



Education Policy Brief

JANUARY, 2000

Retention

In September 1999, the 1998-1999 Delaware statewide assessment scores were released. Public school students in grades 3, 5, 8, and 10 were tested in the spring of 1999 in reading, mathematics, and writing. Results on the statewide assessment, referred to as the Delaware Student Testing Program (DSTP), revealed that an average of 38% of students fell below the standard in reading, an average of 54% fell below the standard in math, and an average of 54% fell below the standard in writing. The reality of these scores indicates that now, perhaps more than ever before, policymakers are faced with the dilemma of what to do when students fail to meet standards. While this dilemma has often been posed as a choice between retention and social promotion, it has been shown that neither works well.

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RESEARCH FINDINGS:

Retention

When faced with the dilemma of low-performing students, the simple solution to the problems would appear to be retention, holding a student back to repeat a particular grade level for a second year. Simple repetition of a year's worth of material does little to help students who have failed. Several comprehensive reviews of the literature on retention have resulted in similar conclusions: grade retention as typically practiced is an ineffective if not harmful practice. In addition, retention is more likely to occur in low-income families, is more than twice as likely to occur among boys as girls, and is more than twice as likely to occur among African American students as among White students.

One study examining the impact of retention on drop-out rates revealed that when a student repeated a grade, the probability of later dropping out increased by 20 to 40 percent. Students who are retained show signs of poorer personal adjustment. There has been a link noted between retention and lowered self-esteem and self-confidence of retained students when compared to students of similar ability who were not retained. Even more telling and shocking is the fact that students rank grade retention as the third most feared life experience, behind blindness and the death of a parent.

Social Promotion

Because retention policies typically have a negative impact on student achievement and psychological adjustment, some believe that social promotion is the best choice for students who are under-performing. In fact, both retention and social promotion policies result in excessively high drop-out rates--especially for poor and minority students. These policies also contribute to inadequate knowledge and skills of students who are affected by such policies.

Data (from the U.S. Department of Education) reveals various indicators that show the practice of social promotion is occurring.

- A recent poll of teachers indicated that a majority of them had promoted unprepared students in the past year because of pressure from administrators and principals and because of the negative impact retention is known to have on students.
- A 1992 study reported that 10 to 15 percent of young adults who graduate high school and do not go on to college cannot balance a checkbook or write a letter to a credit card company to explain an error on a bill.
- The California State University System reported that in 1998, 54% of its incoming freshman failed to pass and entry-level math placement test and 47% failed an English placement test.

Alternatives to Retention and Social Promotion

Because of the ineffectiveness and the rippling effects associated with retention and social promotion, there is a need for alternative strategies that are designed to assist struggling students by finding ways

to extend the amount of time for learning and individualizing the instruction the students receive. Following are several specific strategies that schools can use as preventative measures.

Extending the Learning Time

- **After-School Programs:** Benefits of after-school programs include increased achievement, improved school attendance, reduced drop-out rate, reduced in-grade retention and reduced placement in special education.
- **Year-Round Schooling:** This term can be misleading. It typically means that students still attend school for 180 days per year, but that the year is stretched over a 12-month period with several short breaks during the year in place of the single summer break. The primary arguments in favor of year-round schooling are that it allows for learning to occur continuously, reduces the need for reviewing previously presented material, allows students to remember more of what they learned and reduces boredom. The research is mixed, with some studies reporting benefits and others reporting no benefits of year-round schooling with respect to student outcomes. Some criticisms of year-round schooling include increased operating costs, resistance from parents, and increased stress on the part of teachers.

Restructuring the Learning Environment

- **Class Size Reduction:** Research indicates that the size of the class has to be reduced below 15 students in order to exhibit meaningful impact on achievement as measured through standardized tests. Research also shows that reductions in class size have the most promising effect in the early elementary grades and that economically disadvantaged and some ethnic minority students perform better in smaller classes. The primary disadvantage of class size reduction is the expense.
- **Teacher Looping:** Looping involves having a teacher stay with the same group of students for more than one year. Studies reveal that students in looping classrooms generally out-perform their non-looping peers on standardized achievement tests. However, problems may arise when students are assigned multiple years to an ineffective teacher or to a teacher with whom a personality conflict exists.
- **Classroom Configurations:** This strategy involves grouping students of different ages or grades in the same classroom. The use of multiage and multigrade classrooms is believed to enhance student learning through interaction and cooperation amongst different-aged students, often in the form of peer tutoring. Teachers indicate that the advantages are: better relationships with students and parents, students demonstrate higher progress in academic areas, increased self-esteem, and improved socialization skills. Disadvantages include the need for additional planning and costs associated with hiring teacher aides.
- **School-Within-A-School:** In order to foster a sense of community among students attending a large school and stimulate a small-school feeling, the student body may be divided into a number of semi-autonomous groups. Advantages of this model are opportunities for: an integrated curriculum, cooperative learning, fostering close relationships between students

and teachers, positive effects on student achievement, improved student attitudes, and increased attendance.

Strategies Specifically Designed for Low-Performing Students: Interventions

- **Tutoring/Mentoring Programs:** Tutoring programs involve one-on-one instruction and can pair students with parents, volunteers, or other students. Mentoring programs also provide one-on-one interactions between a student and a mentor, but the mentoring relationship does not always focus on academic outcomes. Benefits of these one-on-one relationships include: improved academic performance, increased attendance rates, better attitudes towards school and lower drop-out rates, and enhanced self-esteem and self-confidence.
- **Individualized Improvement Plan (IIP):** AN IIP lays out instructional activities and curriculum to be used to meet the specific needs of a student. It highlights areas of weakness and develops a plan for improvement in these areas. This approach is a compromise to social promotion or retention, as low-achieving students may be given an IIP and conditionally promoted to the next highest grade, or they may receive an IIP and be retained. This strategy is one currently written into Delaware State law.
- **Alternative Schools:** An alternative school is a separate school designed to meet an educational need or address a problem such as disruptive behavior. The benefits of alternative schools include a reduction in both drop-out rates and student truancy. These schools have the potential to produce significant achievement growth, improve student attendance, and result in high levels of satisfaction among students, teachers, and staff.
- **Transitional Programs:** These programs are designed to provide students with an extra year of experience to prepare them for the next grade. It should be noted that transitional programs are not the same as retaining a student in the same grade because the transitional programs are designed to meet the needs of the underachieving student. Research indicates that most transitional programs have proved to be ineffective. One study of at-risk kindergarten students found that these students were better off in an integrated 1st grade classroom than in a transitional classroom.
- **Summer School:** These programs are designed to provide additional instruction to students who have not passed promotion requirements. The goal of these programs is to help students “catch up” to their peers in time for the following school year.

DELAWARE SITUATION:

RESEARCH SUMMARY:

Policymakers must move beyond the social promotion versus retention debate and find alternatives that work. While there are several promising strategies that emerge from the review of the literature, the success of any strategy for enhancing student learning depends critically upon the quality of curriculum and instruction provided. High quality curriculum and instruction require support in the form of professional development for teachers and adequate instructional resources to meet the educational needs of students. By providing the necessary resources and ensuring quality teaching, schools in your state will likely increase their effectiveness in helping students to learn.

POLICY QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION:

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