

## Beyond Grade Retention

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**Course:** Educational Leadership and Policy Studies EDLP 225 :: Advanced Seminar: Ethical Decision Making

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**Term:** Spring 2001

During the past 30 years, the educational pendulum has alternated between advocating social promotion and supporting grade retention. The current emphasis is on grade retention, which requires students to repeat the same grade in order to master what was not learned. As a result of standards-based promotion and retention policies, an increased number of students who have not met the minimum level of proficiency in the reading and math standards have been retained.

With the significant increase in grade retention, educators are beginning to acknowledge that grade retention is not a satisfactory response to providing the needs of low performing students. Wheelock (1999) contends that grade retention undermines achievement, and is a poor substitute for good teaching and learning. Studies comparing retained and comparable non-retained control group students found that retained students do more poorly on follow up measures of social adjustment, attitudes toward school, behavioral outcomes, and attendance (Holmes, 1989). The achievement levels of students, after being held back a grade, still lags behind the achievement of their peers, and retention increases the likelihood that students will drop out of school. Being held back twice further increases the likelihood of dropping out of school (Darling-Hammond, 1998).

Darling-Hammond (1998) suggests strategies that schools employ as alternatives to grade retention. These strategies must include intervention and supplementary programs that provide instruction that is directly linked to the work the students are doing in the classroom, do not take away from the core curriculum, and are a normal part of the school routine. Some of these widely used interventions and supplementary programs include the following: a). Remedial Reading & Math Classes; b). Early Intervention Programs; c). Mandatory Summer School; d). Intersession Programs; e). Saturday School; f). Differentiated Instructional Strategies; g). Expanding Class Size Reduction; h). One-on-One Tutoring;

i). Before and After School Programs; j). Extended Learning Day; and k). Preparatory Academies.

In addition to these strategies, Darling-Hammond (1998) further suggests that schools provide opportunities for professional development for teachers, redesign school structures to support more intensive learning, improve practices to identify students who are at risk of grade retention, and use assessment to guide academic instruction. Further explanation is provided for each of these.

**Professional Development:** Teachers need an in-depth understanding of subject matter, students' diverse approaches to learning, and multiple teaching strategies if they are to enable students to succeed. Schools must hire well prepared teachers, provide mentors for novice teachers, provide systematic supports for ongoing professional development, provide opportunities to plan, learn effective teaching strategies, examine curriculum, observe effective teaching practices, and to give and receive coaching.

**Redesigning School Structures:** Studies in the United States have found that small schools and those that personalize instruction by keeping the same teachers with the same students for extended periods of time have fewer behavior problems and higher achievement than large schools with highly departmentalized structures in which the students move from one teacher to another. Multi-grade classrooms in which the students stay with the same teacher and a cohort of peers for more than one year may help eliminate the need for grade retention. Another approach to redesigning school structures to support intensive learning is language immersion classes in which students receive instruction in reading in a 'block schedule' format.

**Targeted Services:** Schools must improve practices to identify students with special learning needs, improve fragmented and ineffective service-delivery models, and examine approaches to train teachers to work with special-needs students. It is important to identify students early in order to provide appropriate instructional strategies. Many students who are

identified as failing in the early grades struggle with reading. Literacy programs such as Reading Recovery and Success for All allow for one-on-one assistance and helps teachers develop techniques to improve their ability to teach reading.

**Classroom Assessments:** Assessments that give detailed information about students' levels of performance and their approaches to learning can determine how students can be helped most successfully. Along with standardized test data, educators need to use assessments that engage students in performance tasks such as essays examinations, oral presentations, problem-solving exercises, research projects, and teacher observations to determine student's academic needs, gaps in learning, and to develop individualized academic action plans.

With the significant increase in the number of students who have been retained and are at-risk of grade retention, the need to provide academic and social support to students is most urgent. Clearly, the practice of grade retention, without providing the appropriate interventions and support is not an effective approach to working with low performing students. Many schools are on the right track by developing and implementing interventions and supplementary programs that will improve the instructional program for at-risk students. Emphasis must continuously be placed on providing on-going professional development for teachers, providing opportunities for students to learn the necessary basic skills, and redesigning school structures to support intensive teaching and learning.

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