

SOCIAL PROMOTION OR GRADE  
REPETITION:  
WHAT'S BEST FOR THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY  
STUDENT

BY:

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May 2012

## **Social Promotion or Grade Repetition: What's Best for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Student?**

No Child Left Behind and now the Common Core Standards all address societies cry to increase rigor within the curriculum and get every student to grade level expectation. Teachers, principals, and district level personnel deal with this expectation daily; get students to grade level standard. Standardized tests hold “teachers and principals...more accountable for student performance (McCoy and Reynolds, 1998, p. 1)” than ever before. This paper will help address what is best for our students; social promotion or grade repetition.

### **Literature Review**

Merit promotion was the adopted means of our public school systems in the nineteenth century. This type of promotion system was geared to the best and brightest in our school system; and those who could afford to continue their education. Although not every student attained promotion, this type of promotion was seen as a positive. Students competed for the honor of receiving their diploma, placing the credential at a “very high status value (Labaree, 1982 p.4)”. In the twentieth century the promotion standards became relaxed as educators and legislators began discussing how the school system should be structured.

Educators argued for three different structures.

1. Educators argued that schooling should be structured around the learning needs and abilities of the great bulk of its students rather than focusing on selecting and grooming the most able.
2. Educators argued that a zealous policy of non-promotion seriously impaired the organizational efficiency of the school system.
3. Educators did not entirely abandon a concern for merit; to the extent that they sought to foster merit; not by means of high standards and frequent retentions but through the institution of tracking. (Labaree, 1982, p. 8)

A shift from merit promotion to social promotion came about in the early twentieth century. By the 1930's schools used both social promotion and tracking to address the needs of struggling students.

Social promotion (the practice of sending a student to the next grade regardless of whether they meet grade level expectation, in order to keep them with their peers) became the norm in our districts because the character of schooling began to change. Our schools changed from: (1) a stress on merit to a stress on efficiency; (2) a focus of individual to group learning; (3) a belief in different capability to equal capability; (4) adjusting student to school to adjusting the school to the student; and (5) a focus on the best students to the average students. "In the last two decades there has been a swelling chorus of complaints in this country directed toward the practice of social promotion in the public schools (Labaree, 1982, p. 10)" due to the decrease of our slipping status in academics globally.

President Clinton asked for social promotion to cease during his tenure. This call for the end to social promotion by our nation's leader led our educational professionals to view this as permission to retain low achieving students. Additionally, our nation's educational policies began calling for an increase in standards and accountability, which resulted in greater retention numbers (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) "found that many U.S. school districts [continued to] practice social promotion, despite public policies – and sometimes laws – meant to

prevent it (Di Maria, 1999, p.3).” The increased pressure of districts, teachers, and principals (by the states and federal government) to meet a set criteria in order to stay out of Program Improvement has caused the pendulum from social promotion to swing back to retention of struggling students.

Retention is the act where a student repeats a grade if they fail to meet the minimum competency set by grade level expectations. The current rate of retention in the U.S. is estimated to be 6% with approximately 50% of all students entering into our school system expected to experience non-promotion at least once before going into high school (Shepard & Smith, 1990). Long before these statistics were released researchers began looking at the pros and cons of retention. Leonard Ayres’ book, Laggards in Our Schools (1908), began the initial assault on non-promotion. He saw the act of retention as an effort for educators and society to redefine the basic nature of education. Ayres basic question was: What is the function of our schools?

If it is to sort out the best of the pupils and prepare them for further education in higher schools, then the most rigorous system, with the severest course of study and the lowest percentage of promotions and the highest percentage of retardation is the best system. But if the function of the common school is, as the author believes, to furnish an elementary education to the maximum number of children, then other things being equal that school is best which regularly promotes and finally graduates the largest percentage of its pupils (Ayres, 1097, p. 199).

Through the decades our school systems have changed from “...minimum competency testing in the 1970s... [to] the excellence in education movement [in] the 1980s (Shepard & Smith, 1989; Toch, 1984).” Throughout the years researchers have delved into finding what the best solution is for our students: social promotion or grade repetition.

The first comprehensive overview of research done on the effectiveness of retention was conducted by Jackson in 1975. His review included 30 studies which were published between 1911 and 1973. Jackson (1975) suggested that “it is possible for grade retention to be of some benefit for students; however, grade promotion appears to provide even greater benefits (Jimerson, 2001, p. 422).” In 1984, Holmes and Matthews conducted a meta-analysis which included 44 studies published between 1929 and 1981 which showed a statistically significant difference in students who were promoted versus those who were retained. Labaree (1982) felt previous research showed methodological biases. He stated:

Out of more than 50 studies of the relative impact of promotion and retention on student behavior, the large majority had a methodological bias which favored one policy or the other. Under these conditions the only significant finding would be one which runs counter to the bias. For example, in a study of students promoted and retained according to normal school policy, the promoted students are likely to perform better because it is likely that they were better performers in the first place. If such a study were to find that the retained students achieved greater gains, then one would have valid evidence for the efficacy of retention. However, none of the studies produced such a finding; instead results mirrored methodology. The few studies with an unbiased design produced contradictory results (p. 36).

The voluminous pages of research and its literature, on retention, have one conclusion: “there is no evidence demonstrating that either promotion or retention has any significant impact on low achieving students (Labaree, 1982, p. 37).”

A study conducted by Reynolds (1992) showed that “grade retention was associated with significantly more positive perceptions of school competence (McCoy & Reynolds 1998, p. 27)” even though “same age comparisons of school achievement indicated that

retained children had significantly lower achievement in reading and math...(McCoy & Reynolds, 1998, p. 27).” Besides academic concerns, researchers investigated and documented the social and emotional effects acquired by retained students. Research for the past 30 to 40 years has reported the negative effects of retention (Jackson, 1975; Holmes & Matthews, 1984; Holmes, 1989; Smith & Shepard, 1987; Natale, 1991; House, 1991). The past publications dating from 1900 through 1989 showed mixed outcomes on the effectiveness of retention on eliminating a child’s academic failure or socio-emotional needs. Jimerson (2001) stated that data collected “30 to 40 years ago may be outdated (p. 421).” Some recent studies (Anderson & West, 1992; Smalls, 1997) looking at how students and their families viewed retention; and how educators feel toward retention of struggling students showed contradictory results compared to research from decades ago.

The research conducted by Anderson and West (1992) looked at the reactions and feelings of families and students who had been retained. Their investigation covered four different school districts with students who had been retained at least once from first through eighth grade. Fifty two individuals from 22 families partook in the study. The results showed:

...all of the respondents expressed a belief in the necessity of the practice of grade level retention; this belief did not necessarily translate into an endorsement of the retention decision affecting their own family. Most parents, however, did report a belief that non-promotion had aided the progress of their own child in school. The retained students generally echoed this same belief (p. 3).

Statements from all the parents who were interviewed “felt the practice of grade level retention shouldn’t be totally abandoned by the public schools ( p. 10).” Parents saw

retention as an acceptable practice by the school system due to lack of grade level expectations or failing grades; and furthermore “grade level material should be mastered before a student was allowed to pass along to the next grade (p. 11).” Parents also “felt that placing students in the next grade level when they had not been successful in the current grade would send the wrong message to students (p. 13).” Most of the parents in this study “viewed retention as an educational practice that provided students with a better chance for future success in school (p. 16).”

Students who had been retained echoed the same beliefs as their parents “that students needed to demonstrate their mastery of [grade level] material either through passing grades or through testing (p. 14).” Other researchers expound how retention affects students emotionally; and this study reported that very few students who were retained “acknowledged that their retention experience had adversely affected [their] lives (p. 17).” The act of retaining a student is never an easy decision for parents or for educators. One parent in the above study stated,

Well, we lost a lot of sleep, and we shed a lot of tears because when those report cards came home that were straight F’s ... there were seemingly nothing we could do ... to make him do better in school (p. 20).

Smalls (1997) discovered in her investigation of one large school district that:

... seventy four percent of principals, sixty five percent of teachers and fifty nine percent of parents thought students should “always” or “usually” be retained if they qualified. “Lack of basic skills” was a criteria for retention that most agreed upon (p. 7).

When Smalls (1997) asked teachers if a child should be retained within the same grade level 62% agreed to the retention and 13% disagreed. Eighty three percent of educators

agreed that grade retention could make the difference between academic success and failure for certain students. In another study, House (1991) found that numerous teachers thought retention would save a child from academic failure in the future. Smalls (1997) reported that the majority of teachers in her study thought that being retained in elementary school was the most beneficial for the child.

Holmes and Matthews (1984) conducted a meta-analysis on the effects of retention on elementary and junior high students. They used 44 studies which were published between 1929 through 1981, totaling over 4,208 students. The study showed significant differences between the retained student and the promoted student in several areas such as (e.g. academic achievement, language arts, reading, math, etc.). In 1989, Holmes conducted another meta-analysis on retention and promotion of students and the data showed “9 studies . . . yielded positive results; [however] the benefits of retention appeared to diminish over time (Jimerson 2001, p. 422). Reynolds (1992) indicated that “greater physical maturity and self-expectations (McCoy & Reynolds, 1998, p. 27) rated themselves more favorably than the other students in their class which were younger. Their research also stated “by age 12, retained and non-retained children had similarly positive perception of competence (p.27)” towards their academics.

## **Discussion**

The bulk of research on the disadvantages of retention appears to take place in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Labaree (1982) stated that “despite the volume of research produced about the subject [retention], there are no reliable and definitive



findings which could serve as a basis for policy (p. 16).” Jimerson (2001) reported the huge amount of pages written on the practice of retaining students lacked “empirical evidence supporting the practice of retaining students (p. 422).” Due to the lack of empirical evidence Selden (1982) reported that policy debates on promotion versus retention would not be held due to “competing data-based positions but between competing value positions.”

School system structures have changed greatly since the 1900s. We have gone from a meritocracy where you needed to earn your right to proceed through school; to social promotion where everyone moved through the system so the most students would graduate from high school; and now with the demands of society wanting to be back on top in the educational arena we are once again retaining students. “In a national poll, 72% of the American public favor[ed] rigid grade promotion standards (Gallup, 1986).”

When the Russians sent Sputnik up into space and beat the United States in the space race; the education system and student expectations changed forever. Society began to complain about the inadequacy of the U.S. school system. “The most frequently voiced criticism is that current promotional policies represent abandonment by public schools of their once dominant concern with student achievement (Labaree, 1982, p.10).” The legislation of No Child Left Behind held the highest expectations for districts, principals, teachers and students, to get 100% of the American students to proficient or advanced by 2014. Now school districts are facing the new Common Core Standards that will push the already high expectations to another level of rigor and competency for our students.

The majority of research showing the negative effects of retention was conducted prior to high school exit exams for the American students. At one time it was the job of every U.S. school to furnish an education to the maximum number of children and graduate the largest percentage of these children. With the onset of exit exams from high school; the expectation of the government is for every student to have grade level knowledge to receive their high school diploma. This means that students need to be proficient on their grade level standards in order to proceed from grade to grade and be prepared for high school graduation. Even an opponent of grade level retention stated, “. . . if retention might be expected to have benefits, it is in kindergarten . . . [because] children enter with widely varying maturity and background . . . (House, 1991, p.41).”

Current research has shown retention can show positive effects. Alexander, Entwisle, and Dauber (1994) conducted research on the retention of students in first through third grades on 700+ Baltimore students. They reported:

A major finding was that while post-retention academic performance of retained children remained lower than both same-age and same-grade comparison groups, the performance gap between retained and non-retained children narrowed considerably from pre-retention levels up to the eighth year of school. This was especially the case for children retained in second and third grades (McCoy & Reynolds, 1998, p. 3).

Peterson, DeGracie, and Ayabe (1987) also examined the effects of retention on students in first through third grades and their findings “indicated students made significant improvements in reading and math achievement in first and second grade during the year

of retention but that this advantaged diminished significantly two to three years later.” In another study conducted by Gottfredson, Fink, and Graham (1994) of African-American sixth and seventh graders “retained children reported greater attachment to school, greater overall ratings of school adjustment, and lower rebelliousness behavior (McCoy & Reynolds, 1998, p. 4).”

These more recent studies show that retention can be beneficial in a student’s academic career. However, students who are retained even if they get to grade level at the end of the retained year needs to have scaffolds and supports in place throughout their school years to ensure that they do not regress and fall behind once more. Alexander, Entwisle, and Dauber (1994) reported positive effects of grade repetition in second and third grade. Their report showed the “achievement gap between retained and non-retained children prior to retention narrowed substantially in the years following retention (McCoy & Reynolds, 1998, p. 29).” Studies are beginning to show that grade repetition can have its benefits; the lasting effects of retention are also documented. Alexander, Entwisle, and Dauber (1994) investigation, also indicated that “children who were retained lagged consistently behind both their same-age and same-grade peers by the eighth grade year (p. 29).” Studies that show positive effects of retention in school achievement (Peterson, DeGracie, & Ayabe, 1987; Pierson& Connell, 1992; Alexander, Entwisle, & Dauber, 1994) also find that the effects are short term.

Rachal & Hoffman (1986) reported that “students appear to have considerably fewer difficulties with grade-level basic skills when they are both retained and provided

remediation as soon as inadequate basic skills performance is noted (p. 25).” This observation is critical for struggling students as well as those who were previously retained. Just as we put scaffolds in place for our special education students and for our GATE students who begin to fall behind grade level we must always keep a watchful eye on the students who were previously retained. What would that look like?

- Students who were previously retained should have Individual Learning Plans (ILP) in place that follows them from grade to grade throughout their school years.
- Student Study Teams (SST) should continue to monitor the retained students to ensure they remain at benchmark.
- Retained students should be invited to after school study programs and summer school programs to keep their skills at benchmark.

### **Implications**

Our government is demanding more of our education system. Our districts, principals, and teachers are expected to get all students to proficient and/or advanced. With these expectations comes major decisions – and we must ask the questions – What is best for our students?

Retention of a student is not an easy decision, and it should not be. The decision should be based on data. Several pieces of data should be collected. For example:

1. Use of a scale; such as Light’s Retention Scale. This document asks pertinent questions and starts the conversation.

2. Presentation of academic data. The last benchmark scores in all academic areas.
3. Discussion of how the student has progressed or hasn't progressed scholastically throughout the year.
4. Finally, the most important question must be addressed. Will retention of this student change his life? Will this student get to benchmark by repeating the year with support and scaffolds?

Every student will not improve with retention; and if all evidence points to “no” after looking at all the data gathered, then the retention committee should choose “social-promotion.”

Ayers (1908) question “What is the function of our common schools?” is still pertinent today. If our job as educators is to ensure students can pass the high school exit examine and go forth to a promising job or off to college to a promising career; then we must consider grade repetition for those students that data and a retention committee shows will benefit from retention. If our job as educators is to put students on an assembly line and get them all in and out of school with their cohorts; then yes, social-promotion is the only way to ensure the success of that goal!

Labaree (1982) reported that there is not any empirical evidence that support social promotion is a better solution to retention. He wrote:

The lack of support for retention is understandable. Since social promotion represents the status quo, the burden of proof naturally falls on the supporters of change toward tougher promotional standards; and no such proof currently exists. But there is no proof favoring social

promotion either. . . [so those favoring] social promotion do so not on the grounds of the demonstrable achievement gains which come from promoting students but on the grounds of the potential social harm that might be caused by retaining them. This is less an empirical conclusion than a simple value assertion (p. 17).

Districts, principals, and teachers working with parents must make critical decisions that will affect a child's future for ever. Anderson and West's (1992) investigation of parents who had a child retained reported that "the majority of the parent participants viewed retention as an educational practice that provided students with a better chance for a future success in school (p. 16)." Students in this study also reported that retention had not "adversely affected [their] lives (p.17)."

The future belongs to our students! Each child must be considered individually, and given the opportunity to fulfill their goals; this begins with a successful education.

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