

Alternatives to Retention in Grade

Nancy Protheroe

There are a number of strategies that principals can use to reduce or eliminate in-grade retention.

IN BRIEF

This Research Report summarizes various strategies that have been found to help struggling students succeed without having to repeat a grade. They include aligning instruction with standards, providing “early warning” assessments, multiage grouping, accelerated learning, increased professional development for teachers working with low-performing students, extending learning time after school and in the summer, and improving children’s preschool experience.

Research on the effects of retention in grade has long been of interest to educators. While most research points to retention’s negative effects for students, there also has been research identifying some benefits. Such mixed findings—in combination with educators’ own experiences as well as state- or district-level policies requiring retention in grade for students not “passing” mandated assessments—make it clear that retention will remain what Russo (2005) describes as a “lightning rod issue.”

On a more positive note, schools are increasingly focused on strategies with promise for helping struggling students.

The vigor of the current reform climate can’t help but impress. Many school systems are experimenting, ambitiously and energetically, with “third way” alternatives to both grade repetition and social promotion for children who are not keeping up. These programs often incorporate research-based “best practice” principles—summer programs, reduced class size, one-on-one or small-group supplemental instruction—and preliminary results in many instances are encouraging (Alexander, Entwisle, and Kabbani 2000).

Jimerson, Pletcher, and Kerr (2005) suggest that “school administrators advocate for ‘promotion plus’ policies that depend on effective, evidence-based interventions” and change programs in ways that provide intensive, focused help for low-achieving students. Several such strategies are discussed briefly here.

Aligning Instruction with Standards

The recent increase in emphasis on standards and accountability has focused a spotlight on students not meeting standards. In response, districts and schools have intensified their efforts to better align instruction with standards. Schools and districts that did this well often

have found redesigned curriculum and instruction demonstrating an especially strong impact on low-performing students. For example, a study of California schools found schools doing a better-than-projected job of educating low-income student populations typically had implemented a “coherent, standards-based instructional program” (Williams *et al.* 2005).

Systematic Assessment to Identify Problems

The Education Trust (2005) identifies differences in the ways in which schools with “high” and “average” impact on the educational progress of struggling students used assessment data. The high-impact schools typically had “‘early warning’ systems to catch students before they fail.” Some schools created “intervention teams” to study data about individual students and then developed a learning plan for individual students similar to the individualized education plan (IEP) used with special education students (California Teachers Association 1999). Such teams might include a student’s current teacher as well as a teacher from the next grade.



Changes in Grouping Practices

In the primary grades, some schools are moving toward increased use of multiage classrooms. In such classrooms, students of different ages and ability levels are grouped together, without dividing them or the curriculum into steps labeled by grade designation. The multiage classroom enables students to make continuous progress rather than being promoted once a year or, instead, required to wait until the next school year to move forward in the curriculum.

Schools also have developed creative ways to provide better-focused instruction for students who are behind academically.

An elementary school principal may find, for instance, a high number of academic referrals from second-grade teachers concerned about slow readers. A school might quickly become overwhelmed if it tried to create intensive, customized intervention for each child in a large pool of similarly needy students. A more efficient approach might be

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to put together a building-level program that addresses the shared academic needs of groups of students (Wright 2005).

Interventions that Accelerate Learning

Schools also are working to help struggling students in ways that recog-

nize the need for students to speed up their learning. For example, “double-dose” periods for reading or math might be included in the schedule for students who are behind. Such acceleration addresses the problem associated with providing remediation that, while teaching needed skills, does not provide struggling students with any way to catch up with grade-level peers.

Helping Teachers Increase Their Effectiveness

Some teachers may need professional development designed to help them diversify their approaches in ways that meet the instructional needs of their lowest-performing students. As an example, the Metro Nashville Public Schools instituted a comprehensive program of professional development especially for new teachers in schools serving high-poverty student populations. It includes work on the Ruby Payne Framework for understanding poverty, as well as training in differentiated instruction and the Dignity with Discipline program (Holt and Garcia 2005).

Extending Learning Time

An approach taken by many schools to help struggling students is the provision of supplemental instructional time through after-school, weekend, or summer programs. Although the research on the effectiveness of such programs is mixed, there are growing indications that carefully structured experiences can help students to catch up.

For example, a comprehensive evaluation of Chicago Public Schools’ Summer Bridge program found test score gains among all third, sixth, and eighth graders, with gains larger for sixth and eighth graders. Third and sixth graders received 90 hours of instruction by attending summer school three hours per day for six weeks. Eighth graders received 140 hours of instruction—attending four hours per day for seven weeks (Roderick, Engel, and Nagaoka 2003).

The evaluation also identified factors associated with larger gains. For example, students assigned to teachers who had worked with them before typically made greater gains. In these cases, teachers

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reported being more likely to adapt the curriculum in ways that met each student's needs. In addition, students with teachers who "taught in ways that engaged students, provided substantive feedback, and worked to address individual learning needs" had larger learning gains. There was a similar finding in regard to teachers who "spent more time individualizing the curriculum and working with students outside of class" (Roderick, Engel, and Nagaoka 2003).

Researchers also have studied after-school programs and identified characteristics of the more successful approaches:

- There should be a careful assessment of individual student needs, with instruction designed to address them.
- After-school and regular day teachers should communicate about the progress and problems of individual students.
- It is especially important that staff of the after-school program possess instructional strategies that support their work with students who are experiencing difficulties with school day work. Special professional development may need to be provided for this staff (Poggi 2003).

Pre-kindergarten Programs

There are clear indications that opportunities for student success in school can be improved by participation in preschool experiences that enhance readiness for kindergarten (Karoly, Kilburn, and Cannon 2005). Some schools do this by offering their own pre-kindergarten program, others by working with child care providers.


The Bright Beginnings pre-kindergarten program of North Carolina's Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools was developed specifically to meet the needs of 4-year-olds the district describes as "educationally disadvantaged." Offered by outside providers as well as the district, program components include a child-centered curriculum with a strong language development and literacy component, work with parents, and intensive professional development for staff. In

addition to identifying positive relationships of program participation with student achievement measures, an evaluation of the program found "evidence that student participation in Bright Beginnings tends to reduce the retention of students—especially in Grade 1 for African American, other minority, and free/reduced-price lunch students" (Smith, Pellin, and Agruso 2003).

Schools and districts that cannot afford to offer preschool programs for all children who might benefit can take other approaches to increase children's readiness for kindergarten. For example, they can develop a set of expectations regarding school readiness, along with suggested activities. This information can then be made available to families of preschoolers and preschool providers through training sessions and printed materials (Shellard and Turner 2004).

While it is important for educators to stay current on research about retention, it is even more important that they direct increased—and smarter—school efforts toward providing instruction that dramatically reduces the incidence of student failure. These approaches will have the most impact if they are part of a comprehensive plan with characteristics like these:

- An explicit schoolwide intervention plan that uses data to identify both barriers to achievement and successful practices already in use;
- Highly effective teachers assigned to work with struggling students;
- Small intervention classes, an approach that will likely require creative scheduling;
- Intensive, continuous professional development to help teachers working with struggling students; and
- Formative assessment data used to guide every aspect of the intervention program (Phillips 2005).

Obviously, some approaches will require shifting resources and radically different modes of operating. However, the end goal—schools in which retention is rarely used—is one any principal can and should support. 

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WEB RESOURCES

In a research brief, *Retention, Social Promotion, and Student Outcomes*, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development summarizes findings from a meta-analysis of research conducted by researcher Shane Jimerson.

www.ascd.org/portal/site/ascd/menu.item.03e1753c019b7a9f989ad324d3108a0c/ (click on January 4, 2005)

The longer source document by Jimerson can be found at http://education.ucsb.edu/jimerson/retention/SPR_MetaAnalysis2001.pdf.

A Critical Issues Brief, *Beyond Social Promotion and Retention*, posted on the Web site of the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, highlights five strategies schools can use to reduce the need for retention.

www.ncrel.org/sdrs/areas/issues/students/atrisk/at800.htm

Rethinking Retention to Help All Students Succeed: A Resource Guide summarizes key points made by Designs for Change at a Rethinking Retention to Help All Students Succeed conference.

www.designsforchange.org/pdfs/rethink.pdf

Researchers Hong and Raudenbush's report on a study conducted to evaluate the effects of grade retention in kindergarten concludes that children who are retained learn less than they would have had they been promoted.

www.aera.net/uploadedFiles/News_Media/News_Releases/2005/Kindergarten%20Retention-Hong%20&%20Raudenbush%20PDF.pdf

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