The majority of published studies and decades of research indicate that there is usually little to be gained, and much harm that may be done through retaining students in grade. Yet, many educators continue to use retention as a way to improve student achievement and claim that it produces positive results. The consequence is while a growing body of studies show that retention does not improve academic performance and has a number of negative side effects, more and more states and school districts have adopted retention policy in an effort to enhance the educational accountability. This brief examines the apparent gap between research findings and retention practice and discusses reasons for its existence in four aspects: public belief, teachers’ perspectives, research issues, and politics.
Public Belief

To the public, grade retention seems to make sense — one more year in the same grade would help children to catch up. Conventional wisdom predicts that grade retention will help students gain academically, improve social skills, and become more motivated to work hard. At the school level, retention is expected to reduce the skill variance in the classroom to better meet student needs and enhance educational accountability. The findings that retention is ineffective or even harmful in the long run seem counterintuitive.

The results of the 31st Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public’s Attitudes toward the Public Schools¹ indicate that many people support higher standards for promotion and retention decisions regardless of the consequences. According to the poll, 72% of the respondents favor stricter standards for promotion even if it means that “significantly more students would be held back.”² Other studies also reveal that the public in general views the practice of social promotion as detrimental to low-achieving students because such students, once promoted, are presumed to fall further behind their more academically prepared classmates.³ In contrast, studies that compare low-achieving students who are retained with those who are promoted, find that the promoted students generally do as well or better academically⁴ and have fewer socio-emotional and conduct-related problems.⁵

Moreover, it appears that the general public outside of academic circles is not aware of the potential long-term consequences of grade retention. The results of the 22nd Annual Gallup Poll of the Public’s Attitudes toward the Public Schools⁶ indicate that many people do not understand the link between retention and school dropout rates. When asked whether retained children or low-achieving but socially promoted children are more likely to drop out of high school, 54% of the respondents believe that socially pro-
moted students are more likely to drop out and only 32% view the retained students as more likely to drop out. However, this popular public perception about the relationship between grade retention and high school dropout is directly contradicted by research on this subject. Prior studies have consistently shown that retained students have a higher probability of dropping out of school than their promoted counterparts.

**Teachers’ Perspectives**

Teachers’ views regarding the efficacy of grade retention are generally based on short-term student outcomes. Teachers usually only know of student achievement in the immediate years following retention. They often have limited knowledge of the long-term student trajectories after retention. Since many retained children make some progress the second year, retention may appear effective to educators.

Furthermore, teachers typically 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.

Moreover, teachers often view retention as a means of reducing the range of abilities and achievement levels in classrooms. They believe that a more homogeneous grouping of students within grade allows a better use of educational resources and helps to achieve higher educational outcomes. Low-achieving students will be more confident and less frustrated in learning, once retention brings them closer to their peers in terms of academic preparedness. According to an elementary school principal in Wake County, North Carolina, teachers, especially those who are receiving under-achieving but promoted students, often favor the use of retention in an attempt to reduce the skill
variance in the classroom.

Research suggests that teachers are often unaware of the findings of retention literature, which indicate that apparent academic gains in the immediate years following retention usually disappear several years later. Even when research findings have been effectively and clearly communicated to teachers, they often are not offered other alternatives for intervention or remediation. Educators may lack the time, resources, programmatic tools, and administrative support to identify and implement other effective intervention strategies. In contrast, retention is relatively easy to implement, provides what looks like immediate gains, and does not require the creation and funding of new programs or services.

Research

Another important reason for the evident gap between research and practice is that researchers do not present clear and consistent messages to help inform policy and practice because research designs may influence the study results. For instance, studies, which compare retained students with same-age, different-grade (usually higher-grade), promoted peers, generally find large negative consequences of retention. Yet, studies, which compare retained students with different-age (usually younger), same-grade, promoted peers, often do not show negative effects. Moreover, while studies examining the short-term effects have shown short-lived gains in student achievement in the immediate years following retention, most research fails to find long-term academic benefits of retention. Also, a limited body of research that finds positive outcomes typically involves the implementation of other intervention programs during the retention year. These programs include early identification of and targeted assistance for retained students, personalized education plans, classes with low student-to-teacher ratios, and tutoring or summer school programs. It is unclear whether the positive outcomes of retention would be sustained without these supportive compo-
nents or whether these programs would benefit students without retention.\textsuperscript{18} As a result, policymakers who favor retention can easily find research evidence from existing literature to support their arguments, despite a large majority of research findings against the use of retention.

The fact that most studies are written in an academic format also hinders practitioners from understanding and taking advantage of the research findings. Educators often find it hard and discouraging to read the long, complex research papers. Effective dissemination of research findings requires that “materials be jargon-free, brief and provide concrete illustration.”\textsuperscript{19}

The quality of some studies is another issue of concern. Some articles have used small sample sizes, so their findings are highly questionable regardless of the use of tight and sophisticated statistical analyses. Many others do not follow a comparison group of socially promoted students. Even studies with comparison groups do not always match students to find a fair comparison of a retained group. For instance, some studies compare a retained group with a sample of never-retained students regardless of their age, grade or academic achievement prior to retention. A fair comparison should at least match retained students with their promoted counterparts of same grade or same age, who have similar academic achievement prior to retention. Other factors that could be considered in selecting a fair comparison group include gender, race and ethnicity, socio-economic status, parental participation in school and parental attitudes toward education, maternal level of education, and family size, etc. Unless true field experiments are conducted in retention research, these methodological challenges will continue to undermine the credibility of the research findings.\textsuperscript{20}

**Politics**

The issue of retention has become highly politicized since the 1990s. Popular belief in the efficacy of retention creates a powerful mandate. Policymakers and
politicians at all levels have started to demand high educational standards and accountability. The most recent example is the No Child Left Behind Act signed by President Bush in 2002. As Holmes and Saturday noted, the issue of retention and promotion “provides a popular political platform” and ending social promotion may be “the latest trend in winning political popularity.” As a result, schools are under considerable political pressure to appease popular demands, and research showing the drawbacks of retention can easily get lost in a sea of prevailing appeals to maintain high academic standards.

Policy Implications

Investigating the gap between research and practice suggests that (a) research findings must be effectively, efficiently and clearly communicated to educational professionals, policymakers, and the public, (b) 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, and (c) teachers should be offered alternative remediation tools, preferably school-wide intervention strategies.

NOTES

1 Lowell C. Rose and Alec M. Gallup, 1999, “The 31st Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public’s Attitudes toward the Public Schools,” Phi Delta Kappan, 81(1), 41-56.

2 Ibid, p. 43.


4 Peg Dawson, 1998, “A Primer on Student Grade Retention: What the Research Says,” NASP Communiqué, 26(8); 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


6 Stanley M. Elam, 1990, “The 22nd Annual Gallup Poll of the Public’s Attitudes toward the Public Schools,” *Phi Delta Kappan, 72*(1), 41-54.


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


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The Center for Child and Family Policy brings together scholars from many disciplines, policy makers and practitioners to address problems facing children in contemporary society. The Center is a national leader in addressing issues of early childhood adversity, education policy reform, and youth violence and problem behaviors. The Center bridges the gap between research and policy by assisting policy makers in making informed decisions based on sound evidence and research.

The Center is home to the largest violence-prevention study ever funded by the National Institute of Mental Health; an effort to promote healthy child development and reduce child abuse and neglect in Durham, NC; a $6 million NIDA-funded adolescent substance abuse prevention center; as well as many other research projects related to children and families.

The Center also provides comprehensive program evaluation services to local, state and federal policy makers, nonprofits organizations and foundations.

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