities to explore interests. Students should be provided with time to develop plans for future education and employment (U.S. Department of Education, 1999; Davenport et al., 1998).
- **Involve Parents and the Community.** Research indicates that increased parent involvement is associated with higher levels of student achievement. Studies have found that children whose parents are involved in their education also tend to complete more homework, attend school more regularly, demonstrate better attitudes and behavior, and graduate from high school and go to college at higher rates than children whose parents are less involved (Jimerson et al., 2006; National Association of School Psychologists, 2003; Denton, 2001; Owings & Kaplan, 2001; U.S. Department of Education, 1999; Wheelock, 1998).

There are a variety of ways parents can participate in their child’s education, such as supervising homework, communicating frequently with teachers, serving as volunteers, and participating in school decision-making (Johnson & Rudolph, 2001; Owings & Kaplan, 2001; Phi Delta Kappa International, 2000; Fager & Richen, 1999; Robertson, 1997). Schools must notify parents immediately if their children begin struggling in school, even if it is very early in the school year (National Dropout Prevention Center, 2000; McCollum et al., 1999).

Schools should also attempt to involve members of their local community in school activities. Denton (2001) noted that every

community has adults who care about the children in their neighborhood and are willing to help them succeed. Community members can become involved in their local schools by serving as volunteers or mentors and sitting on advisory councils. Schools should collaborate with local child and family service agencies to provide educational and social services to struggling students (Jimerson et al., 2005; U.S. Department of Education, 1999; Davenport et al., 1998).

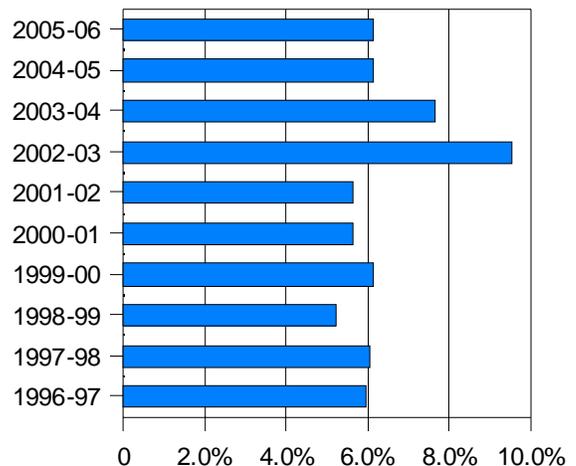
- Monitor Efforts.** Fager & Richen (1999) recommended that school districts assess their current retention policies, using data such as test scores, grades, and behavior referrals, to determine which practices have been effective and which have been less successful. Once a school system begins to implement alternative programs to decrease the incidence of retention, the effectiveness of the new strategies should be evaluated and educators should be prepared to adjust their efforts if the new practices are not successful (National Association of School Psychologists, 2003; Denton, 2001).

### On A Local Note

Miami-Dade County Public Schools (M-DCPS) retained approximately 6 percent of its students in both the 2004-05 and 2005-06 school years (the most recent years for which data are available). In fact, from 1996-97 to 2001-02, the district's retention rates remained relatively stable, ranging from a low of 5.2 percent in 1998-99 to a high of 6.1 percent in 1999-2000 (Figure 1). Beginning in 2002-03, however, a new Florida school law was enacted that required third grade students to be retained if they did not demonstrate proficiency on the reading portion of the FCAT. In order to be promoted to the fourth grade, the law requires students to score at FCAT Reading Achievement Level 2 or higher (unless exempted from mandatory retention for special circumstances). After this law took effect, the district's retention rate increased by 68 percent. Although the percent of retained M-DCPS students increased at 11 of 13 grade levels following enactment of the state law, the most dramatic increase in retention rates was seen at grade 3. The number of retained third grade

students increased from 757 in 2001-02 to 6,388 in 2002-03. As the district introduced new strategies to increase the reading proficiency of struggling third grade students, M-DCPS' third grade retention rates began to decline again. Consequently, the district's overall retention rates in 2004-05 and 2005-06 were similar to those observed prior to the enactment of Florida's third grade retention law (Miami-Dade County Public Schools, 1999-2007).

Figure 1. Percent of Retained M-DCPS Students,\* 1996-97 to 2005-06.

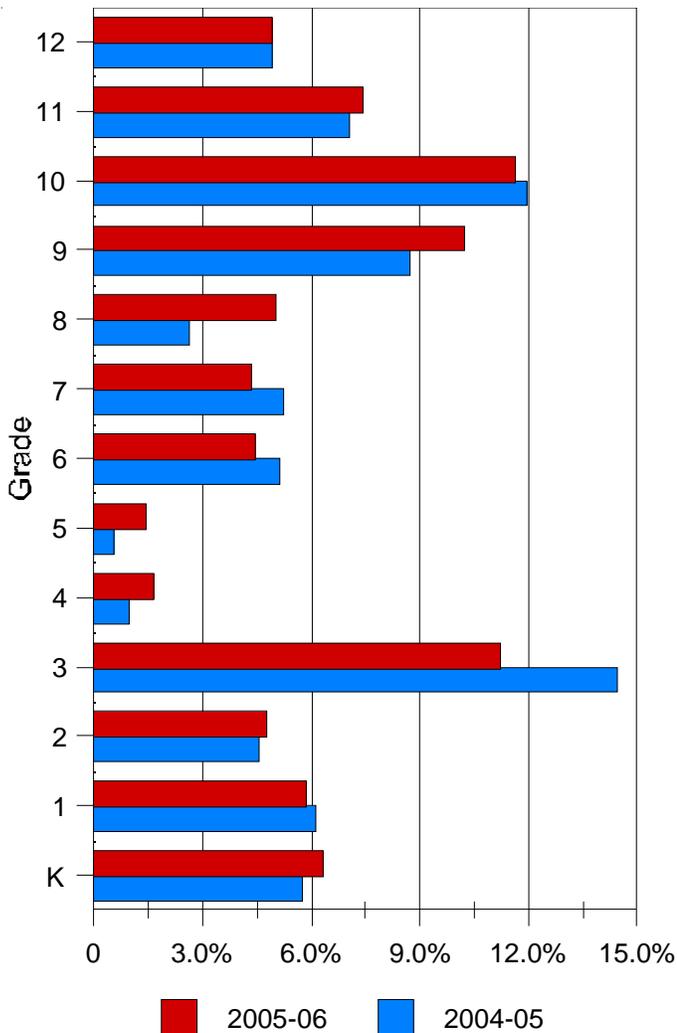


\* Percents are based on fall student membership.

When M-DCPS' retention rates are examined by grade level, it can be seen that, from 2004-05 to 2005-06, the percent of retained students increased at seven grade levels and decreased at five levels, with the percent of retained students remaining stable at grade 12 (Figure 2). The largest percent of students were retained at grades 3, 9, and 10 in both 2004-05 and 2005-06. The biggest changes in retention rates were evident at grades 3 (a 3.2 percent decrease) and at grades 8 and 9 (2.4 percent and 1.5 percent increases, respectively).

More recent, newly released data indicate that the district's third grade retention rates continued to decline from 2005-06 to 2006-07. This decrease can be attributed to higher passing rates on the fall 2007 administration of the Grade 3 Alternative Assessment (SAT-10 Reading; Table 1). Staff from the Office of Curriculum and Instruction have

Figure 2. Percent of Retained M-DCPS Students,\* by Grade Level,\*\* 2004-05 and 2005-06.



\* Percents are based on fall student membership.  
 \*\* No students were retained in Pre-kindergarten either year.

credited two factors with the higher Alternative Assessment passing rates: increased summer school attendance (1,800 third grade students in 2006 and 2,700 third grade students in 2007) and the implementation of a districtwide Alternative Assessment preparation course. The nine-day preparation course was conducted for all retained third grade students and began on the second day of the 2007-08 school year, continuing up until the administration of the Alternative Assessment. Components of the program included strategies designed to improve reading performance; increase reading comprehension; develop essential word attack skills; and strengthen phonological awareness and letter-sound correspondence. Although the decrease in

retentions continued, this decrease cannot be directly attributable to increased summer school attendance or the implementation of the Alternative Assessment preparation course because the SAT-10, a new test, was used as the Alternative Assessment in 2007, in place of the test used in previous years (SAT-9). Alternative Assessment passing rates will be directly comparable in the future when two years of data using the same criteria are available.

Table 1. Grade 3 Alternative Assessment Results, 2006 and 2007\*

	2006	2007	Difference
Number of students tested	2764	3425	+661
Number of students passing	158	907	+749
Percent of students passing	5.7	26.5	+20.8

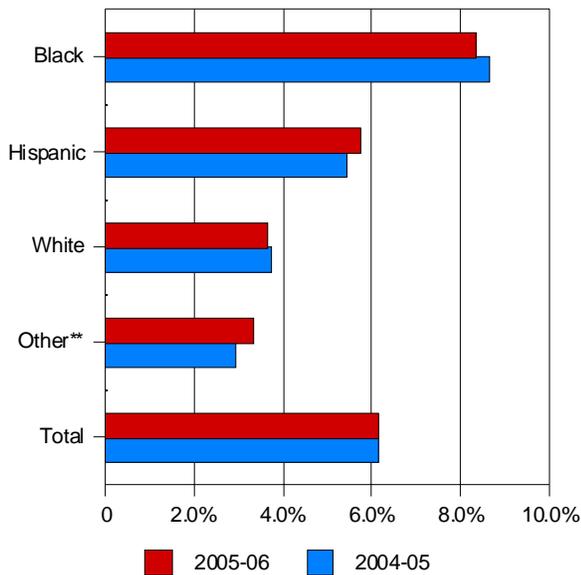
\* In 2007, M-DCPS replaced the SAT-9 with the SAT-10 and set a passing score equivalent to that used for the spring administration of the FCAT NRT. As such, the percent passing in 2006 and 2007 are not directly comparable.

As can be seen in Figure 3, a higher percent of the district's Black and Hispanic students, compared to White students, were retained in both 2004-05 and 2005-06. Retention rates remained relatively stable from one year to the next across all ethnic groups.

M-DCPS' K-12 retention rate ranked forty-second in the state of Florida, with 41 of the state's 67 school districts retaining a higher percentage of students in 2005-06 and 25 school districts retaining a lower percentage of students. The average statewide 2005-06 retention rate was 6.8 percent, with individual districts' rates ranging from 2.3 percent to 12.9 percent (Florida Department of Education, 2007).

In theory, retention costs school districts an amount equal to an extra year of education because students complete the same grade twice (Xia & Glennie, 2005). M-DCPS' 2005-06 average expenditure per full-time equivalent K-12 student was \$7,045 (Miami-Dade County Public Schools, 2006). Since 22,186 M-DCPS students were retained in 2005-06, the district spent over \$156 million (\$7,045 per student) to provide them with an extra year of education.

**Figure 3. Percent of Retained M-DCPS Students,\* by Ethnicity, 2004-05 and 2005-06.**



\* Percents are based on fall student membership.  
 \*\* Other includes American Indian, Asian, and Multiracial categories.

M-DCPS currently offers a variety of programs designed to reduce retention rates, including summer school, extended time and double-dosing in Zone schools, the Parent Academy, and an extensive array of services offered by the district's Division of Student Services, such as guidance and social work services, safe schools facilitators, and comprehensive health services. Retained third grade students are provided with intensive instructional and support services to remediate identified areas of reading deficiency, including reduced teacher-student ratios, small group

instruction, tutoring, extended learning time, summer reading camps, and frequent progress monitoring.

### Summary

Studies have consistently found that retention has a negative impact on students' academic achievement, emotional development, and social behavior. Research has also indicated that the most frequently discussed alternative to retention, social promotion, often results in learning deficits that increase with each passing year, frustration when students are unable to keep up with their classmates, and teachers assigned to classrooms with unacceptably large variations in student ability. Since studies have concluded that both retention and social promotion are failed policies, educators have attempted to find alternative interventions that more adequately address the needs of academic underachievers. A review of the research identified alternative programs and strategies that can be implemented to improve struggling students' performance and decrease the incidence of retention, including identifying learning problems early, extending learning time, and using innovative grouping strategies, such as looping, multi-age classrooms, and cooperative learning groups. A brief history of retention rates in M-DCPS was provided, along with a summary of the percent of the district's students retained at each grade level and by ethnic group.

All reports distributed by Research Services can be accessed at <http://drs.dadeschools.net> by selecting "Research Briefs" or "Information Capsules" under the "Current Publications" menu.

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