NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS

Grade Retention
Achievement and Mental Health Outcomes

By Gabrielle E. Anderson, Angela D. Whipple, & Shane R. Jimerson, NCSP
University of California, Santa Barbara

Introduction

In response to increasing pressures to improve school performance, legislation and policies regarding grade level promotion standards have been developed at the national, state and district levels. The result has been a call for the "end of social promotion" and a renewed emphasis on grade retention as an educational remedy for underachieving children. Often it is thought that the "gift" of another year in the same grade will give the child reinforcing instruction as well as provide another year for the development of grade level educational skills. However, educational research fails to support grade retention as an effective intervention. In fact, grade retention has been associated with a host of negative outcomes on a variety of levels. Of particular concern is whether educators are addressing the academic, behavioral and mental health needs of children when recommending grade retention.

Retention refers to the practice of requiring a student who has been in a given grade level for a full school year to remain at that level for a subsequent school year (e.g., "flunking"). It is estimated that currently over 2.4 million (5-10%) students are retained every year in the United States. On the rise for the past twenty-five years, retention today is estimated to cost over 14 billion dollars per year to pay for the extra year of schooling.

On the individual level, many more boys are retained than girls; more minority students are retained than White students. Retained students are more likely to display aggressiveness, to have a history of suspension or expulsion, to act out in the classroom, or display behaviors associated with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and Conduct Disorder. Children who are learning disabled are also more likely to be retained — and in fact are likely to be so diagnosed immediately following the retention. In addition to poor academic achievement and low standardized test scores, retained students are likely to have a history of numerous school changes and absenteeism. Large family size, low parental education and low family involvement are also related to retention.

Research: Retention Is Ineffective, Maybe Harmful

Systematic reviews and meta-analyses examining research over the past century (studies between 1911–1999) conclude that the cumulative evidence does not support the use of grade retention as an intervention for academic achievement or socio-emotional adjustment problems (Holmes, 1989; Jimerson, 2001). Recent comparisons of academic achievement (i.e., reading, math, and language) and socio-emotional adjustment (i.e., emotional adjustment, peer competence, problem behaviors, attendance and self-esteem) between retained and matched comparison students, reported in 19 studies published during the 1990s, yielded negative effects of grade retention across all areas of achievement and socio-emotional adjustment (Jimerson, 2001).

Research also fails to find significant differences between groups of students retained early (kindergarten through 3rd grade) or later (4th through 8th grades). What is most important is that, across studies, retention at any grade level is associated with later high school dropout, as well as other deleterious long-term effects.

Typically, the test scores of students who are retained in the primary grades may increase for a couple of years and then decline below those of their equally low-achieving but socially promoted

peers. The temporary benefits of retention are deceptive, as teachers do not usually follow student progress beyond a few years.

Long-term outcomes: Studies examining student adjustment and achievement through high school and beyond report assorted negative outcomes associated with grade retention. When comparing retained students with similarly under-achieving but promoted peers, research indicates that retained students have lower levels of academic adjustment in 11th grade and are more likely to drop out of high school by age 19 (Jimerson, 1999). In fact, retention was found to be one of the most powerful predictors of high school dropout, with retained students 2 to 11 times more likely to drop out of high school than promoted students (Jimerson, Anderson, & Whipple, 2002). Furthermore, the retained students are less likely to receive a high school diploma by age 20, receive poorer educational competence ratings, and are also less likely to be enrolled in post-secondary education of any kind. These youth also receive lower educational and employment status ratings and are paid less per hour at age 20 (Jimerson, 1999).

Impact of Retention on Student Mental Health

As teachers and administrators are pressured to implement policies designed to "end social promotion," students are threatened with retention if they do not meet academic standards or perform above specified percentiles on standardized tests. It is unclear if this threat is effective in motivating students to work harder. However, this pressure may be increasing children's stress levels regarding their academic achievement. Surveys of children's ratings of twenty stressful life events in the 1980s showed that, by the time they were in 6th grade, children feared retention most after the loss of a parent and going blind. When this study was replicated in 2001, 6th grade students rated grade retention as the single most stressful life event, higher than the loss of a parent or going blind (Anderson, Jimerson, & Whipple, 2002). This finding is likely influenced by the pressures imposed by standards-based testing programs that often rely on test scores to determine promotion and graduation.

Analysis of multiple studies of retention indicate that retained students experience lower self esteem and lower rates of school attendance, relative to promoted peers (Jimerson, 2001). Both of these factors are further predictive of dropping out of school. Indirectly, low self-esteem and poor school attendance influence adult outcomes. Students who ultimately drop out of school without a diploma face considerable difficulty finding and maintaining employment for self-sufficiency and experience higher rates of mental health problems, chemical abuse and criminal activities than do high school graduates.

Why Retention Is a Failed Intervention

There are several explanations for the negative effects associated with grade retention, including:

- absence of specific remedial strategies to enhance social or cognitive competence
- failure to address the risk factors associated with retention (short-term gains following retention mask long-term problems associated with ineffective instruction)
- retained children are subsequently overage for grade, which is associated with deleterious outcomes, particularly as retained children approach middle school and puberty (stigmatization by peers and other negative experiences of grade retention may exacerbate behavioral and socio-emotional adjustment problems)

Alternative Actions

Early identification (through assessment) for prevention and intervention is essential, whenever a student is struggling. Several school-based supports have been found to be effective in assisting children with educational difficulties. These include various reading programs, summer school and

more direct instruction (teacher to student). Tutoring, well-designed homework activities and after-school programs have also been demonstrated to be beneficial. Other helpful strategies include encouraging parents to communicate regularly with the school and to become involved through attending student study team (SST) meetings, participating in training programs and exploring behavior management strategies if appropriate. Most important is to advocate for implementation of educational interventions that are supported by research first, continue monitoring the child's achievement trajectory, and then revisit the progress made. A coordinated system of comprehensive support services aimed at addressing the academic, socio-emotional, behavioral and psychological needs of the child will help promote healthy adjustment and achievement among children at risk for grade retention.

When weighing the pros and cons of a decision to retain or promote a student, it is critical to emphasize to educators and parents that a century of research has failed to demonstrate the benefits of grade retention over promotion to the next grade for any group of students. Instead, we must focus on implementing evidence-based prevention and intervention strategies to promote social and cognitive competence and facilitate the academic success of all students.

References and Resources

Anderson, G. E., Jimerson, S. R., & Whipple, A.D. (2002). Children's ratings of stressful experiences at home and school: Loss of a parent and grade retention as superlative stressors. Manuscript prepared for publication, available from authors at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

Jimerson, S. R. (1999). On the failure of failure: Examining the association between early grade retention and education and employment outcomes during late adolescence. *Journal of School Psychology, 37*, 243–272

Jimerson, S. R. (2001). Meta-analysis of grade retention research: Implications for practice in the 21st century. *School Psychology Review, 30,* 313–330.

Jimerson, S. R., Anderson, G. E., & Whipple, A. D. (2002). Winning the battle and losing the war: Examining the relation between grade retention and dropping out of high school. *Psychology in the Schools, 39,* 441–457.

National Association of School Psychologists — *www.nasponline.org*

Shepard, L.A. & Smith, M. L. (Eds.) (1989). *Flunking grades: Research and policies on retention.* London: The Falmer Press. (See chapter by C.T. Holmes, pp. 16–33.)

Shane R. Jimerson, Ph.D., NCSP, is a professor at the University of California Santa Barbara school psychology program where Gabrielle E. Anderson and Angela D. Whipple are doctoral students.

This article originally provided by NASP to The Guidance Channel (www.guidancechannel.com) *and posted on their Therapy and Counseling page, July 2002.*