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Bridging the gap between research and public policy to improve the lives of children and families

Part One of Three Part Series on Grade Retention

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Grade Retention: *A Flawed Education Strategy*

By Nailing Xia and Elizabeth Glennie, Ph.D.

In the past century, educational professionals and policymakers have continued to debate whether grade retention or social promotion should be used as an intervention strategy to bring under-achieving students up to standard. The most recent trend clearly favors the use of retention in an attempt to maintain high academic standards and educational accountability. However, a careful investigation of this policy's effects and costs suggests that it is ineffective and expensive. Policymakers and educational professionals should move beyond retention and social promotion by developing and adopting alternative intervention strategies proven as successful and cost-effective.

Effects

Decades of research suggest that grade retention does not work as a panacea for poor student performance. The majority of

Other Policy Briefs in the three part series on Grade Retention by Nailing Xia and Elizabeth Glennie:

- Grade Retention:
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research fails to find compelling evidence that retention improves long-term student achievement. An overwhelmingly large body of studies have consistently demonstrated negative academic effects of retention. Contrary to popular belief, researchers have almost unanimously found that early retention during kindergarten to grade three is harmful, both academically and emotionally.¹ Many studies find that retention does not necessarily lead to increased work effort among students as predicted.²

In a few studies reporting positive academic outcomes for retention, the gains typically disappear several years later, and the retained students eventually fell behind again.³ Moreover, these retained students generally received targeted interventions such as personalized education plans, smaller class sizes, summer school, and tutoring programs, designed to help them overcome individual problems.⁴ It is unclear whether the positive outcomes come from retention or the other supportive components. In general, simply repeating a grade does not improve student achievement in most cases.

In terms of socio-emotional development, students do not benefit from retention either. Researchers find that retention lowers children's self-esteem and causes emotional distress.⁵ Retention has been shown to be associated with increased rates of behavior problems and higher levels of drug and substance use due to the effect of being older in grade.⁶

Grade retention has been shown to have negative long-term consequences. Literature on dropout and retention has documented the connection between retention and dropping out of school prior to high school graduation. Research has consistently found that retained students are at a higher risk of leaving school earlier, even after controlling for academic performance and other factors such as race and ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status, family background, etc.⁷ Grade retention has been shown to increase the risk of dropping out by 20% to 50%.⁸ It has also been reported that grade reten-

tion is associated with decreased lifetime earnings and poorer employment outcomes in the long run.⁹

Costs

It is estimated that nationally 5% to 9% of students are retained every year, translating into over 2.4 million children annually.¹⁰ With an average per pupil expenditure of over \$7,500 a year,¹¹ this common practice of retention costs taxpayers over 18 billion dollars every year.

Other fiscal costs associated with retention include decreased lifetime earnings among retained students, foregone earnings due to delayed entry into the workforce, and decreased government tax revenues associated with the decreased earnings of retained individuals. Overall, the retention practice costs the society billions of dollars, and is far from cost-effective as compared to alternative interventions.

Practice

Although retention is proved to be ineffective, unproductive, and costly, it persists as one of the frequently employed methods of remediation. Investigating the apparent gap between research and practice indicates that the public and practitioners are unaware of the findings of retention literature.¹² Popular belief in the efficacy of retention creates a powerful mandate to hold both schools and students accountable to ensure educational quality. The demand for high educational accountability put schools under considerable political pressure to hold back students. Research showing the drawbacks of retention easily gets lost in a sea of prevailing appeals to maintain high academic standards.

Teachers and other educational professionals often mistakenly claim positive effects of retention. Their perspectives are generally restricted by analyzing short-term student performance and failing to compare retained students to their peers. Teachers usually only know of student achievement in the immediate years following retention, and typically can not follow the long-term student trajectories after retention. Since many retained children make some progress the second year, retention may appear effective to educators.¹³ Furthermore, teachers often compare the retained student's achievement the second time in that grade with the achievement the first time. These comparisons lead to the false conclusions that children benefit from retention. In contrast, studies comparing the retained student to a similar student who was promoted suggest that retained students would have made just as much or even more progress without retention.¹⁴

Policy Implications

Educators and policymakers should caution the use of grade retention as a remedy for poor student performance. As concluded by the majority of past studies, grade retention is a failed and expensive strategy to increase academic achievement. Research evidence has shown a number of negative side effects of retention, including increased likelihood of dropping out, emotional distress, behavior problems, and substance use. Until further proof of its efficacy is found, retention should only be used as a last resort. Alternative remediation strategies should be explored and used to bring under-achieving students up to standard. Such alternatives could include, but are not limited to, early identification of and targeted assistance for low-achieving students, individualized student instruction, parental involvement, curriculum development, school restructuring, summer school, and personalized tutoring programs.

Measures should also be taken to bridge the gap between research and practice. Research findings must be effectively, efficiently and clearly com-

municated to educational professionals, policymakers, and the public. Schools should implement staff training in which teachers and other educational professionals involved in the decision-making process are presented with research evidence about the academic and socio-economic effects of retention. Teachers should be offered alternative remediation tools, preferably school-wide intervention strategies. ■

NOTES

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² William A. Owings and Susan Magliaro, 1998, "Grade Retention: A History of Failure," *Educational Leadership*, 56(1), 86-8; Melissa Roderick, 1995, "Grade Retention and School Dropout. Policy Debate and Research Questions," *Phi Delta Kappa Research Bulletin*, 15; Melissa Roderick and Mimi Engel, 2001, "The Grasshopper and the Ant: Motivational Responses of Low-Achieving Students to High-Stakes Testing," *Educational Evaluation & Policy Analysis*, 23(3), 197-227.

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⁴ Jennifer Fager and Rae Richen, 1999, *When Students Don't Succeed: Shedding Light on Grade Retention*. Portland, OR: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory; Robert M. Hauser, 1999, *Should We End Social Promotion? Truth and Consequences*, CDE Working Paper No. 99-06.

⁵ Gabrielle E. Anderson, Angela D. Whipple and Shane R. Jimerson, 2002, *Grade Retention: Achievement and Mental Health Outcomes*, Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists; Consortium for Policy Research in Education, 1990, *Repeating Grades in School: Current Practice and Research Evidence*, CPRE Policy Brief No. RB-04-1/90; C. Thomas Holmes and Janice Saturday, 2000, "Promoting the End of Retention," *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision*, 15(4), 300-14; Jimerson et al., 1997; Pam McCollum et al., 1999, *Failing Our Children: Finding Alternatives to In-Grade Retention*, San Antonio, TX: Intercultural Development Research Association; Meisels and Liaw, 1993; Michael D. Resnick et al., 1997, "Protecting Adolescents from Harm: Findings from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health," *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 278(10), 823-32; Shepard and Smith, 1990.

⁶ Robert S. Byrd, Michael Weitzman and Peggy Auinger, 1997, "Increased Behavior Problems Associated with Delayed School Entry and Delayed School Progress," *Pediatrics*, 100(4), 654-61; Dawson, 1998; Meisels and Liaw, 1993; William A. Owings and Leslie S. Kaplan, 2000, "Standards, Retention, and Social Promotion," *National Association of Secondary School Principals Bulletin*, 85(629), 57-66; Resnick et al., 1997.

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¹⁰ Dawson, 1998; Eide and Showalter, 2001; Fager and Richen, 1999; Shane R. Jimerson and Amber M. Kaufman, 2003, "Reading, Writing, and Retention: A Primer on Grade Retention Research," *The Reading Teacher*, 56(7), 622-35; Shepard and Smith, 1990.

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¹⁴ Fager and Richen, 1999; Holmes and Saturday, 2000; Shepard and Smith, 1990. ■

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