

Alternatives to Grade Retention

Because grade retention has proven to be an ineffective intervention, educators should incorporate alternative interventions to help low-achieving students succeed.

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Despite the current policies of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), a greater number of students are being left behind because of grade retention than ever before. Grade retention in the United States has increased in the past 25 years despite research that fails to support its effectiveness as an intervention. Recent estimates indicate that at least 2 million U.S. students are held back every year (Hauser, Pager, & Simmons, 2000). Moreover, evidence from research and practice highlights the importance of implementing effective alternatives that promote the social and cognitive competence of all students, thereby enhancing educational outcomes.

Given the accumulating evidence that grade retention is an ineffective and possibly harmful intervention, it is imperative that school administrators advocate for “promotion plus” policies that depend on effective, evidence-based interventions. The issue for secondary school educators is twofold. Not only must educators determine whether

retention is appropriate for a given student, they also need to address the negative academic, social, and emotional consequences for students who were retained in earlier grades. Very often the student’s original difficulties persist, or more likely worsen, as their school career progresses.

The Evidence Regarding Retention

Temporary gains. Although initial academic improvements may occur during the year the student is retained, numerous studies show that achievement gains decline two to three years after retention. Eventually, students who are retained either do not perform better or often perform worse than similar groups of students who were not retained. Without specific, targeted interventions that address the needs of low-achieving or misbehaving students, most retained students do not catch up to their nonretained peers (Jimerson, 2001).

Negative impact on achievement and adjustment. Research has found

that for most students, grade retention had a negative effect on all areas of achievement (e.g., reading, math, and language) and social and emotional adjustment (e.g., peer relationships, self-esteem, problem behaviors, and attendance). Although most retained students demonstrate poor reading skills, research reveals that the effect of retention on reading is the most negative. Notably, research that examined students’ perceptions of stressful life events indicates that sixth graders rate retention as one of the most stressful life events, similar to the loss of a parent and going blind. In addition, during adolescence, retained students are more likely to experience such problems as poor peer interactions, dislike of school, behavior problems, and poor self-concept.

Retention and dropout. Students who were retained are much more likely to drop out of school. A recent, systematic review of research exploring dropping out of high school indicates that grade retention is one of the most powerful predictors of dropping out of high school (Jimerson, Anderson, & Whipple, 2002).

Negative long-term effects. No evidence of a positive effect on either long-term school achievement or adjustment exists for students who

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have been retained. In fact, by adolescence, experiencing grade retention is predictive of such health-compromising behaviors as emotional distress, low self-esteem, poor peer relations, smoking, alcohol use, drug abuse, driving or engaging in sexual

activity while under the influence, early onset of sexual activity, suicidal intentions, and violent behaviors (Jimerson, Anderson, & Whipple, 2002). In addition to lower levels of academic adjustment in grade 11 and a greater likelihood of dropping out of

high school, retained students are also less likely to receive a diploma by age 20. As adults, individuals who repeated a grade are more likely to be unemployed, living on public assistance, or in prison than adults who did not repeat a grade (Royce, Darlington, & Murray, 1983).

CASE STUDY: FIRST-GRADE FAILURE, HIGH SCHOOL STRUGGLES

Kevin entered kindergarten shortly after his fifth birthday with no prior preschool experience. His parents did not live together. Both struggled to make ends meet but shared responsibility for Kevin and his sister. Throughout kindergarten, Kevin lagged behind his peers in a number of areas, including oral language use, the ability to follow directions, fine motor development, and letter and number identification. His teacher expressed concerns about his personal hygiene and frequent absences but noted that Kevin wanted to please, was helpful and cheerful, and responded well to praise.

An instructional support team developed strategies to help Kevin achieve the basic kindergarten objectives. He did well enough to move on to first grade but continued to struggle and fall behind despite extra support from his first-grade teacher. Because of his academic deficits, his teacher recommended retention. He repeated first grade, with the same teacher and seemed to make good progress.

Unfortunately, Kevin's improvement did not last. By the time he entered ninth-grade, he had a long history of difficulties and his report cards and test scores indicated lags of one to three years in grade-level achievement. Although he had been evaluated for special education services twice, he had not qualified for service because his ability scores were too low to meet learning disability discrepancy criteria and too high for classification of mental retardation. Over time, Kevin displayed an increasing pattern of behavior problems and received numerous disciplinary actions, including several suspensions, related to having difficulties with classmates. His high school student support team was concerned about Kevin's hygiene, his attendance, his "Goth" or antisocial persona, and signs of depression. He was described as withdrawn and visibly disdainful of school and his ability to achieve.

Simple strategies were not adequate to address Kevin's now-entrenched problems. The student support team devised a comprehensive, targeted plan to remediate gaps in Kevin's learning and facilitate his social and emotional adjustment. They also expanded the team to include community resources (e.g., a family social worker and an after-school program leader). After conducting a comprehensive assessment of Kevin to rule out a disability (once again, he did not qualify for special education), the team developed specific interventions and support strategies to address his poor reading and math skills, attendance problems, classroom behavior problems, interaction difficulties with peers, and mental health concerns.

Addressing the poor reading skills required targeted interventions that were designed to build upon Kevin's current skills. Specific strategies included enrolling Kevin in a functional reading skills class, using direct instruction in high-interest materials (car and sports magazines), and providing after-school tutoring from a community volunteer (a male college student). It was initially very difficult to engage Kevin in these interventions because of his long-standing resistance to schoolwork. However, he ultimately formed a positive relationship with his tutor who was able to encourage him to participate in the reading class at school. To enhance Kevin's math skills, similar strategies were used that, once again, focused on skills that Kevin could find of immediate use in daily activities. Finally, Kevin was referred to a weekend support program aimed at students who are at a high risk of dropping out. The program provided group counseling and opportunities to earn money while being engaged in work around the community.

The school psychologist worked with Kevin to help him develop effective problem-solving strategies and self-monitoring techniques to reduce his problems interacting in the classroom and with peers. She also worked with Kevin and his family to identify appropriate mental health services in the community that would address his depression and self-esteem issues.

Continual progress monitoring of specific skill areas indicated monthly gains, reflecting positive effects of the targeted interventions. Likewise, Kevin's attendance improved and his behavior problems decreased. It will likely take more time to see noticeable improvements in his relationships with peers and his mental health. Ongoing progress monitoring will be essential in determining which target areas continue to improve and which require alternative strategies.

High school programs can interrupt the cycle of failure that often leads students like Kevin to drop out. However, Kevin's student support team recognizes that the challenge would have been far less daunting if more appropriate early intervention strategies had been implemented when Kevin was in first grade instead of merely sending Kevin through the same instructional program again. As a result, the team worked with their administrator to initiate a task force among elementary and secondary principals to address appropriate alternatives to grade retention.

The Evidence for Alternative Strategies

There is clearly no single silver bullet intervention that will effectively address the specific needs of all low-achieving students. Systematic, evidence-based interventions should be used to facilitate the academic and socioeconomic development of low-achieving students.

Algozzine, Ysseldyke, and Elliott (2002) provide a review of research-based tactics for effective instruction, and Shinn, Walker, and Stoner (2002) provide a more extensive discussion of interventions for academic and behavior problems. It is important to note that the literature indicates that effective practices for at-risk students tends to be very similar to the best practices of general education but at a more intense, individualized level. The following strategies are examples of evidence-based alternatives to grade retention and social promotion:

- Parent involvement through frequent contact with teachers, supervision of homework, and continual communication about school activities that promote learning. Culturally appropriate outreach, in the parents' native language, allows parents who face cultural or language barriers to feel comfortable and work with the school to support their children.
- Age-appropriate and culturally sensitive instructional strategies to accelerate progress in the classroom. Tutoring programs and individual enrichment strategies may be valuable tools in advancing the skills of students.
- Systematic assessment strategies, such as continual progress monitoring and formative evaluation, that enable ongoing modification of instructional efforts. Effective programs frequently assess student progress and adapt instructional strategies to the results of these assessments.
- Reading programs that provide developmentally appropriate, intensive, and direct instruction strategies to promote the reading skills of low-performing students with reading problems.

- School-based mental health programs that promote the social and emotional adjustment of children. For example, addressing behavior problems has been found to be effective in facilitating academic performance (Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg, 2004).

- Student support teams with appropriate professionals to assess and identify specific learning or behavior problems, design interventions to address those problems, and evaluate the efficacy of those interventions.

- Behavior management and cognitive-behavior modification strategies to reduce classroom behavior problems.

- Extended year, extended day, and summer school programs that facilitate the development of academic skills.

- Tutoring and mentoring programs with peer, cross-age, or adult tutors that promote specific academic or social skills.

- Comprehensive schoolwide programs

to promote the psychosocial and academic skills of all students. Too often, remedial and special education services are poorly integrated with the regular education program. Therefore, collaboration and consistency among regular, remedial, and special education programs are essential.

It is essential to address the needs of students by providing effective interventions that specifically target deficits and build upon strengths. Too often, students fall behind in middle level or high school and do not make adequate progress toward graduation. Ultimately, many of these students drop out of high school. Students who were retained in elementary school often display behavior problems and attendance problems during middle level and high school. It is important to carefully consider both the academic and the social-emotional needs of all students who have been retained

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HOW CAN PARENTS HELP STUDENTS AVOID RETENTION?

Parents can provide much needed insight into their children's learning needs, and administrators should encourage parents to do the following:

- Provide a time and a place at home for their child to complete homework.
- Work with teachers to address the needs of their child and identify opportunities to enhance learning outside the classroom.
- Discuss concerns as they arise. Parents should inform teachers if assignments include content that their child does not understand. This helps teachers provide appropriate instruction.
- Be aware of their child's assignments and homework and provide appropriate monitoring to ensure that these are completed.
- Advocate for their child and share the child's strengths and aspirations.
- Make certain that their child gets plenty of sleep, eats a nutritious breakfast, comes to school on time, and receives appropriate medical care.

and to establish support plans that promote their educational success.

Strategies for School Administrators

Administrators who are committed to helping all students achieve academic success and reach their full potential must discard such ineffective practices as grade retention and social promotion in favor of “promotion plus” strategies—specific interventions that are designed to address the factors that place students at risk for school failure. It is important to engage student support personnel—the school psychologist, the social worker, the counselor, and the nurse—to develop and implement alternative strategies to retention because they will work closely with the at-risk students as well as with their teachers and parents.

Implement early identification procedures to promote cognitive and social competence. Systematic procedures to identify needs at the beginning of each academic year (and at regular intervals throughout the academic year) provide the foundation for effective intervention efforts. The cumulative risk associated with ongoing achievement and behavior problems demonstrates the

importance of providing targeted to students early to improve their chances for success.

Collaborate with teachers and parents to meet student needs. Encourage parents to be involved in their children's education. Because parents know their children well and can interact with the teacher, there are many things that parents can do to help. It is important for parents, teachers, and other educational professionals to work together. For instance, parents may emphasize the importance of education and provide a designated space at home for completing assignments. Parental monitoring of activities may be valuable in helping

students focus on their schoolwork. Teachers and parents can be collaborative allies in educating youth.

Use research to establish policies and inform decisions. Research overwhelmingly indicates that grade retention is an ineffective, and possibly harmful, intervention. Therefore, staff training should emphasize evidence-based, alternative interventions that promote student academic and socio-emotional success. Establish school policies that facilitate and support students' cognitive and social competence.

Emphasize the importance of elementary school experiences on middle level and high school success. Education is a cumulative experience; early experience unequivocally influences subsequent success. Administrators who communicate with educational professionals across the K–12 spectrum offer important insights regarding the outcomes of those students who are retained in elementary school. Often the strongest proponents of grade retention are those who only witness the short-term effect (e.g., kindergarten or first-grade teachers), and the strongest opponents are those who experience the deleterious long-term outcomes (e.g., high school teachers, school psychologists, counselors, and administrators). Therefore, it is important for administrators to exchange information across elementary, middle

FACTORS TO CONSIDER WHEN RETENTION IS RECOMMENDED

If retention is recommended for a particular student, consider the following factors to determine appropriate intervention strategies:

- Previous and current assessments of academic skills and behaviors
- Previous intervention efforts and the effectiveness of those interventions
- Previous retention
- Current supports and the duration and effectiveness of those supports
- Community resources
- The student's family context (e.g., frequent moves, divorce, poverty, abuse)
- The extent or likelihood of parent involvement in school
- The student's after-school life and peer group
- Health issues
- Risk behaviors

level, and high school constituencies within a given district or community and emphasize the long-term effect of early intervention efforts.

Lead by example and present the empirical evidence. Present empirical evidence that supports the intervention strategies made available to students at the school. Providing this information to school board members, teachers, and parents will not only communicate essential information regarding the relative effectiveness of selected intervention strategies but also serve as an exemplar for the importance of presenting the empirical evidence.

Access community resources. Collaborate with local child and family service agencies to meet the needs of struggling students and their families. There are numerous challenges facing these students and the contributions of other professionals in the community are essential in helping students succeed at school. **PL**

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