

NATIONAL DROPOUT PREVENTION NEWSLETTER

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Alternatives to Retention

Center Makes Policy Statement on Grade Retention

by Jay Smink

Although the National Dropout Prevention Center has been vocal in its support of a variety of educational strategies, especially the Fifteen Effective Strategies for Dropout Prevention, the policy statement you see here in opposition to grade retention is our first on an educational issue.

Why grade retention, and why now?

The issue of retention has been studied extensively by many researchers, and this research has been monitored by the Center staff over the past decade. The evidence of its negative effect on students' emotional development, social behavior, academic achievement, and dropping out continues to be overwhelming. The current climate of increased accountability, while laudatory in its goal of high expectations, nevertheless needs to be accountable itself to the fact that retention of students does not work.

This policy piece challenges educators, parents, and concerned community members to join in working with local, state, and national policymakers to develop policies which combine accountability with responsible actions that promote the success of every child.

The concept of continuous improvement is one that is supported by research, and efforts need to be made to develop policies and educational practices that support what research reveals about child development. The current rigid grade level requirements imposed upon children—which are not based on research—drive the debate today. Responsible educators and parents need to speak out, loudly and clearly, on this important issue.

Yes, educators should have high expectations. But, they should not forget their knowledge of how and when children learn. To do otherwise would be to shirk their responsibilities to the children in America's schools today.

NDPC Policy Statement On Student Grade Retention

The National Dropout Prevention Center (NDPC) advocates the implementation of alternative strategies based on the principle of continuous improvement, in place of policies supporting student grade retention. Because student cognitive and social development varies for all children, the NDPC supports a holistic approach that blends frequent student assessments for diagnostic purposes; flexibility in school scheduling to allow for appropriate and timely instructional interventions; and meaningful out-of-school experiences. These approaches must be supported by sufficient resources to ensure that all children continue to progress in their learning.

In support of this policy, the NDPC suggests the following:

1. All students must be periodically assessed in order to determine their educational progress.
2. School scheduling must be flexible to allow for daily alternative curricular interventions to meet the students' identified needs.
3. Out-of-school experiences must complement and be coordinated with other curriculum-based interventions.
4. Teachers must receive continuous, intensive, professional development in a variety of educational strategies to successfully implement those interventions.
5. Parents must be informed and involved throughout the assessment/intervention process.
6. Sufficient resources must be allocated to provide the support so that all students make continuous progress.



Prevention Forum

Many articles have been written in recent months on the topic of retention. The excerpts below raise some important questions and provide some good research-based answers.

The flag bearing the motto, "End social promotion," is now being raised by President Clinton, by several governors, and by numerous other politicians. But the movement they are helping to create has many pernicious implications. The real problem in deciding whether or not to promote students from one grade to the next is the existence of grade levels in the first place. As long as we continue to accept that schools must be organized into archaic grade levels, the problem of promotion will plague us.

Given the wide differences in developmental stages of children at any given age, it is ludicrous for schools to use chronological age to place children into groups that move in lock step on year-long schedules. "Retaining" a child who hasn't passed a certain level at the end of June isn't really "retention" at all. It's moving the child clear back to the beginning of the year he or she has "failed" rather than working with the individual child at his or her actual level of achievement.

Children do not develop in nine-month bursts—except during gestation. Their intellectual development is a continuous process that demands attention to individual rather than artificially constructed averages, groups, and standards measured like fiscal years.

From W. Romey, "A Note on Social Promotion" in *Phi Delta Kappan*, April 2000, Vol. 81, No. 8, p. 632.

Dozens of studies have found that retaining students actually contributes to greater academic failure, higher levels of dropping out, and greater behavioral difficulties rather than leading to success in school. Students who are held back actually do worse in the long run than comparable students who are promoted, in part perhaps because they do not receive better or more appropriate teaching when they are retained, and in part because they give up on themselves as learners.



However, the negative effects of grade retention should not become an argument for social promotion—that is, the practice of moving students through the system without ensuring they acquire the skills they need. If neither retention nor social promotion is effective, what are the alternatives?

There are at least four complementary strategies school administrators can employ:

1. enhancing professional development for teachers to ensure that they have the knowledge and skills they need to teach a wider range of students to meet the standards;
2. redesigning school structures to support more intensive learning;
3. ensuring that targeted supports and services are available for students when they are needed; and
4. employing classroom assessments that better inform teaching.

From L. Darling-Hammond, "Alternatives to Grade Retention," in *The School Administrator*, August 1998, p. 18-21.

Everyone is in favor of creating high standards and holding students to them. No one is in favor of social promotion, if that means promoting students who have not mastered the work of one grade and who are not ready for the next. But the question is, "What is the alternative?" Is holding students back in grade—flunking them—good for students? The research evidence shows that it is not.

It makes much more sense to identify learning problems early and to remedy them with solutions that really work—long before the only choices are flunking and social promotion. We know lots of things that work: smaller class sizes, better-trained teachers, a challenging curriculum, high expectations, after-school and summer school help. There is good evidence that these things work—and good evidence that flunking kids does not work.

From R. M. Houser, "What If We Ended Social Promotion?" in *Education Week*, April 7, 1999, p. 64.



On a recent survey conducted by *NEA Today*, 72% of respondents, like teacher-author Gwendolyn Malone below, believed that retention was good for students.

For most struggling children, retention provides the opportunity to refresh, relearn, and acquire new skills that help them move to the next grade level.

Most important, if framed properly, retention gives students self-confidence and an "I can do this" attitude that's likely to boost their academic achievement for years to come.

From "Debate," March 1998, *NEA Today*, p. 43. Also review the *NEA Today's* web site at www.nea.org/neatoday.



Nominations Time!

It is time once again to call for nominations for the National Dropout Prevention Network Executive Board. Board members assist in setting Network policy. Terms are for three years and will begin January 1, 2001. Nominations are solicited from educators, parents, community, labor, and business groups.

To propose a candidate, or to nominate yourself, mail a letter of nomination and a copy of the candidate's resume by August 1, 2000, to Dr. Arthur W. Stellar, Superintendent, Kingston School District, 61 Crown Street, Kingston, NY 12401.

Fourth Annual Crystal Star Awards of Excellence

Excitement is mounting over our Fourth Annual Crystal Star Awards of Excellence nominations. Each year the Network recognizes distinguished leadership and service, as well as outstanding contributions made by individuals and programs in the field of dropout recovery, intervention, and prevention.

Crystal Star winners, determined by a Network review panel, will be celebrated at the 12th Annual National Dropout Prevention Network Conference Awards Luncheon in Baltimore, Maryland, on October 2nd. Winners receive complimentary conference registration, hotel accommodations, and a striking crystal award to proudly display. The deadline for nominations is June 1, 2000. Applications are available from the Center at (864) 656-2599 or can be downloaded from www.dropoutprevention.org. Click on Key People to learn about previous Crystal Star winners.

Stellar Elected

Dr. Arthur W. Stellar was recently elected Vice-President of the Horace Mann League. The Horace Mann League is comprised of 1,000 superintendents, professors, or other high ranking educational officials, and its purpose is to promote the ideals of Horace Mann, an education reformer who in the mid-1880s was responsible for the promotion of public schools.

Dr. Stellar, Superintendent of Schools in Kingston, NY, is a Network Executive Board member.

Meet the Author

This month, you will receive a copy of the Center's newest publication, *Character Education and Service Learning: Walking the Talk*. With much of the country focused on concerns about school violence, many educators and policy leaders, such as South Carolina Governor Jim Hodges, are promoting character education.

Dr. Kevin J. Swick has led a team of professors at the University of South Carolina, the Service Learning and Teacher Education project (SLATE), in developing this new resource for K-12 educators which incorporates service learning as a method for the delivery of character education. More than mouthing the right words, service learning gives students the opportunity to apply community-determined character traits in real-life settings. Thus, the true meaning of such character traits as responsibility, respect, honesty, trustworthiness, caring, and fairness is made real through service experiences and thoughtful reflection.

This publication was produced in partnership with the South Carolina Department of Education, and additional copies are available from the National Dropout Prevention Center.

News From Baltimore

If you can only attend one professional development conference this year, then this is the conference you will not want to miss. Choose from more than 100 workshops, seminars, round robin discussions, and general sessions. Visit the classrooms of Baltimore at Forest Park High School, Canton Middle School, and the Living Classrooms of Baltimore. Tour Baltimore's charming neighborhoods and historical sites. You can even catch an Orioles and Yankees game at Camden Yards! For in-depth information and online registration, view our web site at www.dropoutprevention.org.

An Invitation

The Fall issue of the *National Dropout Prevention Newsletter* will focus on the theme of after-school programming. Federal funds are currently supporting a variety of approaches to this key time of a young person's day, and we believe that this would be a good opportunity to share Network members' ideas, experiences, and research findings.

If you are participating in an after-school program and would like to submit your story for the *Newsletter*, please contact us at ndpc@clermson.edu.





Program Profile

Middle-Level Retention Alternative Program

by Randy Brown and Maria Chairez

The pendulum-like debate between social promotion and grade retention has generated laws in many states, including Nevada, that require school districts to retain eighth-grade students who do not perform at grade-level proficiency. In addition, federal educational dollars, in the near future, will be tied to a district maintaining an acceptable retention program. In accordance with this policy, the number of Clark County School District (CCSD) students who are on a trajectory to be retained is alarming. For example, in the 1998/99 school year, one of CCSD's 12 middle schools had almost 40 percent of seventh graders fail math. Besides the dramatic student overcrowding issues associated with holding students an additional year, student retention is one of the most reliable predictors of student dropout.

In many sectors, fortunately, the debate about retention has moved beyond the rhetoric and into the realm of "What can we do to bring struggling students up to grade-level proficiency?" Many administrators and educators are advocating for programmatic alternatives that can prevent the need for student retention. Indeed, research has suggested that school- and classroom-level methods can be used to prevent the need for student retention. The Middle-Level Retention Alternative (MLRA) program is designed to establish an alternative program that assists students who are "in risk" of eighth grade retention. The goals of this program are to: establish an organized alternative program at each of the targeted middle school sites; encourage each school site to adopt research-based methods; improve participating students' performance; and decrease retention of program participants.

With the support of CCSD funds, six middle school sites have designated at least one teacher and one class for the MLRA student improvement program. MLRA is currently serving approximately 100 students. Each site program targets sixth grade students who are identified as "in risk" of eighth-grade retention. This identification usually consists of a student having failed at least

two core classes (math, English, social science and/or natural science). Students are given the option to participate in MLRA as a substitute for one of their elective classes. Although each middle-level site has the flexibility to develop its own retention prevention class, this program emphasizes several research-based practices including class size reduction, parent involvement, study skills, academic remediation, participatory lessons, individual tutoring, and technology-enhanced materials.

Another component of this program is that teachers from each of the sites periodically participate in a best practices discussion and hear about other methods, curricula, and programs that have been found to be effective. Teachers are also provided staff development workshops, which instruct teachers on particular methodologies. Lastly, during site visits, program administrators consult with principals and teachers to assist them in offering a quality program.

This program is an important beginning in the Clark County School District's attempt to assist struggling students in achieving grade-level proficiency. Although test scores and grade improvements have not been found thus far, many teachers and students have reported that the program is producing successful results for some students. The process evaluation of this program has produced beneficial results in helping to refine and strengthen the program. The program now has taken shape and continues to improve.



The Middle-Level Retention Alternative Program is producing successful results for some students.

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Program Profile

A Comprehensive Approach

by Marilyn Madden

Social promotion and retention pose a challenge to all public schools in America. The solution lies in answering the question of how to help students keep up academically in order to lessen both. As with most tough issues in education, a variety of options are employed nationally. Fayette County Public Schools (KY), an urban district serving an estimated 32,000, has established benchmarks for student performance and provisions for retaining students who don't meet the standards. In order to help students meet these benchmarks, a comprehensive strategy has been implemented.

One area of focus is the improvement of reading skills. They have developed a summer program for students who are two grade levels or below in reading. Ann Lyttle, Coordinator of At-Risk Programs for the district, has seen significant gains in students' reading skills as a result. Every student who enters the summer program is pretested with the Gates-McGinitie test. Teachers who are hired to facilitate the summer program attend a Summer Institute and are trained in a variety of research-based reading programs. Upon ending the districtwide summer program, students are posttested. According to Lyttle, "Many of these students have improved reading skills and move on to the next grade."

As Fayette County's Coordinator of At-Risk Programs, Lyttle heads up 16 different alternative programs. One of their many success stories is the Job Corps Center. The center is a unique residential program serving 16-24-year-olds whose accomplishments culminate with a diploma, **not** a GED. The focus is on occupational skills coupled with academic skills. To further enhance the program, Job Corps places the graduates in a career specific job.

The issue surrounding social promotion/retention is one that requires positive, innovative thinking and not necessarily reinventing the wheel. Fayette County looked at what they do and developed ways they could improve in order to meet the needs of their students.

★ Contact Ann Lyttle, Coordinator of At-Risk Programs, Fayette County Public Schools, 701 E. Main Street, Lexington, KY 40502, (859) 281-0100. Web site: www.fayette.k12.ky.us/.

Project FUTURE—A Multiage Community of Learners

Project FUTURE (Family Units for Thematic Ungraded Real-Life Experiences) is a multiage curriculum implemented at Harding Elementary School in Hammond, Indiana. Project FUTURE Communities include a primary community of learners consisting of students who are 6-, 7-, and 8-years-old (grades 1-3) and an intermediate community consisting of students who are 8-, 9-, and 10-years-old (grades 3-5).

Research indicates children grow, learn, and mature at different rates during their school life. A nongraded, multiage community of learners provides a developmentally appropriate learning environment. This environment allows individual children the opportunity to experience social and academic growth without failure.

All of the core subjects are integrated into a theme. This allows students to make connections between the subject areas, which makes learning more meaningful. The learning is shared and each student can make a contribution. Some of the themes have been: "All Aboard! Passport to Knowledge, Adventure, Imagination, and Discovery"; "Footprints Through American History: Moccasins to Moon Boots"; and "Mysteries Near and Far: Visible and Invisible." The curriculum is supported by Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, Gardener's Eight Intelligences, character education, and brain compatible strategies in a full inclusion program.

Students are exposed to guest speakers and attend numerous field trips where they practice their research skills. In Project FUTURE, learning extends into society and reinforces the concepts taught in the classroom.

The teachers feel an environment in which children work to attain their personal best without the competition created by letter grades allows for more learning to take place. The children work on individual and group projects as a culmination to their learning. Students receive progress reports that parents have helped teachers design.

The program has become an ideal learning environment for at-risk children as it meets their multiple needs. Children have the opportunity not to have to fit into a grade level mold, but succeed at their own rate and become lifelong learners.

★ Contacts: Sue Brietzke or Paula Quigg, Harding Elementary School, School City of Hammond, 3211 165th Street, Hammond, Indiana 46322, (219) 989-7351.





Resources

The reasons, effects, and alternatives to retention are discussed in *Retention in the Early Grades*. This publication looks at retention through the eyes of key participants, and the research is guided by these questions: 1) Why do teachers retain young children? 2) How do children and families experience retention? 3) Does retention help children close the academic achievement gap? 4) What alternatives to retention are schools exploring?


The user-friendly book contains a survey for teachers, a practice guide to understanding the impacts of retention, a list of alternative strategies, a resource list, and an extensive bibliography. *Retention in the Early Grades* is a valuable resource to add to your library. It is not only a guidebook, it is also full of valuable resources for teachers, guidance counselors, school administrators, and parents. *Retention in the Early Grades*, (1996), by Beckie Anderson, is available from RMC Research Corporation, Denver, CO, 800-922-3636, rmc@rmcdenver.com.



In May 1999, the U.S. Department of Education published *Taking Responsibility for Ending Social Promotion: A Guide for Educators and State and Local Leaders*. Acknowledging that neither social promotion nor retention is an appropriate strategy to help students who do not meet standards, this policy guide offers better options to social promotion and retention by focusing on interventions to help **all** students meet high expectations. The guide states that "Taking responsibility for ending social promotion requires a comprehensive effort involving all stakeholders to address multiple problems and a variety of student needs." To learn about the variety of strategies advocated by the U.S. Department of Education, you can get this entire policy guide at their web site, www.ed.gov/pubs/socialpromotion/.



The Education Commission of the States' Information Clearinghouse contains a large volume of information related to each state's policy on promotion/retention. You can get their report on this as well as other related information by linking to the ECS website at www.ecs.org. Look under the Information Clearinghouse, Promotion/Retention/Completion policies.



Turning the Tide in the Next Millennium
12th Annual
National Dropout Prevention Network Conference
October 1-4, 2000
Omni Inner Harbor Hotel, Baltimore, MD

Upcoming Events

★ June 6-7, 2000
Chevy Chase, Maryland
National Juvenile Justice Summit at the National 4-H Center. "How Shall We Respond to the Dreams of Our Youth?" Sponsored by Juvenile Court Centennial Initiative. Contact (202) 637-0590.

★ June 22-24, 2000
Minneapolis, Minnesota
"A Revolution in Alternative Education: New Schools for a New Age." Sponsored by International Affiliation of Alternative Schools. Contact them at (507) 645-3061 or www.geocities.com/maapmn.

★ June 22-25, 2000
Orlando, Florida
The National Youth Summit—"Young People: Partners in Fulfilling the Promise." Sponsored by the Points of Light Foundation. Call the Youth Summit Hotline for registration information, (202) 729-0027.

★ June 24-28, 2000
Orlando, Florida
2000 National Community Service Conference. Sponsored by Points of Light Foundation. For information contact them at (202) 729-8000 or www.pointsoflight.org.

★ June 29-July 2, 2000
Beaver Creek, Colorado
8th International Integration of Academic and Technical Education Program—"Connecting Classrooms, Communities, and Careers." For information contact (303) 988-5505 or www.schooltocareers.com.



A Look at State Retention Policies

Because of the national initiative to end social promotion, states are implementing and reforming their retention policies. A sampling of those policies follows.

California

The policies regarding social promotion and retention provide the identification of students who may be at risk as early as possible. Tests are still used as checkpoints in identification. Policies approved concern the retention and social promotion of students between the following grade levels: second and third, third and fourth, fourth and fifth, fifth/sixth and sixth/seventh (when students move to the middle school), and eighth/ninth and ninth/tenth (when students move to the high school). In second grade through fourth grade, the skill of reading is the prominent factor with regard to retention or promotion, and in all other grades, reading, language arts, and mathematics are stressed. There are opportunities for parents and teachers to appeal the retention of students if they deem it necessary to promote students and have significant evidence to support their claim.

Florida

Students who do not meet the achievement levels in their school district are required to participate in remediation after they are properly diagnosed for the problems hindering their academic success. The students work on an Academic Improvement Plan Program, which includes pullout programs and summer school classes. Based on Senate Bill 1956, Pupil Progression Plans must evaluate student achievement in reading, writing, and mathematics at each grade level.

Illinois

Since August 1996, laws have been administered to end social promotion in the state of Illinois. Prior to retention, students will have opportunities for remediation and summer school. Students are required to have passed the minimum required testing standards for reading and mathematics, have passing grades in reading and mathematics, and have fewer than 20 unexcused absences or they will attend summer school.

Ohio

The Ohio State Department of Education has implemented new programs involving retention and social promotion because of the number of skill-deficient employees entering the workforce and the low self-esteem of children who have been retained.


Even though students are more often socially promoted with intensive remediation, the standards for high school graduation are high. Programs for implementing Ohio high school graduation qualifying tests are projected from the present until 2005. The tests will be administered in the tenth grade with all sections passed by students before they graduate. As well as measuring skills in reading, writing, and mathematics, the tests measure skills in citizenship and science.

Texas

Texas believes in early intervention of reading deficiencies and also in remediation as therapy. The reason why social promotion is ending in Texas is because of studies showing that most children without reading skills by the third grade rarely catch up to their peers. The Texas Department of Education is implementing a plan for assessment of student achievement. The Texas Assessment of Academic Skills test (TAAS) must be passed by the third grade. However, students can retake the test twice. After the third attempt and failure of the test, the student is retained. The same holds true for testing in grades five and eight.

Wisconsin

In the summer of 2002, fourth and eighth grade students will be required to pass basic skills assessments in order to move on to the next grade. The assessments include reading, writing, math, and social science for fourth graders, with the addition of geography and history for eighth graders. Local school districts can use the assessments of the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction or they can implement their own. If parents request that their child be excused from the testing, alternative assessments will be used to measure skill proficiency. Students who do not pass the assessments will be given two additional opportunities to pass.

 This information was compiled by Information Resource Consultant, Marilyn Madden, and Graduate Assistant, Jennifer Cooper. For more information on social promotion and retention issues, visit the U.S. Department of Education's web site at <http://www.ed.gov/pubs/socialpromotion/> — "Taking Responsibility for Ending Social Promotion: A Guide for Educators and State and Local Leaders."





Providing Workable Alternatives to Retention

by Patricia Cloud Duttweiler

The push for standards-based school reform is the predominant issue facing today's public schools. Half the states apply sanctions to those schools whose students fail to meet the standards, and over a third of the states require students to score at designated levels on tests to get promoted and/or to graduate. For many students, the price of failure is retention in grade. This places minority, poor, urban students, and English language-learners in a kind of double jeopardy: Systems that failed to educate them adequately are now punishing them for not being educated.

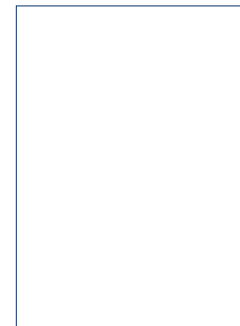
Current high-profile political rhetoric decries social promotion as being partly responsible for students who are unable to pass tests measuring the new, higher standards. Policymakers, school administrators, and teachers see retention as a desirable alternative. When asked why they retain students in grade, teachers respond that it gives students another year to master the academic content and to improve their social behavior. Yet, this reasoning flies in the face of an overwhelming amount of research.

The author of a 1989 analysis of 63 studies conducted on the effects of retention in grade found that 54 of the studies indicated overall negative effects. Retention was found to harm students' achievement, attendance record, personal adjustment in school, and attitude toward school. In a study published in 1997 in the *Journal of School Psychology*, a group of low-achieving students who had been promoted were compared with a group of similarly low-achieving students who had been retained. The researchers found that the groups did not differ significantly on intellectual functioning at five years, four months of age, and at the end of the third grade. In addition, the researchers found that by sixth grade, retained students displayed exacerbated behavior problems while the behavior of the promoted students remained stable.

Studies have found that retention increases the probability of a student's dropping out of school. Male, black, Southern, and poor students are more likely to be the ones retained according to a report from the National Center for Education Statistics, *Dropout Rates in the United States: 1995*. Of those students who had been retained, nearly twice as many reported having dropped out of school as those who had never been retained. A study conducted by the Association of California Urban School Districts found that students who were retained twice had a nearly 100% chance of dropping out.

Jeannie Oakes of UCLA suggests that the strong support for retention is in part an attempt to accommodate the expectation that all children must learn while, at the same time, maintaining the powerful social norms of traditional schooling. Although it makes no sense to ignore the research that points to the futility of retaining students in grade, neither should the negative effects of retention be used to support whole-scale promotion. Students should not be pushed through a system that does not ensure they acquire the skills and knowledge they need. It should be clear to educators, if not to

policymakers, that students with behavioral or academic problems should be identified early and provided the support and interventions needed to help them. Resources should be provided for early childhood education, smaller class sizes, tutoring programs, year-round schooling, multi-grade classrooms, and assessment for continuous improvement. In addition, resources should be provided for after-school and Saturday programs, summer school, teacher professional development, and other strategies designed to help, not punish, students.



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