



who haven't mastered grade-level skills and aren't ready for advancement. "Kids are held back in New York, but not as many as may need to be." Still, she questions the effectiveness of the retention that does occur. "At the same time, sticking them back in a class with the same methods just doesn't work," she acknowledges.

Educators everywhere are familiar with this dilemma. On one hand, you want to enforce rigorous academic standards and avoid passing students on to a grade they're not prepared for. But on the other hand, you don't want to force students to repeat a grade unless it's really going to help them. How did we get here?

Political Pressure

It helps to go back a decade. In his 1998 State of the Union address, President Bill Clinton announced that among his new initiatives, "an end to social promotion" was key to building the nation's strength in the 21st century.

Prior to this point, social promotion—the practice of allowing students who have failed to meet academic standards to pass on to the next grade with their peers instead of satisfying the requirements—had been the de facto policy of choice. It was widely accepted that promoting students in this way was in the best interest of a student's social and psychological well-being.

Ten years later, the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) estimates that the number of kids being held back has skyrocketed. As many as 15 percent of students in the U.S. now repeat a grade each year, and between 30 and 50 percent are retained at least once before ninth grade.

The Case for Retention

Walk into an eighth-grade classroom where only a fifth of the students can read and write at grade level, and you'll quickly grasp why support is growing for holding back kids who don't keep up. That's the situation Sarah Siegel faced when she taught at a large public school in Atlanta. The problem began in the

"Social promotion" is an unpopular phrase in education, but is retention any better? **By Calvin Hennick**

It's the end of the school year, and you have a choice to make. David, who rarely hands in homework, has missed several weeks of school—much of it unexcused. Lisa, already a year older than her peers because she was held back in first grade, puts in a great deal of effort but still can't seem to pull off a passing grade.

Both have failed to meet grade-level standards on the state test. Do you hold them back, thinking another year will help David get back on track and do the trick for Lisa? Or do you promote them and hope for the best next year?

Like most teachers, Brandy Franklin, a 15-year veteran of New York City schools, has seen plenty of students

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early grades and got worse as time went on, she says.

"I knew first-grade teachers who would justify passing weak students, saying, 'Well, they kind of got it,'" says Siegel. "But when you only 'kind of get' the alphabet and sight words and phonics, that's going to affect you for the rest of your life."

Siegel, who now teaches at a charter school in Boston, says her new school's rigid retention policy motivates students to work hard during the school year. Any student who receives a grade of lower than 70 percent in two courses for the year is required to repeat. "The difference is that it's a real threat to the kids," she says.

Clear Policies Help

While it might seem harsh, research shows that the threat does work, says John Easton, executive director of the Consortium on Chicago School Research. A study of Chicago's anti-social promotion policy showed that students, as well as teachers and families, pushed harder for improvement when faced with a firmly defined advancement policy. "There was actually demonstrable additional effort," Easton says.

In one study, 81 percent of sixth graders and 84 percent of eighth graders said they worked harder during summer school than during the regular school year, even though similar numbers of students said they were "upset" or "mad" that they had to attend the program. With the threat of retention hanging over their heads, kids worked hard enough to make roughly half an academic year's worth of progress in reading and math over the summer.

No Long-Term Benefit

Those findings are tempered, however, by the researchers' con-

The Numbers

Zero

The number of elementary-age students held back in the U.K., Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and Japan.

(UNESCO, 2003/4)

2 Million

The number of K-12 students that the U.S. retains each year.

(JIMERSON, 2001; WHIPPLE, 2002)

40%

The increased risk that a student held back once will drop out of school.

(RODERICK, 1995)

90%

The increased risk that a student held back two times will drop out of school.

(RODERICK, 1995)

1.2 Million

The number of teenagers that drop out of U.S. high schools each year.

(AMERICA'S PROMISE ALLIANCE, 2008)

\$10 Billion

The estimated cost of retaining students in the U.S. each year.

(MCCOLLUM, 1999)



clusion that the students who were retained received no long-term benefit and in some cases were harmed. Two years after being retained in the sixth grade, students had made about half a year's less progress than similar students who weren't retained. Worse, being retained in the eighth grade increased a student's chance of dropping out by age 17 by 26 percent.

"I think we shouldn't knowingly do anything that is going to have a negative impact on students," Easton says. That, he acknowledges, creates a catch-22: "How do you set a standard with the goal of motivating people to work harder so they aren't held back, and do that without holding anybody back?"

Repeating Past Mistakes

"No one calls it a retention policy," says Dorothea Anagnostopoulos, an assistant professor of teacher education at Michigan State University (MSU). "They say, 'Let's end social promotion.'" Anagnostopoulos says students don't benefit from retention, in part because they often sit through an additional year of the same instruction that didn't work the first time, with few, if any, modifications.

"The policy sounds good to most people," agrees UCLA professor Gary Orfield. "The only problem is, it really doesn't work."

Mary Lee Smith, a professor at Arizona State University, says the evidence against retention is so overwhelming that she can't think of a situation when it would be best to hold a student back. "They have a better chance of picking up something in the long run if they're passed than if they're failed," says Smith.

The Effect on Kids

Meanwhile, how do the students

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respond to the hold-back position? For most, the threat of retention is the ultimate stomach-knotter. In 1987, children listed being retained as the third-most stressful thing that could happen to them, behind only “going blind” and “losing a parent.” When the study was replicated in 2001, retention topped the list.

But there’s more than just feelings at stake. Retention has actual and lasting effects on kids. As noted, retained students are more likely to drop out—a growing problem that some education experts indicate is under-reported and “epidemic.” (In fact, Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings recently announced that schools will be required to use a standardized drop-out formula to better track these numbers.) In addition to the drop-out danger, retained students often exhibit behavior problems, according to NASP.

By high school, retained students are more likely to smoke, drink alcohol, and engage in violent behavior. As adults, they are more likely to be unemployed.

While these problems are very real, there is no guarantee that social promotion is the answer. Even social promotion advocates note that the practice, by definition, results in students who are unable to perform at the level expected of students their age.

“It’s just passing the problem along,” says Paul Reville, president of the Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy (RCERP) and a lecturer at Harvard University. “If the student hasn’t achieved competence at the level he or she is at, they’re likely going to repeat the failure at the next level.”

Toward a Solution

The anti-social promotion and anti-retention crowds agree wholeheartedly on one thing: Neither is ideal. Heidi Glidden, an assistant director of educational issues at the American Federation of Teachers, sums up her organization’s position on the issue: “We do not believe in the practice of social promotion Having said that, we don’t think the answer to anything is just retaining a lot of kids.”

In a perfect world, every student would be academically prepared for the next grade, and there would be no need to choose between holding students back and passing them on unprepared. Of course, getting every single student caught up is easier said than done.

A good start, though, is to provide interventions before a student falls hopelessly behind. Some measures, such as summer school and small class sizes, will have to be decided at the district or school level. At Siegel’s school in Boston, students who are candidates for retention are assigned a staff mentor and must attend after-school tutoring sessions three times a week. Although Siegel says the policy isn’t a “silver bullet” solution, her school only

retains about two kids in each grade of between 66 and 88 students.

As a teacher, however, you may be able to get a student started with other forms of help, such as before- or after-school tutoring, from the very beginning of the year. Here are a few strategies you can try.

Work to identify learning and behavior problems early in the school year to help avoid the cumulative effects of ongoing difficulties; then steer these students to appropriate support services before they become entrenched in a cycle of failure.

Remember that parental involvement is a crucial aspect in a student’s ultimate success. Discuss concerns and ideas with parents and other professionals at the school; communication is important so that you are not the only adult working with the child to foster academic and social skills.

It’s also important for you to turn an eye toward your own instruction. “You look at students’ learning and then revise your instruction, not just grade somebody,” MSU’s Anagnostopoulos says. Rather than assessing students solely with a high-stakes, end-of-year test, consider creating several meaningful assessments throughout the year that provide checkpoints for student progress. Lobby for staff development to help in this regard.

And never be shy about seeking assistance from other educators who may be part of a multidisciplinary student support team; teachers can’t be expected to solve all classroom or learning problems alone, and collaborating with other educational professionals can help address the specific needs of individual students.

“Avoid the simplistic idea that the only alternative to social promotion is retention,” says RCERP’s Reville. “It’s not an ‘either/or’ situation.” The sooner you get support to the Davids and Lisas of your classroom, the fewer hard calls you might have to make at the end of the year. □

6 Things Schools Can Do to Keep Kids Moving Up

1 Encourage parents to get involved in their child’s education and have frequent contact with their school and teachers.

2 Use student support teams to design interventions specifically tailored to the problems they find. Make them accountable for their results.

3 Take into consideration the social and cultural backgrounds of your student body when designing a support policy.

4 Keep track of students’ progress by evaluating them throughout the year. This will also provide teachers with helpful instructional feedback.

5 Start a peer-to-peer or cross-age tutoring program. Or have adults volunteer to become mentors.

6 Offer additional instruction after school or during summer to help students get the skills they need.

SOURCE: NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS

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