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Policy Matters

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Sorting Out Student Retention 2.4 Million Children Left Behind?

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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It is estimated that around 2.4 million students per year were retained in U.S. schools in the late 1990s.¹ Are these children receiving the best educational services to suit their needs? Are there differences between low-achieving students who are not retained and those who are? Researchers and practitioners are asking these and other questions as the long-held assumptions regarding retention are increasingly challenged. This policy brief looks at some of the challenges around retention and presents a number of related policy considerations for addressing those challenges.

Retention as an Intervention...Or, Retention in Need of Intervention?

Schools have used retention in grade or “holding back” students to deal with “underperforming” students since graded schooling began in the 1850s in the United States. Students who fail to show mastery of

the expected knowledge and skills for a particular grade are retained in the same grade for another year. A typical assumption is that the student needs more time to grasp the curricular concepts and would be able to “catch up” if given more time.

Many studies have shown, however, that retention can have negative consequences on the academic and social-behavioral adjustment of retained students.² Retention has also been linked to poor long-term adolescent and adult outcomes such as:³

- higher dropout rates;
- fewer employment opportunities;
- higher arrest records; and
- higher rates of substance abuse.

Knowing which students are more likely than others to be retained is useful for early intervention—both to prevent development of academic difficulties during schooling and to prevent later negative outcomes such as those listed above.

Are Known Risk Factors Useful for Intervention?

Numerous studies reveal a variety of characteristics that often indicate an increased risk of retention. Among them are, being:

- male;
- a racial minority; and
- in the elementary grades;

or having:

- low socioeconomic status;
- parents with low educational levels; and
- parents who show low involvement in their children’s schooling.⁴

For various reasons, school-based interventions will have little or no impact on the risk factors like being a male or minority student or having a parent with low education levels. We must therefore consider other factors for the development of useful programs or processes to address the needs of children at risk for retention. Among those that yield more fruitful avenues of intervention are:

- low social competence;
- high problem behaviors; and
- academic difficulties.

Still, these characteristics are common among a variety of low-achieving students—not only those who are retained—so it bears looking at what distinguishes the children who are retained.

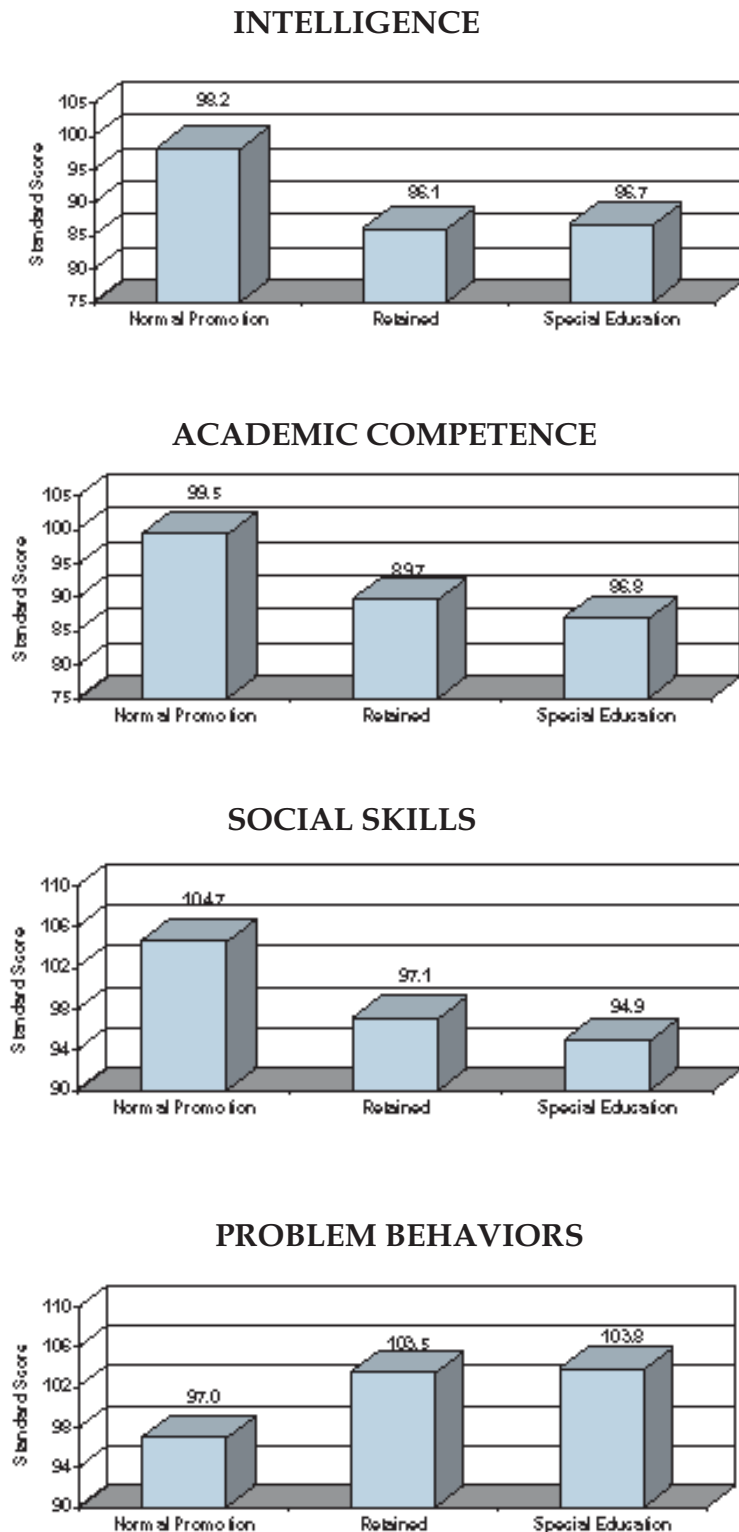
One State's Approach - California

California state law mandates retention in grade for students scoring at or below the 5th percentile on yearly standardized testing. This law provides the opportunity to compare some characteristics among groups of low-achieving students.⁵ Recent research compared normally promoted students, retained students, and low-achieving students receiving special education (who are exempt from California's mandated retention) as they transitioned from second to third grade. Students in the different groups completed intelligence tests, and teachers rated the students' academic competence, social skills, and levels of problem behaviors. Figure 1 (see next page) shows comparisons across the sample for intelligence test scores and teacher ratings of academic competence, social skills, and problem behaviors.

Comparisons of Low-Achieving Students

Compared to the normally promoted students, retained students performed less well on the intelligence test and teachers rated them as less academically competent. Teachers also rated retained students as having poorer social skills and more problem behaviors than normally promoted students. On a separate measure of problem behaviors, the retained students were twice as likely as normally promoted students to have been involved in "critical events" (e.g., setting fires, stealing, physical aggression). This suggests that some of these students with academic

Figure 1: Intelligence test scores and teacher ratings of academic competence, social skills, and problem behaviors. (NOTE: A score of 100 represents the average of each scale—not a percentage.)



difficulties may also need psychological evaluation and intervention.

Especially striking was that while retained students did not significantly differ from the other low-achieving groups on most measures, there was a high degree of similarity between retained students and those in special education in certain areas. In particular, retained students and those in special education closely resembled each other on:

- academic measures;
- social skills; and
- problem behaviors.

The similar average IQ scores for retained students and students receiving special education calls into question the assumption that the retained students have the mental capacity to “catch up” if simply given more time to master grade-level material. The findings may also suggest that retention is currently used as either an intervention or a precursor to formal evaluation for special education services.

Summary

From research, we can distinguish most low-achieving students from those normally promoted on the basis of measures of academic and social skills.

All academic problem students are perceived by teachers as low in social skills and high in problem behaviors.

Students marked for retention and those placed in special education are remarkably similar in terms of how teachers rate their academic competence.

Policy Implications

Most students at risk of retention can be identified on the basis of ability measures and teacher perceptions at least by second grade. Possible strategies for minimizing the likelihood of retention include:

- social skills interventions and programs designed to reduce problem behaviors;
- psychological evaluations and interventions; and
- focused and individualized assessment of their special education needs.

Addressing the Challenge

Policymakers continuously struggle to implement the best possible retention policies. Teachers and school administrators struggle to take into account their best thinking combined with parents' and other stakeholders' views. In doing so, they should consider a range of existing and proposed strategies and related resources that a range of states and districts have used to address these challenges. Among them are the following, which are not being advocated here but are presented for purposes of healthy discussion about this critical issue.⁶

- o Continuous progress monitoring and formative evaluation in order to modify ongoing instructional effort.
- o Effective school-based mental health programs.
- o Student support teams to identify and address specific learning or behavior problems.
- o Appropriate education services for children with educational disabilities.
- o Remedial help, before- and after-school programs, summer school, and instructional aides to work with target children in regular classrooms.
- o Peer, cross-age, and adult tutoring, extended “basic skills,” cooperative learning, extended year programs, and individualized instruction through technology.
- o Comprehensive, school-wide programs to promote both academic and social development . ■

NOTES

¹ Dawson, P. (1998). A primer on student grade retention: What the research says. *Communique*, 26, 28-30.

² Jimerson, S. R. (2001). Meta-analysis of grade retention research: Implications for practice in the 21st century. *School Psychology Review*, 30, 420-437.

³ Cairns, R., & Cairns, B. (1994). *Lifelines and risks: Pathways of youth in our time*. Cambridge: England: Cambridge University Press; Catterall, J. (1987). On the social costs of dropping out of school. *High School Journal*, 71, 19-30; Center for Study of Social Policy (1994). *Kids count data: State profiles of well-being*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office; Grissom, J., & Shepard, L. A. (1991). Repeating and dropping out of school. In L. A. Shepard & M. L. Smith (Eds.), *Flunking grades: Research and policies on retention* (pp. 16-33). London: Falmer Press; Jimerson, S. R., Anderson, G., & Whipple, A. (2002). Winning the battle and losing the war: Examining the relationship between grade retention and dropping out of high school. *Psychology in the Schools*, 39, 441-457.

⁴ Alexander, K., Entwisle, D., & Dauber, S. (1994). *On the success of failure: A measurement of the effects of primary grade retention*. New York: Cambridge University Press; Gurewitz, S., & Kramer, J. (1995). Retention across elementary schools in a midwestern school district. *Research in the Schools*, 2, 15-21; Jimerson, S. R., Carlson, E., Rotert, M., Egeland, B., & Sroufe, L. A. (1997). A prospective longitudinal study of the correlates and consequences of early grade retention. *Review of Educational Research*, 45, 613-635; Zill, N., Loomis, L., & West, J. (1997). *The elementary school performance and adjustment of children who enter kindergarten late or repeat kindergarten: Findings from national surveys*. Washington, DC: National Center for Educational Statistics, U.S. Department of Education.

⁵ Beebe-Framlemberger, M., Bocian, K. M., MacMillan, D. L., & Gresham, F. M. (2004). Sorting second-grade students: Differentiating those retained from those promoted. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 96, 204-215.

⁶ Algozzine, B., Ysseldyke, J. E., & Elliott, J. 2002. *Strategies and tactics for effective instruction*. Longmont, CO: Sopris West; Shinn, M. R., Walker, H. M., & Stoner, G. (Eds.) (2002). *Interventions for academic and behavior problems II: Preventive and remedial approaches*. Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists



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