Over-aged Students in Middle School

Grade retention and delayed entry to kindergarten are two of the major causes of over-aged students in middle school. While data is often difficult to obtain, the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988 reported that 20 percent of all eighth graders had repeated at least one grade (Wheelock 1998). In South Carolina, where students are considered to be over-aged when they are at least two years older than usual for their grade, the state education department reported that for the 2002–2003 school year 4.9 percent of middle school students fell into this category.

Educational research has shown that student retention is often exacerbated by being over-aged in middle school, a pivotal time. A profile developed from this research shows that the over-aged student is likely to have:

- **Poor future learning opportunities.** If a student is retained in grade, the possibility is very strong that he or she will not receive optimal learning experiences as a result of tracking in remedial classes (Oakes 1985).
- **Attendance problems.** Truancy, or unexcused absence from school, has been identified as one of the top 10 problems in U.S. schools (Tait 2004).
- **Feelings of incompetence.** Perceived incompetence is often thought to be determined by a child’s past history of academic achievement (Schickedanz et al. 2001).
- **Lack of self-esteem.** This is exacerbated by being over-aged in middle school, which can lead to lack of motivation and increased feeling of inferiority (Schickedanz et al. 2001).

**Helping Over-aged Students**

The best way to assist over-aged students is to address the issue with your staff. Here are some ideas that can help start the process:

- Collect data from your school to determine the numbers and academic performance of over-aged students.
- Investigate alternative learning experiences for students. The National Dropout Prevention Center at Clemson University (www.dropoutprevention.org) provides information on 15 strategies for dropout prevention that are applicable to middle-grades students.
- Be proactive in approaching change. The data you generate can justify why certain programs are needed when funding requests are made at the local level, and also can be used to justify need in grant applications for external funding.
- Network with your state and national peers to discover what is or is not working in their schools.

**An Exemplary Program**

In 2001, a program called Destination Graduation was started by the New York State Department of Education, in cooperation with the National Dropout Prevention Center. The program addresses problems—including over-aged students—encountered by low-performing middle schools. Although each of the 13 participating middle schools in 12 districts had its own distinctive characteristics and problem areas, there were common concerns of truancy, retention, lack of student engagement, and lack of parental involvement.

Common solutions involved increasing student self-esteem, creating reasons for students to want to go to school and be successful, and increasing parental involvement. For example, in Buffalo, when a local action team (LAT) raised funds for an after-school African drumming and dance program, students were excited by the opportunity to participate—which required them to be “in good standing” academically. Enthusiasm for the activity affected both students and their parents.

In Gowanda, New York, a community with a 26 percent Native American population, the LAT focused on developing a school model called the “Circle of Courage” that incorporated four core Native American values, including “the universal need for belonging.” It succeeded in raising students’ self-esteem and has led to fewer over-aged students.

For additional information on Destination Graduation, visit www.emsc.nysed.gov/sss/Dropout/Evaluation%20News-Vol1Issue1.pdf

**Looking for Answers**

There are many combined factors that lead to problems of retention for both the teacher and the learner. Many of the factors are embedded in the academic system or are connected to the art of teaching. Others reflect the everyday world outside school. As we look for ways to assist over-aged students and to reduce their numbers, we must continue to ask tough questions about the system, the students, and ourselves.

Here are some Web sites you may find helpful:

www.csteep.bc.edu/CTESTWEB/retention/retention.html#intro
Sponsored by the Consortium for Equity in Standards and Testing (CTEST), Anne Wheelock discusses test scores, zero tolerance, and a number of different approaches to social promotion and grade retention.

This editorial stresses the need for identification of students in first grade in order to prevent them from falling behind.
This article describes a special school designated to assist eighth graders with two or more failures at the end of the year.

Consider participating in the Making Middle Grades Work Initiative. Check to see which schools in your state are currently taking part.

This article illustrates examples of creative ideas that schools have used to provide additional support for students.

References


Cheryl O. Lane and Lienne Medford are assistant professors of middle grades education at Clemson University in South Carolina. Their e-mail addresses are clane@clemson.edu and lienne@clemson.edu.

Ron Knorr is a graduate student of middle grades education at Clemson University. His e-mail address is rknorr@clemson.edu.