

BACKGROUND: THIRD-GRADE RETENTION

The Challenge

Each state must adopt a set of challenging standards and make decisions on both the tests and the proficiency levels that indicate successful attainment of the standards. Policies requiring the retention of third-grade students if they do not score at or above the proficient level on high-stakes standardized tests are becoming more commonplace. At best, this test score provides a single data point in a child's learning and does not take into account gains that have been made during the year, merely if a student falls below or above this score. States are concerned that students' inability to pass a reading proficiency test at the end of third grade will hamper the students' ability to progress through school and meet grade-level expectations. There is evidence to support these concerns (Hernandez, 2012); however, there are other factors to be considered when making broad decisions about retention policies.

Many states have adopted *mandatory third-grade retention* laws to hold back students who do not score proficiently on third-grade state examinations. Although these policies are aimed primarily at reading, some states have broader social promotion policies that consider performance on other content area assessments in

determining retention (The Foundation for Excellence in Education, n.d.). The 2015 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data show that 64 percent of fourth graders scored below the proficient level in reading and 60 percent scored below the proficient level in mathematics indicating that retention policies have the potential to affect a majority of students (The Nation's Report Card, n.d.).

These policies disproportionately affect students of color, students living in poverty, English language learners (ELL), and students with special needs as these sub-groups experience significantly lower passing rates on state assessments (Huddleston, 2014; Katsiyannis, Zhang, Ryan & Jones, 2007; Xia & Kirby, 2009). Retention has both short- and long-term negative effects. The short-term effects of retention have the potential to stigmatize students as less capable or less intelligent, and these types of stigma can scar their educational careers (Andrew, 2014). Additionally, there is ample research indicating that retention has a negative impact on long-term academic performance and is the single largest predictor of dropping out (Rumberger, 1995; Smith, 2004; Smith & Shepard, 1987).

In their analysis of the effects of Florida test-based retention, Schwerdt and West (2013) report that there is "no definitive evidence that test-based retention in early grades is beneficial for students in the long run, even when it is accompanied by the requirement that students receive additional services" (p.24). A comprehensive review of test-based retention policies confirms that these policies disproportionately affect ethnic minority and impoverished students and reveals that any short-term gains associated with retention do not hold over time with retained students having an increased likelihood of dropping out (Huddleston, 2014). A 2014 study concluded that retention of elementary students is particularly damaging on their educational trajectories and that

students retained between kindergarten and fifth grade are 60 percent less likely to graduate high school than students with similar backgrounds (Andrew, 2014).

With the potential for such large numbers of students to be affected by these policies, it is important to consider the capital costs of retention. In a cost benefit analysis of retention, Eide and Goldhaber (2005) evaluate the cost of retention across various states and grade levels, considering the per pupil cost of retention, associated interventions, cost of delayed entry into the workforce, and future earnings benefits of “successful retention” as measured by potential increase in test scores. In their analysis, the combined costs of retention overshadowed any potential earnings benefits of “successful retention.”

Third grade has long been considered a critical juncture in student learning. Chall’s (2003) developmental theory of reading designates fourth grade as the time when students shift from learning to read to reading to learn. There is new evidence that this *fourth grade shift* extends beyond fourth grade and into adolescence (Coch, 2015). These findings indicate that reading skills and abilities develop at different times for different students and that what is needed are appropriate supports along individual learning trajectories.

The Opportunity

School systems can ill afford the human and financial burdens of retaining large numbers of students. Alternatives to retention provide an opportunity to allay both the human and capital costs associated with retention practices. Studies on these alternatives agree that failure prevention through a system of learning supports can help lessen poor performance and—ultimately—reliance on retention. According to Darling-Hammond (1998), holding a child back to repeat the same experience does not ensure that the experience will be more appropriate or of higher quality the second time around.

A comprehensive system of learning supports provides the physical, cognitive, social and emotional support that every student needs to succeed in school and in life. These supports extend beyond the classroom and include resources, practices, and environmental factors within the school and community (Center for Mental

Health in Schools, 2008). Several characteristics of classrooms, communities, and schools should be considered in a retention prevention system. As districts and schools move to embrace a prevention model, multiple studies indicate that there are program elements and characteristics that can increase opportunities for student success. Research supports the program elements and strategies discussed here as effective components of retention prevention models.

School readiness. According to the National Association for the Education of Young Children (2009), school readiness is a measure of how prepared a child is to succeed in school cognitively, socially, and emotionally. School readiness, as measured by school-entry academic and attention skills, is a significant predictor of later reading and math achievement (Duncan et al., 2007). Socioeconomic status—which is closely related with race/ethnicity—is also strong predictor of low school readiness skills (Lee & Burkam, 2002; Sadowski, 2006). In addition, there are significant racial and socioeconomic disparities in access to high-quality early education (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). According to Fiester (2013), preschool attendance is one of the strongest success factors that influence school readiness for students from low-income families. Several studies bolster Fiester’s claim and provide additional information on how access to high-quality preschool can benefit children, especially those from low-income families. These benefits include:

- Intensive early childhood intervention helps ameliorate income-based achievement gaps (Duncan & Sojourner, 2012).
- Early development of working memory and attention control skills are predictive of kindergarten reading and math achievement (Welsh, Nix, Blair, Bierman, & Nelson, 2010).
- Early environments and relationship experiences affect the capacity for self-regulation skills development (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2011).

Full-day kindergarten. To support the continuum of school readiness, students should have access to high-quality, full-day kindergarten programs. Full-day kindergarten programs can have a significant impact on student learning and ongoing academic success. Research shows that it can help close achievement gaps by providing added opportunities for students to receive more academically focused and meaningful instruction

(National Center for Education Statistics, 2004; Parker, Dify, & Atchison, 2016). As compared to students enrolled in half-day programs, benefits of full-day kindergarten include:

- Full-day kindergarten students are less likely to be retained in early grades (Center for Public Education, 2011).
- Full-day kindergarten students make greater gains in reading language arts and mathematics over the course of the kindergarten year (National Center for Education Statistics, 2004).
- Full-day kindergarten students have more individualized instructional time with teachers, allowing them to identify and address early learning challenges (National Center for Education Statistics, 2004).

Classroom characteristics.

Individualized instruction. Studies show that tailored instruction and targeted interventions based on diagnostic assessments can help accelerate student learning. These tailored interventions should engage and intellectually stimulate students and include culturally and developmentally appropriate strategies to address students' individual learning needs (Jimerson, Pletcher & Kerr, 2005; Johnson & Rudolph, 2001; Lynch, 2014; Protheroe, 2007). To keep struggling students engaged, teachers can offer alternative routes to success such as revising assignments to allow for mastery while maintaining high expectations of student work (Krier, n.d.; Johnson & Rudolph, 2001; Lynch, 2014; Protheroe, 2007). A key component to success is that teachers provide timely and substantive feedback to students (Protheroe, 2007).

Accelerated learning. For students who are falling behind, remediation alone will not work. Students must have learning opportunities that will allow them to catch-up with their grade level peers while minimizing time out of the classroom. There is evidence that sustained relationships between student and teacher can help accelerate learning by lessening the time that it takes teachers to understand the learning needs and styles of their students, so providing supplemental learning time with teachers with whom students have worked before can have better outcomes (Darling-Hammond, 1998; Krier, n.d.). Interventions and supplemental learning opportunities should be available routinely and carefully tailored

to target deficits and build on strengths of each student (Darling-Hammond, 2002; Jimerson, Pletcher, Kerr, 2005; Lynch, 2014). Extended learning time, flexibility in school scheduling, extended class time, and the use of transitional classes or multiage classrooms are a few ways to support accelerated student learning (Darling-Hammond, 1998; Krier, n.d.; Johnson & Rudolph, 2001; Lynch, 2014; Protheroe, 2007).

Community characteristics.

Parental support. To address the needs of struggling students, support should extend beyond the classroom walls. Teachers, counselors, administrators, and other appropriate school personnel should have frequent contact with parents/guardians to collaborate with them, engage and advise them, and work with them to effectively support their child's learning. These should not be one way conversations, but ways to help them feel connected to the school and strategically plan involvement in their child's education, giving them a voice in what happens to their children in the school environment. This is especially important for students with diverse cultural/language backgrounds (Jimerson, Pletcher & Kerr, 2005; Krier, n.d.; Lynch, 2014).

Community support. Schools should seek ways to involve community stakeholders as an additional means to support struggling students through school-family-community partnerships. These partnerships can include a broad range of individuals/groups including parents, guardians, stepparents, grandparents, foster parents, other relatives and caregivers, businesses, agencies, cultural and civic organizations, colleges or universities, and other community groups. The work within these partnerships should focus on goal-oriented activities specifically linked to student achievement and school success (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jimerson, Pletcher & Kerr, 2005; Krier, n.d.; Lynch, 2014).

School characteristics.

Early identification and use of systematic diagnostic assessments. Early warning systems that alert educators to potential problems early in the educational process are essential to failure prevention. Systematic identification procedures that include diagnostic assessments should be employed for every student at the beginning of every year and at regular intervals during the year. This diag-

nostic information should be studied by school teams and serve as the basis for student learning plans and interventions (Jimerson, Pletcher & Kerr, 2005; Protheroe, 2007). Additionally, student work, teacher observations, and classroom assessments used to inform teaching and learning are equally important to aid in understanding how students think and learn and allow educators to offer supports that tie to work students are doing as part of normal routine (Darling-Hammond, 1998; Lynch, 2014). The continuous monitoring of progress should be used to modify and individualize instruction (Johnson & Rudolph, 2001; Krier, n.d.).

Professional Development. High-quality professional development is a vital link to improvements in teaching and learning (Johnson & Rudolph, 2001). With diverse student populations, teachers must be able to respond to a wide range of student needs. In addition to deep understanding of content, standards and curriculum, teachers must also understand the wide range of students' approaches to learning and possess a diverse range of strategies and pedagogical skills to ensure that they reach all students (Darling-Hammond, 1998; Johnson & Rudolph, 2001; Lynch, 2014). Teachers need access to high-quality professional development to help them attain and maintain these skills as well as the time to implement, refine, and assess them.

Other learning supports. Noncognitive factors also affect student academic performance (Farrington et al., 2012). An abundance of research indicates that social and emotional learning (SEL) programs improve academic achievement along the continuum of learning (Weissberg, Goren, Domitrovich, & Dusenbury, 2013). SEL programs address skills/competencies that can affect academic behavior and long-term academic success (Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg, 2004; Belfield, Bowden, Klapp, Levin, Shand, & Zander, 2015). Schools that employ policies, practices, and structures related to positive school climate are better equipped to support SEL as these support multi-tiered systems of support that address academic, behavioral, and social success factors (Durlak, 2015, Jimerson, Pletcher & Kerr, 2005). These types of supports address different dimensions of student learning and are important supplements to academic interventions aimed at preventing student failure.

Conclusion

Retention policies have the potential to affect a majority of students, and they disproportionately affect students of color, students living in poverty, English language learners and students with special needs. School readiness, early identification, and appropriate learning supports offered along the educational continuum can help lessen the impetus for punitive retention policies.

NEA Opposes:

- The use of standardized tests for mandated determination of a student's future.

NEA Supports:

- Ongoing evaluation of student learning based on multiple measures, including authentic assessments, that are directly linked to the standards, curricula, and the materials teachers use
- Programs to facilitate and enhance school readiness.
- The establishment of nonmandatory "universal" pre-kindergarten for all three- and four-year-old children
- Full-day—as opposed to half-day—kindergarten and prekindergarten
- Programs that meet the needs of students along the educational continuum and enhance student performance in all curricular areas
- A "whole child" approach to learning, teaching, and community engagement that encourages parental and community involvement in all aspects of a child's education; addresses multiple dimensions such as students' physical, social, and emotional health and well-being; ensures equity, adequacy, and sustainability in resources and quality among public schools and districts
- Increased availability and access to extended learning opportunities such as before- and after-school programs, academic enrichment, mentoring, tutoring, and programs that extend the school year or school day for students in need of such services.
- Positive involvement of parents, guardians, or designated caregivers in the schools and programs to provide incentives for appropriate parental and community involvement in schools
- Opportunities for staff development and in-service training for all education employees and initiatives to support the development of cultural competence among all educators.

Resources

Full-day Kindergarten: A Missing Link in the Prekindergarten through Third Grade (P-3) Continuum for Many Students provides background information on the benefits of full-day kindergarten. http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/18781_Full-Day_Kindergarten_Backgrounder-Final.pdf

Full-day Kindergarten Helps Close the Achievement Gaps is an NEA policy brief that outlines the importance of providing young children with a full day of kindergarten to maintain the progress achieved in early childhood programs. http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/18001_Full-Day_Kindergarten_Policy_Brief-final.pdf

Parent, Family, Community Involvement in Education is an NEA policy brief that outlines the importance of family and community involvement as a factor in student success and ways in which families and communities can become active in the education process. http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/PB11_ParentInvolvement08.pdf

The Authentic Assessment Toolbox is an NEA resource to help K-12 teachers create authentic tasks, rubrics, and standards for measuring and improving student learning. <http://www.nea.org/tools/lessons/57730.htm>

Great Public Schools (GPS) Indicators Framework is designed to give policymakers, educators, and advocates a framework to evaluate how well states, districts, and schools address areas critical to student success. Criteria addressed in the framework include: 1) School Readiness; 2) Standards and Curriculum; 3) Conditions of Teaching and Learning; 4) Workforce Quality; 5) Accountability and Assessments; 6) Family and Community Engagement; and 7) School Funding. <http://www.nea.org/gpsindicators>

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