

The  
**BALANCED**  
**VIEW:**

**Research-based  
information on  
timely topics**

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## **SOCIAL PROMOTION & RETENTION**

### *What Are the Issues?*

When President Clinton vowed to end **social promotion** in his State of the Union address, the practice—along with its polar extreme, **grade retention**—became a front-burner issue. To many observers, however, the President's call was just the latest chapter in an ongoing debate on how best to meet the needs of failing students—do we promote them regardless of their academic ability, or do we retain them to pave the way for future school success?

Over the past three decades, the education pendulum has swung between these two policy alternatives. During the 1970s, social promotion was the prevailing course in light of growing evidence about the negative effects of retention on students' self-esteem. But social promotion came under sharp attack during the 1980s when concerns began to mount about low student achievement and the increasing numbers of high school graduates who were ill-prepared for college or the workplace. In response, many school districts passed strict promotion policies often tied to student performance on standardized tests. This resulted in a marked increase in the number of children retained.

The early half of the 1990s witnessed another shift in school policies. Several large city districts, including Boston, Chicago, New York, and Philadelphia, rescinded their stringent promotion policies when research studies (as well as experience) indicated a strong link between grade retention and dropout rates.

### *SOME FACTS & FIGURES*

- **15 to 19 percent of U.S. students are retained in grade each year.**
- **In many large urban districts upwards of 50 percent of students who enter kindergarten are likely to be retained at least once.**
- **The most frequently repeated grades are kindergarten through second.**
- **Retained students are more likely to be male, be African-American or Hispanic, and come from a lower socioeconomic class.**
- **Retained students are more likely to have parents who did not graduate from high school.**

Now the pendulum is swinging the other way. The continued poor achievement of students, particularly inner-city, minority youth, has prompted several states to pass laws forbidding social promotion and requiring schools to reinstate retention. And a good many political leaders are arguing for retention as the best response to student failure.

But the majority of educators and researchers believe that neither social promotion nor retention is an adequate remedy for underachievement. For most poor performing students there are many more appropriate options between the two poles – options that get overlooked when “pass” or “repeat” are the only policy choices.

### **What Do Critics Say About Social Promotion and Retention?**

Opponents of *social promotion* claim that the practice hides school failure and creates problems for everyone:

- Children receive the message that effort and achievement do not count.
- Parents are led to believe that their children are adequately prepared for college and the workplace.
- Business has to invest millions of dollars each year teaching new em-

ployees basic skills they did not learn in school.

- Colleges must spend millions on remedial courses to prepare high school graduates for college-level work.
- Society must embrace a growing proportion of uneducated citizens who cannot assume productive adult roles.

Opponents also challenge the “socially-based” arguments for social promotion. They say that the stigma of repeating a grade and the possible loss in self-esteem are not as damaging to students as the personal toll of graduating without necessary skills. They further contend that while retention may be painful in the short-term, over time students will work harder, be able to master learning requirements, and eventually graduate with a diploma that “means something.” Recent polls seem to support this position. The majority of the public strongly favors making failing students repeat a grade, even if it hurts their self-image and costs taxpayers more.

But wholesale retention is also widely denounced. Critics say that children who are retained do not significantly improve their academic skills, but instead can become alienated from school, develop emotional

and behavioral problems, and be at greater risk of dropping out. They also say that retention hurts taxpayers who must pay for an additional year of school – on average \$6,000 per pupil – with no evidence that those dollars make a difference. Finally, opponents of retention express concern that a disproportionate number of minority students, English language learners, and students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds are among those retained.

### **What Does the Research Say?**

There are hundreds of individual studies, several meta-analyses, and various research summaries on the question of whether to retain or promote low-achieving students. In general, this research suggests that a) neither retention nor social promotion alone is an effective treatment, and b) grade retention may have negative consequences. The following summarizes the key findings:

**Academic Performance –** Controlled studies show that when measured at the same *age*, academically at-risk students who are promoted outperform retained students by a wide margin. In contrast, when promoted and retained students are compared after completing the same *grade*, the results

generally favor retained students; any positive effects of retention, however, fade away after two or three years.

**Social and Personal Adjustment**—Research in this area is inconclusive. Some studies show that retention has a negative effect on self-concept and attitudes towards school. Other studies indicate that student adjustment outcomes are more positive after retention. Still other research suggests that retention has little effect on adjustment; the consensus here, is that any correlation between grade retention and subsequent behavior problems is more likely due to student characteristics that were present prior to the retention decision.

**Dropout Rate**—Most of the research on this front shows a strong link between retention and dropping out even when differences in prior achievement, attendance, sex, race, grades, family background, and personality factors are controlled. Several rigorous studies, for example, have found that repeating one grade more than doubles the odds of dropping out of school. Students who repeat two grades have an 80 to 90 percent chance of dropping out.

The research also questions the often claimed benefits of “extra year” programs, such as *prefirst* where unready

children spend an extra year in kindergarten before being promoted to first grade. These programs have not been found to help students catchup or improve their academic standing relative to low-performing students who are directly promoted to the next grade.

In summary, the research indicates that grade retention provides limited or no academic/social advantages to students. And it may even increase dropout rates. At the same time, the research offers no credible evidence supporting the benefits of social promotion. As stated in a 1998 report by the National Research Council (NRC) — the principal operating agency of the National Academy of Sciences — retention and social promotion are equally undesirable choices; schools can reduce the need for these either-or options by using alternative approaches.

### ***What Are the Alternatives?***

If neither retention nor social promotion is effective, what are the alternatives? Research suggests a number of complementary strategies schools can employ.

■ **Developing clear standards**—In many districts, student progress is judged according to vague criteria, making it difficult for staff to reach sound decisions about student pro-

motion. Without explicit grade-by-grade standards, however, anything goes and anything can be accepted — even poor work. Uniform standards that define expectations for success provide an external check on the teaching and learning process. They give educators a reliable, rather than arbitrary, basis for decisions about student progression.

■ **Using multiple assessment measures for decision-making**—Many states and school districts rely on large-scale assessments in making decisions about student grade progression. Although most use a combination of strategies to guide their decisions, the trend is for more states and districts to base promotion mainly on test scores. Testing experts, however, warn that high stakes retention or promotion decisions should never be made on the basis of a single assessment. Rather, multiple sources of information about students should be used including standardized tests, performance-based assessments, teacher recommendations, grades, and so forth.

■ **Ensuring that teachers have necessary skills**—A recent report from the National Commission on Teaching, states that teacher expertise is one of the most significant deter-

minants of student success. Not all teachers, however, are adequately prepared to meet raised expectations for student learning. Neither clear academic standards nor sound assessments can help students achieve if they do not have competent teachers to support their learning. Researchers, thus, recommend that districts make every effort to attract and retain only the most qualified teachers. They further suggest that systematic support be given to new teachers, who often teach the neediest students, and to existing staff through sustained professional development. To some authorities, effective teachers are the most important alternative to retention and social promotion (see the *Professional Development* issue of the *Balanced View*).

■ **Redesigning schools** — Teaching strategies that address differences in how students learn while aiming for high standards often require organizational changes that provide more extended contact between teachers and students. In high achieving countries such as Japan, Denmark, Norway, and Sweden — where there is virtually no retention — teachers often stay with students for multiple years and teach them multiple subjects. These “looping” strategies help to create close, sustained

relationships among students and teachers — factors that research links to school success.

Personalization and more intensive instruction can also be achieved through

- ◆ smaller schools/ “houses”
- ◆ smaller class size
- ◆ multi-age classrooms
- ◆ multi-year advisory structures
- ◆ block scheduling

Studies show that each of these interventions can significantly reduce or eliminate the need for retention.

■ **Providing remedial assistance** — Social promotion and retention both try to remedy problems after they have occurred. The following approaches have a good track record in preventing school failure:

- ◆ one-to-one tutoring models
- ◆ extended day/after-school programs
- ◆ extra help periods built-in to students’ and teachers’ schedules
- ◆ Saturday classes
- ◆ summer school

The key is that these opportunities not be used in the conventional way. Instead they must be readily available to students as soon as they need help, be integrated with ongoing classroom work, and be provided by

skilled teachers who understand the nature of the student’s learning difficulty. Perhaps, the most effective preventive strategy is quality early childhood education (ECE). The weight of the research evidence indicates that ECE can produce sizable and consistent effects on grade retention and student achievement (see the *Early Childhood Education Part I* issue of the *Balanced View*).

In summary, the research suggests several options to grade retention and social promotion. The options, however, are neither simple nor inexpensive to implement.

According to the NRC, only 13 states currently require and fund these alternatives. If we are truly serious about improving schooling for the children who need it most, “alternatives to social promotion and simple retention should be tried and evaluated” (NRC, 1998, p. 133).

#### For More Information:

**National Research Council. (1998). *High stakes: Testing for tracking, promotion, and graduation*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press**

**Browse the New York State Sharing Success website at <http://www.sharingsuccess.org> for programs with research-based information that have successfully reduced retention.**

**The *Balanced View* welcomes your comments on this topic.**