Retention Has No Place in America’s Schools

Throughout my tenure as an elementary principal, each spring I listened to early childhood teachers explain to me that a child in their class “was socially immature” and “was just not ready to move on.” Their solution to these student shortcomings was the R word: retention. Grade retention is quite possibly the most debated topic in early childhood education.

After listening to these teachers, I began to conduct research on retention. The literature, which mostly describes the negative outcomes associated with retention, led me to two conclusions: The elementary grades are where most children are retained, and many early childhood educators feel retention is not harmful and is best applied before a child reaches the third grade.

I was left wondering whether these teachers had read the research on retention, whether they knew the long-term impacts of retention, and whether these teachers saw retention as punishing the student even though it’s the system that’s broken. These questions, along with the fact that our district simply recycled retained students through the same curriculum with no differentiation, left me frustrated.

I knew that elementary school teachers desperately wanted to help their students. Because I suspected that they knew little about the effects of retention, I hypothesized three issues that skewed their view:

- Early childhood educators recommend retention because they have the inability to see the ramifications of that decision when the student reaches secondary school. Because there is no vertical communication between secondary and elementary schools, early childhood educators suffer from the “out of sight, out of mind” phenomenon.
- The beliefs of practitioners in the classroom are not easily swayed by educational research. Teachers base their decisions on previous experience and influence from their peers.
- Early childhood educators don’t have time to read research; they’re too busy teaching children.

I decided it was up to me to become the conduit of research concerning retention and combat this ineffective intervention.

Why do I detest grade retention? Because the majority of research findings conclude that students who repeat a grade are harmed academically and socioemotionally and seldom persist to graduation.

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Regardless of the fact that my state had a mandatory retention statute at the fourth grade, I did not feel that our school should be retaining kids in elementary school. My opinion was to let the state statute force us to make that decision as opposed to recommending it to parents as a viable option. Our school was not equipped to give a student a different learning experience during the retained year and, as we all know, simply giving them a different teacher does nothing to help. Therefore, it was our job to do everything we could for that child before fourth grade.

Conversations with teachers revolved around not only retention research, but factors to consider before deciding to retain a student. These factors include: size, age, background, student strengths, and parental support for the possibility of retention. Teachers should ask themselves: Is an additional year of the same curriculum really going to help this child reach grade-level expectations? Also vital to this conversation is the issue of special education. Retaining a student who is eventually identified as learning disabled could create a major ethical
dilemma. A flawed decision like that would keep me up at night.

Teachers should have face-to-face conversations with parents of students who they are considering for retention. The point of these conferences is threefold. First, keep parents informed. When something as significant as retention is put on the table as an intervention for a struggling child, the school must ensure that all stakeholders are on the same page. Miscommunication causes hurt feelings and breaks trust.

Second, explain to parents exactly what skills and concepts the child is struggling to grasp. Moreover, ensure that teachers also provide parents with positive information. Retention conferences should not be used by teachers to berate parents with an endless list of student weaknesses.

Finally, brainstorm with parents the possible interventions. Whether it is summer school or additional one-on-one tutoring, schools need to show that they are taking responsibility for the child’s learning. Among other things, professional learning communities have taught practitioners to ask themselves: What do I expect students to know and what am I prepared to do about it if they don’t learn?

A Systematic Approach

Our approach to combat retention was a combination of early identification and communication. Research has shown that students who are retained have similar, easily identifiable characteristics. The school used kindergarten and first-grade reading and math assessments to identify struggling students within the first quarter of the school year. From there, we brainstormed all possible interventions we could apply to these students. For example, additional reading and math support delivered via instructional aides and more one-on-one attention for struggling students from certified classroom teachers. Additional suggestions follow.

- Track and share with stakeholders the data from these interventions.
- Schedule regular meetings with stakeholders to review the data, discuss student progress, and plan next steps.
- Invite parents to meetings to view the data and participate in the intervention-planning process.
- Do not allow individual classroom teachers to be the sole decision-maker on a child’s nonpromotion; a team of practitioners, looking at various data sources, should be charged with making the retention recommendation.
- Attempt vertical communication between elementary and secondary schools to keep abreast of how retained students are performing.

Did I completely eliminate the use of retention in my school? The answer to that question is no. However, I can sleep at night knowing I raised the awareness of my teachers concerning the detrimental effects of retention. Moreover, I feel confident that our process helped a few students from facing the humiliation and self-esteem issues associated with retention.

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