

## Intervention Based Promotion Increases Student Achievement

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Skill Based Retention, the policy of preventing a student whose skills do not meet certain minimum standards from promoting to the next grade level, is largely ineffective in improving student achievement. Intervention Based Promotion, the act of promoting a struggling student to the next grade level coupled with intense educational intervention, improves both attendance and academic focus and decreases both the risk of behavioral problems and the likelihood of drop-out. Accordingly, it is a preferable alternative to Skill Based Retention.

Prior to 1997, California public schools generally promoted students to the next grade level regardless of academic achievement. This practice, however, commonly referred to as "Social Promotion," fell into disfavor on both the State and Federal levels. At the Federal level, President Clinton and many other political leaders made the opposition to social promotion a cornerstone of their education initiatives (Oakes, 1999). At the State level, the California legislature passed a new set of laws in 1997 and 1998 specifically designed to end social promotion. These bills, AB 1626, AB 1639 and SB 1370, significantly impacted the way that students move from grade level to grade level by mandating the implementation of new promotion and retention (i.e. preventing a student from promoting to the next grade) criteria for all students in California.

### The Theory Behind Skill Based Retention

The theory behind these bills was that student achievement could be improved through a combination of implementing a stringent promotion and retention policy including accelerating interventions, establishing a standards-based reform effort and promoting increased accountability for schools. This legislation, much of which is still in effect today, focused on reading proficiency in the early elementary grades and mathematics, language arts and reading in grades four through eight. The new policy, referred to herein as "Skill Based Retention," called for the early identification and retention of students who were unable to meet grade level standards, plus the remediation of students who were either retained or at risk of being retained.

This legislation was based on the commonsense view that students should repeat a grade (and/or pass summer school) to repair deficient skills implying a particular conception of education. According to this view, subject matter can be broken down into sequential units that are presented in a linear fashion. Furthermore, it is presumed that fixed subject matter must be mastered in a particular grade and that uniform progress can be standardized in all subject areas so that, for example, all fourth graders are ready for fourth grade reading, long division in math, local history, and so forth, the same for everyone (Shepard & Smith, 1989). Therefore, retention was, once again, reinstated in a well-intended effort to improve student achievement and raise educational standards.

### Skill Based Retention is Fundamentally Flawed

Research indicates that retention is not the solution and, in fact, results in decreased academic performance. Studies suggest that retention negatively impacts achievement, attendance, and attitude toward school in general. C. Thomas Holmes, a professor at the University of Georgia, conducted a study in 1989 that compared a matched group of retained first graders with low performing peers that had been promoted to second grade. A year later, when the retained had finished second grade, they still fell short of the second grade performance of their promoted peers (Kelly, 1999, January/February). Additionally, a 1992 study conducted by Shepard showed that students who had been retained were twenty to thirty percent more likely to drop out of school. Another study, conducted in 1985 by the Association of California Urban School Districts, found that students who were retained twice had nearly a one hundred percent

probability of dropping out. The research repeatedly indicates that skills based retention should not be utilized as an instructional practice due to its negative impact on children (Jimerson, Carlson, Rotert, Egeland, & Sroufe, 1997; Oaks, 1999, January/February).

#### Promotion Coupled with Intensive Intervention is the Key

This analysis does not, in any way, suggest that students should be passed on with disregard for their educational needs. Rather, students should be given a variety of different opportunities for academic success in the context of their grade level, and retention used only as a last resort. Early intervention is key and it is imperative that such interventions be made long before retention is even considered as a viable option. This approach is referred to herein as "Intervention Based Promotion."

#### The Role of Teachers

"Since retaining a child in grade is always the result of conscious professional action," educators play the most important role in the academic decisions/options for our students (Frymier, 1997, p. 184). Teachers must be effective. Students perform better when teachers know them well, and when they understand how their students best learn, their strengths and weaknesses. Indeed, it could be argued that students would do better if they were to stay with an effective teacher for several years. In such cases, long-term teachers would be able follow their students for a long enough period of time so that they could implement the necessary and immediate interventions for each student.

Intervention Based Promotion programs would likely include reading intervention programs, before and after school programs and teacher assisted study hall for homework help. In addition, educators should consider providing intervention based school wide programs, such as setting aside an uninterrupted block of time for Reading and Language Arts and teacher assisted sustained silent reading time, during which the teacher ensures the student is reading level appropriate reading materials.

#### The Role of Parents

Not to be overlooked, parents play an integral part in the success of their children and their involvement should come early. Knowing this, many school districts inform parents early in the school year of their student's progress. In addition, parents are sent progress reports and are met with regularly to monitor and help facilitate their child's success. Parents, however, must take an active role. It is important to note that although many parents are involved with their child's homework while in the elementary grades, they, ironically, tend to become less involved as their child reaches the secondary level. This time, however, is potentially the most crucial time when students may benefit from the structure and support that parental involvement offers.

#### Conclusion

Current legislation requiring Skill Based Retention inhibits the ability of educators to implement early intervention and other effective instructional strategies. Intervention Based Promotion remains a preferable alternative that enhances academic achievement and promotes the emotional well being of children.

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