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Policy Brief

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

Part Three of a Three Part Series on Grade Retention

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Grade Retention: *The Gap Between Research and Practice*

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

- Grade Retention:
A Flawed Strategy
- Grade Retention:
Cost-Benefit Analysis

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.⁷ 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.⁸

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.⁹

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.¹⁰

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.¹¹ According to an elementary school principal in Wake County, North Carolina,¹² 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,¹³ which indicate that apparent academic gains in the immediate years following retention usually disappear several years later.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ 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.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷ 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.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.”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.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.”²¹ 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.

³ Donna Harrington-Lueker, 1998, “Retention Vs. Social Promotion,” *The School Administrator*, 55(7), 6-10, 12; Jon Lorence et al., 2002, “Grade Retention and Social Promotion in Texas: An Assessment of Academic Achievement among Elementary School Students,” In *The Policy of Ending Social Promotion*, ed. Diane Ravitch, 13-67, Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution; Lorrie A. Shepard and Mary Lee Smith, 1990, “Synthesis of Research on Grade Retention,” *Educational Leadership*, 47(8), 84-88.

⁴ Peg Dawson, 1998, “A Primer on Student Grade Retention: What the Research Says,” *NASP Communique*, 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

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⁵ 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; 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; 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; 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 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.

⁷ Elam, 1990; Shane R. Jimerson, Gabrielle E. Anderson and Angela D. Whipple, 2002, "Winning the Battle and Losing the War: Examining the Relation between Grade Retention and Dropping out of High School," *Psychology in the Schools*, 39(4), 441-57.

⁸ Dawson, 1998; Hauser, 1999; Holmes and Saturday, 2000; Shane R. Jimerson, 1999, "On the Failure of Failure: Examining the Association between Early Grade Retention and Education and Employment Outcomes during Late Adolescence," *Journal of School Psychology*, 37(3), 243-72; Jimerson, Anderson and Whipple, 2002; Debra Johnson, 2001, "Performance Pentagon: Five Strategies to Help All Students Make the Grade," *National Association of Secondary School Principals Bulletin*, 85(629), 40-50; Melissa Roderick, 1994, "Grade Retention and School Dropout: Investigating the Association," *American Educational Research Journal*, 31(4), 729-59; Melissa Roderick, 1995, "Grade Retention and School Dropout, Policy Debate and Research Questions," *Phi Delta Kappa Research Bulletin*, 15; Russell W. Rumberger and Katherine A. Larson, 1998, "Student Mobility and the Increased Risk of High School Dropout," *American Journal of Education*, 107(1), 1-35; Shepard and Smith, 1990; Thompson and Cunningham, 2000.

⁹ Fager and Richen, 1999; Jo Anna Natale, 1991, "Rethinking Grade Retention," *Education Digest*, 56(9), 30-3; Shepard and Smith, 1990; C. Kenneth Tanner and F. Edward Combs, 1993, "Student Retention Policy: The Gap between Research and Practice," *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, 8(1), 69-77; C. Kenneth Tanner and Susan Allan Galis, 1997, "Student Retention: Why Is There a Gap between the Majority of Research Findings and School Practice?" *Psychology in the Schools*, 34(2), 107-14.

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

¹¹ Martin Haberman and Vicky Dill, 1993, "The Knowledge Base on Retention Vs. Teacher Ideology: Implications for Teacher Preparation," *Journal of Teacher Education*, 44(5), 352-60; Jimerson, Anderson and Whipple, 2002; William A. Owings and Susan Magliaro, 1998, "Grade Retention: A History of Failure," *Educational Leadership*, 56(1), 86-8; Tanner and Galis, 1997.

¹² Based on the interview with Cecilia Rawlins, principal of Wiley Elementary in Wake County, North Carolina on June 28, 2004.

¹³ Fager and Richen, 1999; Haberman and Dill, 1993; Jimerson, Anderson and Whipple 2002; Tanner and Combs, 1993; Ellen M. Tomchin and James C Impara, "Unraveling Teachers' Beliefs about Grade Retention," *American Educational Research Journal*, 29(1), 199-223.

¹⁴ Dawson, 1998; Jimerson et al., 1997; Johnson, 2001; Shepard and Smith, 1990; Thompson and Cunningham, 2000; Walters and Borgers, 1995.

¹⁵ Gerald W. Bracey, 2002, "Raising Achievement of At-Risk Students—Or Not [summary of research by B. A. Jacob; M. Roderick and M. Engel]," *Phi Delta Kappan*, 83(6), 431-2; Fager and Richen, 1999; Southern Regional Education Board, 2001, *Finding Alternatives to Failure: Can States End Social Promotion and Reduce Retention Rates?* Atlanta, GA: Southern Regional Education Board.

¹⁶ Karl L. Alexander, Doris R. Entwisle and Susan L. Dauber, 2003, *On the Success of Failure: A Reassessment of the Effects of Retention in the Primary School Grades*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2nd edition; Panayota Y. Mantzicopoulos, 1997, "Do Certain Groups of Children Profit from Early Retention? A Follow-Up Study of Kindergartners with Attention Problems," *Psychology in the Schools*, 34(2), 115-27; Roderick, 1994; Tanner and Galis, 1997.

¹⁷ Hauser, 1999; Jimerson et al., 1997; Johnson, 2001; Roderick, 1995; Thompson and Cunningham, 2000.

¹⁸ Fager and Richen, 1999; Hauser 1999.

¹⁹ Michael W. Kirst, 2000, "Bridging Education Research and Education Policymaking," *Oxford Review of Education*, 26(3/4), 379-91, p. 385.

²⁰ Alexander, Entwisle and Dauber, 2003; Hauser, 1999; Jimerson et al. 1997; Nancy L. Karweit, 1999, *Grade Retention: Prevalence, Timing, and Effects*, Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed At Risk, Report No. 33; Mantzicopoulos, 1997; Ann R. McCoy and Arthur J. Reynolds, 1999, "Grade Retention and School Performance: An Extended Investigation," *Journal of School Psychology*, 37(3), 273-98; Tanner and Galis, 1997.

²¹ Holmes and Saturday, 2000, p. 7. ■

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Center for Child and Family Policy

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