

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 401 646

EA 028 099

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 TITLE Ninth Grade Repeaters--Why They Did Better in Summer School.  
 PUB DATE Apr 95  
 NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Multidisciplinary Conference on the Scholarship and Creativity of African Americans (Towson, MD, April 28-30, 1995).  
 PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)  
 EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.  
 DESCRIPTORS \*Academic Achievement; \*Academic Failure; \*Grade 9; \*Grade Repetition; High Risk Students; High Schools; \*Student Promotion; \*Summer Programs; Summer Schools  
 IDENTIFIERS \*Durham City School District NC

ABSTRACT

A widely held perception is that public schools are failing American children and society. Some research indicates that 9th-graders are more at risk for school failure than are students in other grades. This paper presents findings of a study that examined 9th-graders in the Durham Public School System (North Carolina) who were enrolled in a Basic Education Program (BEP), a summer program required for students who had received a failing grade, in order to gain promotion to 10th grade. The study examined BEP students' academic achievement and surveyed their opinions about their academic performance. Data were collected during the 1992 and 1993 summer sessions from a sample of 438 black students and 120 white students. The data show that students achieved higher scores during each BEP summer session and were promoted to the 10th grade. Students attributed their improved achievement to the shorter school day, the lessened subject load, better attendance, smaller classes, increased classroom participation, and their attitudes toward summer school. The implications are that students must internalize the belief that all students can learn and hold high expectations of themselves; and that educators should address issues of racial and gender equity, reduce class size, and provide alternative approaches to the school day. Three tables are included. (LMI)

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### NINTH GRADE REPEATERS - Why They Did Better in Summer School

Paper Presented at the Towson State University Multidisciplinary Conference On the Scholarship and Creativity of African Americans: New Directions (April 28 - 30, 1995)

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## Introduction

All around there is the cry that public schools are failing the children and the American society. The major reforms taking place in education have been evolving over several decades. Since the early 1970's, reports on the restructuring of education have criticized traditional instructional methods; low student achievement; and the lack of the students' responsibility for their learning and involvement in the educational process.

Ninth-graders have been at the center of many reform efforts. Several studies have indicated that ninth-graders are at risk more than other grade levels. Students tend to drop out in the ninth grade, and ethnic minority students tend to drop out in disproportionate numbers. Absenteeism appears to be the differentiator between ninth grade passers and failures (Texas Education Agency, 1993; Gruenhagen, K.A., 1993; Center for Policy Research in Education, 1990; and Donahoe and Zigmund, 1990).

This study focuses on ninth-graders in the Durham Public School System's Basic Education Program Summer School who must take a core course needed to be promoted to the tenth grade. The core course can be taken at no cost to the student. By attending summer school the student can avoid being retained, which decreases the probability of dropping out.

Durham Public Schools in Durham, North Carolina is a newly consolidated school district with more than 27,000 students. There are six high schools in the system and the racial composition consists of 53.5% African-American; 43.6% white; and 2.9% other.

The Basic Education Program (BEP) is state funded and seeks to assure that all students are successful with basic skills. Students achieving on grade level take Algebra I, Civics, English I, and Physical Science during the freshman year. The State Department of Public Instruction has developed comprehensive course goals and objectives for the BEP which are followed by all teachers across the state.

During summer school, students attend class five hours a day for six weeks. There are 15 days each semester (first and second semesters). They are expected to attend class every day. Only two absences are allowed in a six-week course. Three tardies or early dismissals count as one absence.

## **The Study**

The purposes of this study were threefold:

1. to examine the academic achievements of high school repeaters in the BEP summer school.
2. to survey students' opinions of their academic performance. The effect of school structure, instructional strategy, and expected performance were examined.
3. to glean from the research findings implications for the continued success of students during the regular school year.

Data were collected during the 1992 and 1993 summer school sessions.

## **The Population**

In order to determine the gender and racial mix of 9th grade BEP students the sex and race of the students were determined. Table 1 shows the racial composition of the population by sex.

Table 1: The Race of the Students by Sex

	<b>Sex</b>		
<b>Race</b>	<b>Female</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Total</b>
Black	202	236	438
White	41	79	120
Total	243	315	558

From Table I we observe that 438 Black and 120 white students were used in the study. Of the 558 students in the population, 315 were male and 243 were female. Chi square was used to determine if the racial distribution was even across sex. The distribution of students enrolled in the summer school BEP shows a significantly higher proportion of the white students were male compared to the total population,  $\chi^2 (1) = 5.47 p < .01$ .

### **Student Achievement**

In order to determine how well students who received a failing grade during the academic year achieved in the summer, the academic achievement for the students in each subject was examined. Table 2 shows the mean achievement score earned by students during the summer for each subject in each session.

Table 2: The number of students, the mean achievement scores, and standard deviations for each session by subject.

Subject	Session I			Session II			Session III		
	N	Mean	SD	N	MEAN	SD	N	MEAN	SD
<b>Alg I</b>	22	80.6	13.9	48	74.0	15.1	47	77.0	10.4
<b>Civics</b>	-	-	-	28	75.2	11.7	28	81.5	9.9
<b>Eng I</b>	13	75.0	13.1	154	73.7	16.8	129	77.6	12.9
<b>P Sci</b>	8	82.6	5.6	41	80.1	8.6	40	70.9	19.8

In Table 2 we observe that civics was not taught in session I.

In order to answer the question: Was the mean score earned by students in each subject consistent across sessions, ANOVA was used. There are no significant differences in the mean score earned by students between sessions for Alg I and Eng I. The mean achievement score for students enrolled in civics during session 3 was significantly higher than the mean achievement score for students in session 2,  $F(1,54) = 4.76, p < .03$ . The mean achievement score for students enrolled in physical science was significantly higher in session 1 than it was in session 3,  $F(2,86) = 4.78, p < .01$ .

A second question was: Did students tend to do better in one subject than they did in another? ANOVA was used. There is no significant difference in the mean achievement score between subjects in session 1 or in session 2. The mean achievement score for students in session 3 was significantly higher in Civics,  $F(3,240) = 3.46, p < .01$ .

**Note: Session I was conducted in the summer of 1992.**

### **Student Opinions of Academic Achievement**

To assess the students' opinions of their academic achievement in Summer School, a Student Survey Questionnaire was developed and administered to them. Pearson's chi-square (goodness of fit) was used to determine if students had definite opinions concerning their achievement. From this analysis ( $X^2(df = 1, \alpha = .05) = 3.84$ ) it was concluded that students perceived that they benefited from a shorter day, fewer subjects, better attendance, smaller classes, their expectations, and their class participation. A negative influence which students said had a positive effect on achievement was that they hated to attend summer school. Table 3 presents the data from the survey.

Table 3: The Student Survey Questionnaire, Each Question, and the Student Response for each Question are Shown.

<u>School Structure</u>	Yes	No
Did a shorter day help you earn a better grade in Summer School?	272	95*
Did fewer subjects help you earn a better grade in Summer School?	290	82*
Did a longer class period help you earn a better grade in Summer School?	162	210
Did smaller classes help you earn a better grade in Summer School?	216	147*
Did you have fewer absences in Summer School?	322	45*
<u>Instructional Strategy</u>		
Did you have more homework in Summer School?	66	300*
Did you have more group work in Summer School?	191	175
Did you use more learning materials in Summer School?	179	190
Did your teacher put more pressure on you to earn a better grade in Summer School?	206	157
<u>Expected Performance</u>		
Did your parents put more pressure on you to earn a better grade in Summer School?	157	210
Did you expect to earn a better grade in Summer School?	309	56*
Did you participate more in class during Summer School?	291	79*
Did you study more in Summer School?	201	171
<u>Attitude toward summer school</u>		
Did you hate to attend Summer School?	254	113*

\* Indicates a significant level of difference in student response

## Conclusions

From the data analysis we can conclude:

1. All students earned a higher score in the BEP summer school in each session for each of the four subjects than they did in the regular session. They were promoted to tenth grade.
2. Of the students enrolled in the BEP summer school the percentage of total whites who are male is significantly higher than the percentage of total Black students who are male.
3. The academic achievement in civics was significantly higher in session 3.
4. The academic achievement in physical science was significantly higher in session 2.
5. For all sessions combined, the academic achievement in physical science was significantly higher than Alg I, Civics, or English I.
6. Students perceived that more structure (a shorter day, fewer absences, and fewer subjects) contributed significantly to their improved academic achievement.
7. Students perceived that more individual attention (smaller classes and class participation) contributed significantly to their improved academic achievement.
8. Students perceived that their attitude (expected to achieve higher and their dislike for having to attend summer school) contributed significantly to their improved academic achievement.

## **Implications for the Regular School Year**

It is apparent that summer school provides opportunities for students who have failed to succeed. Such achievement must be continued during the regular school year. Some suggestions for ensuring such progress follow:

1. The current emphasis on the belief statement: "all children can learn" must be stressed in different ways thorough out the school. Students need to be encouraged to internalize this belief and to value it deeply.
2. School administrators and teachers need to look very closely at which students are failing in relation to race and gender and not just focus on failing grades. Racial and gender equity needs to be addressed straight forwardly.
3. An understanding of why some students perform better in one subject opposed to another needs to be found. Research and serious dialogue are needed in this area. Unfortunately students have had to carry the burden of not being intelligent enough or not being studious enough. Other factors, such as teaching style, should be considered.
4. Alternative approaches to the school day should be provided as is being done in some schools. Classes can be scheduled for double periods to offer students more time to focus on a particular subject and to offer more opportunities for collaborative learning. Diverse learning styles are accommodated with this approach. Also, student can be grouped and regrouped as often as necessary during the school year based on academic growth. This kind of flexibility in grouping students for instruction is important.

5. Smaller classes and class participation have a positive correlation to student achievement as students recognized. According to Ted Sizer of the Coalition of Essential Schools, reducing the load of students assigned to each teacher is one of the most critical things that characterizes the most successful Coalition schools. He contends that even if nothing else changes, by getting the number down you see an effect on the kids. The kids show up. Students can be organized into interdisciplinary teams and team teaching can be done. Also, the personal, interactive relationships needed to support learning occurs. (O'Neil, 1995).
  
6. Students must hold high expectations for themselves and frequent opportunities for success and achievement in the classroom must be provided for them. It is essential for schools to build on the summer school success of students. Their confidence needs to be reinforced and serious dialogue between teachers and students needs to be on going around the importance of their determination to work hard and be successful at whatever the task. They must hold on to that "last chance to make it" mentality.

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