# Position Statement on Student Grade Retention and Social Promotion (NASP, 2008)

The increasing emphasis on educational standards and accountability has rekindled public and professional debate regarding the use of grade retention as an intervention to remedy academic deficits. While some politicians, professionals, and organizations have called for an end to "social promotion," many states and districts have established promotion standards.

Despite a century of research that fails to support the efficacy of grade retention, the use of grade retention has increased over the past 25 years. It is estimated that as many as 15% of American students are held back each year, and 30% - 50% of students in the US are retained at least once before ninth grade. Furthermore, the highest retention rates are found among poor, minority, inner-city youth. Research indicates that neither grade retention nor social promotion is an effective strategy for improving educational success. Evidence from research and practice highlights the importance of seeking alternatives that will promote social and cognitive competence of children and enhance educational outcomes.

The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) promotes the use of interventions that are evidence-based and effective and discourages the use of practices which, though popular or widely accepted, are either not beneficial or are harmful to the welfare and educational attainment of America's children and youth. Given the frequent use of the ineffective practice of grade retention, NASP urges schools and parents to seek alternatives to retention that more effectively address the specific instructional needs of academic underachievers.

## Research Findings

Findings from extensive research during the last century on the efficacy of grade retention–warrant serious consideration. The following summarizes the preponderance of the evidence.

***Student characteristics:***

Some groups of children are more likely to be retained than others. Those at highest risk for retention are male; African American or Hispanic; have a late birthday, delayed development and/or attention

problems; live in poverty or in a single-parent household; have parents with low educational attainment; have parents that are less involved in their education; or have changed schools frequently. Students who have behavior problems and display aggression or immaturity are more likely to be retained. Students with reading problems, including English Language Learners, are also more likely to be retained.

***Impact at the elementary school level:***

- While delayed entry and readiness classes may not hurt children in the short run, there is no evidence of a positive effect on either long-term school achievement or adjustment. Furthermore, by adolescence, these early retention practices are predictive of numerous health and emotional risk factors, and associated deleterious outcomes.
- Initial achievement gains may occur during the year the student is retained. However, the consistent trend across many research studies is that achievement gains decline within 2-3 years of retention, such that retained children either do no better or perform more poorly than similar groups of promoted children. This is true whether children are compared to same-grade peers or comparable students who were promoted.
- The most notable academic deficit for retained students is in reading.
- Children with the greatest number of academic, emotional, and behavioral problems are most likely to experience negative consequences of retention. Subsequent academic and behavioral problems may result in the child being retained again.
- Retention does not appear to have a positive impact on self-esteem or overall school adjustment; however, retention is associated with significant increases in behavior problems as measured by behavior rating scales completed by teachers and parents, with problems becoming more pronounced as the child reaches adolescence.
- Research examining the overall effects of 19 empirical studies conducted during the 1990s compared outcomes for students who were retained and matched comparison students who were promoted. Results indicate that grade retention had a negative impact on all areas of achievement (reading, math and language) and socio-emotional adjustment (peer relationships, self esteem, problem behaviors, and attendance).

*Impact at the secondary school level:*

- Students who were retained or had delayed kindergarten entry are more likely to drop out of school compared to students who were never retained, even when controlling for achievement levels. The probability of dropping out increases with multiple retentions. Even for single retentions, the most consistent finding from decades of research is the high correlation between retention and dropping out. A recent systematic review of research exploring dropping out of high school indicates that grade retention is one of the most powerful predictors of high school dropout.
- Retained students have increased risks of health-compromising behaviors such as emotional distress, cigarette use, alcohol use, drug abuse, driving while drinking, use of alcohol during sexual activity, early onset of sexual activity, suicidal intentions, and violent behaviors.

*Impact in late adolescence and early adulthood:*

- Prospective, longitudinal research provides evidence that retained students have a greater probability of poorer educational and employment outcomes during late adolescence and early adulthood. Specifically, in addition to lower levels of academic adjustment in eleventh grade and a greater likelihood of dropping out of high school by age 19, retained students are also less likely to receive a diploma by age 20. Retained students are also less likely to be enrolled in a post-secondary education program and more likely to receive lower education/employment status ratings, be paid less per hour, and receive poorer employment competence ratings at age 20 in comparison to a group of low-achieving, promoted students. In addition, it should be noted that the low-achieving but promoted group of students are comparable to a general population of peers on all employment outcomes at age 20.
- Grade repeaters as adults are more likely to be unemployed, living on public assistance or in prison than adults who did not repeat a grade.

There are multiple explanations for the negative effects associated with grade retention, including: 1) the absence of specific remedial strategies to enhance social or cognitive competence; 2) failure to address the risk factors associated with retention; and 3) the

consequences of being over-age for grade, which is associated with an assortment of deleterious outcomes, particularly as retained children approach middle school and puberty (stigmatizing by peers and other negative experiences of grade retention may exacerbate behavioral and socio-emotional adjustment problems). Evidence of the psychosocial effects of grade retention is apparent in studies examining children's perceptions of twenty stressful life events. Initial research two decades ago indicated that, by the time students were in 6th grade, they feared retention most after the loss of a parent and going blind. In 2001, 6th grade students rated grade retention as the *most* stressful life event, followed by the loss of a parent and going blind.

## Individual Considerations

The research on retention at all age levels and across studies is based on group data. While there may be individual students who benefit from retention, no study has been able to predict accurately which children will gain from being retained. Under some circumstances, retention is less likely to yield negative effects:

- Broadly, research indicates that students who have relatively positive self-concepts; good peer relationships; social, emotional, and behavioral strengths; and those who have fewer achievement problems are less likely to have negative retention experiences.
- Students who have difficulty in school because of lack of opportunity for instruction rather than lack of ability may be helped by retention. However, this assumes that the lack of opportunity is related to attendance/health or mobility problems that have been resolved and that the student is no more than one year older than classmates.
- Retention is more likely to have benign or positive impact when students are not simply held back, but receive specific remediation to address skill or behavioral deficits and promote achievement and social skills. However, such remediation is also likely to benefit students who are socially promoted.

## Alternatives to Retention and Social Promotion

Both grade retention and social promotion fail to improve learning or facilitate positive achievement and adjustment outcomes. Neither

repeating a grade nor merely moving on to the next grade provides students with the supports they need to improve academic and social skills. Holding schools accountable for student progress requires effective intervention strategies that provide educational opportunities and assistance to promote the social and cognitive development of students. Recognizing the cumulative developmental effects on student success at school, both early interventions and follow-up strategies are emphasized. Furthermore, in acknowledging the reciprocal influence of social and cognitive skills on academic success, effective interventions must be implemented to promote both social and cognitive competence of students. NASP encourages school districts to consider a wide array of well-researched, evidence-based, effective, and responsible strategies in lieu of retention or social promotion (see Algozzine, Ysseldyke, and Elliott, 2002 for a discussion of research-based tactics for effective instruction; see Shinn, Walker, and Stoner, 2002 for a more extensive discussion of interventions for academic and behavior problems).

Specifically, NASP recommends that educational professionals:

- encourage parents' involvement in their children's schools and education through frequent contact with teachers, supervision of homework, etc.
- adopt age-appropriate and culturally sensitive instructional strategies that accelerate progress in all classrooms
- emphasize the importance of early developmental programs and preschool programs to enhance language and social skills
- incorporate systematic assessment strategies, including continuous progress monitoring and formative evaluation, to enable ongoing modification of instructional efforts
- provide effective early reading programs
- implement effective school-based mental health programs
- use student support teams to assess and identify specific learning or behavior problems, design interventions to address those problems, and evaluate the efficacy of those interventions
- use effective behavior management and cognitive behavior modification strategies to reduce classroom behavior problems
- provide appropriate education services for children with educational disabilities, including collaboration between regular, remedial, and special education professionals
- offer extended year, extended day , and summer school programs that focus on facilitating the development of academic skills
- implement tutoring and mentoring programs with peer, cross-age,

or adult tutors
- incorporate comprehensive school-wide programs to promote the psychosocial and academic skills of all students
- establish full-service schools to provide a community-based vehicle for the organization and delivery of educational, social and health services to meet the diverse needs of at-risk students.

For children experiencing academic, emotional, or behavioral difficulties, neither grade retention nor social promotion is an effective remedy. If educational professionals are committed to helping all children achieve academic success and reach their full potential, we must discard ineffective practices, such as grade retention and social promotion, in favor of "promotion plus" specific interventions designed to address the factors that place students at risk for school failure. NASP encourages school psychologists to actively collaborate with other professionals and parents in their school districts to address the findings of educational research, and develop and implement effective alternatives to retention and social promotion. Incorporating evidence-based interventions and instructional strategies into school policies and practices will enhance academic and social outcomes for all students.

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