

## PLEASE, NOT ANOTHER PUSH TO GET TOUGH ON STUDENT RETENTION

*Standardized academic testing, under-performing schools, demands for high standards in America's schools and current levels of student dropouts have resulted in renewed calls for "getting tough on student retention." The push for student retention is demanded by school boards and others in spite of the overwhelming research evidence that student retention in-grade does not support the improvement of student academic performance or personal behavioral qualities. Social promotion whereby students move to the next grade level even though they have not mastered the academic requirements of a particular grade also is being questioned due to its unsatisfactory academic results. At this time in history, education researchers and practitioners do not have "best answers" to the on-going problem of student promotion.*

*This article briefly discusses relevant research on student promotion and then gives primary attention to alternatives to student retention and social promotion. Emphasis is placed on the paramount importance of early identification of unsatisfactory learning performance and the continuous monitoring of student performance for each individual student. School organizational considerations such as new and/or expanded student learning strategies are presented. Re-engagement of students in the learning process, the need for teacher and administrator student advocacy, and efforts for preventing student failure are discussed. Strengthening parental involvement and recommendations for programs of professional development are considered from the perspective of fostering greater links to student achievement.*

If medical research found a highly successful treatment for curing lung cancer, most likely it would be overwhelmingly endorsed and put into practice by physicians nationally and internationally. Yet, in education, research findings of paramount importance to the welfare of children and youth all too often are not implemented. It has been said that if all the research findings on cancer were to be erased and no longer considered for medical practice, procedures relative to cancer treatments would be set back fifty years or more. Yet, in spite of all the research findings on the negative effects of student retention in grade, the non-promotion of students goes on much the same as it did many years ago. The practice of using grade retention in dealing with underperforming students reportedly began in the United States in 1850 (Kinlaw, 2005). There certainly is no lack of research on the topic of student retention. In fact, retention has been one of the most frequently researched topics in the entire field of education.

Research studies of student retention over a period of fifty years have resulted in one major conclusion, that grade retention alone does not

support the improvement of student academic performance nor is it conducive to the student's improvement in social maturity or personal self-esteem (Kinlaw, 2005; Anderson, Whipple & Jimerson, 2002; Jimerson, 2001, 2002; Johnson & Rudolph, 2001; Hauser, 1999; Shepherd & Smith, 1989; Holmes & Matthews, 1984; Norton, 1983; Koons, 1977; Sowards & Scobey, 1961). *Social promotion* whereby students are moved to the next grade level even though they have not mastered the academic requirements of a particular grade also has been researched with two primary results: (a) Social promotion carries with it more positive advantages than non-promotion relative to academic achievement and other factors such as personal behavior, self-esteem and the potential for becoming a dropout from school altogether, but (b) Social promotion has not proven to be a solution to the student's lack of achievement academically or major improvement of personal qualities. Many authorities now are viewing both retention and social promotion as being unsatisfactory solutions for underachieving students. It is not that retention program adjustments, interventions, and practices have not been implemented by school boards; rather, most every attempt by school boards to deal with the problem of student retention has ultimately been termed as a failure. Problems related to flawed research procedures have been associated with most studies that have claimed positive results for their retention program efforts. Some of these studies will be considered briefly in this article. However, the primary focus here centers on a consensus of best practices relative to program interventions related to alternatives for student retention in school settings.

Most everyone would agree that each person is an individual and possesses a unique personality, varied skills, special interests, particular talents, varying levels of intelligence, different physical features and behavioral qualities different from other individuals of the same age. Yet, when it comes to abilities related to academic achievement, the setting of standards, academic testing, and grade-level promotion all seem to expect each third-grader to reach or exceed the same minimal level of performance.

Renewed public concerns for the lack of student academic achievement results as measured primarily by high-stakes testing, demands for high standards, new pressures for performance accountability, and calls for "getting tough on student retention" have renewed the interest in student non-promotion. The logic of withholding students in a grade for an additional year centers on the contention that it will enable students to gain academically, increase their social maturity and readiness for learning and serve as personal motivation for students to improve their personal work ethics and interest in learning. Unfortunately, none of the foregoing contentions are supported by research or empirical evidence. In fact, "A review of the research on efficacy or retention...demonstrates that retention impedes the progress of children in learning the material they have missed and leads primarily to drop out and educational failure" (Advocates for Children of New York, 2000, p. 1). In spite of the overwhelming evidence

that student retention is unproductive regarding the student's academic performance, school systems continue to implement the practice even after it has proven ineffective since its first adoption in 1850.

Retention in grade requires a student to remain in a particular grade for another year purportedly to provide an opportunity for the student to gain a mastery of skills needed in later grades, gain needed maturation and improve personal behaviors required for successful learning performance. Martin and Vandergrift (1991) point out that the sequential and linear view of learning has considerable support in education. That is, learning is viewed as a building-block structure whereby one skill or concept must be mastered before the next higher skill or concept can be learned. Smith (1989) points out that 50 percent of the teachers in one study believed that students developed in this linear manner, developing in blocks or through stages when they are ready. Smith's research found that teachers with the linear view held back 30 percent of their students, while teachers who were of the opinion that they could have a positive impact on their students' performance held back less than 2 percent.

Cognitive psychology does not support the linear perspective for learning. Rather, *cognitive learning* is likened to the building of tinker toys; information is received and stored in various ways. As new information is gained some connections between and among the parts are completed. At some point new information serves to make additional connections that result in new insights for the learner. It is quite possible that the student's achievement does remain on a plateau for a period of time but as other knowledge is added it serves to make the important connections and insight results in learning achievement.

### **A Summary of Selected Retention Evidence**

It is not the purpose here to detail what has been known about student retention for many years. However, a summary of student retention research findings is necessary in order to provide a better understanding of later recommendations relative to new strategies to replace the negative practices of student retention and social promotion. Although social promotion is not supported in this article, it has proven to be more beneficial to the student than student retention. For example, Soward's and Scobey's (1961) early study of retention found that children do not learn more by repeating a grade in elementary school; rather, they often learn less; they show actual regression. Koons (1977) found that promoted low-achieving students score higher on achievement tests than do similar retained pupils after they spend an additional year in a grade. Wheelock (1998) notes that grade retention and social promotion are inadequate responses to low student achievement because they are not preventive.

Research is virtually unanimous in its findings that:

- \* There is a high correlation between student retention and student drop-

outs. Goldschmidt and Wang (1999) used the National Longitudinal Study (NELS) to examine student and school factors associated with students dropping out in different grades. “Consistent with previous research, the results indicated that being held back is the single strongest factor predictor of dropping out and that its effect is consistent for both early and late dropouts” ( p. 717).

- \* Retention for the purpose of improving academic performance is faulty. Students who are permitted to move on to the next grade level actually learn more than if retained in the same grade. Grade retention has a negative effect on all areas of student achievement including reading, math, language, and social and emotional adjustment (Jimer-son, Pletcher, & Kerr, 2005).
- \* Retention has deleterious effects on the student’s self-esteem and social and personal adjustment, including discipline. Retained students have increased risks in health related areas such as stress, low social confidence, substance abuse, and violent behaviors. Studies have shown that students view retention as being more degrading and stressful than losing a parent or going blind (Yamamoto & Byrnes, 1984).
- \* As adults, grade repeaters are more likely to be on public assistance programs, unemployed or imprisoned (NASP, 2011).
- \* Neither social promotion nor retention per se is effective in solving the problem of providing appropriate instruction for low performing students. The retention research has been phrased for a yes or no answer relative to its implementation, but the main conclusion should be that both policies are failures (Karweit, 1991).
- \* In those instances when retained students sometimes make initial improvements, research studies find that such gains are not sustained but decline in the two or three years following retention.

### **Alternatives to Student Retention and Social Promotion**

The foregoing discussion makes it clear that school districts must stop the practice of student retention in grade and become true advocates for the best welfare of all students. School authorities must reject the pressures brought upon them to initiate or continue non-promotion policies. Neither has social promotion proven to be an acceptable solution to performance achievement for the low-achieving student. “To pass students along in school when they are unprepared or retain them without addressing their needs denies students access to opportunities at the next level of schooling, in postsecondary education and in the workplace” (U.S. Department of Education, 1999, p. 1). Authorities tend to agree that social promotion has more positive results than retention, especially when promotion plus interventions accompany it. Other more pro-active, performance-produc-

ing alternatives must be earnestly considered. The following section provides alternatives to retention and/or social promotion that should be considered by school leaders and staff personnel in the best interests of all students. It is clear that no specific successful alternative solution has been found for teaching the slow-learning student, although numerous alternatives have been recommended and/or implemented in practice. However, many recommendations presented by authorities, educational agencies and other sources are presented in the following section.

### **Early Identification Program**

When a child becomes physically ill a physician makes every effort to diagnose the causes of the illness and then prescribes the appropriate medications and follow-up procedures for curing the illness. Similarly, professional educational personnel must be prepared to assess the causes of a child not performing satisfactorily from an academic and/or behavioral standpoint. Waiting until the end of the year to report the low performance of a student and then recommending retention at the end of the school term is unsatisfactory. "Systematic procedures to identify needs at the beginning of each academic year (and at regular intervals throughout the academic year) provide the foundation for effective intervention efforts" (Jimerson, Pletcher & Kerr, 2005, p. 13).

Just knowing that the student is not mastering the subject material falls short of the analysis that is needed. We know that all students do not learn in the same way. In analyzing the status of slow-learners, several questions must be addressed. What specific subject material is the student failing to master and what instructional methods appear to be unsuccessful in the learning process (e.g., lecture, aural/oral methods used, question/answer, seat practice, small group work, one on one seat help, etc.)? Not all students are equally competent in receiving and interpreting information presented orally. Figure 1 is a sample checklist with guideline entries for recording such information. The identification of problem areas can facilitate the early diagnosis of problematic subject areas and help to focus on interventions for remediation activities. Johnson and Rudolph (2001) support such assessments for providing detailed information relative to student progress, what the student really knows, what skills he or she possesses, what learning methods are most productive, the specific problem areas, and providing clues to how the student's instructional needs might be met. Continuous progress monitoring and evaluation provide evidence for modifying subject content and instructional methods for each individual learner.

Student's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

	Reading	Mathematics	Science	Social Science	English
Achievement High, Average, Fair, Poor					
Sub. Material, Topics, Skills					
Problem Areas					
Instr. Methods, Lecture, Discussion, Aural/Oral, Group Work, Study					
Behavioral Observations					
Special Needs					
Assessments Utilized					
Other Assessments of Student's Progress					

Figure 1. Checklist for Continuous Student Learning Assessment.

### School Organizational Consideration

Historically, early country schools commonly served all grades, one through eight, in one classroom. As the population of communities grew, it became necessary to find a different organization for student attendance. The decision was to divide pupils by ages into several grades beginning with grade 1 that commonly included pupils of ages 6–7, grade 2 ages 7–8, grade 3 ages 8–9 and so forth. Discrepancies were handled among slow-learning pupils, normal learners and more gifted learners by retaining the slow learners and accelerating the gifted ones. The practice solidified the age-graded elementary school organization model that is still implemented by the large majority of schools in the U.S. today. In view of the research regarding individual differences among pupils, cultural influences on a pupil's readiness for school, native intelligence and pupil special needs, the graded primary school organization has fostered the procedure of non-promotion of students in spite of the fact that many students are performing at their potential levels but not perhaps at the levels of other students on standardized tests.

## **The Un-Graded Primary School Organization**

The un-graded primary school organization is not a new concept. It has been implemented by many school districts nationally in an attempt to adjust instruction and administrative procedures to meet the special academic and social needs that differ among children. In some instances the terms first grade, second grade and so forth are never used in un-graded primary school organization. Some schools, such as the public schools in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, have used the terms primary 1, primary 2 and so forth to specify the number of semesters that a child has been at the primary grade level. Each learner is placed in the primary school classes according to his or her individual abilities, academic progress, social development and readiness for advancement in the specific subject-matter area at hand. *Flexible scheduling* is a major feature of the un-graded primary. Pupil retention is not part of the vocabulary used in un-graded schools. Rather, primary attention is given to the pupil's success level, the level that reflects the current achievement status of the pupil and the level from which the implementation of increasingly more complex experiences are successfully provided that serve to build a personnel confidence toward achievement in learning. One of the benefits of the un-graded primary school is its potential for eliminating the stigma of student failure.

Many of the school districts that have implemented the un-graded school organization have returned to the age-graded system primarily for two reasons: (a) This organizational arrangement failed to receive the necessary support from parental and community members who had a long history of attachment to the age-graded system, and (b) The majority of schools that professed to be un-graded, in fact, ultimately assumed most all of the characteristics of the traditional self-contained, graded classroom. That is, they never actually became a truly un-graded school. Thus, test results commonly showed no difference between previous test scores for the graded school and schools with the so-called un-graded school arrangement.

## **New or Expanded Opportunities for Student Learning**

The consideration of expanding learning opportunities for pupils through the flexibility of un-graded primary school organization was discussed in the previous section. One positive feature of *block scheduling* is its potential for facilitating individualized instruction. In this type of organization, needed changes in the scheduling of the school year and/or school day can allow for an adjustment in the use of time for meeting the special needs of all learners and also providing needed time for professional staff planning and development (i.e., reading and reading comprehension, basic arithmetic, English usage, etc.).

The practice of block scheduling has proven of value in enabling pupils to spend more time on the subjects of most need although it has

received much criticism for problems such as a student's attention span. Block scheduling has the potential benefit of centers for capitalizing on the concept of time on task. For example, if a student's primary deficiency is in the area of reading, block scheduling provides the student additional opportunities to concentrate on specific reading skills.

The literature is replete with other program and instructional arrangements that purport to be viable strategies for what slow learners should do in the classroom. The large majority of such strategies is not new; transition classes, Saturday school programs, class size reduction, one-on-one tutoring, personalized instruction, mandatory summer classes, looping, and extending the learning day are examples of such strategies. The implementation of *transition classes* is another example that research results do not support. Shepard and Smith (1989) found that pupils who spent time in a transition class after kindergarten and before entering grade one did not benefit academically from the experience. Many of the well-intended intervention strategies tend to recommend what could be done but not how to get them accomplished.

The New York City's Promotional Gates program in 1981 called a halt to social promotion and adopted a get tough on student promotion policy. Students who did not meet a minimal score on a standardized reading test had to attend summer school. If they did not pass a cutoff score after summer school they were retained in grade the following year. Promotional Gates students failed to receive better test scores than other students who were simply socially promoted to the next grade before the get-tough policy was implemented. Dropout rates for the Gates students were higher than the socially promoted students' rates in spite of the fact that the Gates students had attended summer school and spent an extra year of work in classes of reduced size with teachers who had received special training for teaching in the program.

The preceding example is not meant to degrade the efforts of leaders in New York City in their attempt to do something to improve student achievement; rather the purpose is to underscore the fact that get-tough policies on student retention and having students repeat instructional materials that they encountered the previous school term are not viable alternatives for student achievement.

What is needed is the implementation of well-planned interventions that are carefully monitored and controlled with ongoing research methods that serve to identify successful and unsuccessful results. Two examples of such interventions are as follows:

**Student reengagement in learning.** Students often just lose interest in school. That is, they become disengaged in the learning process, see little or no value in what is being taught, and see other alternatives such as the GED test, getting a job and earning money, or just wanting to get away from the pressures placed upon them regarding their lack of academic performance. Behaviors such as increased absences from school,



discipline problems and completely dropping out of school often result. Snapshot #1 is an example of a supportive school administrator and staff who intervened to save a school dropout and reengage him in the school's learning program.

**Snapshot #1.** Clair was a high school junior whose academic record was satisfactory in every subject. However, he did not return to school to complete the senior year; he had just lost interest in school. He was out of school for one entire year before an administrative advocate contacted him and encouraged him to come back to school and graduate. The administrator specified the support that he would give to Clair and said that they needed him to participate in the school's football program. Clair did return to school and the promised support was given him. Special attention was given to Clair's personal interest and talent in mathematics and science.

Following graduation from high school, Clair served in the military and then enrolled in an engineering program at the university. He took a job with the Sperry-Rand Corporation and became involved in resolving production problems for the autopilots on the B-52 bomber and the DC-8 commercial aircraft. In brief, Clair also gained the patents for three gyroscopes, one of which was used on NASA's Galileo space project. No one can say what Clair's life might have been if he had not been supported in his return to school, but it is reasonable to say that his contributions to the aero-space science would not have been possible. In addition, Clair's personal self-respect and satisfaction likely would have been diminished (Norton, Kelly & Battle, 2012, p. 1–2).

**Teachers and administrators as student advocates.** Schools that possess teachers and administrators who are truly student advocates are student centered. The personal needs and interests of each student are the focus of policy and regulation decisions. Advocates create a school environment in which students can focus on their personal interests and strengths in learning activities. Advocates are able to see things from the student's perspective in relation to problems faced and best solutions.

Teacher and principal student advocates are good listeners. They seek opportunities to confer with students about their needs and personal interests. They understand that a good way to learn about students' thoughts is to ask them why they have become disengaged. In order to help students to become reengaged in school and learning, it is of paramount importance that teachers and administrators serve the student in a supportive way. The student's current interests are considered whenever changes in the student's current program and learning activities are under review. "Reviews of the literature on human motivation stress that providing student with options and involving them in program decision making is an effective way to enhance their engagement in learning and improve their learning and performance" (Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA, 2007, p. 27). For example, consider the case of a student with dis-

abilities in speech/language and learning and the case of another student whose interest in art led to her reengagement in the learning process.

**Snapshot # 2.** A speech/language therapist had the student take an interest inventory and learned that low-rider cars were of special interest to him. The therapist capitalized on this interest by purchasing low-rider magazines for the student to read and also brought films on the building of low-rider cars for the student to watch. The therapist used these aids to engage the student in language practice and to build the student's vocabulary and reading skills. The activities were tied closely to the curriculum objectives of the regular classroom. The speech therapist understood the importance of motivating students for learning using the student's personal interests. (Norton, et al., 2012, p. 108).

**Snapshot #3.** Ann is a ninth-grade student whose basic skills test scores are all in the lower quartile for her grade. Ann is a quiet student who does not associate with others in her class and whose only interest seems to be in art. Her soap carving of a small Scotty dog was placed in the school's art showcase. One teacher commented that Ann was just waiting for the end of the school year when she could drop out from school and enter the world of work. What action on the part of the school's teachers and administrators is in the best interests of Ann at this time?

A counselor or other caring staff member should ask Ann about her current interests related to educational and recreational pursuits. A meeting of Ann's current teachers and a school counselor should team together to see how the school program could capitalize on her special interests and talent in art. Suggestions by the teachers and administrators should be discussed with Ann to gain leads as to what choices that she might likely pursue. Ann's interest in art could be used in the assignment of reading activities, written composition and history.

The intent of reengagement is to ensure the opportunity of choice on the part of the student. Choice carries with it the perception of ownership and a personal responsibility for the learning process. This does not mean that the student is given personal autonomy for his or her learning activities. Rather, involvement centers on establishing working relationships between and among the student, teachers, counselors and others that result in a climate of trust in decisions concerning the student's interests and personal welfare.

**Snapshot #4.** This snapshot tells of an English teacher's wisdom in focusing on the concept of individualization to engage a student in learning achievement. Merton's English teacher assigns a writing assignment that includes two topics from which to choose. Merton is not interested in either topic and asks the teacher if he could write on another topic of personal interest to him. What action on the part of the teacher is in the best interests of the student? Listening to the student's thinking about his topic of interest and then providing suggestions regarding the student's pursuit

of his topic provides the opportunity for him to engage the student's personal interest, individualize the class activity and still meet the purposes of the class assignments.

Haberman (1995) speaks of gentle teaching that serves to focus on learning rather than mere compliance. Students who have the opportunity to choose tend to take more responsibility for the outcomes of the choice. For students who are disengaged from learning, having a wider range of options gives the student a feeling of being more in control of their personal destiny and provides the motivation to act responsibly.

## **Preventing Failure**

### **Selected Promotion-Plus Interventions and Activities**

School leaders must assume the role of the learning leader by placing priority efforts on:

- \* Establishing within the school staff the basic concept that failure is not an option. Principals and teachers have the responsibility to make certain that all students are motivated to complete high school and continue their personal advancement through life-long learning (Norton, et. al., 2012).
- \* Understanding that by determining a student's success level and providing an agenda of increasingly more advanced learning activities will serve to motivate the student and build a confidence level toward advanced academic achievement. The setting of more realistic expectations for the student and improving the individualization of instruction should serve effectively to drop the student's self-concept of failure (Norton, 1983).
- \* Believing that the assessment of the school's climate is a proven way to diagnose the status of relationships between and among students, teachers and administrators. "Climate is defined as the collective personality of a school or school system. It is the atmosphere as characterized by the social and professional interactions of people" (Norton, 2008, p. 237).

Several studies have found a direct correlation between positive school climates and positive student achievement. Efforts to improve learning within the school will be inhibited if it does not have a healthy climate that facilitates student learning.

- \* Knowing that involvement at the secondary school level commonly is very difficult to achieve, which makes it even more necessary to find innovative ways to gain such interest. School and parent involvement and support of the student's progress in education are of paramount importance. The environment of the home is one primary source of

helping a student succeed. In some cases, the interventions being implemented by the school become ineffective because they are unsupported by practices carried out by parents at home. Low parental expectations and non-involvement in their student's progress in school are two factors commonly associated with student dropouts. Early attention should be given to students who come from a single-parent household, come from a low-income family, have an older sibling who dropped out of school, have parents who did not graduate from school, and are not English-proficient students (Rumberger, 1997). Thus, family engagement for the student's educational progress looms significant. Some schools have adopted activities that require parents to attend student future planning sessions in which the student's program is reported, progress is celebrated and parents' input is solicited.

- \* Providing professional development that results in improving teacher quality is directly linked to greater increases in student achievement (Darling-Hammond, 1997). Pre-service and in-service programs that emphasize effective strategies for individualizing instruction, re-engaging students in the learning process and capitalizing on the student's current interests and strengths, multiple teaching strategies, and provide coaching and mentoring programs for school personnel are of paramount importance. Time for the instructional staff to collaborate with one another on students' progress, to work with other personnel in developing an instructional plan for individual students and to keep up-to-date in regard to best practices for students with special learning needs is crucial.

Today in many schools the traditional faculty meeting is now called the school improvement meeting with a focus on strategic planning for student learning. Although the improvement of classroom instruction is a topic of concern, primary consideration is given to the improvement of student learning. How do human beings learn? What are the implications of cognitive learning concepts in learning strategies for students, especially those students whose achievement is below the expected norm at this point and time? Which learning methods/strategies are most successful for each individual student?

### Summary

The primary focus of this article is that practices of the retention of students in-grade and social promotion of students have proven to be unsuccessful and no longer should be practiced in schools today. Renewed pressures to "get tough on student promotion" should be opposed and new efforts to find successful strategies for improving the academic achievement of students at risk should be expanded and pursued.

Although social promotion in itself is an unsatisfactory procedure for dealing with students with learning problems, promotion-plus alternatives such as un-graded primary organizational arrangements, block scheduling, looping, special coaching and tutoring, and after-school and summer programs that extend learning opportunities have been successful when individualized for each student's personal needs and interests. Spending time just repeating the material that the student has just completed has not proven to be of value.

Early identification of students with learning problems is of paramount importance. Assessing the student's personal interests and capitalizing on his or her personal strengths serve to reengage them in the learning process. Relevant instruction goes beyond the attempt to tie learning to practical life experience; it necessitates knowing the student's current interests and using these interests to provide learning experiences in math, English, science, social science and other subjects.

One of the surest routes to improving student achievement academically is to assess, improve and implement a healthy school climate. School climate was defined as the collective personality of a school or school system. It is the atmosphere that prevails as characterized by the social and professional interactions of people. Parental involvement in their child's school program has proven to be essential. Parental and school collaboration takes on a larger meaning than merely communicating periodically. Rather the home plays a role of primary importance in supporting the planned learning experiences of the student at school. If the home counteracts what the school is trying to do, the school's chances of success are greatly inhibited.

In the final analysis, the student promotion problem will best be resolved when each school's mission becomes that of improving learning for all students, where the focus is on student learning, when failure is not an option, and when each school is led by a learning-centered principal with learning leaders teaching in every classroom.

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