



## **Research Brief**

### **Keeping Students on Track for Graduation**

#### **Questions:**

How can we keep students on track for graduation in four years?

What about promoting with age group versus promoting by credits (retention)?

#### **Summary of Findings:**

#### **Online Resources:**

No Child Left Behind is one of several factors motivating more and more high schools to work with their students to stay on track to graduating within four years. Often, there is the question, do we promote students to the next grade level even if they haven't accrued enough credits (social promotion) or do we simply promote by credits (retention)?

Unfortunately, research shows that neither by themselves works especially well: retention and social promotion are expensive failures. They are ineffective in improving student learning and achievement. Grade retention is ineffective. It is often imposed for nonacademic reasons, fails to improve academic achievement, and exacerbates the dropout problem. Of 66 studies done from 1990 to 1997, 65 found in-grade retention to be ineffective or actually harmful. Retained students suffer low self-esteem and are not likely to make up academic deficiencies. African American and Hispanic students are retained at twice the rate of Whites, and 40% of grade repeaters come from the lowest socioeconomic quartile. Social promotion is equally ineffective at providing appropriate instruction for low-performing students.

The alternative to these failed strategies is to personalize the learning environment. Personalization occurs when a school is committed to high achievement from at-risk learners; when opportunities are presented for early prevention of school failure; when at-risk students and teachers know, trust, and respect each other; when at-risk students find curricula meaningful and relevant; when instructional practices increase at-risk students' personal investment in learning; when extra time and extra help are provided to support learning; and when there is strong parental involvement in students' academic progress. Meaningful instruction taught by competent teachers in caring school environments helps at-risk students become competent learners, thus preventing the need for retention and social promotion.

Summer, weekend, and transitional programs are partly successful alternatives. Findings show that summer programs may be a useful intervention for students who are behind, but they are not a substitute for effective instruction during the school year. The strongest approach to motivating students (and keeping them on track for graduation) is a curriculum made meaningful to the students through engaging instruction. Muir (2001) showed that good learning experiences: create strong relationships; involve hands-on, active work;



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adjust for differences in learning styles; make learning interesting; allow students to make choices; make connections to previous knowledge, the students lives, and the real world; and put learning into context.

Promising Practices to Improve Motivation and “On Time” Graduation:

- Improve pedagogy,
- Intensify learning,
- Expand learning options,
- Provide meaningful curriculum and instruction,
- Provide extra help and extra time,
- Redesign school structures to provide more support,
- Assess to inform teaching,
- Provide professional development to ensure skilled teachers,
- Create a positive school environment,
- Foster continuity of teacher-learner relationships,
- Create effective home-school discussion.

**Helpful, Related Research Briefs from The Principals' Partnership:**

(Available at <http://www.principalspartnership.com/library.html>)

#### **Meaningful Curriculum & Engaged Instruction**

- Achievement Gap
- Brain Based Learning and Breaking Ranks
- Differentiating Instruction
- Experiential Education
- High School Curriculum

#### **Structures to Provide More Support**

- Block Scheduling
- Dropout Rate
- Ninth Grade Transition
- School-based Child Care
- Small Learning Communities
- Teaming and Achievement

#### **Improved Relationships**

- High School Advisory
- School-home Partnerships
- Student Mentoring Programs



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#### Online Resources:

##### **Performance Pentagon: Five Strategies To Help All Students Make the Grade.**

Johnson, Debra

NASSP Bulletin v85 n629 p40-55 Dec 2001

Reviews research and then describes five alternative strategies to social promotion and grade retention: Intensify learning, provide professional development to ensure skilled teachers, expand learning options, assess to inform teaching, and intervene early and often.

[http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_qa3696/is\\_200112/ai\\_n9016487](http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3696/is_200112/ai_n9016487)

##### **Standards, Retention, and Social Promotion.**

Owings, William A.; Kaplan, Leslie S.

NASSP Bulletin v85 n629 p57-66 Dec 2001

Describes origin and elements of the standards movement. Reviews research on grade retention and social promotion and concludes that both are failed strategies to improve student achievement.

Describes principal's role in meeting standards. Discusses the use of systemic and classroom interventions to help students meet state standards.

[http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_qa3696/is\\_200112/ai\\_n9008419](http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3696/is_200112/ai_n9008419)

##### **Social Promotion or Retention? Two Wrongs Don't Make a Right.**

Parker, Dennis R.

Leadership v30 n4 p12-14,16 Mar-Apr 2001

With passage of several recent laws, the California State legislature intended to end social promotion, replacing it with a system of prevention, intervention, and retention. The "strategic schooling" approach depends on three elements: targets (both students and content), continuous feedback via assessments, and organizational and classroom know-how.

[http://www.acsa.org/publications/pub\\_detail.cfm?leadershipPubID=1029](http://www.acsa.org/publications/pub_detail.cfm?leadershipPubID=1029)

##### **Learner-Centered Alternatives to Social Promotion and Retention: A Talent Development Approach.**

Thomas, Veronica G.

Journal of Negro Education v69 n4 p323-37 Fall 2000

Discusses the notion of social promotion versus grade repetition, arguing that neither approach represents an appropriate solution for enhancing the learning outcomes of low-performing students and closing the achievement gaps among students of various ethnic groups. Offers a learner-centered approach as a viable alternative and a mechanism for building upon students' preexisting skills and assets

[http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_qa3626/is\\_200010/ai\\_n8916442](http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3626/is_200010/ai_n8916442)



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#### **Failing Our Children: Finding Alternatives to In-Grade Retention. A Policy Brief.**

McCollum, Pam; Cortez, Albert; Maroney, Oanh H.; Montes, Felix

This policy brief presents an in-depth look at the issue of grade-retention in Texas, reviews research that finds this practice to be ineffective, and outlines alternatives to both retention and social promotion. In-grade retention has been a recurrent theme in education over the last 30 years, and it is currently linked to calls for higher standards by politicians. It is often seen as the only alternative to social promotion, passing students with the age-appropriate cohort. Of 66 studies done from 1990 to 1997, 65 found in-grade retention to be ineffective or actually harmful. Retained students suffer low self-esteem and are not likely to make up academic deficiencies. African American and Hispanic students are retained at twice the rate of Whites, and 40% of grade repeaters come from the lowest socioeconomic quartile. In-grade retention is increasing in Texas, especially for minority and economically disadvantaged students. The highest retention rates are found in urban school districts. The Intercultural Development Research Association has developed some recommendations for addressing issues related to in-grade retention in Texas. These include early identification of students at risk, professional development for teachers, redesign of school structures to provide more support, and establishment of new criteria for determining whether or not students should be promoted.

<http://www.idra.org/Research/ingrade.htm>

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