

White Paper

GRADE RETENTION AND SOCIAL PROMOTION

The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) promotes the use of interventions that are evidence-based and effective and that promote the educational attainment of America's children and youth. NASP urges schools to prevent the need for dichotomous choices between grade retention and social promotion by instead implementing systems that permit early identification of academic difficulties and that ensure individualized, evidence-based remediation plans with frequent progress monitoring for students who fall below grade level expectations. When students continue to perform below grade level standards and other causes for failure are ruled out (e.g., handicapping condition, limited English proficiency), and the student is retained in grade, the retention intervention must offer more than a "repeat" of the previous year's instruction.

Grade retention in U.S. schools has a long history characterized by fluctuations in the frequency and application of this educational practice. These fluctuations reflect shifts in educators' and policy makers' beliefs about the effectiveness of grade retention and the conditions under which it should be applied. Because no institution or agency tracks national data on the frequency of grade retention, precise estimates of changes in frequency across decades are not available. According to the U.S. National Center for Education Statistics (2006), in 2004, 9.6% of youth ages 16–19 had ever been retained in grade. This represents a decrease from 16.1% in 1995. Of great concern is the fact that the highest retention rates are found among poor, minority, and inner-city youth.

The majority of studies conducted over the past four decades on the effectiveness of grade retention fail to support its efficacy in remediating academic deficits (Jimerson, 2001a). However, because students are not randomly assigned to this intervention, a failure to adequately control for pre-existing differences between retained and promoted students that may affect students' academic and social-emotional trajectories leaves open the possibility that pre-existing vulnerabilities rather than retention per se may be the cause of poor post-retention outcomes. Consistent with this possibility, recent studies utilizing more rigorous methods to control for selection effects are less likely to report negative effects (e.g., Hong & Yu, 2008; Wu, West, & Hughes, 2008; Hughes, Chen, Thoemmes, & Kwok, 2010).

Retention effects also vary depending on whether retained and promoted students are compared at the same grade or the same age. When retained and promoted peers are compared at the same age, retained students achieve at a slower rate. When retained and promoted peers are compared in the same grade, retained students experience a short-term boost that dissipates within 4 years (Wu et al., 2008). Finally, when the measure of achievement is closely aligned with the curriculum, as in the case of state accountability testing, retention bestows short-term benefits (Hughes et al., 2010).

Although retaining students who fail to meet grade level standards has limited empirical support, promoting students to the next grade when they have not mastered the curriculum of their current grade, a practice termed social promotion, is not an educationally sound alternative. For these reasons, the debate over the dichotomy between grade retention and social promotion must be replaced with

efforts to identify and disseminate evidence-based practices that promote academic success for students whose academic skills are below grade level standards. The best alternative to grade retention and social promotion is early identification of students who are not meeting grade expectations and the provision of individualized, accelerated instruction utilizing evidence-based instructional practices and frequent progress monitoring.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Researchers have attempted to assess the effects of grade retention on achievement for more than three decades (for meta-analytic reviews, see Holmes, 1989; Jimerson, 2001a; for narrative reviews, see Jimerson, 2001b; Shepard, Smith, & Marion, 1996; Sipple, Killeen, & Monk, 2004). The unanimous conclusion from these reviews is that grade retention offers few if any benefits to the retained student and may increase the retained child's risk for poor school outcomes, including dropping out of school prior to high school graduation. For example, in a meta-analysis of 18 studies published from 1990 to 1999, Jimerson (2001a) reported retained students achieved at a lower level than promoted peers (average effect size of $-.39$). However, most of the studies included in these reviews are plagued by significant methodological limitations, the most important being lack of a comparison group of promoted peers equivalent prior to retention on achievement and other variables predictive of achievement.

A recent meta-analysis of 207 achievement effects nested in 22 studies published from 1990 to 2007 (Allen, Chen, Willson, & Hughes, 2009) determined that studies that used higher quality controls for selection effects (i.e., pre-retention differences between students selected for retention intervention and promoted peers) resulted in less negative effects for retention. Specifically, studies employing adequate to good methodological designs yielded effect sizes not statistically significantly different from zero. This study also found that effect sizes differed based on whether retained and promoted students were compared when they were the same age or in the same grade; retention effects were less negative (or more positive) when same grade comparisons were employed. Retained students often show a sharp improvement, relative to promoted peers, in meeting grade level standards during the repeat year, when retained students are exposed to a familiar curriculum; however, this improvement often disappears 2 to 3 years subsequent to retention (Alexander, Entwisle, & Dauber, 2003; Wu et al., 2008). Some researchers have argued that same grade comparisons are more consistent with the purpose of retention, which is to provide students the opportunity to be more successful in meeting the academic demands of future grades (Karweit, 1999; Lorence, 2006).

Several recent studies utilizing modern propensity score methods to control for possible selection bias corroborate the recent meta-analytic findings (Hong & Yu, 2008; Wu et al., 2008). A propensity score is a conditional probability of being assigned to the retention intervention. Propensity scores offer a parsimonious way of reducing bias because it generates a single index—the propensity score—that summarizes information across many possible confounds. Wu et al. (2008) found that the effect of retention in first grade on growth in achievement differs in the short term (1–2 years) and longer term (2–4 years). Furthermore, the effects differ depending on whether achievement is assessed relative to one's grade placement or one's age. When using age-based scores, retained children experienced a slower increase in both mathematics and reading achievement in the short term but a faster increase in reading achievement in the longer term than the propensity-matched promoted children. When using grade standard scores, retained children experienced a faster increase in the short term, but a faster

decrease in the longer term in both mathematics and reading achievement than promoted children. In a second study with this same sample, students retained in first grade were more likely to obtain a passing score on the third grade state accountability tests in reading and math than were propensity matched promoted students (Hughes et al., 2010).

Many studies have examined effects of retention on social–emotional adjustment. Whereas previous meta-analyses of these studies documented negative effects of retention on social–emotional adjustment (Jimerson, 2001a), more recent studies employing propensity matching methods yield a less negative view of retention effects (Hong & Yu, 2008; Wu, West, & Hughes, 2010) on hyperactivity, internalizing behaviors, classroom engagement, peer acceptance, and academic self-efficacy, at least in the shorter-term.

Largely missing from research on grade retention are studies of how retention (or social promotion) is implemented. Too often, grade retention just means repeating the prior year’s experience (Peterson & Hughes, in press; Picklo & Christenson, 2005). States that have linked retention to performance on grade level accountability tests have passed legislation requiring additional accelerated instruction to students at-risk for retention and to students who are retained in grade. Examples include Texas (Texas Education Agency, 2009) and Florida (Florida Department of Education, 2002). However, systems to monitor implementation of these regulations are virtually nonexistent (Powell, 2007).

WHO IS RETAINED AND AT WHAT FINANCIAL COST?

A number of student characteristics have been associated with selection into grade retention, including racial or ethnic minority membership, males, delayed development, attention or behavior problems, poverty or single-parent household, low parental educational attainment, and student mobility (Jimerson, Carlson, Rotert, Egeland, & Sroufe, 1997; McCoy & Reynolds, 1999). Most educators agree that the most important consideration in retaining a student should be the student’s performance relative to grade level expectations. One consequence of increased use of accountability tests that are aligned with grade level competencies may be that retention decisions are less likely to be based on student characteristics other than grade level proficiencies (Willson & Hughes, 2009).

Grade retention is an expensive intervention. Using Texas as an example, the estimated cost of retaining 202,099 students (4.8% of total students enrolled) during the 2006–2007 year, based on the average per student yearly expenditure of \$10,162 that year, was more than 2 billion dollars.

ALTERNATIVES TO RETENTION AND SOCIAL PROMOTION

Neither repeating a grade nor merely moving on to the next grade provides students with the supports they need to improve academic and social skills. Holding schools accountable for student progress requires effective intervention strategies that provide educational opportunities and assistance to promote the social and cognitive development of students. Recognizing the cumulative developmental effects on student success at school, both early interventions and follow-up strategies are emphasized. Furthermore, in acknowledging the reciprocal influence of social and cognitive skills on academic success, effective interventions must be implemented to promote both social and cognitive competence of students. NASP encourages school districts to consider a wide array of well-researched, evidence-based, effective, and responsive strategies in lieu of retention or social promotion (see Algozzine, Ysseldyke, & Elliott, 2002 for a discussion of research-based tactics for effective instruction; see

Epstein, Atkins, Cullinan, Kutash, & Weaver, 2008; and Evertson, Emmer, & Worsham, 2006 for a more extensive discussion of interventions for academic and behavior problems; see Shinn & Walker, 2010 for guidance in implementing classroom-based interventions within a multitiered model of service delivery).

NASP supports the use of multitiered problem-solving models, often referred to as response to intervention (RTI), to provide evidence-based instruction and intervention to meet the needs of all students across academic, behavioral, and social-emotional domains (NASP, 2009a, 2009b). Elements of these models include: a first, or universal, tier focused on high quality instruction and support for appropriate student behavior and school-wide screening for academic and behavioral difficulties; a second tier that provides more intensive academic or behavioral support; and a third tier for the delivery of more intensive, individualized support for students based on their progress and needs. Progress monitoring data are collected across tiers and used to inform decisions regarding student need and support (Fletcher & Vaughan, 2009). The core components of RTI, namely, evidence-based instruction and intervention, screening, and progress monitoring, will likely reduce the need for educators to choose between two undesirable options, grade retention and social promotion, to meet the needs of students who are struggling to meet grade-level academic and behavioral standards.

Of critical importance to the prevention of grade retention or social promotion is effective classroom instruction in general education (Tier 1). Effective classroom instruction has been defined in terms of the provision of opportunities for students to learn (Pianta et al., 2007). Opportunities to learn, in turn, are defined in terms of specific instructional practices that can be observed reliably and are empirically related to student academic growth (Mashburn et al., 2008). At the elementary level, opportunities to learn are greater in classrooms that (a) are well managed and that provide students with social and emotional support; (b) provide instruction that is responsive to students' needs and that promotes higher level thinking skills; and (c) provide high quality, frequent feedback to students on their performance (Hamre & Pianta, 2005; Pianta et al., 2007). Opportunity to learn outside of school is also crucial to understanding students' academic progress and in efforts to close the achievement gap among various racial/ethnic subgroups (Brooks-Gunn & Markman, 2005).

Increasing students' opportunities to learn at school will require an increased emphasis on intensive, evidence-based approaches to teacher professional development. Effective practices involve teachers as active participants and provide (a) opportunities for teachers to observe effective teaching practices; (b) opportunities to enact practices in real-life practice settings; and (c) context-embedded, responsive feedback and support to teachers as they adopt practices (Murray, 2005; Pianta, Mashburn, Downer, Hamre, & Justice, 2008). Of concern is that the least effective model of teacher professional development, one-time workshops removed from practice settings in which teachers are passive recipients of information, are the most frequently used in schools (Sandholtz, 2002).

Opportunities for students to learn prior to school entrance and outside of the school day/year is another critical consideration for promoting student competence, particularly among those who are most at risk for forms of educational failure, such as grade retention and dropout. Studies have shown students who attended high quality preschool programs, such as Child Parent Centers and Perry Preschool, demonstrated lower rates of grade retention, special education placement, and dropout (Reynolds, 2001). Many after-school and summer programs which include focused instruction aim to address disparities in opportunity to learn and can be effective in raising student achievement among at-

risk students (Lauer et al., 2006), thereby reducing the need for grade retention as a means of addressing students' difficulties.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For children experiencing academic, emotional, or behavioral difficulties, neither repeating the same instruction another year nor promoting the student to the next grade is an effective remedy. NASP encourages school psychologists to collaborate actively with other professionals by assuming leadership roles in their school districts to implement models of service delivery that ensure:

- Multitiered problem-solving models to provide early and intensive evidence-based instruction and intervention to meet the needs of all students across academic, behavioral, and social–emotional domains
- Equitable opportunities to learn for students from diverse backgrounds
- Universal screening for academic, behavioral, and social–emotional difficulties
- Frequent progress monitoring and evaluation of interventions

Furthermore, NASP urges schools to maximize students' opportunities to learn both in and outside of school through effective teacher professional development and extended day/year programs. Finally, grade retention is a costly intervention with questionable benefits to students. If it is necessary to retain a student in grade, an intensive individualized intervention plan and frequent progress monitoring should be employed to ensure the maximum benefit for the student.

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