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Grade Retention and Promotion: A Guide for Educators

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Grade retention has become an increasingly common practice over the past 30 years. Currently, an estimated 2 million students in the United States are retained each year at significant cost to taxpayers. Students are usually retained because they are achieving low academically and/or experiencing behavior problems. The current emphases on educational accountability, grade-level performance standards, high-stakes testing, and ending *social promotion*—the practice of promoting students with their same age-peers regardless of mastery of grade level content—all have likely contributed to the increased use of retention.

Some educators and administrators believe grade retention is necessary for schools to meet their Adequate Yearly Progress mandates of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, while others believe that giving a student the “gift” of another year in the same grade will allow for more time to mature academically, behaviorally, or socially. However, these beliefs are not supported by current research, which shows that neither grade retention nor social promotion alone is an effective strategy for improving students’ academic, behavioral, and social and emotional success. In fact, over 100 research studies in the last century show that grade retention is associated with many negative student outcomes.

Considering these findings, it is particularly concerning that the highest retention rates are found among youths from poor, minority, inner-city backgrounds. Although research does not support grade retention or social promotion, it does support effective alternative interventions to enhance students’ academic, behavioral, and social and emotional success.

The following information highlights important research findings about the characteristics of students who are typically retained, outcomes and potentially negative effects of retention, alternative intervention strategies, and specific recommendations for classroom teachers.

WHAT ARE THE CHARACTERISTICS OF RETAINED STUDENTS?

Some groups of students are more likely to be retained than others. Student risk factors for retention include:

- Poverty or single-parent household
- English language learner status
- Black or Hispanic/Latino male
- Younger than same-grade peers (summer birthdates)
- Parents with low educational attainment
- Parents with limited involvement in school activities or interaction with teachers
- Frequent school changes
- Chronic school absences
- Delayed development and/or attention problems
- Low self-perceptions of academic and/or social competence
- Behavior problems and/or aggression
- Difficulty with peer relationships
- Low academic achievement (especially in reading and language arts)
- High-conflict relationships with teachers
- Multiple risk characteristics

WHAT ARE THE EFFECTS OF GRADE RETENTION?

Many years of research indicate that grade retention has numerous deleterious effects on student performance and long-term outcomes.

Temporary Gains

Academic achievement may improve during the first year after grade retention, but achievement gains typically decline within the following 2–3 years. Students who are retained typically do not improve long-term, do not automatically catch up to their peers without targeted intervention, and perform more poorly than other low-achieving students who were not retained.

Negative Impact on Achievement and Adjustment

Retention is associated with negative outcomes in all areas of academic achievement (particularly reading, math, science, and language arts) as well as in social and emotional adjustment (such as peer relationships, self-esteem, and problem behaviors). Additionally, retained students typically have a more negative attitude toward school and higher absenteeism. They are also two times more likely than nonretained students to be retained again.

Negative Long-Term Effects

Retention is predictive of emotional distress, low self-esteem, poor peer relations, tobacco use, alcohol and other drug abuse, early sexual activity, suicidal intentions, and violent behaviors during adolescence.

Retention and high school dropout. Retention is one of the most powerful predictors of later high school dropout. Specifically, retained students are 20–50% more likely to drop out of high school than nonretained students.

Consequences during adulthood. Individuals who have experienced grade retention are less likely to receive a diploma by age 20 and are more likely to be unemployed, living on public assistance, or in prison when compared to nonretained individuals.

IS GRADE RETENTION EVER EFFECTIVE?

While a few students may benefit from grade retention, there is no proven method for predicting who will and who will not. Educators may believe that some students who have difficulty in school because of lack of instructional opportunities, rather than lack of ability, will benefit from retention. However, this is only likely if the lack of opportunities is related to attendance, health, or mobility problems that have been resolved, and if the student is no more than 1 year older than his or her

classmates. Additionally, though some believe that grade retention is more effective in earlier grades than later grades, the preponderance of empirical evidence reveals that retention is ineffective *across grade levels*.

Given the multiple negative outcomes associated with retention, and the rarity of positive outcomes, retention cannot be a recommended practice for anyone until there is a more reliable method for identifying those few students who might benefit. It is important for parents, educators, and administrators to carefully examine the evidence from retention research before making grade placement decisions for an individual student.

WHAT ARE ALTERNATIVE INTERVENTION STRATEGIES?

Considering the diverse developmental, cultural, linguistic, and gender backgrounds among students, there is no single silver bullet intervention that effectively addresses the needs of all students at risk for grade retention. A comprehensive review of preventive and remedial instructional approaches is beyond the scope of this handout; educators are referred to Algozzine, Ysseldyke, and Elliott (2002) for a review of research-based tactics for effective instruction, and to Shinn, Walker, and Stoner (2002) for a more extensive review of specific interventions for academic and behavior problems (see Recommended Resources on the next page). There are a number of school-wide, classroom-based, and home-based interventions that provide evidence-based alternatives to grade retention and social promotion.

School-Wide Interventions

School-wide interventions that provide evidence-based alternatives to grade retention and social promotion include:

- Early intervention and preschool programs to enhance language and social skills (rather than waiting until difficulties accumulate before providing intervention)
- Early and intensive reading programs using direct instruction strategies (e.g., programs targeted to increase phonemic awareness and decoding skills)
- Structured follow-up support services throughout the primary grades (following completion of an early intervention program)
- Student support teams composed of multidisciplinary professionals to assess and identify specific academic or behavior problems, design interventions targeting these problems, and evaluate the effectiveness of the interventions
- School-based mental health programs to promote social and emotional adjustment

- Extended year, extended day, and summer school programs to promote development of academic skills
- Tutoring and mentoring programs with peer, cross-age, or adult tutors to promote academic or social skills
- Comprehensive, school-wide positive behavior support programs to promote the psychosocial and academic skills of all students (involving collaboration between regular, remedial, and special education)
- Revision of school grading policies that incorporate grades for behavior, work completion, and learning outcomes, which tend to increase the rate of failure and decrease motivation among students

Classroom-Based Interventions

Classroom-based interventions that provide evidence-based alternatives to grade retention and social promotion include:

- Developmentally appropriate and culturally sensitive instructional strategies to accelerate academic progress
- Behavior management and cognitive-behavioral strategies to reduce classroom behavior problems and increase academic achievement and prosocial behavior
- Systematic assessment strategies (such as continuous progress monitoring and formative evaluation) to enable ongoing evaluation and modification of instructional interventions

Home-Based Interventions

Home-based interventions that provide evidence-based alternatives to grade retention and social promotion include:

- Frequent communication between home and school about student progress
- Academic practice opportunities at home
- Ideas for parents to create a home environment conducive to completing homework
- Home supervision of assigned homework
- Parent involvement in school-wide and classroom-based interventions

WHAT CAN TEACHERS DO?

It is the responsibility of school personnel to use effective strategies that will facilitate the success of students at risk for grade retention. Specifically, teachers can address problems early and improve students' chances for success by:

- Using research-based instructional strategies to promote an optimal learning environment
- Identifying learning and behavior problems early to avoid the combined effects of continuing difficulties and failure
- Discussing student concerns with parents and other educational professionals to raise awareness and promote a team-based problem solving approach
- Providing materials, structured activities, and guidance to parents and others who can support students with additional opportunities to develop academic or social skills
- Seeking assistance from other educational professionals (e.g., school psychologists, social workers, or administrators) to access resources and expertise when addressing unique student needs

SUMMARY

Neither grade retention nor social promotion is an effective remedy for addressing the needs of students experiencing academic, behavioral, or social and emotional difficulties. To help all students succeed and reach their full potential, it is important that teachers discard ineffective practices and use research-based interventions designed to address the specific needs of individual students.

There is no single intervention that will address the diverse needs of all students; rather, a comprehensive approach involving multiple interventions should be used. Teachers are encouraged to actively collaborate with other educational professionals and parents to develop and put into practice effective alternatives to retention and social promotion. Additionally, research-based interventions and instructional strategies should be used at the school, classroom, and home levels to enhance school success for all students.

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RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Print

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Online

- Beyond Grade Retention and Social Promotion: <http://www.education.ucsb.edu/jimerson/retention>
- National Association of School Psychologists: <http://www.nasponline.org>

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