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William A. Owings and Susan Magliaro

Grade Retention: A History of Failure

A long trail of research tells us that retention is not the route to take in our efforts to improve student achievement.

For almost 50 years, research has shown that grade-level retention provides no academic advantages to students. Yet, the practice is gaining increasing attention as schools face political pressure to demonstrate accountability for student achievement. Publications including *USA Today* (Ritter, 1997) and *Education Week* (Reynolds, Temple, & McCoy, 1997) have addressed the topic, and President Clinton in his 1997 and 1998 State of the Union Addresses called for increased retention of students with low scores on standardized tests, stating that a child should not move from grade to grade "until he or she is ready." Research suggests that retention is on the rise. According to one study (Roderick, 1995), from 1980 to 1992 the national percentage of retained students increased from approximately 20 percent to nearly 32 percent.

The overly simplistic view of retention as a panacea for education woes ignores its negative impact on children. A walk through history reminds us of what we have learned about retention.

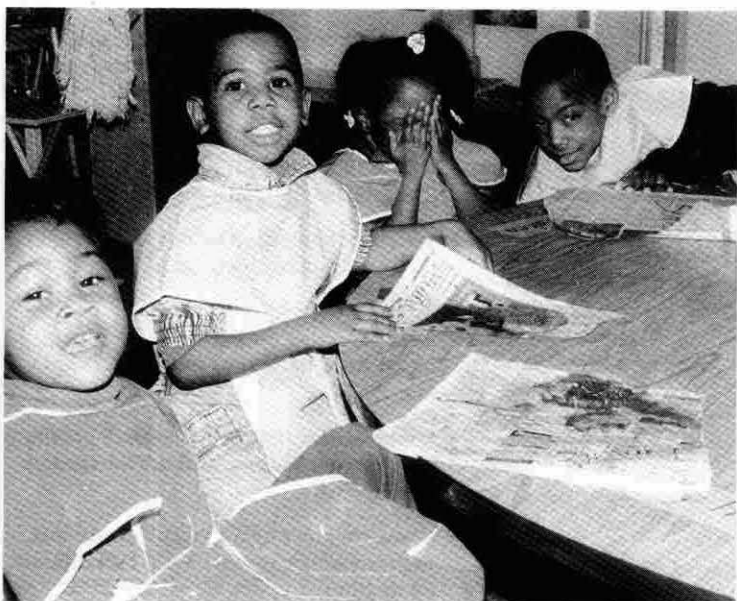
History of Grade Retention

It was not until about 1860 that it became common in U.S. elementary schools to group children in grade levels, with promotion dependent on mastery of a quota of content. The New York City school system was reporting the results of promotion and retention as early as the turn of the century. Maxwell's (1904) age-grade progress study became the standard vehicle for school system reports on retention, promotion, and dropouts. Within the next two decades, researchers started to examine the efficacy of retention in terms of student achievement.

The goal of grade retention was to improve school performance by allowing more time for students to develop adequate academic skills (Reynolds, 1992). By the 1930s, researchers were reporting the negative effects of retention on achievement (Ayer, 1933; Kline, 1933). Goodlad (1954) summarized the research between 1924 and 1948 related to grade retention. This synthesis showed that retention did not decrease the variation in student achievement levels and had no positive effect on educational gain. Otto (1951) suggested that retention had no special educational value for children and that the academic gain of nonpromoted students was smaller than the gain of their promoted counterparts.

In the mid-20th century, researchers began to investigate the relationship between retention and dropouts. One study (Berlman, 1949) indicated that students who were retained might be more likely to drop out of school than those who were not retained. This article appeared at a time when the literature was emphasizing the need to keep students in school (Anderson, 1950; Holbeck, 1950; Moffit, 1945; Nancarrow, 1951; Sandin, 1944).

In the 1960s and the 1970s, the pendulum moved toward the social promotion of students. After the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983), a time of reduced public confidence in schools, many school systems instituted more stringent promotion and retention policies—in spite of the lack of supportive research evidence (Roderick, 1994). For the public at large, it



Photos courtesy of William A. Owings

Research indicates that students learn better without grade retention.

was counterintuitive to think that retention was not useful in helping students to reach basic skill levels (Natale, 1991).

Current Practice and Research

No precise national data record the exact numbers of retained students. However, a number of studies suggest that retention has persisted and possibly has increased. The Center for Policy Research in Education (1990) reported that by the 9th grade, approximately 50 percent of all U.S. school students have been retained. Roderick (1995) reported that the proportion of overage students entering high school has risen almost 40 percent since 1975. One synthesis of research indicated that the current level of retention matches that of the early 20th century (Shepard & Smith, 1990).

Of 66 articles on retention written from 1990 to 1997, only 1 supported retention (Lenarduzzi, 1990). These articles and Holmes's (1984) and Holmes and Matthews's (1989) meta-analyses document the effects of retention.

Many studies show the association between retention and dropping out of school (Cairns, Cairns, & Neckerman, 1989; Dawson, 1991). These studies control for the effects of other influencing factors. Grissom and Shepard (1989) determined that retention significantly increases the probability of dropping out, controlling for prior achievement, sex, and race.

Demographic data show that retained students tend to come from lower socioeconomic (SES) backgrounds than nonretained students (Thomas et al., 1992). Meisels (1993) found that approximately 40 percent of repeaters come from the lowest SES quartile, whereas approximately 8.5 percent come from the highest SES quartile. Meisels (1993) also determined that more than two-thirds of all retentions take place between kindergarten and 3rd grade. Other studies have shown that retained students tend to be male and African American, with parents who are less educated than the parents of nonretained students (Byrd & Weitzman, 1994; Dauber, 1993; Foster, 1993; Meisels, 1993). In California, George (1993) found that retention

rates for African Americans and Hispanics are twice the rate for whites. Byrd and Weitzman (1994) examined social and health factors associated with retention. Poverty, gender, mother's education level, hearing and speech impairments, low birth weight, enuresis, and exposure to household smoking are significant predictive factors. Learning disabled students may also be retained more frequently than the general population (McLeskey, Lancaster, & Grizzle, 1995).



The long-held belief that early retention is best for students continues to be refuted in the literature.

The long-held belief that early retention is best for students continues to be refuted in the literature (Johnson, 1990; Mantzicopoulos & Morrison, 1992; Thomas et al., 1992). Studies of retention in kindergarten indicate that retained students have significantly lower scores on standardized achievement tests than do nonretained students (Dennebaum & Kulberg, 1994). Another study shows no differences in achievement for retained kindergarten students and the matched control group (Shepard & Smith, 1987). Some research indicates that early retention may produce a short-lived increase in achievement; however, this gain vanishes in two or three years (Butler, 1990; Karweit & Wasik, 1992; Snyder, 1992).

Research indicates that retention produces negative social implications. Kindergarten students who were

retained indicated a slightly more negative attitude toward school than did a matched control group (Shepard & Smith, 1987). Retained students may have more behavioral problems than those who are not retained (Meisels, 1993). Rumberger (1987) suggests that retention contributes to a permanent disengagement from school.

Research also shows that retention may have negative effects on long-term student achievement. Holmes's (1989) meta-analysis reviewed 63 controlled studies that compared the progress of retained students with that of lower-achieving promoted students; 54 studies showed negative achievement results for the retained students. Holmes then reviewed only those studies with the greatest statistical control. The negative achievement effects were again demonstrated. These findings were substantively identical to those of Goodlad's analysis in 1954. Subsequent studies have provided little new evidence to contradict Holmes's synthesis of research.

Other studies indicate an increased, cumulative negative effect of retention on achievement for at-risk students (Reynolds, 1992). Retained children may continue to decline in reading achievement over time compared with nonretained students. Whether this cumulative decline occurs in mathematics achievement is uncertain.

Retention Harms Learners

Historically, educators have viewed retention as a means of reducing skill variance in the classroom in an attempt to better meet student needs. Clearly, this practice has not achieved its goal. In the process we have harmed our clients. Physicians take an oath that guides their professional practice—first, do no harm. Educators would do well to take a similar oath. Retention harms an at-risk population cognitively and affectively. Alternatives to consider include requiring summer school, offering intensive remediation before and after school, changing teacher and administrative perceptions, and increasing teacher expectations.

One indicator of a profession is that a body of research guides its practice

(Darling-Hammond & Goodwin, 1993). A body of research exists on the subject of retention, and it should guide our practice. If we are to treat our "patients" professionally, we need to stop punishing nonlearners and instead provide opportunities for success. ■

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