



NATIONAL
ASSOCIATION OF
SCHOOL
PSYCHOLOGISTS

Position Statement

GRADE RETENTION AND SOCIAL PROMOTION

Although retaining students who fail to meet grade level standards has limited empirical support, promoting students to the next grade when they have not mastered the curriculum of their current grade, a practice termed social promotion, is not an educationally sound alternative. For these reasons, the debate over the dichotomy between grade retention and social promotion must be replaced with efforts to identify and disseminate evidence-based practices that promote academic success for students whose academic skills are below grade level standards. NASP urges educators to use methods other than grade retention and social promotion to ensure that all students have access to effective and equitable education.

Grade retention in U.S. schools has a long history characterized by fluctuations in the frequency and application of this educational practice. The majority of studies conducted over the past four decades on the effectiveness of grade retention fail to support its efficacy in remediating academic deficits (e.g., Jimerson, 2001). However, because students are not randomly assigned to this intervention, a failure to adequately control for pre-existing differences between retained and promoted students that may affect students' academic and social-emotional trajectories leaves open the possibility that pre-existing vulnerabilities rather than retention per se may be the cause of poor post-retention outcomes. Consistent with this possibility, recent studies utilizing more rigorous methods to control for selection effects are less likely to report negative effects (e.g., Hong & Yu, 2008; Wu, West, & Hughes, 2008; Hughes, Chen, Thoemmes, & Kwok, 2010). Retention effects also vary depending on whether retained and promoted students are compared at the same grade or the same age. When retained and promoted peers are compared at the same age, retained students achieve at a slower rate. When retained and promoted peers are compared in the same grade, retained students experience a short-term boost that dissipates within 4 years (Wu et al., 2008). When the measure of achievement is closely aligned with the curriculum, as in the case of state accountability testing, retention bestows short-term benefits (Hughes et al., 2010) but there is no evidence of long-term benefits for students.

ALTERNATIVES TO RETENTION AND SOCIAL PROMOTION

NASP encourages school psychologists to collaborate actively with other professionals by assuming leadership roles in their school districts to implement models of service delivery that ensure:

- Multitiered problem-solving models to provide early and intensive evidence-based instruction and intervention to meet the needs of all students across academic, behavioral, and social-emotional domains
- Equitable opportunities to learn for students from diverse backgrounds
- Universal screening for academic, behavioral, and social-emotional difficulties
- Frequent progress monitoring and evaluation of interventions

Furthermore, NASP urges schools to maximize students' opportunities to learn both in and outside of school through effective teacher professional development and extended day/year programs. Grade retention is a costly intervention with questionable benefits to students because, for students who attended school regularly, having them repeat the same grade with the same instruction will yield no improvement for the student. Except in very rare circumstances when a student has missed a large number of school days, grade retention and social promotion are not recommended. Instead, students whose performance is substantially below their grade level peers need an intensive individualized intervention plan with frequent progress monitoring and involvement with specialists and related services providers, in order to ensure the maximum benefit for the student.

Additional information concerning grade retention and social promotion practices can be found in the following NASP documents:

- NASP White Paper on Student Grade Retention and Social Promotion
- NASP Position Statement on Appropriate Academic Supports to Meet the Needs of All Students
- NASP Position Statement on Appropriate Behavioral, Social, and Emotional Supports to Meet the Needs of All Students

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- Wu, W., West, S. G., & Hughes, J. N. (2008). Effect of retention in first grade on children's achievement trajectories over four years: A piecewise growth analysis using propensity score matching. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 100*, 727-740.

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NATIONAL
ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL
PSYCHOLOGISTS
4340 East West Highway, Suite 402
Bethesda, MD 20814
(301) 657-0270
(301) 657-0275, fax
(301) 657-4155, TTY
www.nasponline.org



White Paper

GRADE RETENTION AND SOCIAL PROMOTION

The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) promotes the use of interventions that are evidence-based and effective and that promote the educational attainment of America's children and youth. NASP urges schools to prevent the need for dichotomous choices between grade retention and social promotion by instead implementing systems that permit early identification of academic difficulties and that ensure individualized, evidence-based remediation plans with frequent progress monitoring for students who fall below grade level expectations. When students continue to perform below grade level standards and other causes for failure are ruled out (e.g., handicapping condition, limited English proficiency), and the student is retained in grade, the retention intervention must offer more than a "repeat" of the previous year's instruction.

Grade retention in U.S. schools has a long history characterized by fluctuations in the frequency and application of this educational practice. These fluctuations reflect shifts in educators' and policy makers' beliefs about the effectiveness of grade retention and the conditions under which it should be applied. Because no institution or agency tracks national data on the frequency of grade retention, precise estimates of changes in frequency across decades are not available. According to the U.S. National Center for Education Statistics (2006), in 2004, 9.6% of youth ages 16–19 had ever been retained in grade. This represents a decrease from 16.1% in 1995. Of great concern is the fact that the highest retention rates are found among poor, minority, and inner-city youth.

The majority of studies conducted over the past four decades on the effectiveness of grade retention fail to support its efficacy in remediating academic deficits (Jimerson, 2001a). However, because students are not randomly assigned to this intervention, a failure to adequately control for pre-existing differences between retained and promoted students that may affect students' academic and social-emotional trajectories leaves open the possibility that pre-existing vulnerabilities rather than retention per se may be the cause of poor post-retention outcomes. Consistent with this possibility, recent studies utilizing more rigorous methods to control for selection effects are less likely to report negative effects (e.g., Hong & Yu, 2008; Wu, West, & Hughes, 2008; Hughes, Chen, Thoemmes, & Kwok, 2010).

Retention effects also vary depending on whether retained and promoted students are compared at the same grade or the same age. When retained and promoted peers are compared at the same age, retained students achieve at a slower rate. When retained and promoted peers are compared in the same grade, retained students experience a short-term boost that dissipates within 4 years (Wu et al., 2008). Finally, when the measure of achievement is closely aligned with the curriculum, as in the case of state accountability testing, retention bestows short-term benefits (Hughes et al., 2010).

Although retaining students who fail to meet grade level standards has limited empirical support, promoting students to the next grade when they have not mastered the curriculum of their current grade, a practice termed social promotion, is not an educationally sound alternative. For these reasons, the debate over the dichotomy between grade retention and social promotion must be replaced with

efforts to identify and disseminate evidence-based practices that promote academic success for students whose academic skills are below grade level standards. The best alternative to grade retention and social promotion is early identification of students who are not meeting grade expectations and the provision of individualized, accelerated instruction utilizing evidence-based instructional practices and frequent progress monitoring.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Researchers have attempted to assess the effects of grade retention on achievement for more than three decades (for meta-analytic reviews, see Holmes, 1989; Jimerson, 2001a; for narrative reviews, see Jimerson, 2001b; Shepard, Smith, & Marion, 1996; Sipple, Killeen, & Monk, 2004). The unanimous conclusion from these reviews is that grade retention offers few if any benefits to the retained student and may increase the retained child's risk for poor school outcomes, including dropping out of school prior to high school graduation. For example, in a meta-analysis of 18 studies published from 1990 to 1999, Jimerson (2001a) reported retained students achieved at a lower level than promoted peers (average effect size of $-.39$). However, most of the studies included in these reviews are plagued by significant methodological limitations, the most important being lack of a comparison group of promoted peers equivalent prior to retention on achievement and other variables predictive of achievement.

A recent meta-analysis of 207 achievement effects nested in 22 studies published from 1990 to 2007 (Allen, Chen, Willson, & Hughes, 2009) determined that studies that used higher quality controls for selection effects (i.e., pre-retention differences between students selected for retention intervention and promoted peers) resulted in less negative effects for retention. Specifically, studies employing adequate to good methodological designs yielded effect sizes not statistically significantly different from zero. This study also found that effect sizes differed based on whether retained and promoted students were compared when they were the same age or in the same grade; retention effects were less negative (or more positive) when same grade comparisons were employed. Retained students often show a sharp improvement, relative to promoted peers, in meeting grade level standards during the repeat year, when retained students are exposed to a familiar curriculum; however, this improvement often disappears 2 to 3 years subsequent to retention (Alexander, Entwisle, & Dauber, 2003; Wu et al., 2008). Some researchers have argued that same grade comparisons are more consistent with the purpose of retention, which is to provide students the opportunity to be more successful in meeting the academic demands of future grades (Karweit, 1999; Lorence, 2006).

Several recent studies utilizing modern propensity score methods to control for possible selection bias corroborate the recent meta-analytic findings (Hong & Yu, 2008; Wu et al., 2008). A propensity score is a conditional probability of being assigned to the retention intervention. Propensity scores offer a parsimonious way of reducing bias because it generates a single index—the propensity score—that summarizes information across many possible confounds. Wu et al. (2008) found that the effect of retention in first grade on growth in achievement differs in the short term (1–2 years) and longer term (2–4 years). Furthermore, the effects differ depending on whether achievement is assessed relative to one's grade placement or one's age. When using age-based scores, retained children experienced a slower increase in both mathematics and reading achievement in the short term but a faster increase in reading achievement in the longer term than the propensity-matched promoted children. When using grade standard scores, retained children experienced a faster increase in the short term, but a faster

decrease in the longer term in both mathematics and reading achievement than promoted children. In a second study with this same sample, students retained in first grade were more likely to obtain a passing score on the third grade state accountability tests in reading and math than were propensity matched promoted students (Hughes et al., 2010).

Many studies have examined effects of retention on social–emotional adjustment. Whereas previous meta-analyses of these studies documented negative effects of retention on social–emotional adjustment (Jimerson, 2001a), more recent studies employing propensity matching methods yield a less negative view of retention effects (Hong & Yu, 2008; Wu, West, & Hughes, 2010) on hyperactivity, internalizing behaviors, classroom engagement, peer acceptance, and academic self-efficacy, at least in the shorter-term.

Largely missing from research on grade retention are studies of how retention (or social promotion) is implemented. Too often, grade retention just means repeating the prior year’s experience (Peterson & Hughes, in press; Picklo & Christenson, 2005). States that have linked retention to performance on grade level accountability tests have passed legislation requiring additional accelerated instruction to students at-risk for retention and to students who are retained in grade. Examples include Texas (Texas Education Agency, 2009) and Florida (Florida Department of Education, 2002). However, systems to monitor implementation of these regulations are virtually nonexistent (Powell, 2007).

WHO IS RETAINED AND AT WHAT FINANCIAL COST?

A number of student characteristics have been associated with selection into grade retention, including racial or ethnic minority membership, males, delayed development, attention or behavior problems, poverty or single-parent household, low parental educational attainment, and student mobility (Jimerson, Carlson, Rotert, Egeland, & Sroufe, 1997; McCoy & Reynolds, 1999). Most educators agree that the most important consideration in retaining a student should be the student’s performance relative to grade level expectations. One consequence of increased use of accountability tests that are aligned with grade level competencies may be that retention decisions are less likely to be based on student characteristics other than grade level proficiencies (Willson & Hughes, 2009).

Grade retention is an expensive intervention. Using Texas as an example, the estimated cost of retaining 202,099 students (4.8% of total students enrolled) during the 2006–2007 year, based on the average per student yearly expenditure of \$10,162 that year, was more than 2 billion dollars.

ALTERNATIVES TO RETENTION AND SOCIAL PROMOTION

Neither repeating a grade nor merely moving on to the next grade provides students with the supports they need to improve academic and social skills. Holding schools accountable for student progress requires effective intervention strategies that provide educational opportunities and assistance to promote the social and cognitive development of students. Recognizing the cumulative developmental effects on student success at school, both early interventions and follow-up strategies are emphasized. Furthermore, in acknowledging the reciprocal influence of social and cognitive skills on academic success, effective interventions must be implemented to promote both social and cognitive competence of students. NASP encourages school districts to consider a wide array of well-researched, evidence-based, effective, and responsive strategies in lieu of retention or social promotion (see Algozzine, Ysseldyke, & Elliott, 2002 for a discussion of research-based tactics for effective instruction; see

Epstein, Atkins, Cullinan, Kutash, & Weaver, 2008; and Evertson, Emmer, & Worsham, 2006 for a more extensive discussion of interventions for academic and behavior problems; see Shinn & Walker, 2010 for guidance in implementing classroom-based interventions within a multitiered model of service delivery).

NASP supports the use of multitiered problem-solving models, often referred to as response to intervention (RTI), to provide evidence-based instruction and intervention to meet the needs of all students across academic, behavioral, and social-emotional domains (NASP, 2009a, 2009b). Elements of these models include: a first, or universal, tier focused on high quality instruction and support for appropriate student behavior and school-wide screening for academic and behavioral difficulties; a second tier that provides more intensive academic or behavioral support; and a third tier for the delivery of more intensive, individualized support for students based on their progress and needs. Progress monitoring data are collected across tiers and used to inform decisions regarding student need and support (Fletcher & Vaughan, 2009). The core components of RTI, namely, evidence-based instruction and intervention, screening, and progress monitoring, will likely reduce the need for educators to choose between two undesirable options, grade retention and social promotion, to meet the needs of students who are struggling to meet grade-level academic and behavioral standards.

Of critical importance to the prevention of grade retention or social promotion is effective classroom instruction in general education (Tier 1). Effective classroom instruction has been defined in terms of the provision of opportunities for students to learn (Pianta et al., 2007). Opportunities to learn, in turn, are defined in terms of specific instructional practices that can be observed reliably and are empirically related to student academic growth (Mashburn et al., 2008). At the elementary level, opportunities to learn are greater in classrooms that (a) are well managed and that provide students with social and emotional support; (b) provide instruction that is responsive to students' needs and that promotes higher level thinking skills; and (c) provide high quality, frequent feedback to students on their performance (Hamre & Pianta, 2005; Pianta et al., 2007). Opportunity to learn outside of school is also crucial to understanding students' academic progress and in efforts to close the achievement gap among various racial/ethnic subgroups (Brooks-Gunn & Markman, 2005).

Increasing students' opportunities to learn at school will require an increased emphasis on intensive, evidence-based approaches to teacher professional development. Effective practices involve teachers as active participants and provide (a) opportunities for teachers to observe effective teaching practices; (b) opportunities to enact practices in real-life practice settings; and (c) context-embedded, responsive feedback and support to teachers as they adopt practices (Murray, 2005; Pianta, Mashburn, Downer, Hamre, & Justice, 2008). Of concern is that the least effective model of teacher professional development, one-time workshops removed from practice settings in which teachers are passive recipients of information, are the most frequently used in schools (Sandholtz, 2002).

Opportunities for students to learn prior to school entrance and outside of the school day/year is another critical consideration for promoting student competence, particularly among those who are most at risk for forms of educational failure, such as grade retention and dropout. Studies have shown students who attended high quality preschool programs, such as Child Parent Centers and Perry Preschool, demonstrated lower rates of grade retention, special education placement, and dropout (Reynolds, 2001). Many after-school and summer programs which include focused instruction aim to address disparities in opportunity to learn and can be effective in raising student achievement among at-

risk students (Lauer et al., 2006), thereby reducing the need for grade retention as a means of addressing students' difficulties.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For children experiencing academic, emotional, or behavioral difficulties, neither repeating the same instruction another year nor promoting the student to the next grade is an effective remedy. NASP encourages school psychologists to collaborate actively with other professionals by assuming leadership roles in their school districts to implement models of service delivery that ensure:

- Multitiered problem-solving models to provide early and intensive evidence-based instruction and intervention to meet the needs of all students across academic, behavioral, and social-emotional domains
- Equitable opportunities to learn for students from diverse backgrounds
- Universal screening for academic, behavioral, and social-emotional difficulties
- Frequent progress monitoring and evaluation of interventions

Furthermore, NASP urges schools to maximize students' opportunities to learn both in and outside of school through effective teacher professional development and extended day/year programs. Finally, grade retention is a costly intervention with questionable benefits to students. If it is necessary to retain a student in grade, an intensive individualized intervention plan and frequent progress monitoring should be employed to ensure the maximum benefit for the student.

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PSYCHOLOGISTS
4340 East West Highway, Suite 402
Bethesda, MD 20814
(301) 657-0270
(301) 657-0275, fax
(301) 657-4155, TTY
www.nasponline.org

BULLET POINTS FOR HB 5111 TESTIMONY---MASP

November 13, 2013

Introductions

—Dr. Cheryl Somers—

- PhD school and counseling psychology
- Associate Professor at WSU in Educational Psychology/School Psychology
- Practicing as a School Psychologist since 1993 and currently in a LSD
- Serve on MASP board as University Relations Liaison and Professional Standards representative.

Our general position on the proposed bill

—The Michigan Association of School Psychologists opposes HB 5111 as introduced, both because of research regarding grade retention and our professional experiences.

—We believe that the bill sponsor has a goal that we whole-heartedly support. We agree w/ the intentions of the bill—to be sure that all students who go into 4th grade can read to learn and digest the complexities of content-area curriculum (science, social studies, advanced literature-based E/LA, etc.).

—However, state-mandated grade retention is not the answer to solving this very important problem.

Research base against grade retention as a general practice

—Decades of research have collectively and clearly demonstrated that, overall, retention is not an effective means for academic remediation, which is the #1 reason for retention....

* It is linked to higher probability of drop out and poorer employment outcomes during late adolescence (There is a multitude of research)

* It is found to have no lasting academic benefits (multitude of research). A recent Harvard study found that even Florida, which institutionalized this retention policy, and who found

short term gains, learned that the effects don't hold long term. Any short term gains are primarily due to the fact that when you start over in a grade you are at an advantage in the beginning. The students ended up where they started, which was behind.

Any short term gains are better explained by the RTI practices in those districts, which should be started young and continued K-12. Interventions often wane after mid-elementary school.

Case law decisions

—Courts have rules on this as well. Although courts have generally stayed out of grade retention decisions, a precedent setting ruling (Sandlin v Johnson, 1981) did establish that it must be purposeful and not arbitrary. Instead it must be related to the purpose of providing appropriate instruction and furthering education. Furthermore, it was ruled that any

disproportionate impact on minorities may be scrutinized more closely. We are sure to have disproportionate representation of minorities in those grade retained due to poverty that strikes our minorities disproportionately.

—Moreover, there are things that are far more cost effective than the foundation allowance cost would be.

Conclusions

—Overall, it is unequivocal that there are harmful unintended consequences---statutory mandatory retention is not the answer; but there **are** some things that work.....

Alternatives to grade retention

—Early intervention is critical! All literature on alternatives point directly to this. We have to focus on *System Accountability* (e.g., Picklo & Christenson), and stop perpetuating *Student Accountability*.

—This requires deeper systems change. We have to explicitly look at the children’s skill levels every year and make sure that they are meeting THAT year’s benchmarks. There is no ideal time to set a “cut off” by which children should be reading. We have to set standards and allocate financial supports for ensuring that youth meet early literacy benchmarks in Kindergarten, and then the next benchmarks for 1st grade, then the next ones for 2nd grade, and so on.

—This is the spirit of the RTI process that other states have put into place. Put resources into K-1 reading intervention. There are steps that you can take that will work to ensure that at the end of EACH grade level the children are developing critical foundational reading skills that accumulate over time.

More details about what we need to do instead.....

--Solid core instruction in Kindergarten should focus heavily on phonemic awareness (PA). There is ample literature on Evidence-Based Practices (EBPs) for teaching PA. Tier II intervention would, in turn, utilize any number of research-based interventions for PA. Examples: IES.gov, FCRR, MCRR all have excellent lists.

--Solid core intervention in 1st grade should focus heavily on phonics and beginning fluency. There is ample literature on EBPs for teaching phonics. Again, Tier II intervention would, in turn, focus explicitly on phonics.

--Solid core intervention in 2nd grade should focus heavily on oral reading fluency. And beginning comprehension.

--From 3rd grade onward, we continue to work on word reading/decoding *while simultaneously* teaching comprehension of more complex text, including the vocabulary necessary to support comprehension.

--Schools need to make this happen deliberately, sequentially, and with fidelity, as this is necessary for it to work. They *must* progress monitor frequently. They *must* analyze that data and use it to make instructional changes.

--Schools will point out that they need *some* level of resources in order to do it. Schools also need to choose different practices that will allow for intensive core and tier II instruction.

--It is not the child's fault when by 3rd grade he/she is not reading proficiently. He/she should not be penalized for not yet having learned how to read.

--You have to change Michigan's instructional infrastructure first!!!

Additional points and Practical Application/Observations from the Field

See John Clay's statement

Conclusion

I greatly appreciate your time and your consideration of our points. I would be happy to answer any questions. And MASP would be happy to provide input and collaborate on the development of alternatives to meet what we think are ultimate goals of this legislation.

CASE HISTORY AND PRACTITIONER COMMENTS ON HB 5111

BY JOHN CLAY, Regional Director for Michigan Association of School Psychologists- 11/13/13

Background: John Clay became a school psychologist in 1977 and has worked since then in a variety of districts and clinical settings over the years, including Dearborn Public Schools and the Henry Ford Academy.

It is far more cost-effective to do Tier II interventions than add a year of school for the child, without the potential negative impact. In my professional experience, I have observed that the three factors below often have a negative impact on student MEAP scores and believe they would likewise negatively impact student tests scores on whatever test replaces the MEAP:

- 1) **Handicapping conditions**, especially for students who are blind, deaf, or learning disabled
- 2) **Recent immigration**, particularly for children whose families have been refugees and always for those who arrive as non English speakers.
- 3) **Situational Conditions** which can cause a poor MEAP score even if the teacher can verify the student can read at the third grade level:
 - Death in the family
 - Home burned down
 - Death threat against family
 - Sick the day they take the reading MEAP
 - Lost their reading glasses on test day

Case Study

The following case illustrates how a multi-tiered, collaborative, problem-solving model was used to provide intensive research-based interventions to meet the needs of a student across academic, cultural, and emotional domains. This model is often referred to as Response to Intervention or RTI:

BACKGROUND

Mohammed's parents came to Dearborn from the Middle East where they had spent a number of years in refugee camps. Even though the family had been in the US for a number of years, they spoke very little English. Mohammed was born in the US. He came to my school in second grade from another district. His English was poor and his academic skills were well below grade level. Dad had suffered emotional and physical trauma in the refugee camps and was not able to work. The family had very few resources.

TIER 1

When Mohammed enrolled in my school he was placed in a regular classroom as a new student. The teacher quickly recognized Mohammed's limitations. We assessed Mohammed's language skills and found that he was a limited English speaker. His academic skills were assessed and his reading was found to be at the kindergarten level. His family was interviewed and it was learned that they were experiencing a number of emotional and economic stressors.

TIER 2

Mohammed was given bilingual classes to improve his English skills. When his English skills became stronger he was given Reading Recovery during the school day. Reading Recovery is a researched based reading intervention. He was also given School Social Work services to help him cope with the stressors at home and at school.

The school called in ACCESS, the local human services agency, which provided wrap around services to Mohammed's family to assist in resolving their physical, economic and emotional problems.

Mohammed's progress was regularly monitored and the interventions were adjusted as indicated. As Mohammed's English skills became stronger, bilingual services were faded. Through the efforts of ACCESS, his family situation became more stable. Mohammed's coping skills improved and School Social Work services were no longer necessary. By 5th grade he was reading at grade level and no longer needed support services.

