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# An Investigation of Student Retention Practices and Development of a Proposed School Retention Policy for the Beecher City, Illinois School District

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An Investigation of Student Retention Practices  
And Development of a Proposed School  
Retention Policy  
For the Beecher City, Illinois School District

By

*Douglas C. Heiden*

**FIELD EXPERIENCE**

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF

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IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY  
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1998  
YEAR

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## Abstract

The purposes of the study were to investigate student retention policies and practices in selected elementary schools in the Beecher City, Illinois, area and to develop a proposed school retention policy for the Beecher City School District where the author was employed as an elementary school principal. The issue of student retention has been debated across the country for decades. The review of literature and research found mixed evidence concerning the effectiveness of student retention. Since retention is an age-old practice, an historical review of literature was included to inform the reader of progression of the practice of retention in schools. After investigating the respondents' retention practices, the author developed a policy on retention for the Beecher City School District.

Information on student retention practices and policies was collected through the development of a survey document that was sent to 42 elementary principals in the Beecher City, Illinois, area. Thirty-four principals returned the questionnaire for an 81% response rate. Schools whose principals answered the survey had a combined enrollment of 10,380.

Results showed that a very low number of students were retained in the schools whose principals responded to the survey. A larger number of boys were retained than girls,

and a large number of schools retained no students. Results also showed that a high number of students receiving free lunch were retained. Less than one-half of the surveyed schools had developed a policy on retention. With a remarkably low number of students retained, most retentions were the result of a philosophy or guidelines.

Fewer than 50% of the schools surveyed had a formal policy. Schools without a formal policy followed essentially the same procedures as those with a formal policy. Approximately one-third of the principals thought that retention led to later academic success. Only 18% of the principals surveyed believed that the teacher should make the final decision on retention.

The review of literature for the study revealed that most educators disagree with the practice of retention. Results of this study indicated slightly more than half of the principals favored retention, however 36% of the principals responding to the survey indicated that they believed that little academic progress was achieved by retaining a student.

Finally, as a result of information received from the completed questionnaires, a retention policy for Beecher City Unit School District #20 was developed by the author. The policy was presented to the Beecher City Unit 20 Curriculum and Policy Committee for adoption.

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## Chapter 1 Overview of the Study

Grade level retention of students is a practice which continues across the country as educational reform proponents advocate greater accountability by educators. The practice of retaining students is supported by historical use and public belief. While some school district policies sanction retention, many educators question its value. Retention could have adverse effects on achievement, social adjustment, attitudes toward school, and drop out rates.

District policies should promote and guide administrative and teacher actions. The author believes that formal retention policies are essential to prevent inconsistent, discriminatory, or haphazard retention practices from occurring.

Not all school districts recognize the importance of formal policy; some address retention through informal administrative procedures or on a case-by-case basis. Some principals handle all possible retentions in this manner (Shepherd & Smith, 1985). In order to develop a retention policy for the Beecher City School District, where the author was employed as an elementary school principal, there was a need to investigate existing policies and practices in the surrounding area.



### Purposes of the Study

The purposes of this study were to investigate student retention practices in selected elementary schools in the Beecher City, Illinois, area and to develop a proposed school retention policy for the Beecher City School District.

The specific objectives of the study are:

1. To examine policy of small rural elementary schools in the areas surrounding Beecher City to see if there is any correlation as to why students are retained.
2. To determine if demographic features such as age, gender, grade level, social status, or race have any relationship to who is being retained.
3. To utilize the information gathered from surveys and literature review to develop a proposal for the best retention policy to be used by the Beecher City School District.
4. To offer the findings and the sample policy to the participants of the survey.

### Background

Every year some students in the Beecher City District are recommended for retention. Student retention has been a major topic of discussion at principals' meetings in the Beecher City area.

The subject of retention, in conjunction with a new

emphasis being placed on standards, outcomes, and student performance, has been reviewed by the teaching staff at Beecher City Elementary School. However, no resolution to the grade retention question was reached.

#### Significance

Student retention is an issue currently being debated by educators across the county. With the new Illinois Academic Standards, public citizens, the business community, and political advocates have demanded greater accountability by schools.

Many surveys of parents, teachers, and principals have been conducted to determine their views on retention. In general, results have indicated that retention is a strongly recommended practice in many communities. Even the sample Academic Achievement Promotion, Retention and Remediation Policy (section 655.06), developed by the Illinois Association of School Boards in 1988 states: "Promotion from grade to grade for purely social reasons is discouraged." (I.A.S.B., 1988)

#### Definition of Terms

The following terms are defined for the purpose of this study.

Academic Achievement. Knowledge attained or skills developed in the school subjects, usually designated by test scores or by marks assigned by teachers, or both.

Failure. The lack of success on the part of a student in the accomplishment of the work of a school subject or grade which can result in nonpromotion of the student.

Flunk. The informal term used to describe retention or nonpromotion.

Maturation. The physical and psychological growth that occurs during childhood and adolescence as a function of individual changes rather than educational or environmental influences.

Policy. A plan or course of action, usually in written form, adopted by the board of education of a school district to guide and determine present and future decisions.

Promotion. The school's action of advancing a student to the next higher grade level at the end of the school year.

Readiness. The ability of a person to profit from some experience. Developmentally and cognitively, a student can benefit from instruction (e.g., reading readiness).

Retention. Synonymous with nonpromotion; the act of not allowing a student to be promoted and requiring that the student repeat the curricular requirements of the current grade level the following school year.

Self-Esteem. A judgment an individual reaches and maintains regarding his/her personal worth.

Self-Concept. A person's view of himself/herself; the

perception of a person as an object of his/her own self-knowledge and feelings.

Social Promotion. The action taken by the school in advancing the student at the end of the school year to the next higher grade level, not based upon academic performance, but rather the maintenance of social relationships with age mates.

#### Limitations of the Study

1. This study was limited by the number of returned policies secured from the schools solicited.

2. Only nonpromotional data from public elementary schools in the Beecher City, Illinois, area were utilized. Other areas of the state and other grade levels were not evaluated in the study.

The setting of the study was the elementary schools in the area that surrounds Beecher City, Illinois. A primary factor for this limitation is the author's familiarity with that area. A secondary factor in limiting the study to this geographic area was the desire of the author to develop a model retention policy that could be used in his school district and shared with the area schools.

#### Assumptions

It was assumed that the respondents would be honest in their replies and knowledgeable about the current retention policies and practices prevalent in their school districts

in order for accurate data to be obtained. It was also assumed that the data collected would be useful to the author in developing a proposed retention policy for the Beecher City Schools.

## Chapter 2

### Review of Related Literature and Research

Retention, the practice of requiring low-achieving students to repeat the requirements of a grade level, has fluctuated in and out of favor over the last 200 years. This practice has been prevalent in the United States since the 1800s (Medway, Rose, Cantrell, & Marus, 1983). During the 1930s, retention practices fell out of popularity and a new educational strategy was implemented. This practice, known as social promotion, was intended to keep students with their age-appropriate peers. With the "school reform" and "competency movement," an emphasis was placed on developing standards and outcomes that place demands on students to meet these requirements. Therefore, the subject of retention has been revived and brought to the forefront (Sherwood, 1993).

Many students have been retained by the use of policies based upon deep-seeded beliefs and long-established practices. A rigorous adherence to grade level promotional standards and reliance on the threat of retention is hypothesized to improve the achievement of individual students in two ways. First, if there is a negative consequence for failing to achieve, students are to be more diligent in their academic pursuits. Second, failing students have another opportunity to acquire necessary

skills by repeating and practicing them again (Smith & Shepard, 1987).

According to Smith and Shepard, "Retentions are a way of recycling pupils through material that administrators demand be mastered and certified at a given grade level. Thus, retentions represent a response to the accountability culture and factory model of school" (1989, p. 2).

The supporters of nonpromotion utilize the arguments that retentions allow students to catch up, grow up socially, become more mature, develop better skills, or become leaders during the retained year. However, retention research literature over the years offers little support that retention is a sound practice (Smith & Shepard, 1989). Specifically, the research in this area indicates the following:

1. Retention does not ensure significant gains in achievement. Any improvements in achievement are usually temporary, and some studies indicate an adverse effect, both short and long term (Holmes, 1989).

2. Retention does not improve academic achievement or emotional adjustment for developmentally immature students (Smith & Shepard, 1989).

3. Retention has an overall negative effect on social adjustment, emotional adjustment, behavior, self-concept, attitudes toward school, and attendance (Holmes, 1989).

4. Retention increases the probability of dropping out of school, even when background, sex, and achievement are controlled (Grissom & Shepard, 1989).

5. Retention may discriminate against male, economically deprived, black, Hispanic, and younger students (Abidin, Golladay, & Howerton, 1971).

Why does the practice of student retention continue even though there are decades of research to contradict its supposed benefits? Retention continues to be supported by public opinion and sanctioned by district policies (Elam, Rose, & Gallup, 1992). Grade repetition is considered to help students who have poor work habits, are immature, or lack basic skills. Having the practice of retention as a viable option in the educational process has support among professional educators and parents. The results of a survey by Byrnes and Yamamoto indicated that 64% of teachers and 74% of principals felt that student retention should be available for use. Fifty-nine percent of parents supported retention for students who did not meet grade level requirements. The lack of basic skills was cited as the number one reason justifying retention (1986).

Public support for accountability of schools and public opinion against the philosophy of social promotion were assessed by the 24th Annual Poll of the Public's Attitude Toward the Public Schools, sponsored by Phi Delta Kappa and



conducted by the Gallup Organization in April and May, 1992. Public opinion continues to oppose promotion from one grade to the next unless students can pass examinations which are curriculum related and grade appropriate. Opinion on this issue has not changed appreciably since it was first asked in 1987 (Elam, Rose, & Gallup, 1992). Public sentiment is against social promotion.

Historically, retention can be traced to 1925, when it was estimated that 35,000 to 40,000 students were failed in Chicago alone (Rogers, 1983). In a survey conducted between 1928 and 1931 and reported in The Elementary School Journal, the amount of nonpromotion varied from 4.9% in Utah to 16.7% in Virginia (Edwards, 1933).

Retention continued to be a common practice until the 1930s when it was challenged by social scientists who questioned the side or adverse effects of retention on students' social or emotional development (Afinson, 1941).

In the 1960s and 1970s, many educators attributed declining scores on achievement tests to a deterioration of academic standards and social promotion practices. The reinstating of stricter promotion standards and the condoning of retention practices were advocated as ways of ensuring academic integrity. However, research studies failed to support the effectiveness of implementing stricter promotion standards (Goodlad, 1982).

As more liberal and child-centered practices were advocated, social promotion began to increase. Over the next three decades, social promotion became the standard prescription for grade school children needing the next grade to maintain social relationships (Hall & Demarest, 1958).

In 1975, Jackson analyzed 44 studies on grade retention, but found that the research was too poor to draw any definite conclusions. In summary, he wrote, "Thus those educators who retain pupils in a grade do so without valid research evidence to indicate that such treatment will provide greater benefits to students with academic or adjustment difficulties than will promotion to the next grade" (p. 627).

Over the years, retention decisions have been based on deficiencies or poor performance in the following areas: academic, social, emotional, maturation, behavior, physical, and school attendance (Jackson, 1975).

In 1977, Light, a California psychologist, developed the Light's Retention Scale, a measure of 19 factors to assess candidates for retention (Light, 1981). Lieberman (1980) created a decision-making model for in-grade retention. Some of the Light and Lieberman factors which were acknowledged by educators as affecting achievement, include the following:

1. The student's chronological age
2. The student's knowledge of English
3. The present grade of the student (the lower the grade, the more likely the success of retention)
4. Previous retention of the student
5. A sibling's retention experience
6. Estimate of the student's IQ
7. School attendance of the student
8. A student's learning disability
9. The student's attitude toward the retention.

However, the results of a study conducted by Sandoval (1980) indicated that Light's Retention Scale total score was not sufficiently reliable, had little concurrent validity, and did not meet the conventional standards for a psychometric device intended for use in school. Sandoval concluded that Light's Retention Scale might have some utility as a counseling aid, but retention decisions should not be based solely on this scale.

In a 1986 study, Safer assessed grade retention in elementary schools and junior high schools and found them to be substantially different in character and outcome. Retention at the elementary level was usually associated with low achievement and low IQ, while retention at the junior high level was associated with school misconduct and absenteeism.

Some organizations have attempted to change educational policy and practice by publishing position statements and sample policy suggestions. In order for change limiting the practice of retention to occur, educators, armed with research data as well as creative and innovative alternatives to retention, must be willing to take a stand to work for a positive solution (Stammer, 1987).

Bredenkamp and Shepard (1989) reported that the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP, 1988) was one of the first national organizations to call for alternatives to the common educational practice of retaining students. In the summer of 1988, the Delegate Association of School Psychologists committed itself to promoting educational practices that were demonstrably effective in enhancing the educational attainment of all children. According to the NASP, the retention of students, while widely practiced, was not in large measure substantiated by sound research.

Retention has not been successful in the following cases:

1. When it is employed in lieu of other more effective interventions
2. When students fail to learn; when it is used to postpone or supplant special education services
3. When it is used at the secondary level where it

correlates positively with student drop-out rates

4. When retention or delayed school entrance is used with students with social or behavioral deficits linked to "developmental immaturity" (Bredekamp & Shepard 1989, p. 1).

Holmes conducted a meta-analysis of 63 studies and found that 54 of these had negative effects for retention, while only nine were positive. However, few of the positive studies involved compared retention plus remediation to promotion plus an equivalent amount of remediation. The positive studies tended to be based on more favorable comparisons with grade peers rather than age peers, used only academic outcome measures, and did not follow-up past one year. "When all available longitudinal studies were taken together, the same-grade apparent benefit disappeared over time so that retained children were no better off in relation to younger at-risk controls who went immediately on to the next grade" (Holmes, 1989, p. 16).

Over the years, many suggestions for handling inadequate academic progress and alternatives to nonpromotion have been proposed. Some of these were:

1. The development of transitional maturity classes
2. Increased remedial instructional opportunities
3. Smaller classes with more individualized instruction
4. Establishment of school readiness of children prior to kindergarten entrance

5. The use of multi-grade groupings or non-graded school structure (Byrnes, 1989).

Other proposals encountered in the educational literature are:

1. Transitional classrooms
2. Tutoring
3. Home assistance programs
4. Raising kindergarten or first grade entrance ages
5. Curriculum modifications or different teaching techniques
6. Cooperative learning groups
7. Summer school
8. Preschool experience (Sevener, 1990).

In California, transitional programs, which were designed to provide another year of school experience for kindergarten students who were predicted not to do well in first grade, were made illegal by the state legislature (Brewer, 1990). Kindergarten students were then expected to proceed to first grade and not spend an extra year between kindergarten and first grade in transitional programs.

A 1990 Massachusetts report examined current research on grade retention and suggested alternative practices for dealing with low-achieving students (French & Nellhaus, 1990). Based on that review, grade retention may hinder rather than enhance student achievement. The report offered

recommendations and administrative strategies for assessment and planning, curriculum and instruction, student grouping and promotion, and staff development. Seven projects to reduce the numbers of grade retentions were briefly described in the report. Statewide data on students recommended for grade retention were also presented (French & Nellhaus, 1990).

In May, 1990, the chancellor of the New York City school system announced the elimination of the Mandatory Promotional Gates Program. This program had been initiated in 1981 in an effort to revitalize and revamp the New York City schools. It required that any fourth grade student who was more than one grade level below on the district reading exam or any seventh grade student who was more than one and a half years behind would be required to repeat fourth or seventh grade respectively. With the chancellor's edict, however, schools had the option not to promote but were no longer required to retain fourth and seventh grade students who performed poorly on the achievement tests (Dawson & Rafoth, 1991).

Formal retention policies are, nevertheless, important to prevent inconsistent, haphazard, or discriminatory retention practices. Consequently, there needs to be a basis for developing these retention policies. Such a basis can be accomplished only through qualitatively analyzing

policies and their outcomes (Dawson & Rafoth, 1991).

In April, 1990, the Massachusetts Commissioner of Education called for an end to retention in that state (Brewer, 1990). In that same year, an educational task force appointed by the governor of Wyoming issued a report recommending that kindergarten through third grade students not be retained. In Texas retention below the first grade was banned (Dawson & Rafoth, 1991).

A study conducted by the Virginia Department of Education concluded that developmentally slow children who were placed in a transition program between kindergarten and first grade did not do as well on cognitive tests as children who proceeded directly from kindergarten to first grade. The subjects in these two groups were matched for sex, race, and socio-economic status. Consequently, Virginia educational officials were investigating ways to restructure the primary grade programs in order to eliminate transitional programs (Dawson & Rafoth, 1991).

Data on kindergarten students in three California school districts were collected between 1989 and 1990. Records were used to obtain data on students' birth dates, gender, and ethnicity. Teachers indicated which students were retained the following year. Following are the results found in each of the three districts:

1. More Latino children were retained than Anglo



children.

2. Younger children were retained more often.

3. More males were retained than females. Young Latino boys were being retained more than any other group (Cosden & Zimmer, 1991).

In a report for the Association for Elementary Principals (Dawson & Rafoth, 1991), it was suggested that after adopting a no-retention policy, a committee or some other approach would be useful for taking the necessary steps that should be followed. Such steps could include:

1. Developing programmatic interventions to address the needs of failing students

2. Expanding the capabilities of classroom teachers to meet the needs of failing students at different skill levels

3. Considering changes in the way schools are organized so that each child can develop at his or her own pace and proceed along a unique and personal learning trajectory (Dawson & Rafoth, 1991).

Few studies have investigated the impact of school policies and demographics on retention rates at a district level. In 1992, the influence of school district policies on grade level retention in elementary schools was investigated in Boston, Massachusetts (Schwager, Mitchell, Mitchell & Hecht, 1992).

A 1992 Oregon School System Curriculum (OSSC) bulletin

examined some of the following questions that arise when children are not ready for promotion:

1. Should they be retained?
2. Who decides?
3. Are there alternatives to retention?
4. What is the effect of retention on the student?

Despite research limitations, those who examined the studies on grade repetition indicated that grade retention did not have a positive effect either on academic achievement or on personal adjustment, and it was also expensive. Potential solutions examined in schools were the following:

1. Schools should establish prevention programs to ensure the mastery of reading and mathematics.
2. When early intervention is not enough, additional help must be given.
3. Alternatives such as partial promotion to a "half-step" grade should be considered.

A number of specific programs were briefly described in the OSSC bulletin. Seven Oregon school districts were contacted to determine their policies and practices concerning promotion and retention. Most educators interviewed indicated they focused more on prevention than on retention; consequently, the number of retained students was not considerable (Oregon School System Curriculum Bulletin, 1992).

Another study examined the impact of grade repetition or retention on the subsequent academic performance of students in rural and urban areas in northeast Tennessee. A total of 40 students who were retained in grades three or five during the 1985-86 school year and 70 students who were not retained completed the Stanford Achievement Test yearly between 1986 and 1989. Results indicated the following:

1. Students who were retained showed an increase in their achievement scores the second year they were in their retained grade.

2. The increase in achievement scores diminished the following year.

3. In the third year after retention, there was no difference between the achievement scores of students who were retained and students who were promoted.

4. There were no differences in the effects of retention for students in urban and rural schools (Snyder & West, 1992).

In Florida, a number of approaches to improving student achievement without resorting to grade retention have been proposed. Among them are the following:

1. Tutorial programs including peer tutoring, cross-age tutoring, and adult volunteer tutoring coordinated with classroom instruction.

2. Extended basic skills programs which eliminate

"non-essentials" from the student day, and which add more time to reading, writing, and mathematics.

3. Cooperative learning programs

4. Extended-year programs achieved in Florida because of funding constraints through summer school

5. Individualized instruction through such technologies as interactive video, word processing, and story starters (Sherwood, 1993).

After a review of current applicable research on classroom management and teacher effectiveness, a New Jersey School district developed the following four terminal objectives to reduce retention rates from 7% to 3% or less:

1. Staff development

2. The work of the intervention committees

3. The implementation of whole-language, cooperative learning, and developmentally appropriate instructional practices

4. The implementation of the Writing to Read Program

At the end of the 1992 school year, the retention rate was 1% of the kindergarten, first, and second grade population (Turco, 1993).

In one study, first and fifth grade teachers' perceptions of student retention were assessed. Respondents generally believed that retention improved academic performance or facilitated student growth and increased

learning success (Tanner & Combs, 1993).

A recent study provided a concise, cumulative report of literature and research on elementary grade retention. Most research indicated that elementary school retention did not effectively increase academic achievement among low-achieving students. Research-based decision making on this issue was considered essential (Walters & Borgens, 1995).

Some school systems have changed retention policies through task force action. National education groups and state education agencies have sometimes played an active role in this process. Wyoming, Massachusetts, New York City, Texas, Virginia, and the city of Chicago have all changed their stands on retention (Sanchez, 1995).

The precedential Illinois case law specific to retention policy is Morgan v. The Board of Education, Trico Community Unit School District No. 176. Angela Morgan was retained in kindergarten, based on her scores on a readiness test. Morgan was six years old and her retention meant she would not attend the minimum length of 185 days as required by the compulsory attendance statute (Ill. Revised Statute 1988)

The plaintiff also claimed that her district denied equal education and equal protection by requiring children to pass a readiness test to exit kindergarten and enter first grade. Children who had not attended kindergarten in

the district were not required to pass the test for admittance. Validity of the test was not an issue in this case.

The court found that Morgan was denied equal protection of the law. The case was an issue of first impression. The 3rd Appellate Court said, "The issue was essentially one of statutory interpretation, defining the scope of, and limits to a school board's power" (Ill. Revised Statute 1988, p. 2-3.64).

Justice George J. Moran wrote the following opinion:

Since Angela is six years old and the Trico School district only conducts kindergarten for half-day sessions, her retention in kindergarten would mean that she would not attend a school term of minimum length of 185 days. Furthermore, section 10-20.12 requires that the school board secure for all persons in the district the right and opportunity for an equal education. Since children who attend Trico School system in kindergarten must pass the 'readiness test' to move to first grade, but 7 year-olds who move into the Trico system are automatically registered in first grade without being tested, the children in the Trico district are being denied an opportunity for an equal education and equal protection of the

law (Ill. Revised Statute 1973, ch. 122, p.10-20.12).

Morgan v. Trico established an issue of first impression. Courts were now involved in educational policy change (Morgan v. The Board of Education, Trico Community Unit District No. 176).

Peter Doe (Peter W.) v. San Francisco Unified School District was filed in California in 1972. The first amended complaint was filed October 31, 1973. Peter asserted that the school district was negligent in teaching, promoting, and graduating him from high school with the ability to read at only the fifth grade level. He also claimed his performance and progress were misrepresented to his parents. His parents testified that they were unaware of Peter's deficiencies until they had him privately tested.

The court ruled in favor of the defendant, reasoning that the school district did not have duty to guarantee mastery of basic academic skills; that the complexities of the teaching/learning process made it impossible to place the entire burden on the school; that there was no legitimate connection between school district's conduct and the alleged injury; and that to hold the district liable would expose educational agencies to unlimited tort claims.

In addition to Peter W.'s tort claim, the suit was filed on grounds of misrepresentation, breach of statutory

duty, and breach of constitutional duty. These causes were all refuted.

The cases of Morgan and Doe are highly significant in the investigation of policy used in retention. To be specific, a school district could be held in violation of law by retaining a student, and, conversely, a school district could be in violation of law by not retaining a student.

As Toni Waggoner, spokesperson for the Illinois State Board of Education School Report Card Research and Policy stated, "In many schools the absence of policy or vague guidelines opens the door to litigation if a child is retained or if a child is promoted. The State Board stopped recording retention numbers in 1990" (T. Waggoner, Personal Communication, March 21, 1997).

Except in the case of a student who has been found to be in need of special education, a school board has general authority to determine retention and promotion. Such decisions must be made uniformly, based on objective, nondiscriminatory criteria, and consistent with the teacher evaluation of student progress (Braun, 1996).



## Chapter 3

### Design of the Study

The purposes of the study were to investigate student retention practices in selected elementary schools in the Beecher City, Illinois, area and to develop a proposed school retention policy for the Beecher City School District.

#### Data Collection and Instrumentation

The study was carried out by the researcher who was an elementary school principal in Beecher City, Illinois. The participants involved were the principals of elementary schools in the area surrounding Beecher City, Illinois. A cover letter (see Appendix A), survey (see Appendix B), and stamped, self-addressed envelope were sent to principals of 42 schools.

Studies referenced in the review of literature were the basis for the survey. Studies conducted by the Austin Independent School District (Sanchez, 1995; Walters & Borgens, 1995; Tanner & Combs, 1993) were used to develop the survey.

#### Sample and Population

The sample included all public schools with elementary grades (K-8) within a 75 mile geographical area surrounding Beecher City, Illinois. Parochial schools located inside the area were excluded from the survey.

A total of 42 surveys were mailed to principals, and 34 surveys were returned, representing a response of 81%.

#### Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics in the form of numbers and percentages were tabulated. Qualitative statements from schools were used in the data collection. Policies on retention that were obtained became part of the data.

## Chapter 4

### Results

The purposes of the study were to investigate student retention practices in selected elementary schools in the Beecher City, Illinois, area and to develop a proposed school retention policy for the Beecher City School District.

Principals were asked to indicate the student enrollment of each school. As indicated in Table 1, the total student enrollment of schools whose principals responded to the survey was 10,380. A total of 82 students were retained from 1992-1996. The largest school enrollment was 925, and the smallest was 82. Thirteen of the 34 principals indicated that no students were retained from 1992-1996. Information from the respondent districts revealed that only one black boy and one black girl were retained in the time period indicated. It should be noted that there is only a small number of black students in the geographical area studied. The survey did not include a question to address the total black student population.

As indicated in Table 2, 67% of the retained students were boys and 33% were girls. Therefore, the number of boys retained was almost exactly twice the number of girls retained.

Table 1

Demographics of the Schools of Survey Respondents

Survey items	Survey answers
1. Total number of students	10,380
2. Total number of retained students	82
3. Largest school enrollment	925
4. Smallest school enrollment	82
5. Number of schools retaining no students	13

Table 2

Number of Students Retained from 1992 through 1996

Group	Number	Percent
Boys	55	67%
Girls	27	33%

As shown in Table 3, 67% of retained students were receiving free lunches.

As indicated in Table 4, the largest single class with students being retained was kindergarten with 27% of all retained students. The class with the fewest students retained was the fourth grade in which only 2% of students were retained.

Table 3

Lunch Status of Retained Students

Group	Number	Percent
Paid Lunch	24	33%
Free Lunch	58	67%

Table 4

Retained Students from 1992-1996

Retained Students		
Grade	Number	Percent
Kindergarten	22	27%
1	19	23%
2	8	10%
3	3	4%
4	2	2%
5	5	6%
6	9	11%
7	7	9%
8	7	9%

As revealed in Table 5, 47% of the schools had a formal retention policy while 41% did not. Nine percent of the principals gave no answer to this question, and one principal reported that he did not know whether or not the school had a policy.

Table 5

Schools with a Retention Policy

Answer	Number	Percent
Yes	16	47%
No	14	41%
No Answer	3	9%
Did not know	1	3%

Of the 16 schools whose principals reported their retention policies in returned surveys, 14 policies contained the following responses:

1. Retention is discouraged.
2. Children need to be kept with their age group.
3. Policy is based on passing subjects.
4. Some subjects are weighted.
5. Parent(s), teacher, and principal work as a team.
6. Placement decision is made by the building principal.
7. Parent(s) are notified in January - February.

8. Retention of the younger students is considered more effective.

Most policies reflected a belief that retention should occur at early grades. One policy, however, discouraged lower grade retention. In this policy, upper elementary students were promoted or retained on a strict 70% grading scale with no exceptions.

It was evident by reading the policies that retention was not taken lightly. It seems that each individual situation was given considerable thought before the final decision was made.

Not all school districts recognized the importance of formal policies; some chose to address potential retention through informal administrative procedures or on a case-by-case basis without specified guidelines. In phone conversations or on their surveys returned to the researcher, some educators indicated that this was their district's manner of addressing retention decisions.

Written retention policies of reporting schools revealed similar approaches to the problem. Retention was usually discouraged and meetings took place before final decisions were made.

The policy or guidelines from the 16 schools outlined the role of the teacher. The role of the classroom teacher was concluded to be important in all schools. It was

apparent that in schools without formal policy, the teacher assumed a much more prominent role in the retention procedure.

Surveyed principals were asked if they believed that student retention was a beneficial educational practice. As shown in Table 6, only 35% of the principals thought that retention was beneficial.

Table 6

Is Retention a Beneficial Education Practice?

Answer	Number	Percent
Yes	12	35%
No	22	65%

As shown in Table 7, only 29% of principals reported that they believed that the teacher should make the final decision concerning retention. Seventy-one percent of the responding principals indicated that the teacher should not make the final decision.

Principals were also asked if student retention led to academic success in later grades. As indicated in Table 8, 36% of principals did believe that retention resulted in future successes. Twenty-seven percent of principals believed that retention sometimes led to future academic



Table 7

Should the Teacher Make the Final Decision on Student Retention?

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Answer	Number	Percent
Yes	10	29%
No	24	71%

---

success, and 36% did not believe that retention usually led to future academic success.

Table 8

Do You Believe That Student Retention Leads To Academic Success in Later Grades?

---

Answer	Number	Percent
Yes	12	36%
Sometimes	9	27%
No	12	36%
Do not know	<u>1</u>	<u>1%</u>
Total	34	100%

---

## Chapter 5

### Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purposes of the study were to investigate student retention practices in selected elementary schools in the Beecher City, Illinois, area and to develop a proposed school retention policy for the Beecher City School District.

#### Summary

The survey (included as Appendix B) requested the following information from respondent elementary school principals:

1. Grades in the school and school enrollment.
2. Student retention information from 1992-93 to 1995-96 school years.
  - a. Number of boys and girls retained.
  - b. Ages of retained students.
  - c. Number of non-white retained students.
  - d. Number of retained students on free lunch.
3. Does your school have formal written policies and procedures on student retention?
4. If yes, please outline the policies and procedures?
5. If no, who makes the determination for retention and what criteria are used?
6. As principal, do you believe that retention is a

beneficial education practice?

7. Do you believe that the teacher should make the final decision on student retention?

8. Is it your perception that student retention leads to academic success in later grades?

The study was based on data collected from a survey of 42 elementary schools found in a 75 mile radius of Beecher City, Illinois. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data collected for each specific research question.

Following are highlights of the survey findings:

1. Only 82 students were retained from 1992-1996 from a surveyed population of 10,380.

2. Twice as many boys were retained than girls.

3. Twice as many free lunch students were retained than paid lunch students.

4. Less than 50% of the schools surveyed had formal written policies on student retention.

5. Schools without formal policies generally followed the same procedures as those with policies.

6. Only 18% of the principals surveyed believed that the teacher should make the final decision on retention.

7. Only one third of the principals thought that retention led to later academic success.

### Conclusions

As the findings of the study show, the practice of

retaining students is not considered a beneficial practice for future success. Nearly 50% of the principals believed the practice should not be used. Young, poor, male students were discriminated against by being retained more than any other group.

After reviewing data from the compiled surveys, the author concluded that school officials did not retain any student without great consideration, discussion, and forethought. Each case was apparently thoughtfully reviewed to see what was best for the student.

It can be concluded that the findings concerning the practice of retention paralleled the findings of previous research, studies, and literature. It can be concluded that the practice of retaining students is not considered beneficial by a large percentage of principals. Interestingly, 25 respondents indicated that success would come from modifying the curriculum or implementing special programs for the students who were retained.

Through the gathering of sample policies from surveyed schools, a retention policy for consideration was established by the author. A conclusion drawn from this portion of the survey would be that all schools essentially follow the same pattern during consideration for retention; however, a written policy ensures that all cases are given the same determining criteria before the decision is made.

### Recommendations

The practice of retention has been used in education for many years. The only way for the practice to cease would be by the passage of law forbidding it. Until such an event, the only assurance that all retentions are given equal consideration would be implementation of a policy for the school staff to follow. The policy should focus upon the parent, teacher, and the principal as a team working to develop alternatives to retention and to retain students only after considering alternatives.

Prevention assistance or special programs should be part of the policy. Students who are in danger of failing and their parents should be notified in a timely manner in order that all possible means of assistance can be used. Retention should be used as a last resort when all other assistance has failed.

Through the gathering of sample policies from surveyed schools, the researcher developed a Proposed Retention Policy for the Beecher City, Illinois Schools. That proposed policy (included as Appendix C) was presented to the Curriculum and Policy Committee of the Beecher City Unit 20 Schools. The author recommended this policy be adopted for use in the Beecher City School District.

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## Appendix A

## Cover Letter

Principal  
School  
Address  
City, State, Zip Code

Dear Principal,

I am a graduate student at Eastern Illinois University doing research on student retention. This is a requirement for the Specialist in Education Degree.

This research into student retention is being conducted in the elementary schools in the Beecher City area.

If you would, please take a few minutes from your busy schedule to assist me with this project. Please complete the survey and return it in the enclosed envelope.

Since your time is limited and valuable, I want to thank you for any help you can contribute.

Sincerely,

Doug Heiden

Appendix B

Retention Survey

School \_\_\_\_\_  
 Grades \_\_\_\_\_  
 Enrollment \_\_\_\_\_

Students Retained During the 1992-93 to 1995-96 School Year

Grade	Student Age	Boys	Girls	Race <i>other than white</i>	Free Lunch
K	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
1	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
2	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
3	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
4	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
5	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
6	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
7	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
8	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

**Yes or No** Does your school have formal written policies and procedures on student retention?

If **Yes**, please outline the policies and procedures.

If **No**, who makes the determination for retention and what criteria are used?

**Yes or No** As principal, do you believe that retention is a beneficial education practice?

**Yes or No** Do you believe that the teacher should make the final decision on student retention?

**Yes or No** Is it your perception that student retention leads to academic success in later grades?

## Appendix C

**Proposed School Retention Policy  
For The Beecher City School District**Grading and Promotion

The administration and professional staff shall establish a system of grading and reporting academic achievement to parent(s)/guardian(s) and students, as well as determine when promotion and graduation requirements are met. The building principal shall strongly discourage the promotion and retention of students for purely social reasons. The criteria for promotion shall be the student's ability to meet District goals and objectives and to perform at the next grade level rather than age or any other social reason not related to academic performance.

Every teacher shall maintain an evaluation record for each student in the teacher's classroom.

The final grade assigned by the teacher cannot be changed by a District administrator without notifying the teacher. Reasons for changing a student's final grade include:

1. a miscalculation of test scores;
2. a technical error in assigning a particular grade or score;
3. the teacher agrees that the student may do an extra work assignment and its evaluation impacts the grade;

4. an inappropriate grading system used to determine the grade

Should a grade change be made, the administrator making the change must sign the changed record.

#### General Procedures

Student academic achievement is assessed in terms of the attainment of measurable specific skills determined by the teaching staff to be their instructional goals and objectives. Student academic achievement is graded in terms of standardized criterion - referenced test scores, letter grades, and/or other assigned numerical criteria.

#### Reporting to Parents

Parent(s)/guardian(s) shall be informed of their child's progress in school at regular intervals, but at least 4 times a year. Divorced or separated parents will both be informed unless a court order requires otherwise. All grades and symbols will be appropriately explained. Grading will not be used for disciplinary purposes. Grading will be based on improvement, achievement, and capability. Parents will be notified when a student's performance requires special attention.

Various methods for communicating with parent(s)/guardian(s) will be used:

1. Parent-teacher conferences, conducted on a regular basis, are an effective means of reporting student progress

to parent(s)/guardian(s). Parent-teacher conferences may be scheduled on different days and at different times to accommodate the various grade levels and attendance centers.

2. Additional methods for reporting, such as open house, parent education meetings, and newsletters, shall be the responsibility of each building principal.

3. Interim reports, through which teachers contact parents to impart information or to arrange a conference when teachers believe additional information should be shared, shall be encouraged. Teachers also shall make every effort to be available to meet with parent(s)/guardian(s) at a mutually agreed upon time.

#### Promotion, Retention, and Remediation

Placement, promotion, or retention shall be made in the best interests of the student after a careful evaluation of the advantages and disadvantages of alternatives.

When any alteration in a student's normal progression through school is contemplated, all factors must be considered. Quantitative measures such as age, physical size, ability and level of academic achievement shall be supplemented by a qualitative assessment of the student's motivation, self-image and social adjustment. Students shall not be promoted for purely social reasons.

Students shall not be promoted to the next higher grade level unless they meet district requirements for

successfully completing the curriculum, attendance, and performance on the IGAP test and local assessment tests.

Students who are not eligible for promotion will be provided with remedial programs that include:

1. A summer school bridge program of at least 90 hours of instruction;
2. tutoring sessions;
3. increased or concentrated instructional time;
4. modified instructional materials; or
5. grade retention.

#### Local Assessment

As a result of their schooling, students will be able to meet the individual performance level on 50% of curriculum areas assessed by the Stanford Achievement Test.

Any student who does not meet the performance level may be considered for an individual remediation plan. A student may be considered for an individual remediation plan if the student scores below the school average by more than 100 points. A student shall be eligible for an individual remediation plan if the student scores below the state average by 100 points or more.

#### Illinois Goal Assessment Program (IGAP)

As a result of their schooling, students will be able to meet the individual performance level on the IGAP test in the fundamental areas tested at that particular grade level.



### Attendance

Students who are determined to be at risk for truancy will be offered a remediation plan for improvement of attendance through the Regional Office of Education truancy prevention intervention program. In the event that the student is determined to be truant without making any effort for improvement, an individual remediation plan may be considered. An individual remediation plan will be implemented for a student found to be a chronic truant.

### Administrative Procedure

A panel consisting of 1) the building principal; 2) the student's parent(s)/guardian(s); 3) at least two teachers that have direct instructional contact with the student; and 4) other interested parties such as counselors, psychologists, therapists, social workers, and attendance officers shall meet during the second semester of the school year to determine the guidelines for the appropriate school remediation plan for the student.

After consideration of all facts pertaining to the student's academic progress, the building principal will have the authority to implement the student's multi-level remediation plan which includes possible grade retention.

Students who demonstrate a proficiency level comparable to the average student performance one grade or more below current placement shall be provided with an individual

remediation plan developed in consultation with the parent(s)/guardian(s). The remediation plan may include summer school, extended school day, special homework, tutorial sessions, modified instructional materials, other modifications in the instructional program, reduced class size, or retention in grade.

LEGAL REF: 105 ILCS 5/2-3.64, 5/10-20.9a, 5/10-21.8, and 5/27-27.23 Ill. Admin. Codes 1.440.