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ABSTRACT

This paper suggests that since neither grade retention nor social promotion work, there must be an alternative between these two extremes. Successful efforts to end these practices should: identify student problems as early as possible; intervene as soon as problems are identified; design the extra help around each student's needs; and have strong quality controls and monitoring. Data are presented on: what is known about retention rates; variations in state promotion and retention policies; how retention and social promotion leave children behind; Texas' approach to supporting at-risk students; the importance of learning to read in preventing failure; keys to preventing failure; the effect of teacher quality; the need for extra time during the school year for targeted interventions; state policies on grade promotion and retention; one North Carolina county's efforts; the use of continual assessment to prevent failure; getting parents and communities involved; the impact of high quality summer school; what research says about the effects of retention; and the responsibility of schools to help all children succeed. (SM)

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Questions policy-makers should ask about ending social promotion and reducing retention rates

- Are state tests clearly aligned with the grade-level content standards that schools are expected to teach? Is the curriculum teachers use to teach and assess classroom work consistent with the standards used to determine passing levels on state tests?
- If test scores are used to make decisions about promoting students, do students have multiple chances to pass the tests?
- Are students who meet all other criteria for success (passing classroom grades, strong teacher recommendations, no behavior problems, regular school attendance) unfairly penalized when test results fail to reflect overall achievement?
- Do all schools assess children to identify learning problems as early as possible? Are all schools prepared to provide students with extra time and help during the school year to correct those problems before students fall too far behind?
- Is summer school required for students who still do not meet passing standards at the end of the school year? Are there focused efforts to enforce attendance and to ensure that summer school programs are high-quality and address individual students' needs?
- Are there procedures for meeting the needs of students who have been allowed to fall extremely far behind (more than one full grade level)?
- If a student is required to repeat a grade, are the teacher, curriculum and teaching methods during the retention year different from those that did not work the first time?
- Are students who attend summer school and/or repeat a grade monitored and provided with support to sustain the gains and correct any problems that recur?
- Is targeted, high-quality professional development available to teachers in whatever areas they need?
- Are there policies and procedures to ensure meaningful involvement by parents?
- Are information systems capable of tracking students over the long term and assessing the effectiveness of efforts to help struggling students?

Finding Alternatives to Failure:

Can States End Social Promotion and Reduce Retention Rates?

Social promotion. State policy-makers have become increasingly concerned about ending social promotion (allowing students to advance to the next grade, even when they have not mastered the material in their current grade). Social promotion is unfair to students and detrimental to society. These students typically fall further and further behind their classmates and ultimately leave school — often by "social graduation" — without the basic skills and knowledge every adult needs to be a productive member of society.

Mandatory retention. The most frequently discussed alternative to social promotion is mandatory retention (requiring students to repeat the grade when they have not demonstrated mastery of the material). Retention is not a new strategy. For decades the nation's public schools have been retaining hundreds of thousands of students every year. In most schools, that has meant doing the same thing over again and hoping that what did not work the first time somehow will work the second time. Research shows that it rarely does. Instead, it greatly increases the chance that a student eventually will drop out of school.

What does work? If neither retention nor social promotion works, the obvious question is "What are the alternatives?" The answer lies between these two ineffective extremes. Successful efforts to end social promotion and reduce grade retention should:

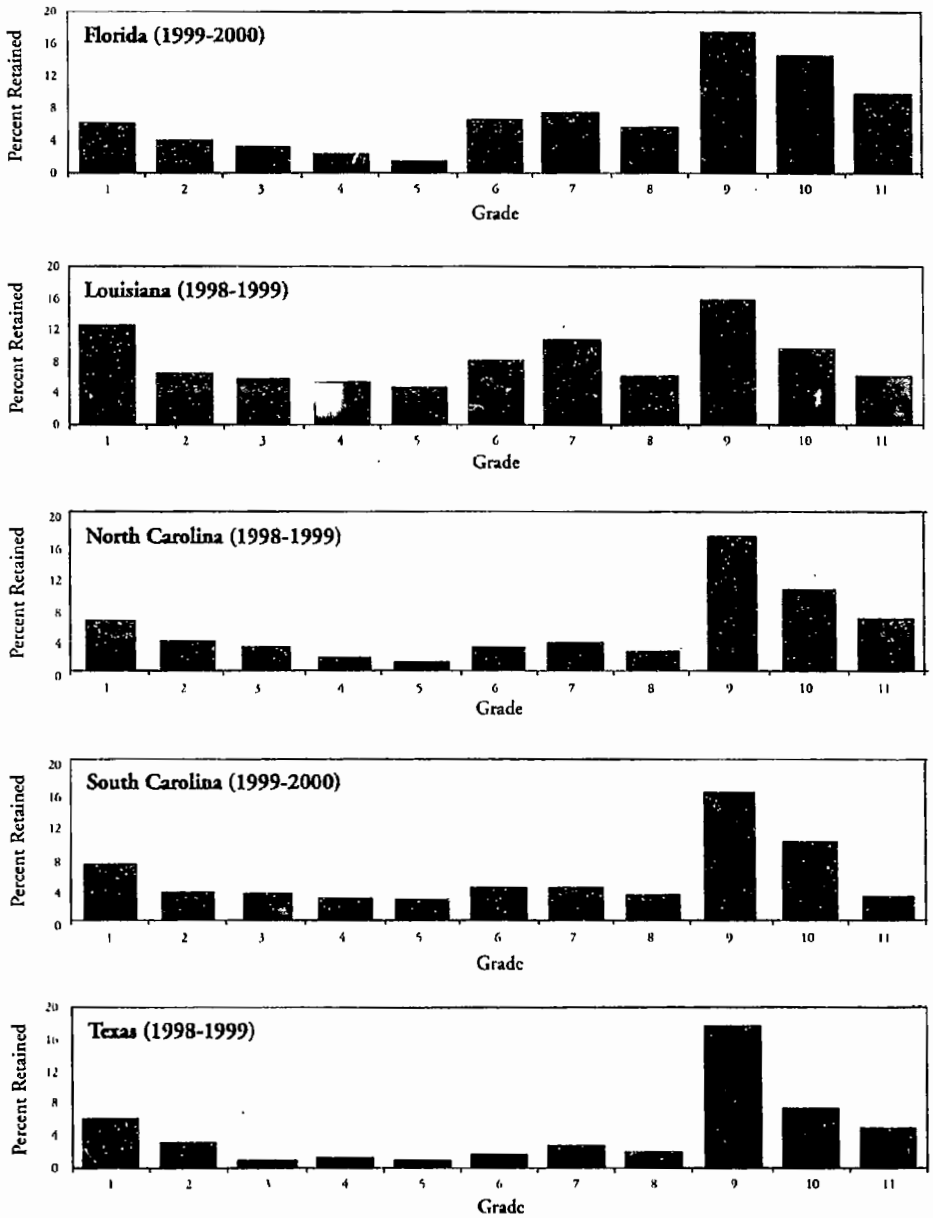
- identify student problems as early as possible in the school year instead of waiting until an entire year is lost;
- intervene as soon as problems are identified to provide struggling students with the extra time and help they need;
- design the extra help around each student's individual needs — "cookie-cutter" solutions rarely work; and
- have strong quality controls and monitoring to ensure that the extra help and time are working.

Providing struggling students with the right kinds and amounts of extra help during the school year is more complicated and demanding than promoting or retaining these students, but it is the only way to avoid dooming millions of children to continued failure. It may be the only way to make education reform and accountability work.

This report was prepared by David R. Denton, SREB director of school readiness and reading.

What we know about retention rates

- 15-20 percent of all students repeat at least one grade between the ages of six and 17.
- Seven million of today's elementary and secondary students will be retained at least once. Many will be retained more than once.
- Poor and minority students are two to three times more likely than others to be retained.
- Boys are twice as likely to be retained as girls.
- The highest retention rates are in ninth grade, not early elementary school.



State promotion and retention policies vary widely

The chart on pages 8-9 outlines state policies on grade promotion and retention.

- Twelve of the 16 SREB states have or are phasing in requirements for end-of-grade tests at certain grade levels.
- Seven SREB states (Delaware, Florida, Louisiana, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina and Texas) make the test results a factor in decisions about student promotion or retention.
- Louisiana and South Carolina are the only states in which a student can be required to repeat a grade based solely on test scores.
- Every state that ties promotion decisions to test results gives students more than one opportunity to pass the test.
- Most states with testing and promotion standards specify what schools must do to help failing students; most require student intervention plans that provide extra help, extra time or both.
- Only Louisiana and South Carolina require school districts to provide summer school for students who do not meet promotion standards at the end of the school year. Only Oklahoma and South Carolina have state guidelines for summer school programs. Virginia is developing such standards.
- Delaware is the only state that limits the number of times a student may be retained (a maximum of two years).
- Some states appropriate funds specifically for intervention programs for failing students. South Carolina, for example, earmarks $14 million for summer school programs; North Carolina provides schools with $200 for each student who is failing. Others fund such services as part of reading initiatives and other special initiatives. (See Texas sidebar on page 4.)
- Only five states (Florida, Louisiana, North Carolina, South Carolina and Texas) collect and make readily available information on students who are retained in all grades between first grade and 11th grade. As the graphs on page 2 suggest, comprehensive data is important for providing a complete picture of where students most often encounter serious problems.

Seven SREB states use end-of-grade tests for promotion

Retention and social promotion both leave children behind

Although it is very clear from the research that requiring students to repeat a grade usually does more harm than good (see pages 14-15), retention rates nationwide remain high. The author of one important study of retention concluded that the main reason for the contradiction between research and practice is that educators simply do not know what else to do with some students. Even when teachers have an idea of what might help certain students, they often lack the time, resources and administrative support to make it happen.

Building for Success in Texas

In 1996 Texas launched an ambitious statewide reading initiative. (SREB reported on this effort in 1997 in *The Texas Reading Initiative: Mobilizing Resources for Literacy.)* The Student Success Initiative, enacted by the Legislature in 1999, expanded this focus on reading. The plan focuses on three key areas:

- improving overall classroom instruction;
- identifying students who are at risk of reading problems; and
- providing targeted assistance to struggling readers in kindergarten through second grade.

When the Student Success Initiative is implemented fully in 2007-08, all students in third, fifth and eighth grades will be expected to pass grade-level tests in reading and language arts in order to be promoted automatically to the next grade. (Final decisions on grade placement will be made by a committee that includes the child's parents, teacher and principal.) Students will have three opportunities to pass the tests. To ensure that all students facing the new promotion requirements receive the quality education they need to pass the tests, the state has committed significant resources both for teachers' professional development and for intervention programs for at-risk students. Appropriations for this purpose during the 1999-2001 biennium include:

- $173 million under the Student Success Initiative for:
  - accelerated reading programs for struggling students;
  - stipends for kindergarten and first-grade teachers to attend four-day reading academies; and
  - after-school programs for students in the middle grades in districts with high rates of juvenile crime;
- $12 million for annual stipends (of up to $5,000) for specially trained and certified master reading teachers who agree to teach in high-need schools;
- $50 million for innovative in-school reading academies to help struggling students and to strengthen the teaching of reading in general;
- $200 million to expand the state prekindergarten program and to expand half-day kindergartens to full-day; and
- $85 million for a basic-skills program for ninth-graders who are at risk of failing.

Results on the National Assessment of Educational Progress show that 40 percent of fourth-graders and 30 percent of eighth-graders nationally read below the assessment's "basic proficiency" level, which signifies only partial mastery of reading skills. Considering that only 15 percent to 20 percent of students are retained at least once in elementary or secondary school, it is clear that, while some students who lack needed skills are being retained, many more are being promoted. Few of those in either category are getting the help they need.

Students who struggle in a grade the first time around are unlikely to overcome their problems simply by repeating the material. Instead, they need well-designed programs to solve their individual problems. Recent research points to potential strategies for helping struggling students reach and remain at grade level.

Learning to read is critical to preventing failure

Reading problems probably are the most common cause of student failure. Developments in early reading instruction during the 1990s demonstrate how much has been learned about identifying students with learning problems early and providing them with effective help.

Research increasingly shows that virtually all children can learn to read. However, the research also confirms that not all children learn to read in the same way. The fundamental problem with the recent debate over whole language vs. phonics lies in trying to identify one standard program of reading instruction that will work for all students. In fact, any reading program needs to include both phonics instruction and elements of whole language. Some children will master phonics quickly and easily; others will learn to read only if they receive much more intensive phonics instruction than is necessary or desirable for most of their classmates.

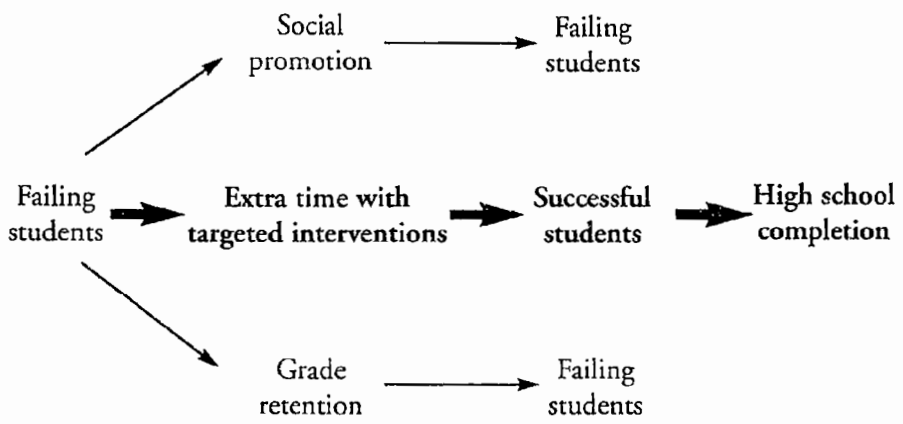
Struggling students need targeted interventions, not more of the same

Repeating a grade is particularly ineffective for students who struggle with reading. Students who have difficulty mastering phonics need intensive, individualized instruction. Simply repeating the same first- or second-grade instruction will do little or nothing to help them and may reinforce their sense of failure and frustration, making them less receptive to later efforts to help them. Similarly, children who have problems getting meaning from written text need special help to develop comprehension skills. Both groups of children need extra time and attention as soon as their problems are identified. For some, this help may come in the form of small group instruction in the classroom; others may need intensive one-on-one tutoring. Until such help is provided, expecting these students to follow the standard grade-level curriculum will be largely a waste of time, regardless of how many times they repeat it.

We know the keys to preventing failure

Eliminating social promotion and minimizing retention mean reducing the number of students who are failing at the end of the school year. Schools must do a better job of identifying students who are struggling during the school year and of providing these students with extra help. The elements that must be in place for schools to achieve this goal fall into three key areas:

- competent, motivated teachers in every classroom;
- special help targeted at individual students' problems, with extra time to give struggling students a chance to catch up and keep up; and
- continual assessment to monitor student progress and to detect problems as early as possible.



Teacher quality makes a big difference

Ensuring that all students receive high-quality instruction means having elementary school teachers who have mastered a range of teaching skills, who can diagnose children's individual strengths and weaknesses, and who can provide these children with the help they need. It also means having teachers in the middle grades and in high school who have mastered the content knowledge in the subjects they teach and who can detect problems and refer students to appropriate sources of help.

Success starts with expert classroom teachers

Unfortunately, many elementary school teachers do not know enough about how children learn to read. As a result, they cannot assess students accurately or solve problems effectively. Likewise, too many teachers in the middle grades and high school lack expertise in the subjects they are assigned to teach.

A recent study of the effectiveness of Head Start reviewed the quality of elementary school classrooms that children move into after completing Head Start. The researchers found that

the quality of reading instruction in grades one through three was very uneven; only about one-third of the classrooms offered the kind of individually balanced instruction in reading that is needed. Unfortunately, reading instruction generally was worst where good instruction was needed most: in schools with many low-income children.

The situation in math was even worse. The researchers found that very few of the more than 150 elementary schools studied offered high-quality instruction in math, regardless of the schools' resources or the characteristics of their communities.

Many problems of student achievement that have led to the debate over retention and social promotion undoubtedly stem from low-quality classroom instruction. Research suggests that the quality of instruction in third grade is especially important. Third grade may be the last chance for struggling students to master basic skills before they are plunged into materials that are too far over their heads for them to catch up.

Some children will struggle even if they receive high-quality classroom instruction. Their problems will involve different subject areas and will vary considerably in severity. Expert teachers should be able to recognize such problems and either address them directly or refer the students to the appropriate specialists. Otherwise, these students quickly can fall far behind their classmates.

Targeted interventions require extra time during the school year

Students who are retained are required to spend an entire school year trying to make up lost ground, even though they may not be a full year behind. This is a very costly option, both in terms of monetary expenses and, as the research shows, potential harm to students. It is much better, in most cases, to provide students with extra learning time during the school year. There are essentially two ways to do this:

- flexible and creative scheduling during school hours; and
- extra-time programs outside of the regular school day.

Flexible scheduling provides more learning time in areas where students need help

Flexible scheduling can allow one group of students to receive extra help from the teacher in a particular skill or subject area while students who already have mastered that material move on to a more advanced level or work on other projects. For example, a second-grade teacher could work closely with students who need additional help in reading while more advanced readers practice their skills. (The only way to become a fluent reader is to read a lot!)

Similar results can be achieved in the middle grades and high school by breaking subjects such as algebra into shorter blocks of time than the typical semester. At the end of the first

State Policies on Grade Promotion and Retention in SRE

State	AL	AR	DE	FL	GA	KY
State specifies requirements for grade promotion	No (proposal before state board)	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
State end-of-grade tests required (grades)	No	Yes (4, 6, 8)	Yes (3, 5, 8, 10)	Yes (3-10)	Yes (1-8)	Yes (4, 5, 7, 8)
Test score may be sole cause for retention	No	No	No	No	No	No
Number of retakes permitted	NA	0	multiple	5	0	0
State has guidelines for aid to failing students	No	Yes (student plans required)	Yes (student plans required)	Yes (student plans required)	Yes (student support teams required)	No
Summer school required for failing students	No	No	Yes	No	No	No
State has guidelines for summer school	No	No	No	No	No	No
State collects retention data (grades)	No	Yes (K-8)	Yes (K-11)	Yes (K-11)	Yes (not by grade)	Yes (4-11)

NA - not applicable

Note: This chart reflects only end-of-grade tests; high school graduation, end-of-course and subject tests are not included.

Source: Departments of Education, November 2000.

B States

LA	MD	MS	NC	OK	SC	TN	TX	VA	WV
Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No (statewide goal is 97% promotion in grades K-8)	Yes	No	No
Yes (4, 8)	No	Yes (2-8)	Yes (3-8)	Yes (3, 5, 8)	Yes (3-8)	No	Yes (3 8)	Yes (3, 5, 8)	No
Yes	No	No	No (but a major factor at grades 3, 5, 8)	No	Yes (after failing three consecutive years)	No	No (but a major factor at grades 3, 5, 8)	No	No
1	NA	0	2	1	2	NA	2	0	NA
Yes (lans required s 3-4, 7-8)	Yes (schoolwide plans required)	No	Yes (schoolwide plans required)	Yes (students failing state tests receive remediation)	Yes (student plans required)	No	Yes (see sidebar on pg. 13)	Yes (student remediation programs required)	No
Yes	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No	No (may be part of remedial programs)	No
No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes (under development)	No
Yes (-11)	Yes (not by grade)	No	Yes (K-11)	No	Yes (K-11)	Yes (K-8)	Yes (K-11)	Yes (not by grade)	Yes (prekindergarten 11)

grading period, all students take the same exam and then are regrouped to give extra time to those who need it. The students are tested and regrouped after each grading period — until all have mastered the material.

The key to this type of scheduling lies in the term "flexible." Unlike traditional tracking of students, grouping decisions under flexible block scheduling are made for only one grading period at a time and in only the subject at hand. Students should move from group to group according to their progress, rather than being locked permanently into a less-challenging curriculum.

After-school and Saturday programs provide extra learning time and help keep students out of trouble

After-school and Saturday programs may have higher personnel and transportation costs, but they also have definite advantages. These programs do not require students to miss regular classroom time that they may need very much. In addition, many students who are struggling academically also have behavioral problems, and after-school or Saturday programs provide adult supervision during times when many students find themselves on their own.

Like any other intervention for struggling students, extended-time programs should supplement regular classroom instruction — not just repeat it — and should be led by qualified teachers.

Having the right kind of teachers is essential

Extra help for a child experiencing learning problems must be targeted to his or her individual needs. In many cases, expert classroom teachers may be able to diagnose problems and design the interventions needed. In other cases, however, classroom teachers will not have the time and may not have the specialized expertise.

When time is the primary issue and specialized training is not required — as in the case of children who simply need a lot of practice reading — adult volunteers and even peer tutors drawn from among classmates can help. These volunteer tutors must be given clear instructions and must be monitored closely by expert teachers. (The recent SREB report *Focus on Volunteer Reading Tutors* summarizes the research on the most effective ways to use volunteer tutors.)

Early evidence suggests that reading specialists may be one of the most effective ways to improve reading performance

When problems are more complex, all schools need to be able to call on teachers or other professionals who have in-depth training in dealing with serious learning difficulties. An excellent example of such an expert is the reading specialist. Reading specialists may be called many different things. For example, in Arkansas they are called literacy coaches, and in Texas the term is master reading teachers.

Early evidence strongly suggests that having reading specialists in low-performing schools is one highly effective way to improve student reading performance. The specialists work directly with struggling students and also serve as invaluable in-school resources for helping to improve classroom teachers' skills.

Going Above and Beyond in Johnston County

Johnston County Schools, a largely rural North Carolina district with more than 20,000 students, adopted its Student Accountability for Academic Achievement Policy in 1996. The district worked closely with the community to develop the policy, which requires students in grades three through eight to meet minimum standards on state end-of-grade tests in order to be promoted. High school students must meet standards on state end-of-course tests in 10 subjects to receive credit.

To ensure that everyone understands that the performance standards are serious, parents, students and teachers all are required to sign Student Accountability Agreements that pledge their commitment to students' success. At the beginning of each school year, teachers are expected to identify students who are likely to have problems. Teachers then are expected to provide these students with targeted assistance.

Any student in grades three through eight who fails to meet the minimum test standards will be retained in the same grade unless at least one of five conditions is met:

- The student receives extra help and passes the test before the end of the school year.
- The teacher and principal document that the student is doing passing work.
- The student already has repeated one or two grades (depending on grade level).
- The student is in special education and is making satisfactory progress.
- The student attends summer school, retakes the test and meets the passing standard.

Since the new standards were implemented in 1996-97, passing rates on the end-of-grade exams have risen from 66 percent to 82 percent in reading and from 62 percent to 87 percent in math. As expected, the percentage of students repeating a grade initially rose, but by 1999-2000 it had dropped back to 2 percent (the same as before the new standards). To reduce the possibility of recurring failure, the policy specifies that students who are retained must receive "differentiated" instruction in the repeated year.

School Superintendent Jim Causby says student accountability can be a powerful tool for school improvement, but it must have five essential elements to be fair and effective:

- a rigorous, relevant curriculum;
- an assessment system designed to test that curriculum;
- high standards for promotion or graduation;
- appropriate intervention for at-risk students; and
- very specific procedures for waivers and appeals of retention decisions.

Continual assessment is essential to preventing failure

Helping struggling students reach and stay at grade level usually means accelerating their learning. Providing extra help during the school year allows for immediate responses when problems appear and for immediate feedback as the student applies this extra instructional help in the classroom. Students need to be assessed continually so that educators can make timely decisions about their progress and their programs of study.

Assess individual needs early then monitor students' progress regularly

Any student who has experienced serious learning difficulties is at risk of developing further problems. Teachers and administrators should be alert to catch such problems early and deal with them promptly and effectively.

Teachers usually should not be surprised when a student fails a high-stakes test. They should know who is at risk of failure, and they should be working as far in advance of the test as possible to get these students extra help. Schools have a fundamental responsibility to monitor students' progress, understand individual students' needs and ensure that effective programs are in place to help those who experience problems.

Schools need to get parents and communities involved

Education reform frequently stresses the importance of parents' involvement in their children's education. Every effort should be made to bring parents into the educational process and to make them feel welcome and comfortable. However, for various reasons, those efforts sometimes still fail with some families.

Every community has many adults who care about the community's children and want to help them succeed

An alternative to full parental involvement is community involvement. Every community — even the most educationally or economically deprived — has many adults who not only care about the community's children but also would be willing to help them succeed. Schools should reach out to these people in any way possible — through community advisory councils or mentoring programs, for example — to mobilize them for community support. Such involvement helps all students.

While many school leaders pay lip service to parental involvement, some have taken real action to help students get needed support from their families and/or the community. Every principal should learn what works and should do everything possible to make it happen. Under any circumstances, lack of parental involvement should not be an acceptable excuse for teachers and schools to allow students to fail.

Summer school makes a difference ... if it is done right

When special help during the school year does not help students attain grade-level standards, summer school should be the next step. Numerous studies have shown that, during summer vacations, virtually all students forget some of what they have learned. If even high-achieving students experience this summer slide, students at or near the bottom of their class are likely to slip well below grade level before the next school year. There is substantial evidence that high-quality summer school can help bring many struggling students up to grade level.

North Carolina data provide strong evidence of summer school's potential value. Among students who were not promoted at the end of the 1997-98 school year in North Carolina, 71 percent of those who attended summer school were able to move to the next grade. Unfortunately, fewer than a third of the students who had been recommended for retention attended summer school.

Of course, not all summer schools are equal in quality. In many states, summer school programs differ considerably from one district to another — in terms of both length and quality.

The most critical factor in making summer school useful is making it *different*. A crash course that uses the same materials and methods that previously did not work for students is unlikely to produce the desired gains in student performance. Like all strategies to help struggling students before they are retained, summer school programs must be based on analyses of individual students' needs, and methods and materials must be selected carefully to match those needs. In many places, summer school has tended to function like a summer jobs program for teachers who want extra income. But summer school staffing should not be determined solely by teacher interest. Students with serious learning problems need and deserve the best teachers possible, and faculty should be recruited and assigned based on students' needs.

High quality summer programs can help bring struggling students up to grade level

To ensure that summer school has a sustained impact on student performance, it is very important that the school, the student and the student's family do not view it as an end product. Students who have experienced problems and have begun to overcome them in summer school need continued attention to ensure that, during the next school year, they do not lose the ground they have gained.

In the Chicago experience described on pages 14-15, 80 percent of students who failed during the regular school year attended summer school — a much higher rate than in North Carolina. However, only 40 percent of those students improved test scores enough to avoid being retained. Even for those students, the gains from summer school faded quickly in the classroom in the following school year, leading researchers to conclude that these students needed continued support that the schools were not providing.

What Research Says About the Effects of Retention

Flunking Grades — the 1989 book widely regarded as the most comprehensive review of retention research — reviewed results of dozens of retention studies and found that retained students consistently lagged behind classmates who had performed at similarly low levels but were not retained. In addition, students who had repeated one year were 20 percent to 30 percent more likely to drop out of school than those who were not retained.

Most studies reviewed in *Flunking Grades* involved so-called "simple retention": Students were required to repeat essentially the same year of work they had failed. In the few studies that found any positive effects, schools provided the retained students with targeted interventions designed to help them overcome individual problems. Even in these cases, however, the gains typically were short-lived, and the students eventually fell behind again.

Additional studies of retention conducted in the 1990s generally reinforced the findings in *Flunking Grades.* One review looked at 66 studies of retention conducted between 1990 and 1997 and found that 65 of them showed retention to be ineffective and/or harmful. A 1997 study of 23 risk factors for school failure found that, in every risk area, retained students had more problems than similar students who were not retained.

Some in the media have cited three recent studies — in Baltimore, Chicago and Texas — as providing compelling new evidence that grade retention can improve student achievement. However, closer analysis fails to support this conclusion.

The Baltimore study — Johns Hopkins University researchers spent eight years studying 775 public school students who had been retained in elementary school. The students' performance improved modestly during the year they repeated and for several years after, but then the gains began to fade. Follow-up on some of the retained students in their early 20s revealed that 65 percent had not finished high school, compared with 18 percent of all other students. Among those who were held back more than once, the dropout rate was 94 percent.

The Chicago study — In 1996, the Chicago public schools began requiring students in third, sixth and eighth grades to achieve a minimum score on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills in order to be promoted. Early reports by news media in Chicago suggested that retention had a positive impact on test scores. However, a later report by the independent Consortium on Chicago School Research found that half of the retained students were required to attend summer school — even after repeating the grade — and many were required to repeat the same grade a second time. Two years after being retained the first time, fewer than half had passed the test for the grade they repeated. The retained students also were more likely to drop out.

Effects of retention (cont'd)

The Texas study — In a 1999 study of students who failed the third-grade Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS), researchers reported that the performance of retained students improved, compared with the performance of students who failed the test but were not retained. However, the large disparity between the number who failed but were not retained (about 35,000 a year) and the number who were retained (about 400 a year, barely 1 percent of the total) makes the validity of this comparison highly questionable. The relative improvement of the retained students compared with those who were not retained probably resulted from the statistical phenomenon called "regression to the mean." That is, the 1 percent of students who were retained represented the extreme low end of the range of test scores. They had nowhere to go but up, so their test scores would be expected to improve more than those of the other 99 percent. This problem and a number of flaws in the study's design cast serious doubts on whether the results are useful.

Unfortunately, while many retention studies meet rigorous standards, many others lack comprehensiveness and have methodological shortcomings that limit their usefulness. Regardless of individual studies' limitations, however, the preponderance of evidence on retention strongly indicates that retention rarely does much good and often can do considerable harm. The research is particularly clear on one significant point: being required to repeat even one grade — even when individualized interventions are provided — dramatically increases the likelihood that a student will drop out of school. Few students who repeat more than one grade will complete high school.

Retention may be the right choice for a small number of students in special situations. However, the decision to retain any student at any grade should be made only after careful evaluation of the overall situation and with the input of parents and professionals who have insight into the student's needs. In most cases, automatic retention based on any single performance indicator (such as an end-of-grade test) is likely to cause more harm than good.

"The research evidence is absolutely one-sided in finding negative effects from flunking students. I know of no educational practice in which the research is in such agreement."

— from *Flunking Grades*

The No. 1 job of every school is to help all children succeed

In most cases both retention and social promotion are easy — but *wrong* — answers to the problem of how to help struggling students succeed. Instead of choosing between these two failed strategies, schools must be held accountable for doing what works for students throughout the school year. There are no easy answers.

It is perhaps natural for teachers and administrators to search for one strategy or program to deal with all struggling students' problems. However, research on learning styles and brain development is showing ever more clearly that no single program can solve all — or even most — student learning problems.

Every staff member in every school should understand clearly that it is unacceptable to leave any child behind because he or she does not seem to benefit from a program that works for other children. Instead, teachers and administrators need to know and understand the different needs of different students and need to be held responsible for finding the right answer for every student.

Research shows that teachers' expectations of what students can accomplish are reflected not only in actual student achievement but also in students' expectations of themselves. Raising expectations has been a key to the success of the Southern Regional Education Board's highly regarded *High Schools That Work*, but high expectations are fundamental to the success of students at every grade level.

Too often, students are faced with having to repeat a grade only after years of being allowed to fail. By that time, they often are so far behind that it is almost impossible to provide the help they need to bring them up to the level of their peers — and to convince them that they actually can do it. This feat certainly cannot be accomplished by making them repeat the current grade.

If teachers expect *all* students in every grade to succeed, it is far less likely that learning problems will persist to the point of hopelessness. If all children learn to read in elementary school — something we know is possible — many problems that now afflict students in the middle grades will be prevented. If middle grades teachers and administrators have high expectations of all students and can identify and address new problems, many problems that students encounter in high school will be prevented and shocking retention rates in ninth grade should drop dramatically.

In its reports on school readiness SREB has said that it is not up to teachers and schools to decide which children are ready to start school; instead, they need to do whatever it takes to help all children succeed, even those who are not as ready as they should be. The same principle should be applied at all grade levels.

The Three Keys to Ending Social Promotion:

- **High expectations for all students**
- **Early identification of learning problems**
- **Timely, effective and individualized help**