

GRADE RETENTION: BENEFIT OR BURDEN?

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Abstract

This document will discuss several researched positions on the pros and cons of retention and additional instructional strategies that professional educators can implement to increase achievement of at risk or low achieving students.

*Keywords:* retention, social promotion, alternatives, instructional strategies

## Grade Retention: Benefit or Burden?

“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” (Hennick, 2008, p. 58). Unfortunately, the world we live in is full of students who struggle to *make the grade*. For many years, these students have been automatically promoted to the next grade, but with recent legislation, they are instead being retained, “The call for an end to social promotion from many state and federal politicians has been interpreted by many educational professionals as encouragement to retain students who do not meet state performance standards” (Jimerson & Ferguson, 2007, p. 315). This strategy has become very popular as found by Jimerson (2003), Alexander, Entwisle, & Kabbani (1999), and McCoy & Reynolds (1990), “Research during the past decade indicates that in some districts, by ninth grade 30% to 50% of students will receive this intervention strategy at least once” (Jimerson & Ferguson, 2007, p. 315). However, one might ask, is retention the band aide that struggling students need? What are the benefits and drawbacks of retention; could there be another option for the struggling student?

It is no secret that there are students who struggle and do not meet the criteria for being promoted onto the next grade level. However; the debate begins when educators develop and implement interventions to accommodate those students. Should these students be promoted to the next grade unprepared and academically behind their peers? Should they remain in the current grade and repeat the information hoping to gain the knowledge and skills necessary to be promoted the following year? “Both the policy and the practice of retention of a child who is deemed to be faltering academically or socially

are fraught with hopes for the best and fears of the worst" (Frey, 2005, p. 332). Retention became a very popular intervention strategy for students who struggle when the state and federal politicians called for an end to social promotion. Social promotion is the act of promoting students onto the next grade level, even if they have not achieved and demonstrated mastery in the academic skill areas for their current grade. Many educational professionals interpreted retention as the answer to the call to end social promotion. They also viewed this as a strategic intervention to assist students who lacked necessary skills and prepare them for advancing to the next grade level the following year (Jimerson & Ferguson, 2007, p. 315).

Students who are retained tend to lack characteristics that teachers refer to as school readiness. A study of kindergarten teachers conducted by Smith & Shepard (1989) indicates "...teachers attribute school readiness based on normal physiological readiness, an effective preschool curriculum, the treatment of diagnosed disorders, and/or maturity" (Bowman, 2005, p. 43). Still teachers debate over doing the right thing for the child. "Even among teachers who rarely retained students, most were in agreement about retaining a child for one year when he or she was too immature to be passed to the next grade" (Bowman, 2005, p. 43). The focus on maturity seems to be at the root of the case for retention; yet, there are additional reasons why students who perform below grade level are retained. As found by multiple sources, Light & Morrison (1990), Natale (1991), Dawson (1998), Thomas (1992), Anderson, Whipple, & Jimerson (2002), and Shepard & Smith (1990), "...students are retained for a variety of reasons. They include: (a) retaining a child because of immaturity, (b) the belief that an extra year of schooling will produce successful academic outcomes, (c) failure to meet criteria for promotion, and (d)

nonattendance and frequent unexcused absences" (Bowman, 2005, p. 42). It is a difficult choice for a teacher to send a student onto the next grade level knowing they are academically or socially unprepared.

Research has indicated that a retained student usually harvests a negative outcome; nevertheless, in some cases, retention could be the best option, "Rather, in light of available research, schools should critically examine their retention policies and how they respond to the demands of national standards when making decisions about whether to retain or promote a student" (Bowman, 2005, p. 42). In some cases, retention has been used as an accountability measure or motivation technique. Dawson (1998) and Jimerson (2001) along with Thomas (1992) agree, "The assumption inherent in using grade retention as a student accountability mechanism is that the prospect of retention will motivate students to achieve, and if students do not reach a certain achievement level, they should repeat the material" (Picklo & Christenson, 2005, p. 259). Chicago Schools took the anti promotion message to heart as they implemented retention policies. When John Easton, the executive director of the Consortium of Chicago School Research, was asked by Hennick about their strict retention policies he replied, "While it might seem harsh, research shows that the threat, [of retention] does work...A study of Chicago's anti-social promotion policy shows that students, as well as teachers and families, pushed harder for improvement when faced with a firmly defined advancement policy" (Hennick, 2008, p. 56). Hennick also reported the results of a study completed on the student perspective of the harsh policy,

...81 percent of sixth graders and 84 percent of eighth graders said they worked harder during summer school than the regular year, even though similar numbers of students said they were "upset" or "mad" that they had to attend the program. With

the treat 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. (Hennick, 2008, p. 56)

While many schools do have a strict retention policy with clear guidelines, it is important to take the student into the equation, "The decision to retain a student should be made on an individual basis, especially after other options have been considered" (Bowman, 2005, p. 42-43). Students cannot be viewed as equations where you simply plug one number in and get an *answer*. Students need to be able to demonstrate their understanding and do their personal best. Some educators promote retention with the mindset that retaining a student in the early years of their education would provide an early intervention. This would give the students the opportunity to demonstrate their understanding and benefit the student the following year. Others may justify that the child's development and learning is the root of the problem and not the learning environment itself (Bowman, 2005). Holmes (1989) and Jimerson (2001) both agree, "Although it was originally designed to be a solution, retention became a significant problem. It was initially intended to be a solution to keep students from passing to the next grade without necessary skills" (Bowman, 2005, p. 43). With legislation calling for the end to social promotion, research on retention increased with staggering results. Researchers documented studies that demonstrated financial, emotional, and long-term burdens along with behavior problems were directly correlated as outcomes linked to retention.

Financially, Bowman notes, "If a school spends \$6,000 per year per student and retains 15 students, the argument can be made that the \$90,000 that being spent on retaining students could be used to hire additional teachers and staff" (Bowman, 2005, p.

44). This staggering thought is multiplied when looking at a report released by The Florida Association of School Psychologists (2004). They indicate, "Retention is not an inexpensive intervention. For instance, at the end of the 2002-2003 academic year, 192,713 students were retained in kindergarten through third grade in Florida, which cost the state over 1 billion dollars" (Jimerson, Pletcher, & Graydon, 2006, p. 86). The numbers continued to increase as McCollum (1999) reported the estimated financial burden on the United States, "Retention of students in grade is estimated to cost the county on average about \$10 billion per year" (Holmes, 2006, p. 58). With such a financial payload, retention needs to be heavily weighed as a cost-effective intervention technique. Research needs to be up to date and used to determine whether or not retention is appropriate and outweighs the financial burden placed on Americans.

Retention not only has a negative effect on the financial piece of the puzzle, "Those who oppose retention often do so because of the financial cost that includes the cost to children's self esteem and its relationship to subsequent student school dropout." (Bowman, 2005, p. 42).

Students who are retained are also negatively influenced both socially and emotionally. "In addition to academic achievement, grade retention apparently can be damaging to the social and emotional development of children, especially as it relates to personal adjustment" (Frey, 2005, p. 338). Bowman (2005) also refers to multiple studies to reinforce emotional damage, "According to the literature, in most cases, there is a hefty price to pay for student grade retention. That is, it costs most academically and personally and affects society as well" (Bowman, 2005, p. 43). This indicates that the child is not the only person who suffers. Members of society also suffer when students, and future

community members and leaders, do not have a solid educational foundation. With an increase in the amount of retentions, the fear of retention from a student's perspective has also risen. Jimerson, (2003) Bowman, (2005) and Hennick (2008) all refer to an interesting insight into the mind of a student; "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" (Hennick, 2008, p. 58). This information relays an astonishing insight into the thoughts and insecurities of a student. The majority of the students surveyed would rather lose their eyesight as opposed to remaining in the same grade level for an additional year. With this in mind it is not difficult to understand that there are many long term burdens placed on students who are retained in lower grades.

As students who are retained progress in age and grade level, they begin to become burdened with their age difference among their peers. Dawson (1998) and Isenhardt & Bechard (1987) both indicate, "Not all of the negative consequences of grade retention are apparent immediately. Students who are retained are more likely to drop out of school included those who are over-age for their grade" (Bowman, 2005, p. 43-44). Students are not only beginning to feel the pressure of age difference, as Jimerson (1999) reports,

...retained students had lower levels of academic adjustment at the end of eleventh grade, were more likely to drop out of high school by age 19, were less likely to receive a diploma by age 20, were less likely to be enrolled in a postsecondary education program, receive lower education/employment status ratings, were paid less per hour, and received poorer employment competence ratings at age 20 in



comparison to a similar group of low-achieving, promoted students" (Jimerson & Ferguson, 2007, p. 317-318).

These are humbling facts for educators who want to give students the "gift of another year" to catch-up academically. In fact, educators who want the best for their students would be interested to know that Alexander (2003) concluded, "At best, retention helps some children during elementary school; however, by middle school most are relegated to remedial courses" (Jimerson & Ferguson, 2007, p. 318). Another disheartening fact for teachers attempting to do what is best for their students.

There are multiple factors that influence a particular student's performance; what school they attend, their family situations, and the individual characteristic of the child just to name a few. It is challenging for teachers to attempt to improve a struggling student's performance when they only have control over one of the many influential factors. "Simply repeating a grade is unlikely to address the multiple factors influencing the students' poor achievement in the first place" (Jimerson & Ferguson, 2007, p. 320). When a school corporation, teacher, or parent looks at grade retention as a possible intervention they should examine the multiple factors and attributes of the student who is struggling as well as the additional long term burdens associated with retention.

There is overwhelming evidence to demonstrate that students who are retained are more likely to dropout of school altogether, "Students who experience grade retention are five times more likely to dropout relative to students...[who were] promoted" (Jimerson & Ferguson, 2007, p. 330). Jimerson & Ferguson (2007) also indicate that, "...empirical evidence demonstrates consistently that children who are retained are more likely to drop

out of high school" (Jimerson & Ferguson, 2007, p. 331). With this kind of evidence against retaining a student Roderick (1995) examined dropout rates and claims,

"...three aspects of retention combine to increase the risk of dropping out: (1) retention in grade is not effective as a remediation strategy; (2) retention is seen as a strong message that the school and teacher see the student as a failure; and (3) retention makes a child older than his or her new grade peers" (Holmes, 2006, p.58).

Since the threat of retention can distort the student's perception of themselves in the teacher's point of view, the student could begin to view themselves as a failure, possibly also destroying the relationship between parent, teacher, and student. Roderick (2005) states, "Student grade retention is linked to greater academic failure, an increase in behavior problems, and may contribute to higher levels of school dropout" (Bowman, 2005, p. 44).

Students who have been retained also have the long-term burden of demonstrating aggressive or behavioral problems. "The significant differences in these analyses demonstrate that the retained students display more aggression during adolescence relative to the low-achieving, promoted students" (Jimerson & Ferguson, 2007, p. 330). Aggression is also linked to age as discussed earlier, "...simply being older than others in one's class, without experiencing grade retention, also is associated with increased rates of behavioral problems, most noticeably among adolescents" (Holmes, 2006, p. 58). As a retained student continues to struggle, they also, have a higher likelihood of engaging in destructive behavior. "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"

(Hennick, 2008, p. 58). Others have also found a correlation between students who were retained and classroom behaviors. As reported by Jimerson (1997)

...students who were retained displayed more negative classroom behaviors, and they were significantly less confident, less self-assured, and less engaging than similarly low-achieving peers. Teachers also reported that the retained students were less popular and less socially competent than their peers" (Jimerson & Kaufman, 2003, p. 624).

With the large amount of data that illustrates the negatives of retention and social promotion, some have looked to and suggest alternatives. Several authors have recommended an alternative to both retention and social promotion.

The authors who suggest alternatives to retention and social promotion are those that take a proactive approach to the dilemma. "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" (Hennick, 2008, p. 58). Jimerson & Ferguson reinforce this thought, "Taking into account the research during the past 100 years, the evidence clearly indicates that we must move beyond grade retention and social promotion. Instead...focus on interventions that build upon the strengths of students and target their needs" (Jimerson & Ferguson, 2007, p. 335).

Many different opportunities have been recommended by researchers, "Several alternatives to grade retention are offered in the literature. One is to change retention and promotion policies so that students will not be retained; another is to offer summer school as an option for students to catch up on deficit skills" (Bowman, 2005, p. 45). With budget cuts, summer school was one of the first interventions in many corporations to be cut.

However, McCollum (1999) argues, "More cost effective would be to increase educational resources to improve student performance and eliminate the need for retention" (Holmes, 2006, p. 58). Agreeing with McCollum, Jimerson & Kaufman (2003) encourage close consideration of research-based interventions. "...it is necessary to examine other interventions that *do* have research support for their utility" (Jimerson & Kaufman, 2003, p. 628). Jimerson & Kaufman also included a list of instructional interventions, The National Association of School Psychologists (1990) and the Association of California School Administrators noted by Merrick (1998) have recommended alternatives to social promotion or grade retention (Jimerson & Kaufman, 2003, p. 628). These alternatives include; actively encourage parents' involvement, adopting age-appropriate and culturally sensitive material, establishing multiage grouping in classrooms with appropriately trained teachers, establishing early intervention and preschool programs and improving instructional strategies. They continue to list; summer school, and intersession programs, creating personal intervention plans for students, reducing class size and holding one-on-one tutoring before and after school programs. They also endorse; identifying specific learning behavior problems, providing appropriate special education services, and establishing full service schools (Jimerson & Kaufman). The Association of School Psychologists also include; preschool and early reading programs, mnemonic strategies, behavior and cognitive-behavior modification, and summer school programs. They also promote; school-based mental health programs, comprehensive school wide programs, parental involvement programs, and formative evaluations (Jimerson & Kaufman).

Darling-Hammond (1998) identifies, "Teacher preparedness and expertise as the most important factor regarding students' school performance" (Bowman, 2005, p. 45).

When professional educators are prepared, have the expertise, and have adequate supplies the students will be the beneficiary. Bowman (2005) agrees with Darling-Hammond by citing the importance of training and hiring highly qualified teachers. She also cites Thomas (1992) suggesting the idea of promotion with interventions the following year, "...students will be promoted to the next grade level with remedial instruction for unmastered skills as alternatives to retention" (Bowman, 2005, 45). Also cited is Shepard & Smith's (1990) recommendation of, "...before-and after-school programs and tutoring" (Bowman, 2005, 45). A final citation Bowman refers to in the case of alternative programming is Bolt, Krentz, and Thurlow (2002) who suggest, "...extending the school day as an option to help students make academic gains rather than retaining them" (Bowman, 2005, 45). These are a few of the proactive approaches that researchers have identified as potentially being successful, yet Jimerson & Ferguson (2007) suggest a slightly different perspective of this approach. "Specific interventions to promote the academic success of students are essential to meet achievement standards. In this era emphasizing "evidence-based interventions," research unequivocally fails to support the effectiveness of grade retention" (Jimerson & Ferguson, 2007, p. 335). They advise not just using any strategy that comes to mind, but instead implementing research proven methods, that when appropriately executed offset the notion of, research disproven, grade retention.

"Proven alternatives to retention exist. Among other effective ways to assist the struggling learning are systematic individual student plans and instruction, individual assistance, and the use of frequent assessment of progress to adapt the curriculum to meet the needs of the learner. In short, what we should be doing is providing the assistance most boards of education policies are willing to provide

after retention *before* retention, instead of flunking those children" (Holmes, 2006, p. 58).

When parents and educators can identify and create a meaningful relationship with a student who is struggling academically or socially, and determine an appropriate proactive approach to aid the student, extreme progress can be obtained.

Many researchers have indicated different activities teachers can do to assist students who are struggling. Some schools use mentoring, "...students who are candidates for retention are assigned a staff mentor and must attend after-school tutoring sessions three times a week" (Hennick, 2008, p. 58). One can see the benefits of building such an important relationship that supporting the student with extra time and help can build. Hennick (2008) suggests teachers try to including; working to identify behavior problems early in the school year and providing extra support where necessary. Other interventions he also recommends include (1) remember to involve parents, one of the most important aspects in a student's life and educational career. (2) It's important to turn your eye on your own instruction, taking into consideration the valuable tool of self-reflection. (3) Don't be shy about seeking assistance from other educators, working as a team can make more progress than problem solving alone. (4) Finally, avoid the idea that the only alternative to social promotion is retention and vice versa (Hennick, 2008, p. 58). The National Association of School Psychologists also published a list of items teachers can do to assist all students, not only struggling students, to continually increase their learning. According to Hennick, The National Association of School Psychologists refer to this list as, "6 Things Schools Can Do to Keep Kids Moving Up." The list entails:

(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 student's progress by evaluating them throughout the year. This will also provide teachers with helpful instruction 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 (Hennick, 2008, p. 58).

The National Association of School Psychologists offer the interesting intervention of peer-to-peer tutoring. They are not the only researchers who have offered the idea of using cooperative learning to aid learners who struggle; in fact Picklo & Christenson suggest cooperative learning not only as an instructional technique, but also a financial advantage point. "...cooperative learning strategies and group work were used to assist struggling students...Cooperative learning strategies...rely on peers to assist struggling students and do not require extra school personnel or resources to be delivered" (Picklo & Christenson, 2005, p. 265). With the multitude of research that supports assists students prior to failure it is hard to ignore the idea of emphasizing early intervention. "Thus, there should be an emphasis on early interventions designed to promote the social and cognitive competence of students" (Jimerson & Kaufman, 2003, p. 628). Although the fight between instructional strategies versus funding struggle will differ in opinions, one proposal many researchers standby is the idea of being proactive in the educational or social struggle of a student.

"Many researchers agree that the best solution to the retention versus social promotion debate is to prevent academic failure before it occurs" (Picklo & Christenson, 2005, p. 260).

One additional aspect of the retention and social promotion is the idea of the proactive parent. These parents tend to determine that they can alter the damaging effects of both practices by keeping their child at home for an additional year to grow and mature. "...late kindergarten enrollment has emerged among parents...seeking to mitigate the harmful effects of either practice...young children have been enrolled a year or more after their fifth birthday in the hope of giving them an opportunity to develop early literacy behaviors" (Frey, 2005, p. 341). This is an interesting thought on behalf of the parents and a breath of fresh air for educators who constantly debate over what is the best plan of action for the students they question for retention. Educators have coined the phrase "academic redshirting" for this approach. One may wonder what criteria a parent uses to determine if they will "red shirt" their child. "The parents of these children typically cite one of the two reasons for doing so - either the child's birthday occurs late in the year...making him or her younger than peers, or the child has exhibited less mature behaviors" (Frey, 2005, p. 341). Even though this is not a new idea, it is a big step for parents to take in a proactive approach to helping their child meet their full potential. Some researchers have determined the goals of the parents may not rely entirely on academic and behavioral performance. Frey cites from Kagan in his article, *Readiness 2000: Rethinking rhetoric and responsibility*, (1990), "In some instances, the parents may be reluctant to admit that there may be a competitive component to the decision - a hope that their child's physical, emotional, and academic growth may give him or her a comparative advantage over classmates" (Frey, 2005, p. 341). With the competitive drive



engrained in many Americans it is not surprise that academic redshirting is a consideration for a competitive edge. Regardless of their motivation, academic redshirting has become an increasingly popular approach for proactive parents. Frey discusses Gnezda, Garduque, & Shultz's article, *Improving instruction and assessment in early childhood education* (1991), "The use of delayed kindergarten entry is so popular that a survey of state education officials estimated that between 10% and 50% of children experience delayed kindergarten enrollment" (Frey, 2005, p. 342).

In conclusion, as research has proven there are few benefits to retention and many drawbacks. A fight for retention marks that the student is given the "gift of time" in an additional year, or may not be physically, emotionally, or socially mature enough for the content presented in the following grade; nonetheless, the drawbacks far outweigh the benefits. Concluding that school dropout rates, greater academic failure, increased behavior problems, increased likelihood to smoke, drink, and engage in violent behavior are all linked to retention. It is easy for an educator to feel abandoned on their journey to do what is best for each and every one of their students, particularly the ones that struggle.

Yet, educators are not left alone in the battle of what to do, there are other options. One option is for parents and educators to take a proactive approach to the education of the student that struggles. Researchers and teachers alike have offered instructional strategies for teachers to complete with their students to prevent failure before it occurs. Another approach discussed was the idea of academic redshirting students; still, this could easily have hidden or a mixture of motives. Frey phrases it appropriately, "Retention, social promotion, and academic redshirting,...have been called "the gift of time." Perhaps the true "gift of time" is in the work of the educational researchers who can answer the

questions of teachers, administrators, and parents” (Frey, 2005, p. 344). With the research based instructional strategies, interventions, and action research conducted in the classroom educators are becoming more and more privileged to appropriate academic intervention strategies and resources to aide their learners. Although much of this intervention material is available and many educators implement it every day in their classrooms, it is important to remember that not every intervention strategy or technique is the *silver bullet* that will solve all students’ educational needs. Students are people. They are different from the student sitting beside them, different from the student an educator had the previous year, and different from the student they will have the following year. Students are individuals. They are unique. They can be a puzzle. One strategy may work for one student and not another. Educators need to be warned of the potential negative consequences that follow retaining a student, but they must also examine every child on an individual basis. They must look at more than just the child’s *data*, and look at their personality, ambition, and relationship with those in their environments, both in and out of school. Educators are also challenged to examine their own instruction and relationship with the student, and then determine the most efficient and effective strategy, action plan, or learning goal for the individual student. When an educator and student bond and work together with an intervention strategy prior to the failure of the child, the result is not only rewarding for the student but also, for the educator. The world we live in is not perfect, but if it were what would be the challenge of the educational profession? If at graduation, all children were the same cookie cutter shape that the public education system deemed appropriate what would happen to creativity, diversity, and individuality of Americans? Through relationships and proactive appropriate intervention strategies,

educators can invest in students who struggle and motivate them to become lifelong learners and assets to society who share their gifts with the world.

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