

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 434 962

UD 033 135

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TITLE Failing Our Children: Finding Alternatives to In-Grade Retention. A Policy Brief.  
INSTITUTION Intercultural Development Research Association, San Antonio, TX.  
PUB DATE 1999-00-00  
NOTE 39p.; For other policy briefs, see UD 033 132 and UD 033 134-136.  
AVAILABLE FROM Intercultural Development Research Association Institute for Policy and Leadership, 5835 Callaghan Road, Suite 350, San Antonio, TX 78228-1190. Tel: 210-684-8180; Fax: 210-684-5389; e-mail: contact@idra.org; Web site: <<http://www.idra.org>>.  
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)  
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.  
DESCRIPTORS \*Academic Failure; Academic Standards; Elementary Secondary Education; \*Grade Repetition; Low Achievement; \*Social Promotion; \*Student Promotion; Urban Schools

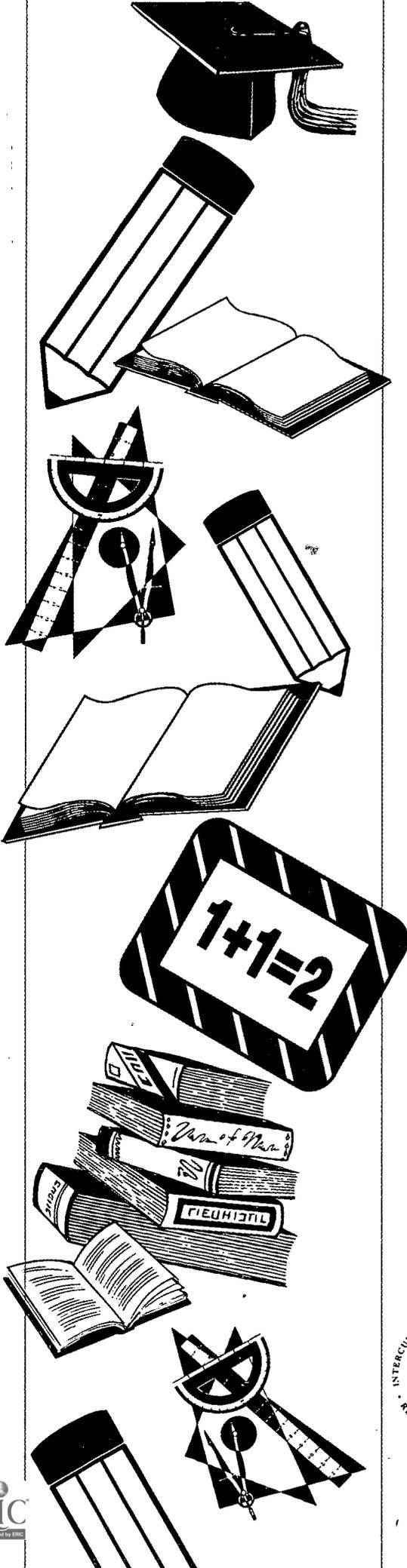
ABSTRACT

This policy brief presents an in-depth look at the issue of grade-retention in Texas, reviews research that finds this practice to be ineffective, and outlines alternatives to both retention and social promotion. In-grade retention has been a recurrent theme in education over the last 30 years, and it is currently linked to calls for higher standards by politicians. It is often seen as the only alternative to social promotion, passing students with the age-appropriate cohort. Of 66 studies done from 1990 to 1997, 65 found in-grade retention to be ineffective or actually harmful. Retained students suffer low self-esteem and are not likely to make up academic deficiencies. African American and Hispanic students are retained at twice the rate of Whites, and 40% of grade repeaters come from the lowest socioeconomic quartile. In-grade retention is increasing in Texas, especially for minority and economically disadvantaged students. The highest retention rates are found in urban school districts. The Intercultural Development Research Association has developed some recommendations for addressing issues related to in-grade retention in Texas. These include early identification of students at risk, professional development for teachers, redesign of school structures to provide more support, and establishment of new criteria for determining whether or not students should be promoted. (Contains 6 tables, 1 graph, and 39 references.) (SLD)

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# Failing Our Children

## Finding Alternatives to In-Grade Retention



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## A Policy Brief

INTERCULTURAL DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH ASSOCIATION

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## Foreword

This publication is part of a series of policy briefs developed by the Intercultural Development Research Association on four key issues in education. The series is designed to inform community and policy decisions during the Texas legislative session and beyond. Topics in the series are:

- 0 Disciplinary alternative education programs.
- 0 Dropout and attrition rates in Texas public high schools.
- 0 In-grade retention (this publication).
- 0 Use of public money for private schooling.

The series and associated data are available on line at [www.idra.org](http://www.idra.org).

## Context

A review of education columns in newspapers across the country shows that politicians and education policy-makers are taking a stance against “social promotion” in the public schools. In his 1998 State of the Union Address, President Clinton linked ending the practice of social promotion to improving schools. The centerpiece of his education policy was a proposed voluntary national test based on national standards in fourth grade reading and eighth grade math. The president’s plan would retain students in grade who do not meet those standards.

The intuitive appeal of holding students back who have not mastered grade-level knowledge and skills is so strong and its history is so long that its efficacy is rarely questioned, even though research overwhelmingly shows that retention has negative personal and academic effects.

During a 30-year period, the educational pendulum has alternated between advocating social promotion and supporting in-grade retention. *Social promotion* refers to the practice of passing students who have failed to master part or all of the grade-level curriculum on to the next grade with their age-grade peers. *In-grade retention*, on the other hand, requires students to repeat the same grade a second time in order to master what was not learned.

The pendulum has changed directions by decade. For example, in the 1970s, social promotion was favored, but with the call for raising educational standards in the 1980s and its attendant minimal competence testing, the favor returned to retention. By 1990, however, two of the largest school districts in the country, Chicago and New York City, were advocating promoting students with their age-appropriate cohort.

As we approach the year 2000, the pendulum clearly indicates in-grade retention as the favored response to addressing poor academic achievement. This policy brief by the Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA) presents an in-depth look at the issue of in-grade retention in Texas, reviews research that finds this practice to be ineffective and outlines alternatives to both retention and social promotion.



## Recommendations

Based on the research presented in this policy brief, the Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA) recommends the following.

- ☛ Establish a goal for reducing the number of retentions in grade in Texas schools.
- ☛ Identify as early as possible students who are not achieving at satisfactory levels.
- ☛ Enhance the professional development of teachers to ensure they have the knowledge and skills to teach a wider range of students to meet standards.
- ☛ Redesign school structures to support more intensive learning, i.e., multi-age classes where teachers stay with students for more than one year.
- ☛ Publish retention rates along with TAAS scores at the campus and district level as well as the cost per pupil to repeat a grade.
- ☛ Use criteria to determine “exemplary” and “recognized” school status that include low rates of in-grade retention.
- ☛ Re-establish limits on the number of times a student can be retained in grade.
- ☛ Establish multiple criteria for determining whether a student should be retained or promoted to the next grade. Decisions should be made on multiple criteria rather than solely on test scores or teacher recommendations.
- ☛ Establish a mechanism for determining whether a student should be retained or promoted to the next grade. Such mechanisms should include campus review committees (that include teachers, parents, administrators, counselors and other specialized staff) that review multiple criteria. These committees should have a role in *influencing decisions* regarding possible retentions rather than responding to them.
- ☛ Use classroom assessment that better informs teaching, i.e., performance-based assessments (rubrics, checklists, anecdotal records) that guide instruction.

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*"It would be difficult to find another educational practice on which the evidence is so unequivocally negative."*

– E. House, 1989,  
professor, University of  
Colorado at Boulder

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## Findings at a Glance

### The National Scene

- ☞ In-grade retention (the practice of requiring students to repeat the same grade a second time to master material) has been a recurrent theme in education during the last 30 years. Policy-makers favor it one decade only to oppose it the next.
- ☞ Currently in-grade retention is the favored response to addressing poor academic performance and is linked to a call for higher educational standards by politicians.
- ☞ Retention is often seen erroneously as the only alternative to social promotion (the practice of passing students who have not mastered grade level content to the next grade with their age appropriate cohort).
- ☞ The research on the ineffectiveness of retention is very clear. The effects of retention are harmful. Retention harms students academically and socially. Out of the 66 studies done on retention from 1990 to 1997, 65 found it to be ineffective and/or harmful to students.
- ☞ According to retention research, 50 percent of students who repeat a grade do no better the second time, and 25 percent actually do worse.
- ☞ The threat of retention is not a motivating force for students to work harder.
- ☞ Retention is strongly associated with dropping out of school in later years. A second retention makes dropping out a virtual certainty.
- ☞ Retained students suffer lower self-esteem and view retention as a punishment and a stigma, not a positive event designed to help them.
- ☞ African American students and Hispanic students are retained at twice the rate of White students.
- ☞ Forty percent of repeaters come from the lowest socio-economic quartile as compared to only 8.5 percent from the highest quartile.
- ☞ Retention is expensive. It costs the country an average of \$10 billion annually to have students repeat a grade a second time.

**Fifty percent of students who repeat a grade do no better the second time, and 25 percent actually do worse the second time.**

**Retention is expensive, costing the country an average of \$10 billion every year. It is more cost effective to increase educational resources to improve student performance and eliminate the need for retention.**

## The Texas Scene

The Texas Education Agency (TEA) is required by the Texas Education Code to produce an annual grade level retention report. This report has been produced for the 1993-94 through 1996-97 (the most recent year for which data are available) school years and presents annual retention rates by grade and ethnicity. The following highlights are based largely on these TEA reports.

**Retention rates for Hispanic students and African American students are over two and a half times higher than the rate for White students.**

**In Texas, one out of six ninth grade students repeats that grade every year. This rate is twice as large as any other grade and continues to rise.**

- ☞ The total number of retained students in Texas has increased steadily from 125,959 in 1993-94 to 147,202 in 1996-97.
- ☞ The cost of retaining 147,202 students in 1996-97 was \$694 million.
- ☞ Retention rates for minority students (Hispanic and African American) are over two and a half times higher than the rates for White students.
- ☞ Economically disadvantaged students (5 percent) are more likely to be retained than are non-economically disadvantaged students (3.5 percent).
- ☞ Special education students (6.1 percent) are retained about twice as often as are non-special education students (3.8 percent).
- ☞ Male students are over-represented among all retainees; they made up over 60 percent of all retained students from 1993 to 1997.
- ☞ Contrary to the national pattern that shows the highest number of students are retained in first grade, retention in Texas occurs most frequently in ninth grade. One out of six ninth grade students repeats that grade every year. This rate is twice as large as any other grade and continues to rise. The 1993-94 ninth grade retention rate of 16.5 percent rose to 17.8 percent in the 1996-97 school year.
- ☞ When the district and campus characteristics are analyzed, the highest retention rates are found in districts located in urban areas and in districts with large percentages of minority and low socio-economic status students.

## Findings Examined

### The National Scene

*While grade retention is enjoying renewed popularity as a policy for ensuring students acquire academic skills, it has been found to be ineffective. Research overwhelmingly concurs on the finding that grade retention does not improve students' achievement.*

As early as the 1930s, studies reported the negative effects of retention on academic achievement (Ayer, 1933; Kline, 1933). Retention does not benefit students academically or socially (Holmes and Mathews, 1984; Holmes, 1989; Shepard and Smith, 1989; Foster, 1993; Harvey, 1994; Walter and Borgers, 1995).

A meta-analysis of 63 studies on retention found that on average, retained children are worse off than their promoted counterparts on both personal adjustment and academic outcomes (Holmes, 1989; Foster, 1993). Retention is strongly associated with dropping out of school in later years (Grissom and Shepard, 1989; Roderick, 1995). A second retention makes dropping out a virtual certainty (Setencich, 1994).

Students who are retained suffer lower self-esteem and view retention as a punishment and a stigma, not a positive event designed to help them improve their academic performance (Byrnes, 1989). Studies comparing retained and comparable non-retained control group students found that retained students do more poorly on follow-up measures of social adjustment, attitudes toward school, behavioral outcome, and attendance (Holmes, 1989; Meisels and Liaw, 1993; Rumberger, 1995).

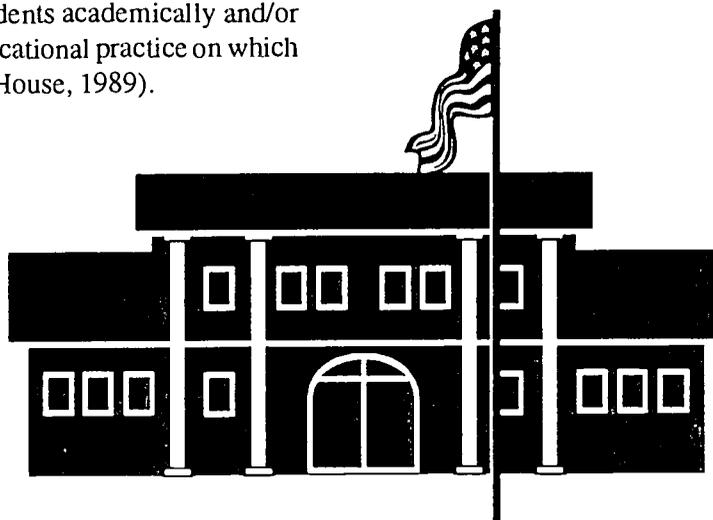
Small advantages that accrued to a fraction of first graders who were retained washed out by the end of third grade (Butler, 1990a and 1990b; Karweit and Wasik, 1992; Shepard, 1989; Snyder, 1992). Finally, between 1990 and 1997, 66 studies were done on retention with 65 reporting it ineffective or harmful to students academically and/or socially. It would be hard to find another educational practice on which the evidence is so unequivocally negative (House, 1989).

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*"Students are retained in rather arbitrary and inconsistent ways, and those flunked are more likely to be poor, males and minorities, although holding students back is practiced to some degree in rich and poor schools alike."*

– E. House, 1989,  
professor, University of  
Colorado at Boulder

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*"The effects of flunking are immediately traumatic to the children, and the retained children do worse academically in the future, with many of them dropping out of school altogether. Incredibly, being retained has as much to do with children dropping out as it does their academic achievement."*

– E. House, 1989, professor, University of Colorado at Boulder

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**In general, the purpose of these traditional responses to improving retained students' achievement is to give them a larger dose of what failed to work the first time.**

*Instituting promotional gates and retention policies is not a solution for improving education for all children. These have inordinately severe effects on low-income and minority students.*

A rarely mentioned consequence of ending social promotion is a sharp rise in summer school enrollment for students who fail to meet promotion standards. Summer school now functions as the educational system's "release valve" for dealing with large numbers of primarily minority, low-income students who have not met the new standards. The magnitude of the problem is indicated by the following:

- ☞ In Chicago, 130,200 students attended summer school in 1998 at a cost of \$65 million (Spielman, 1998). Of those, more than 11,500 students did not successfully complete summer school and will repeat their previous grade. Even more disturbing is the fact that 14 percent of the 11,294 students who were retained in 1997 will be retained a third time. Students are clearly being served the same ineffective program each year.
- ☞ The Denver Public Schools required 2,500 students to attend summer school as a condition for promotion in the 1997-98 school year (Harrington-Lueker, 1998).
- ☞ Washington, D.C., schools had difficulty financing summer school for the 20,000 students who did not meet testing standards in the 1997-98 academic year (Harrington-Lueker, 1998).

Some districts require students in summer school to pay for each course they are required to take. Analyses of retention data show that 40 percent of retained students come from the lowest socio-economic quartile as compared to only 8.5 percent from the highest quartile (Meisels and Liaw, 1993). African American students and Hispanic students are retained at twice the rate as White students (George, 1993). When one considers that the majority of students who are required to attend and pass summer school as a condition for promotion are low-income minority students, it becomes obvious that the requirement of summer school attendance tends to be financed by those who are least able to pay. Such a policy also calls the policy of a free public education into question.

Another corollary structure to in-grade retention is the transitional school or academy for students who are not yet ready (in terms of mastering grade-level skills) to transition from one level of schooling to

another. In the case of double and triple retainees, pre-high school and pre-junior high schools serve as “stopovers” for those who are physically too large to attend classes with students two or three years their junior. “Transition rooms” are no longer adequate to hold the burgeoning numbers of students who are being retained in grade. Transition rooms also do little to prepare pupils to be successful when they are promoted to the next level.

Several schools and school districts across the country are reinstating retention policies that failed a decade ago. The governors of California, Delaware, Michigan, Wisconsin and Texas have all made this a central theme of their education agendas. The recent call for higher standards coupled with ending social promotion has been the catalyst for many politicians to advocate in-grade retention. Across the country, cities such as Philadelphia, Long Beach, Milwaukee, Detroit, Boston, Oakland (Calif.), Springfield (Mass.), and Corpus Christi (Texas) have already abolished or given notice that social promotion will be abolished by the year 2000.

In 1997, the Chicago Public Schools took the lead in abolishing social promotion. Students who do not master curriculum at certain checkpoints or “promotional gates” are required to attend summer school to master the content or repeat their grade the following year. The Chicago program is very similar to the Promotional Gates Program of the early 1980s in New York, which was abandoned because it did not improve student academic achievement and cost over \$40 million to implement (House, 1989).

Instead of restructuring or redesigning education to serve students appropriately, the schools simply gave stronger doses of what had not been effective previously. One researcher commented, “As a consequence, it was not uncommon to find 12-year-olds stuck in fourth grade and 17-year-olds repeating seventh grade” (Darling-Hammond, 1998).

That previous experience notwithstanding, the present Schools Chancellor of New York City recently called for curtailing social promotion by reinstating the Promotional Gates Program. Why in the span of 20 years is the same unsuccessful policy of retaining students at promotional gates being re-implemented, particularly in light of what research says about its negative consequences?

**Nationwide, retained students are more likely to drop out. *Youth in Transition*, a long-term study of school dropouts, reports that being held back one grade increases the risk of dropping out later by 40 percent to 50 percent, two grades by 90 percent.**

**When one considers that the majority of students who are required to attend and pass summer school as a condition for promotion are low-income minority students, it becomes obvious that the requirement of summer school attendance tends to be financed by those who are least able to pay. Such a policy also calls the policy of a free public education into question.**

*Given the ineffectiveness of in-grade retention as proven by research, other alternatives need to be offered to students who are performing at lower than grade level expectations.*

Traditional offerings for students who are retained in grade include two year kindergartens, transitional rooms or “half grades” and tutoring programs. Two-year kindergartens and transitional rooms operate on the premise that students just need more time to mature and develop appropriate skills. An ancillary line of thinking is that curricula should be presented in a linear fashion. In general, the purpose of these traditional responses to improving retained students’ achievement is to give them a larger dose of what failed to work the first time.

There is also a tendency to place students in remedial tracks that often become permanent. The approach is deficit in nature and places the blame for failure on the child, ignoring the possibility that the educational program, the instructional approach or the teacher played a major part in the child’s failure.



## **Alternatives to Retention**

There is a need to abandon the deficit model, which places the problem of poor achievement within the child, and to acknowledge that classroom and school practices contribute to a child’s failure. Acknowledging the ineffectiveness of both retention and social promotion, researcher Darling-Hammond offers administrators four complementary alternatives to retention (1998).

*Strategy 1: Enhance the professional development of teachers to ensure they have the knowledge and skills to teach a wider range of students to meet standards.*

This strategy involves staff development in the sense of sustained learning over time, where teachers learn effective strategies to help students learn standards. Such an approach to staff development would include teacher academies, professional development laboratories or university offerings that support individual and collective teacher learning (Darling-Hammond, 1998). Staff development needs to be sustained and responsive to teachers’ needs. Darling-Hammond makes an often-ignored point that the two most common motivators for achievement – standards and assessments – do not operate without competent teachers.

**Retention gets the public's attention by advocating a kind of educational "tough love," but unfortunately it does not deliver what it promises... Students need to have access to different ways of acquiring the knowledge and skills they need for the 21st century. It is time to admit that retention has never worked well; moreover, it does not offer a viable alternative for the future.**

*Strategy 2: Redesign school structures to support more intensive learning.*

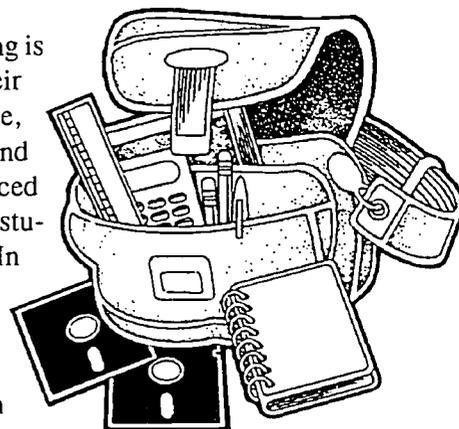
The practice of grouping students by age was adopted in the mid-19th century to efficiently move groups of students through a sequential curriculum correlated to grade. Given the different rates of development, particularly for children in the early grades, multi-age classes (where teachers stay with the same class for more than one year) provide many advantages: (a) exposure to older, more competent peers who can help provide appropriate models of behavior and academic assistance; (b) opportunities for more intensive instruction; and (c) teachers who come to know their students better over time.

Another example of structural change that might support learning is cross-grade grouping. Students do not have to be locked into their appropriate age-grade group for all of their instruction. For example, a fourth grade student who has trouble with reading could attend reading instruction with the third graders; likewise, more advanced readers could attend a reading class with the fifth graders. Some students may only perform poorly in one subject but excel in others. In these cases, repeating an entire grade deprives them of learning new academic material.

Structural changes at the high school level entail envisioning new ways to provide different opportunities for students to learn outside the "traditional" structure of school. For example, courses could be changed from a semester format and be given in quarters that could be begun any time during the year. Credits would be earned in much the same manner as in college and students would have the opportunity to repeat selected courses instead of repeating a whole year of school.

"Double-dosing" – or the practice of having students who are not doing well in a particular subject take two periods of the class each day or on selected days of the week – is another change that would serve some students well. Block scheduling would provide a similar opportunity for students who would benefit from having increased amounts of time to work on material in depth.

For many low-performing students, increasing the amount of time spent for instruction alone does not improve achievement. Getting a second dose of what did not work the first time does not make sense. An example of redesigning school structures to support more intensive learning in different ways is language immersion classes. Here, students receive intensive instruction in reading and language arts in a block format instead of getting greater doses of remedial reading.



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*"Test-based promotion policies leave behind disproportionate numbers of poor, Black and Hispanic children."*

*– Reprints from the Harvard Education Letter, January 1985 to August 1988*

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*Strategy 3: Provide students the support and services they need in order to succeed when they are needed.*

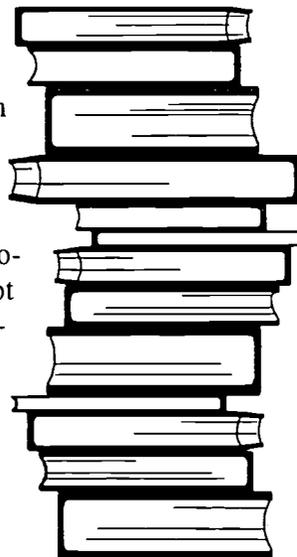
This strategy is presented together with the fourth due to their interrelation.

*Strategy 4: Use classroom assessments that better inform teaching.*

In order to know that students need help and to be able to structure lessons appropriately, teachers should use performance-based or informal assessment techniques to understand how students approach learning. Informal assessment techniques such as keeping anecdotal records and using checklists and rubrics as part of the instruction, provide information on the process of learning rather than just the product (i.e., standardized test scores). Once teachers identify the problems, schools should provide opportunities for students to receive instructional support or resources as they need it. Saturday school has proven to be effective in some settings providing these services. Darling-Hammond cites Reading Recovery and Success for All as two successful literacy programs that stress individual instruction in the early grades (1998).

The Talent Development model originated from research conducted by the Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed At Risk (CRESPAR) at Johns Hopkins University. It provides a fresh approach for reconceptualizing instruction for students who have not been well-served by traditional education. Everything about Talent Development schools' organization, curriculum teaching and student support structure stems from the belief that schools must develop talent and that they can do this best in schools where every student has access to an engaging standards-based curriculum in heterogeneous classrooms. In addition, schools must be a place where every student is in a classroom with caring teachers and peers who are "rooting for them to do well, who are encouraging them to give their best in the classroom, and who are doing everything in their power to help them improve their skills and increase their understanding" (MacIver and Plank, 1996).

A. Wheelock cautions that setting up Talent Development schools is a complex process that takes several years (1998). It is not based on funding a series of "add-ons" (programs provided in addition to the "regular curriculum") but depends on a coherent culture of high standards grounded in research-based strategies to improve student achievement.



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*"Neither retention in grade nor social promotions constitute an adequate response. The ideal response lies in determining and addressing reasons for the poor school performance of such a large segment of the student population."*

– Dr. José A. Cárdenas, founder and director emeritus,  
Intercultural Development Research Association, 1995

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As we approach the new millennium, educators speak of becoming part of the "information superhighway" and advancing classroom learning through technology. It is ironic that futuristic conceptualizations of education embrace discussions of retention, a practice that was first shown to have negative effects on students as early as the 1930s. Since then, the literature has grown in depth and breadth. Yet, predictably, every 10 years we decide to give it another chance.

Retention gets the public's attention by advocating a kind of educational "tough love," but unfortunately it does not deliver what it promises. The growing numbers of students who are retained two and three times and the implementation of special schools for the legion of students who cannot pass to the next level of schooling, attest to the fact that we need to explore other alternatives. Students need to have access to different ways of acquiring the knowledge and skills they need for the 21st century. It is time to admit that retention has never worked well; moreover, it does not offer a viable alternative for the future.

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*"The retention of students is consistent with a student deficit model. It is assumed that the student has total control over the learning situation, and the failure to learn is attributed to student negligence or unwillingness to do so."*

– Dr. José A. Cárdenas, founder and director emeritus,  
Intercultural Development Research Association, 1995

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## The Texas Scene

In most areas, Texas data mirror national data for retention. The state is striving to improve academic achievement. Texas Governor George Bush Jr. has called for a halt to social promotion of students who are having academic difficulties.

In the period 1993 to 1997, retention rates have steadily risen. In the 1996-97 academic school year (the year most recent data are available), 147,202 students were retained in grade. Of those, 70.6 percent were minority students, with Hispanic students representing 50.3 percent of the total. While some might argue that this larger number is simply a reflection of the comparable growth in the student population in the state, the fact that we have not seen declines in retention rates reflects the fact that Texas has not made much progress in improving the status quo for many low performing students.

Occurring along with the steady rise in numbers of students retained, has been a rise in the cost of making students repeat a whole year in the same grade. In the 1996-97 school year, it is estimated that retention cost the state a total of \$694,351,834. The estimated total operating expenditures was \$4,717 per pupil for that year.

From a cost benefit analysis perspective, retention is a counterproductive policy to pursue. When one considers the dysfunctional academic and affective effects of retention, it is increasingly difficult to understand the educators' and public's steadfast belief that it is the most effective remedy to improve achievement.

### *A Profile of Texas Retentions in Grade*

According to the latest Texas Education Agency (TEA) report on in-grade retentions in Texas, the number of students retained in grade grew from 125,959 pupils in 1993-94 to 147,202 pupils in 1996-97, a net increase of 16.8 percent in a four-year period. The greatest increases in retention rates occurred between 1994-95 and 1995-96, the year that legislatively mandated limits in elementary school retentions were lifted. In that two-year span, retentions increased from 128,369 in 1994-95 to 144,683 pupils in 1995-96, a net increase of 13 percent in

one year (see box below).

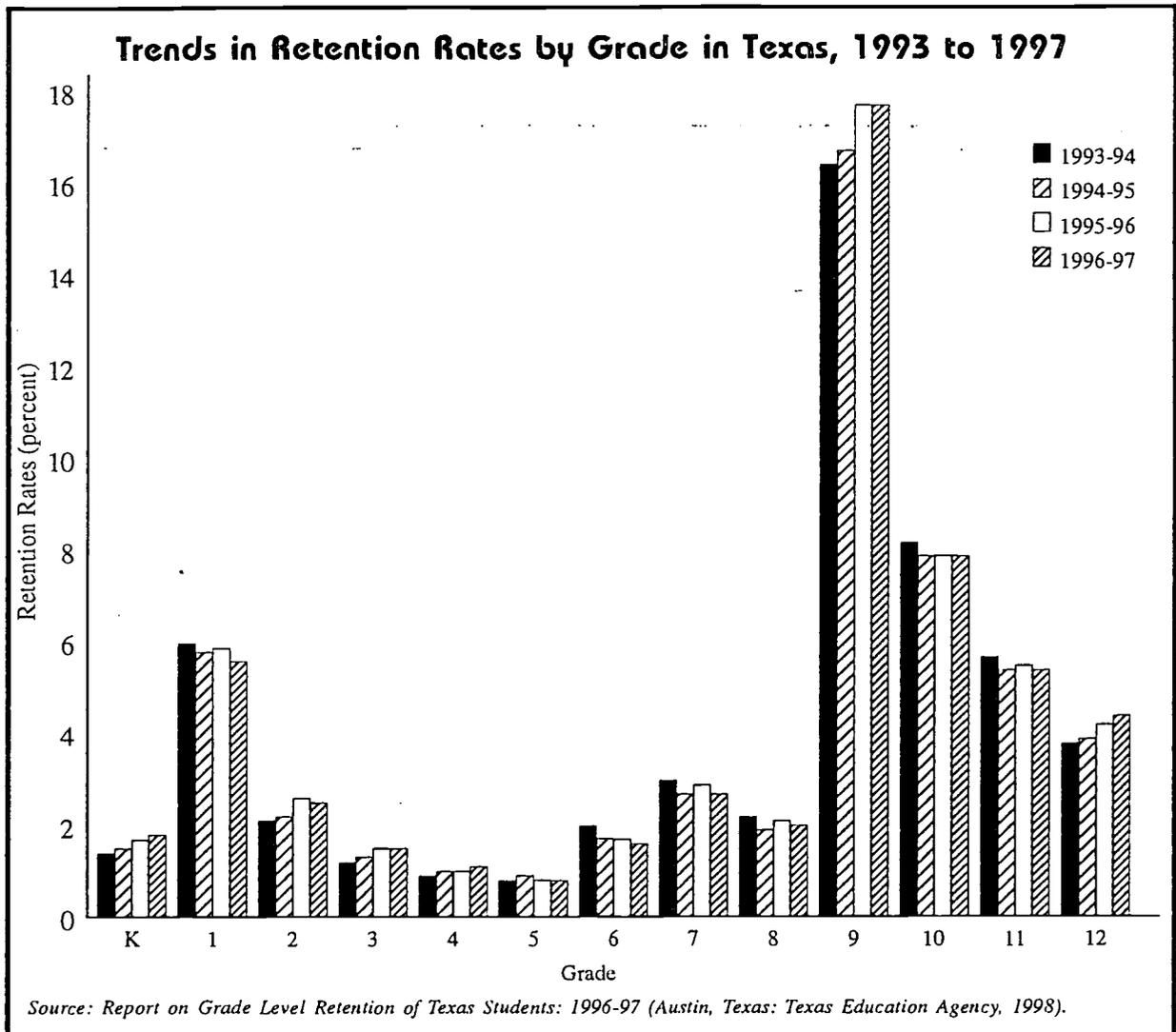
The agency also compiled data on the proportion of students retained as a proportion of the total Texas public school enrollment. Because the overall number of pupils has also been increasing, these data show that the percentages of retained pupils have remained

#### Historical Review of In-Grade Retention in Texas, 1993 to 1997

Year	Total Students*	Number Retained	Retention Rate
1993-94	3,129,085	125,959	4.0%
1994-95	3,193,214	128,369	4.0%
1995-96	3,399,451	144,683	4.3%
<b>1996-97</b>	<b>3,475,407</b>	<b>147,202</b>	<b>4.2%</b>

\* The value for "Total Students" is derived using information from two consecutive PEIMS submissions. It is not the same as fall enrollment counts that districts report directly to PEIMS.

Source: Texas Education Agency, 1998.



relatively constant over the last four years, running at approximately 3.7 percent to 4.0 percent per year.

Review of TEA data reveals that the greatest numbers of student retentions in grade occur at the first, ninth and 10th grade levels, where the retention levels equal several times the annual retention percentages seen at most other grade levels other than high school (see box above).

#### Retention of Special Population Pupils in Texas

The state education agency also compiled data on a limited number of student characteristics including gender, racial or ethnic group, and whether pupils were identified as being in need of special education or being limited in English proficiency. The boxes on the next page summarizes state retentions in grade by ethnic group. It is clear from these data that the state's major minority groups – Hispanic and African

### Number of Retentions In Grade in Texas, 1993 to 1997

School Year	Total Retentions	White	African American	Hispanic American	Other	Number Minority
1993-94	125,959	38,375	24,363	61,385	1,836	87,584
1994-95	128,369	38,593	24,452	63,490	1,834	89,776
1995-96	144,683	43,302	27,871	71,453	2,057	101,381
1996-97	147,202	43,308	27,632	74,103	2,159	103,894

Source: Report on Grade Level Retention of Texas Students: 1996-97 (Austin, Texas: Texas Education Agency, 1998).

### Percentage of Retentions In Grade in Texas by Race and Ethnicity

School Year	White	African American	Hispanic American	Other	Percent Minority
1993-94	30.4%	19.3%	48.7%	1.5%	69.5%
1994-95	30.1%	19.0%	49.5%	1.4%	69.9%
1995-96	29.9%	19.3%	49.4%	1.4%	70.1%
1996-97	29.4%	18.8%	50.3%	1.5%	70.6%

Source: Report on Grade Level Retention of Texas Students: 1996-97 (Austin, Texas: Texas Education Agency, 1998).

American – are retained at substantially higher rates than their White counterparts. Although Hispanic students represented 33 percent of the state enrollment, they constituted 50 percent of all retainees in 1996-97. In contrast, White pupils represented about 50 percent of the state enrollment, but they represented only 29 percent of retainees in that year. In 1996-97, minority students represented 70 percent of all pupils retained in Texas, though as a group they represented only 50 percent of the state's total enrollment. TEA-compiled data show that retentions are highest in the state's urban areas, which also house the majority of the state's minority pupils.

IDRA reviewed data compiled by TEA that summarize numbers of retainees who were in special education (see box below) or who were

identified by schools as being limited-English-proficient (LEP) (see box on next page). These data show that special education pupils were retained at 33 percent higher rates than those of non-special education pupils.

The data on students identified as LEP or English language learners, indicate that they are twice as likely to be retained as their English-speaking counterparts (see box on next page). English language learners who were enrolled in elementary bilingual programs had comparable retention rates to their English-speaking counterparts. Students in English as a second language (ESL) programs and those receiving no special instructional services at the elementary level had slightly higher retention rates than their counterparts.

Retention rates for English language learners were higher at the secondary level, however pupils receiving bilingual services were retained at the lowest rates. Conversely, pupils receiving ESL program services and those receiving no special support have retention rates that are almost twice the state percentages for English-speaking secondary level pupils.

### Grade Level Retention of Students in Special Education in Texas

School Year	Special Education Students		Non Special Education Students	
	Total Retained	Retention Rate	Total Retained	Retention Rate
1993-94	22,434	6.0%	103,525	3.8%
1994-95	23,633	6.0%	104,736	3.7%
1995-96	26,792	6.2%	117,891	4.0%
1996-97	28,276	6.2%	118,926	3.9%

Source: Report on Grade Level Retention of Texas Students: 1996-97 (Austin, Texas: Texas Education Agency, 1998).

### Grade Level Retention Rates of Students Who are Second Language Learners in Texas

Grade	School Year	Receiving Bilingual Services	Receiving ESL Services	Receiving No Services	Total SLL Students	Total SLL Students
K to 6	1993-94	2.9%	3.4%	2.9%	3.0%	2.0%
	1994-95	2.8%	3.1%	2.8%	2.9%	2.0%
	1995-96	2.7%	3.1%	2.9%	2.8%	2.1%
	1996-97	2.6%	2.8%	2.8%	2.7%	2.1%
7 to 12	1993-94	6.1%	12.4%	10.6%	12.0%	6.4%
	1994-95	4.9%	12.1%	11.0%	11.7%	6.4%
	1995-96	5.1%	11.9%	11.2%	11.6%	6.8%
	1996-97	8.3%	12.1%	11.5%	11.9%	6.7%

*Source: Report on Grade Level Retention of Texas Students: 1996-97 (Austin, Texas: Texas Education Agency, 1998).*

#### Cost of Retentions In Grade

Although alluded to in the report, there were no data presented on the estimated costs of retaining students in grade in Texas over the last four years. IDRA staff retrieved data on the average total state and local expenditures per pupil for each of the years for which retention data were reported. In order to arrive at the additional state and local statewide costs of retentions in grade, we multiplied the total number of retainees by the per pupil expenditure figure. The results of our tabulations are summarized in the box at right. According to these data, retaining 147,202 pupils in Texas in 1996-97 cost the state an additional \$694 million (in 1996-97 dollars). The cumulative costs of retaining 546,213 pupils over four years (from 1992-93 to 1996-97) total a staggering **\$2.48 billion in expenditures** on a practice that research indicates is not only ineffective, but also counterproductive in that it contributes to increased numbers of students dropping out.

#### Cost of Retentions In Grade in Texas

School Year	Total* Retentions	Operating Expenditures Per Pupil	Estimated State and Local Costs
1993-94	125,959	\$4,294	\$540,867,946
1994-95	128,369	\$4,360	\$559,688,840
1995-96	144,683	\$4,756	\$688,112,348
1996-97	147,202	\$4,717	\$694,351,834
Total	546,213		\$2,483,020,968

*\*Source: Report on Grade Level Retention of Texas Students: 1996-97 (Austin, Texas: Texas Education Agency, 1998).*

Some might argue that the \$694 million in additional state and local costs for educating one group of retainees for an extra year will not actually show up until the students' 13th or (for students who attended kindergarten) 14th year. Others will point out that since many of these pupils will drop out, these retention costs are not real expenditures. To those, IDRA would point out that losses to the state for every group of students who drop out totals about \$11 billion over the lifetime of each group of dropouts. Thus, in either case, retentions in grade will actually cost the state of Texas billions of dollars.

While some would argue that retentions remain a local prerogative, they are also a state issue, since the state and its taxpayers bear on average, about 50 percent of the costs for these so-called local actions. Given the wealth of research on the ineffectiveness of retention in grade, more programmatically effective and financially cost effective alternatives must be considered.

## Texas: A Look Back

Retaining students in grade to master academic material is not a new practice in Texas. Like most, Texas educators have long believed in the efficacy of having low performing students repeat a grade to improve their academic performance. This commonly held belief, however was not grounded in research or any subsequent studies of the progress of students who were made to repeat a grade. Instead, the practice held and continues to hold common intuitive appeal as a “logical” practice for improving student achievement.

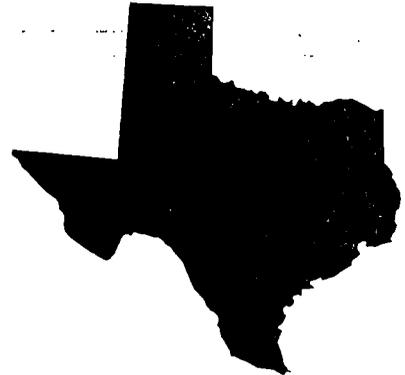
According to former Texas educators, retaining students in grade has been a longstanding practice. Local classroom teachers or, in some cases, principals usually made retention decisions. In some schools, parents were advised of the intent to retain the child in grade and were given no opportunity to react. In others, parents were provided an opportunity to react to the proposed retention of their children. In a few instances, parents had the option to request the promotion of their child to the next grade, regardless of the school’s recommendation. In practically all cases, schools retained the final decision to promote or retain individual pupils.

As schools became larger and more complex, districts began to adopt formal and informal policies governing student retention. Local school board retention policies were usually broad, prescribing the type of documentation needed to make retention decisions (i.e., grades, test scores, parents’ perspectives, and sometimes the views of other education professionals such as the school counselor). Local boards of education sometimes provided guidelines governing retention, but decisions were most often left to local schools, in keeping with Texas’ longstanding tradition of emphasizing “local control” in educational practices.

It was not until 1991 that legislation required school districts to collect data on the number and characteristics of students retained in grade annually.

During the 1960s and 1970s, social promotion (passing low achieving students to the next grade with their age-grade cohort) was favored over having students repeat entire years of school. Being with age appropriate peers was thought to be better for students’ social and academic development. It also avoided the problem of having over-age teens mixed in classes with 9-, 10-, and 11-year-olds who are at different stages of physical development.

Social promotion was also seen as a policy that served the administrative function of reducing class size and alleviating space problems in elementary schools created by retaining students in grade. While some favored social promotion, most teachers have opposed it on the premise that it is wrong to pass under-prepared students to the next grade who lack necessary skills for success. Many believed retention was a “motivational” tool that could be invoked to coerce students to study.



**In some schools, parents were advised of the decision and given no opportunity to question the school’s actions.**

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*"For a school district contemplating tougher promotion policies, it is possible to estimate what the effect might be on the district's dropout rate. If annual retention rates are increased, say from 5 percent to 7 percent, the cumulative retention rate will go up on the order of 20 percent. That is, an additional 20 percent of students will experience retention sometime in their school career. Following from the extra retentions, the district's dropout rate will go up by 3 to 6 percentage points. A district that had a 20 percent dropout rate could anticipate a new rate of 25 percent as groups of previously retained students reached high school age."*

– J.B. Grissom and L.A. Shepard, 1989

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During the 1970s and 1980s, when the amount of state and local funding for public education increased, the issue of social promotion resurfaced in the midst of major Texas education reform deliberations. Prompted by business leaders' concerns with the quality of education being provided in local schools, Texas lawmakers adopted House Bill 72 in 1983. The centerpiece of HB 72 was the creation of a comprehensive school and student accountability system that included setting school and student performance standards and prescribing consequences for failing to achieve them. Included in the historic legislation were requirements for student promotion and graduation and for reporting of these data at the state and local level.

With the adoption of state standards and the consequences associated with failing to meet them, in-grade retention rates rose.

In the 1990s, some legislators took note of the importance of the retention question. Given the large numbers of students who were not performing at desired levels and the cost (both personal and financial) of retaining students in grade, legislation began to appear that addressed the issue.

In 1991 in the 72nd Legislature, HB 1314 was passed into law. It mandated the first official report on in-grade retention for each campus and school district and stipulated retention data be disaggregated by grade level and ethnic group. The first state report was published in May of 1993. Retention reports have been filed annually since then. The most recent report available is the 1996-97 academic school year report (TEA, October 1998).

Senator Gregory Luna of San Antonio emerged as a leading critic of in-grade retention in Texas in 1992 during the 73rd Legislature. He authored SB 679, which was passed into law. It calls for

the implementation of an *Optional Extended Year* program for low performing students and provides an alternative to being retained in grade. After successful completion of an intensive six-week summer program, students are promoted. The optional extended year program was originally established in the 1993-94 school year to reduce the number of first grade students retained in grade. It was funded by Senate Bill 7 (TEC, Section 21.562) which provided \$10 million for a two-year period.

The success of the program led to its expansion in the 1995 session of the Texas legislature. Senate Bill 1 expanded the grade levels that the optional extended year program serves to include students in kindergarten through grade eight.

In 1997, the 75th Legislature continued support for the optional extended year program. Funding for the 1997-98 program is provided through a 5 percent maximum set-aside from the State Compensatory Education Allotment, as described in TEC, Section 42.152(p). The 1998-99 appropriation for the program was \$58,474,092. Eligibility for funding is based on meeting a set of criteria for districts with large numbers of at-risk, economically disadvantaged students.

Despite the creation of at least one alternative to retention, large numbers of Texas school children continue to be retained. Given the overwhelming evidence of its ineffectiveness and the continuing state efforts to raise standards and improve achievement, additional alternatives should be considered and adopted.

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*"As a consequence, it was not uncommon to find 12-year-olds stuck in fourth grade and 17-year-olds repeating seventh grade."*

– Darling-Hammond, 1998  
commenting on the  
Promotional Gates Program  
in New York

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*"As with many other school practices which sort students, grade retention impacts disproportionately upon low-income and minority students and, in most cases, reduces their future opportunities to lead productive lives."*

– Massachusetts Board of Education, 1990

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## A Closer Look

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*"Personally, I believe that retention helps but a few students. [When presented with the possibility of retention] I need to be convinced that retention is the best option for the child."*

– Texas school administrator

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Data from the Texas Education Agency (TEA) show that more than 147,000 students were retained in grade in 1996-97. Of this number, approximately 39,000 were elementary students (grades kindergarten through five) and more than 108,000 were secondary school students (grades six through 12).

To get beyond the numbers, the Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA) conducted telephone surveys to find out what kinds of policies and practices have been successful in helping campuses maintain low retention rates. IDRA does not propose that the campuses interviewed are representative of all programs. On the contrary, these campuses were selected because they were recognized as being national Title I "distinguished schools." Three of these campuses earned "exemplary" accreditation status in Texas in 1996-97 and had average retention rates of 0.3, 1.3 and 1.8 in 1996. A fourth campus earned "recognized" accreditation status in Texas and had an average retention rate of 0.9 in 1996. Varying in size between 380 and 800 students, these campuses illustrate what is possible in schools with large numbers of low-income students and, in most cases, large minority populations.

IDRA researchers conducted interviews with administrators at four Title I "distinguished" elementary school campuses in Texas. Our hosts were candid in discussing the policies and practices that contributed to their campuses' ability to maintain low retention rates. To help guide our discussions, the IDRA team compiled a set of questions that looked at the following items:

- ✍ the district's promotion policy,
- ✍ parental involvement regarding student retention,
- ✍ campus retention patterns,
- ✍ assistance provided to students who are considered at risk of being retained,
- ✍ collection of follow-up data for retained students, and
- ✍ classroom instructional focus for retained students.

The following is a summary of the impressions obtained by IDRA.

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*"Nine times out of ten, retention doesn't work. So we focus on meeting the individual needs of the child."*

– Texas school administrator

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## Conversations with Personnel at Campuses with Low Retention Rates

All four of the administrators interviewed said that their campuses emphasized maintaining low retention rates. This **emphasis on low rates of retention** involves the cooperation and participation of all school partners: administrators, teachers, students and parents. One principal said she set the expectation for zero retentions at her campus at the beginning of the school year. In doing so, the intervention process is enabled earlier in the academic year, allowing students who are at risk of retention to receive the assistance they need in order to be promoted. Each of the other three administrators interviewed also noted that early intervention has been an important factor in maintaining low retention rates at their campuses.

Another important factor is that the attitudes and beliefs of campus faculty and staff set a tone for zero or low retention. One administrator said that she makes every attempt to stay abreast of the current research information related to in-grade retention and makes it a point to share that information with her entire staff.

Regarding the practice of retention, interviewees commented:

- ☞ "I just don't see much success with retention."
- ☞ "Personally, I believe that retention helps but a few students. [When presented with the possibility of retention] I need to be convinced that retention is the best option for the child."
- ☞ "Nine times out of ten, retention doesn't work. So we focus on meeting the individual needs of the child."
- ☞ "I don't believe it [retention] works under any circumstances, truthfully."

All interviewees agreed that retention is considered as the absolute, final option for students at their campuses.

While it may be the case that the administrators see retention as a last resort, they must reconcile their points-of-view with policies that mandate retention in particular circumstances and with the evidence that is presented to them in the form of performance assessment, attendance records and other student development criteria. These administrators shared that this reconciliation is often made easier through early and effective intervention strategies; however, in some extreme cases, they have found it necessary to adhere to prescribed policies and criteria for retaining students.

Three of the four interviewees cited campus-level policy as the major factor affecting retention decisions. One administrator noted the importance of implementing campus-level policy at her campus: "We're different from the other campuses in the district; we don't fit [in the district mold because] we have a high African American population of students." In this case, the institution of campus-level policies allows the faculty and staff to better meet the challenges that arise from serving a more diverse population of students.

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*"I just don't see much success with retention."*

– Texas school administrator

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*"I don't believe it [retention] works under any circumstances, truthfully."*

– Texas school administrator

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Among the three administrators who said they were governed by campus-level policy, items cited as evidence in retention decisions included the following:

- ☞ teacher assigned grades (math, reading, language, science and social studies),
- ☞ standardized test scores,
- ☞ developmental factors (also including physical attributes), and
- ☞ teacher observations, informal assessment and recommendations.

One of the three interviewees also noted that her campus practice of considering teacher-assigned grades and standardized test scores (TAAS, specifically) is used as retention policy throughout the district, in addition to the district attendance policy, which limits students to five unexcused absences per year. Two of these three interviewees said that attendance has not played a critical role in retention at their campuses.

The fourth interviewee, when asked about retention policy, said her campus is governed by district-level policy. She said that the primary indicators in retention decisions were teacher-assigned grades (math and language arts) and attendance. Developmental factors and teacher recommendations also sometimes impact retention decisions. However, this interviewee noted that her district does not use TAAS scores as a primary indicator for retention. While two others said attendance was least often the reason for retention, this interviewee said that attendance tends to be the primary reason for retention at her campus. Case in point, two years ago, only one student was retained in the entire school – she had missed approximately one-half of the instructional year.

All four of these administrators said their campuses make every effort to intervene and offer assistance before they are left with retention as the only alternative. Intervention strategies included, but certainly were not limited to the following items.

### *Administrator and teacher observations*

One interviewee noted that her teachers' observations and opinions about their students "carry a lot of weight; they spend about seven hours of the children's day with them; their observation of the students in the classroom means a lot." This same administrator noted that the principal and assistant principal perform regular "walk-throughs" at the campus, during which they visit classrooms and observe the teachers and the students. The administrators "compare notes" on their observations with the teachers, which helps to address any concerns that they may have about a student.

Two other administrators specifically noted that observations and recommendations play an important role in retention decisions.

### *Special needs testing*

For students who continually experience difficulties in the classroom, the teachers' and/or administrators' observations sometimes lead to special education testing. In some cases, such testing has provided important insights into the students' difficulties and has made it possible for campuses to provide those students with valuable resources, including, where necessary, special education resource classes. In cases not involving special education referrals, the testing data helped identify specific pupil needs.

### *Tutoring assistance from the teacher*

All of the interviewees noted that the teachers and staff at the campuses make an effort to provide special attention and assistance to students who are at risk of being retained. However, three of the interviewees specifically noted that teachers offer tutoring assistance to these students as a somewhat routine part of their teaching.

One administrator said that the classroom teachers at her campus offer students tutoring for about one hour twice a week in an identified content area. Another said that there is a reading assistance teacher who works with students needing assistance with decoding skills for about an hour each day. In addition, she said that some of the teachers at her campus voluntarily use their conference periods or may choose to keep students after school to offer them additional assistance.

A third administrator said that the teachers at her campus are given two conference periods during the day, during which time they may provide tutoring assistance for students (this is important since all students ride the bus to this campus). The students may receive tutoring during these conference periods three of the five days (Tuesday through Thursday) of the week.

### *Peer tutoring*

One administrator cited peer tutoring as an effective practice used at her campus. There are two similar peer assistance programs from two local high schools through which her students benefit from tutoring by high school students. In addition, she noted that her campus has instituted vertical team tutoring wherein the upper elementary grade students tutor their lower grade peers.

### *Extended day programs*

Three of the four administrators said their campuses also offered after school assistance for students. (The fourth administrator noted that after school assistance is rather difficult because all of the students at her campus have to ride the bus to school.) One administrator stated that her campus' extended day program starts in January of every year and allows students to receive assistance for up to one

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*"Retention is perceived as a punitive device.*

*For minority, disadvantaged and other atypical students, retention can be perceived as punishment for being atypical rather than punishment for lack of effort."*

– Dr. José A. Cárdenas,  
founder and director  
emeritus, Intercultural  
Development Research  
Association, 1995

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hour after the regular school day ends.

In addition to offering a similar extended day program, another administrator said that her campus also hosts a "power hour" where students may receive after school tutoring from college students and other community members.

### *Saturday tutoring*

One campus administrator said that her third through fifth grade students are given the opportunity to attend optional Saturday morning (9:00 a.m. to 12:00 noon) tutoring, which begins in January of the school year.

### *Extended year programs and Summer school*

All four of the interviewees said that students who do not meet promotion standards by the end of the regular school year may attend summer school. The extended year program is often recommended for students, but remains optional.

### *Parental involvement*

Because parents are partners in their children's educational experience, these campuses have found ways to help parents remain an integral part of the schooling experience. There are opportunities for parents to be involved regardless of whether or not their child is experiencing academic difficulties. One interviewee said that her entire district places a strong emphasis on parental involvement and her campus does not have any problems getting parents involved in activities.

Another interviewee agreed that parental involvement has been a key factor in maintaining low retention rates. She said that the teachers and administrators maintain ongoing contact with the parents throughout the year and are especially sure to do so if a student is experiencing difficulties.

Some activities that were noted as having been effective in providing extra assistance to students were using word banks and other parent-child team activities to do at home and encouraging parent-child reading time and the maintenance of a reading log.

### *Cooperative learning classrooms*

One administrator noted that cooperative learning is emphasized on her campus. Also, in support of cooperative learning, this campus practices team teaching. The kindergarten through second grade teachers do what are called "round robin" workshops with mixed classes by grade level. For the third graders, two teams of teachers work with one another's classes. The concept is similar for fourth and fifth grades, except that each of the grade level teachers focuses on a particular

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*"Repeating grades in elementary school was the single strongest predictor of dropping out of high school."*

– Stroup and Robins, 1972

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area of expertise and works with all of the classes in his or her own grade level.

### *Promotion and retention decision-making processes*

In addition to relying on parents to provide necessary intervention and assistance for their children, particularly for students who are facing challenges in school, the schools allow parents to play a critical role in deciding whether or not to retain a student. All of the interviewees noted that one critical intervention strategy is to notify the parents when the child begins experiencing difficulty in school. For many students, this may begin as early as the first grading term of the school year. Although intervention may start early, there are still instances in which students may require additional assistance in order to meet promotion standards. Early in the second semester of the year, administrators and, subsequently, parents are notified of possible retention.

One administrator said that her campus notifies parents of this possibility by the end of February and then schedules ongoing parent conferences between the time of notification and the end of the school year. In May, the primary teacher, principal and other teachers must determine if the student has made reasonable progress and whether or not retention will be the most effective option for the student.

At another campus, all teachers are required to submit a listing of potential retainees to the principal by April. The parents are then informed of the fact that retention is a real possibility for their child and are usually given the recommendation to send their child to summer school.

At a third campus, the teachers are required to have contacted a student's parents by the end of the fourth six weeks grading period if the student is performing less than satisfactorily. The teachers are required to document all notices, conferences and verbal communication with parents regarding their child's difficulties in school.

The fourth campus administrator said that the school sends progress reports home to parents throughout the year and notifies the parents by a formal letter in April if retention is a real possibility for their child.

All of the administrators said that the parents do have an important "say-so" in whether or not their child gets retained in grade. One administrator said that even if the school faculty and administration determines that it may be in the student's best interest to be retained, the parents have the "final say." If the parents do not want their child retained, the school will honor that request.

Another campus administrator said that the parents are given the option of sending their child to summer school to avoid retention, however, if the parents opt not to send the child to summer school, the child will be retained.

Another administrator emphasized that the school provides the students and parents with due process, however, the district policy and

**Parents are notified early in the second semester of the possibility of retention of their children.**

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*"A single test score is a particularly inappropriate means for deciding who will be held back. Often two or three wrong answers spell the difference between being promoted and staying in the same grade for another year."*

– Mary Smith and Lorrie Shepard, *Illinois Fair Schools Coalition Report* (study that cites 40 sources), 1985.

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*"A substantial body of research about the effects of retention programs indicates clearly that retention is an enormously costly practice that doesn't work."*

– Mary Smith and Lorrie Shepard, *Illinois Fair Schools Coalition Report* (study that cites 40 sources), 1985.

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the school officials have the "last say" in whether or not a student is retained. This administrator said that the student's age and previous retentions are taken into consideration when making decisions about retention.

The fourth administrator said that at her campus, the administration meets with parents and requests their approval for retention. If the parents do not agree, the school will promote the student with the understanding that this action is against the better judgement of the teacher and principal. However, the administration does maintain the "power to override" the parents' request.

### *Retention practices*

Despite the concerted efforts of these administrators, their faculties, students and parents, instances have arisen in which retention was the only feasible choice. The pattern of retention for these four campuses was more evident in the lower grades (pre-kindergarten through second grade). Three of the interviewees specifically cited retention in the lower grades as being directly related to the critical foundations of reading, writing and math that are acquired in the early grades, as well as strategies for early intervention.

One administrator explained that it is important to ensure that the students are able to read for decoding purposes in the higher grades, which is the result of skills acquired in the early grades. She said that she makes it a point to try not to consider retention in the higher grades because the students "should've received help before then," and retention would prove useless.

Another administrator said that retention occurs in the lower grades on her campus because there is "more of a focus on it at those grades; we're able to more easily identify standards that the students are or aren't meeting." She said that the early focus on student performance helps to prevent students from getting too far behind and having to be retained in the higher grades.

A third administrator said that there are no retentions above the second grade on her campus, with more retentions occurring in the first and second grades.

The fourth interviewee said that she feels that retention is psychologically damaging for students and is even more damaging for older students.

Once it has been determined that retention is the most feasible option for a given student, it must be determined how all of the educational partners will assist the student in achieving academic success during the retention year and in the years to follow. All of the administrators said that one of the first steps in doing so is to assign the student to a different teacher. In some rare instances, this is not feasible due to campus and/or district size or to the lack of other important resources such as a bilingual teacher.

The interviewees noted that they work closely with their teachers to ensure that these students are receiving the attention and assistance needed during the retention year: "More attention is paid to them." One administrator said that the students who must be retained are identified as being in need of additional assistance. She and the other interviewees also emphasized that every effort is made to ensure that students' learning styles are taken into consideration as well. Another administrator said that she reviews all of her teachers' grade books every six weeks. During this time, she is able to check on the progress of all of the students on her campus, as well as those specific students who were retained.

Each of the interviewees noted that **teamwork** is the major factor that helps them continue to maintain low rates of retention on their campuses. One campus' philosophy is that teamwork will help all children to succeed. That principal said that she expects all teachers and staff members to help children to be successful.

An important resource that contributes to student and school success is ongoing staff development. Each of the interviewees said that their districts have provided faculty and staff with sustained professional development opportunities. Some examples of training topics included: math, reading, discipline management, Kagan's Cooperative Learning, cooperative learning strategies, the Boys Town model (currently in its third year of implementation on one particular campus), the balanced approach to reading, math summits, the Open Court Reading Program, and the "Step up to TAAS Program." One administrator also noted professional ties that have been established in her district through the establishment of vertical team planning among feeder pattern schools.

One other administrator said "we don't accept excuses for not learning or being in school." She shared that many of her school's families are low-income. When she handed out perfect attendance awards last year at her campus, she presented one to a student whose family lived in a school bus who attended school every day, clean, attentive and ready to learn, despite the family's circumstances.

### *Successful strategies*

In sharing with these four administrators, it seems they have found that the best and most effective practices for successful students and schools are those which require that all partners in education – administrators, teachers, parents, community members and students – focus on the academic success and well-being of all students. Many of the practices that have been implemented at these four campuses are supported by current research that cites effective alternatives to in-grade retention. The four strategies cited previously in this brief are as follows:

**An important resource that contributes to student and school success is ongoing staff development.**

- ☞ Enhance the professional development of teachers to ensure they have the knowledge and skills to teach a wider range of students to meet standards.
- ☞ Redesign school structures to support more intensive learning.
- ☞ Provide students the support and services they need in order to succeed when they are needed.
- ☞ Use classroom assessments that better inform teaching (Darling-Hammond, 1998).

By employing such strategies in their day-to-day operations, the four campuses highlighted here have moved away from deficit model thinking and boldly acknowledged the critical role they assume in providing children with opportunities to learn. While the school is not solely responsible for the educating of children, the school is the primary facilitator in the learning experience. As such, it is of the utmost importance that educators be willing to move away from outdated, ineffective practices and look at ways in which they may facilitate effective learning and high academic achievement for *every* student. As these four case studies have demonstrated, all students are capable of achieving to high standards, given high expectations and quality academic resources.

## Research Questions Used

The research questions that guided this policy brief are the following:

- ☞ Does the practice of retaining low performing students in grade to master academic content result in improved academic achievement?
- ☞ What effects, both social and academic, does being retained in grade have on students?
- ☞ Is there a current trend regarding retention policies and practices nationally?
- ☞ Does the state of Texas fit national trend data pattern regarding in-grade retention policy and practices?
- ☞ Are certain groups of students retained in grade at higher rates than others?
- ☞ What is the cost at the state level of having low performing students repeat entire years of school to improve achievement?
- ☞ What are schools with low rates of in-grade retention doing to avoid retaining students?
- ☞ What are possible alternatives to in-grade retention and social promotion for low performing students?

## Research Methods Used

The research methods used for this policy brief were primarily review and analysis of secondary data, i.e., recent research reports, meta-analyses of the research literature on in-grade retention, and archival documents that provided an historical look at the issue. Current trend data were obtained from analysis of media reports on retention policies and practices nationally and within the state of Texas.

In order to explore what Texas campuses are doing to lower the number of low performing students retained in grade, a telephone interview was conducted with administrators from four campuses that have low rates of in-grade retention. Their anonymity was guaranteed. The rationale for selecting a sample of convenience was that, by selecting schools from among the Title I Distinguished Schools winners for the 1996-97 school year, we would assure that the schools had low retention rates. Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, selecting schools that were recognized for providing excellent services to largely minority, Title I populations would provide insights for rethinking in-grade retention and providing alternatives for the types of students who are most often retained.

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## Acknowledgments

This publication could not have been possible without the contributions of Texas educators and many people at IDRA. We extend our gratitude to the four administrators of the Title I Distinguished Schools who graciously gave their time to participate in interviews. These campuses include: Bowie Elementary School, Alamo, Texas; Garcia Elementary School, Houston, Texas; Hamlet Elementary School, Amarillo, Texas; and Las Yescas Elementary School, Los Fresnos, Texas. At IDRA, we extend special thanks to María Aurora Yáñez, M.A., and Anna Alicia Romero for research assistance; to Christie L. Goodman, APR, for editing and design; and to Isolina “Lena” Guerra, Sarah H. Alemán, Juanita “Janie” Daywood and Martha Hernandez for production and web site assistance.

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### *Failing Our Children—*

#### *Finding Alternatives to In-Grade Retention*

by Pam McCollum, Ph.D., Albert Cortez, Ph.D., Oanh H. Maroney, M.A., and Felix Montes, Ph.D.

Series coordinators: Albert Cortez, Ph.D., and María Robledo Montecel, Ph.D.

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Distributed by the Intercultural Development Research Association.  
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