

Rethinking Retention to Help All Students Succeed

A Resource Guide

8 Strategies that Educate
Our Children Effectively
Without Social Promotion
or Retention

by Designs for Change

Suzanne Davenport, Ed.D.

Antonio Delgado, Ph.D.

Marlene Meisels, Ph.D.

Donald R. Moore, Ed.D.

presented at the
Rethinking Retention to Help All Students Succeed Conference
Chicago, Illinois • November 14, 1998

Educating Our Children Effectively

Strategies That Don't Work In Achieving The Goal

1	Social Promotion
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2	Retention in Grade, even with special help
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Strategies That Do Work In Achieving The Goal

1	Basic School Restructuring: Changing What Happens in School Between 9 a.m. and 3 p.m.
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2	Immediate Intensive Help for Students Who Do Not Master Skills & Knowledge the First Time
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3	High Quality Early Childhood Education
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4	Effective Reading Instruction in All Grades
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5	Smaller Learning Communities That Use Effective Educational Practices
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6	Family & Community Involvement Focused on Educational Improvement
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7	Connecting Students with Real Futures
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8	Promotion with Extra Help
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Top Priority Goal

Highest possible percentage of students who:

- Graduate from high school
- Master academic skills

RESOURCE GUIDE FOR “RETHINKING RETENTION TO HELP ALL STUDENTS SUCCEED”

In the view of most people, the top priority goal of urban public education is that:

The highest possible percentage of students both:

- (1) Graduate from high school and
- (2) Master academic skills sufficiently so that they are able to succeed in the post-secondary education and/or in obtaining and succeeding in a job with a future.

Two Strategies That Clearly Do Not Work In Reaching This Top-Priority Goal, Based On Educational Research

Strategy 1: Social Promotion

Definition: Allowing students to move through school with their age group, without carrying out educational practices that, research indicates, will enable a very high percentage of students to reach the top priority goal of high school graduation and academic competence.

What Research Says

As defined above, “social promotion” allows schools to escape their responsibility to organize themselves and to teach students in ways that keep students in school and that actively and effectively help students to master academic skills. The basic attitude of many staff in such ineffective schools is that some students “have it” and some students do not, and their school is not able to have much impact on those students who do not “have it.”

Therefore, students are allowed to drift through school with their age group. However, this approach is very destructive to many students for several reasons:

- Students who are far behind in academic skills when they reach high school are far more likely to drop out.¹
- Students who graduate from high school but have not mastered academic skills will have trouble finding a job with a future in today’s global and changing economy or succeeding in post-secondary education.²

Strategy 2: Grade Retention

Definition: Requiring students to repeat a grade if they fail to meet promotion standards for that grade (flunking). Sometimes, this repeated year includes additional or different educational programs for the student.

What Research Says

This strategy is extremely popular, because it sounds like common sense. If a student has not mastered the skills and knowledge needed to advance, keep the student at the same grade level until they have caught up. Then, when they have caught up, they can move ahead and succeed.

If this strategy worked in the way that it is supposed to, few could be opposed to it. Unfortunately, one of the clearest and most consistent findings of educational research is that:

- Students who are retained in grade do not do better academically, as measured by standardized tests, compared with similar low-achieving students who are promoted.
- Students who are retained in grade are much more likely to drop out of high school.³

These patterns hold true even if the retained students are given substantial extra help in the year or years that they are held back.

Neither social promotion nor retention help us achieve the primary goal of maximizing the number of students who graduate from high school and master academic skills.

Eight Strategies That Clearly Work In Reaching This Top-Priority Goal, Based On Educational Research

It is time to get beyond the social promotion versus retention debate, and focus on strategies that, research indicates, are effective in achieving the goal of maximum high school graduation with strong academic skills for our students.

Below, we briefly describe eight research based strategies for achieving this goal. Notice that they are interrelated; for example, basic school restructuring (Strategy 1) makes it more likely that students who do not master skills and knowledge the first time will get immediate intensive help.

Also notice that what these eight strategies have in common is that they are not easy to carry out, because they require teamwork, creativity, and ongoing education among all the adults in a school community that work with children — for example, staff, parents, volunteers.

Strategy 1. Basic School Restructuring: Changing What Happens in School Between 9 a.m. and 3 p.m.

What the Research Says

For more than 30 years, researchers have been studying urban schools that serve a high proportion of low-income children in which students achieve at national norms. They have been called “effective schools” or “successful schools” or “schools that work.”

Two recent summaries of this research, for example, are:

- Daniel Levine and Lawrence Lezotte, *Unusually Effective Schools: A Review and Analysis of Research and Practice*.⁴
- Charles Teddlie and Sam Stringfield, *Schools Make a Difference: Lessons Learned from a 10-Year Study of School Effects*.⁵

In Chicago, research about successful urban schools has been organized around Five Essential Supports for School Improvement:

- Leadership Focused on School Improvement.
- Family-Community Partnerships Support Learning.
- School Environment/Culture Supports Learning.
- Staff Development and Collaboration.
- Quality Instructional Program.

These Five Essential Supports reflect the fact that high achievement requires a fundamental restructuring of the school’s policies, practices, and social organization, as well as its relationship to its community. A number of research efforts have identified specific educational practices for these Five Essential Supports. The Consortium on Chicago School Research has organized much of its research on Chicago schools around the Five Essential Supports and concludes that “we have now assembled considerable evidence testifying to the validity of the framework...”⁶ Designs for Change found that elementary schools that showed a seven-year trend of substantial improvement on the Iowa Test in reading were carrying out these Five Essential Supports. These schools brought a dramatic decrease in their percentage of students scoring in the bottom quartile on the Iowa reading test, the students at risk of being retained.⁷

Examples

Galileo Academy of Math and Science, Chicago, Illinois
Kinzie School, Chicago, Illinois
Garden Homes Elementary School, Milwaukee, Wisconsin

Strategy 2. Immediate Intensive Help for Students Who Do Not Master Critical Skills and Knowledge the First Time

What Research Says

In an unsuccessful urban school, the teachers often teach a skill once and move on, or they keep teaching it the same way, even if the students don't "get it." Often the view that underlies this approach is that some students "have it" and some do not, so that there is not much use in providing immediate intensive help for students who do not master skills and knowledge using the school's established methods.

Wheelock has summarized the qualities of successful schools that "see academic failure as evidence that they themselves [the staff] have failed to provide students with the support they need to do better work."⁸ In these schools:

- Staff develops a schoolwide "culture of high standards" and every student receives the support needed to "meet standards" for grade promotion. Educators in such schools do not wish to pass unprepared students on to the next grade, but they also know that grade retention undermines achievement and is a poor substitute for good teaching and learning.
- These schools offer every student effective help *early and often* during the school year, rather than after students fail.⁹
- They provide this help in the regular classroom during the regular school day. They assume that all students will need extra help, and that "Everybody has to get it. No one can be sorted out."
- While they may group students sometimes to teach specific subjects or tasks, these groupings are flexible. They do not segregate out a group of low-achieving students in permanent pullout classes or entirely separate classrooms.
- They attend to students' academic and social needs and involve families as partners providing help to children and in problem-solving.
- With extra help built into the regular school day, students who need help are also given extra assistance through such strategies as after school tutoring, Saturday schools, summer school, and homework help-lines.¹⁰

Examples

Ohio Reading Recovery Project, Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio
Success for All Project, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, Maryland

Strategy 3. High Quality Early Childhood Education

What Research Says

There is clear evidence that high quality early childhood education for children ages three to five has short-term and long-term impacts on children's educational achievement, the likelihood that they will avoid special education placement and retention in grade, and the likelihood that they will graduate from high school. Some key qualities of a high quality preschool program include the following:

- Providing adequate student-teacher ratios, facilities, and instructional materials.
- Committing to an instructional strategy for early childhood education that has been shown, through research, to lead to short-term and long-term educational benefits.
- Adequate training and support for teachers in carrying out the program's instructional strategy.
- Building on children's strengths and building up areas where they are weaker. Enabling children to demonstrate different modes of knowing and learning and different ways of representing what they know.
- Assessing students' progress and achievements in ongoing, strategic, and purposeful ways. Results are used to benefit the children in adapting curriculum and teaching to meet the developmental and learning needs of children.
- Addressing the range of children's needs that help them benefit from school, including health, nutrition, and emotional and social well-being .
- Communicating regularly with the families of students in the language they speak, and involving families in the classroom and in learning at home.

Research suggest that early childhood programs with quite different strategies can succeed. Issues critical to success of a strategy are grounding the program in research about its effects, preparing teachers thoroughly in how to carry out the program, and using consistent strategies with the children as they move through elementary school.¹¹ Key practices include actively engaging children with hands-on learning materials in an environment that creates stimulating educational experiences; engaging children in oral language activities and meaning discussions, reading and writing activities; as well as specific instruction in word analysis skills, including phonemic awareness and phonics skills to understand the relationships between print and speech.¹²

Low-income children in Chicago participated in a program that included pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, and follow-through into grades two and three. The early childhood program featured a structured reading readiness program, parent involvement, and comprehensive health services. Reynolds has followed these students for two years after they exited the program, and found that participation in the full program extending into elementary school was associated with higher levels of reading achievement, math achievement, and parent involvement, and lower levels of grade retention.¹³

Some Examples

Child Development Schools, Developmental Studies Center, Oakland, California
 High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, Ypsilanti, Michigan
 Norwood Park School, Chicago, Illinois
 Greeley School, Winnetka, Illinois
 Murphy School, Chicago, Illinois
 Johnson School, Bensenville, Illinois
 State Pre-Kindergarten Demonstration School, Chicago, Illinois

Strategy 4. Effective Reading Instruction in All Grades

Learning to read with understanding is perhaps the single most important competence that schools teach. Learning to read should be a major focus of the primary grades (pre-kindergarten through third grade). However, every teacher at every grade level must see himself or herself as a reading teacher and incorporate reading development objectives and activities into classroom instruction.

What Research Says

Primary Grades. For decades, there has been a battle between advocates for “phonics” and advocates for “whole language” in the teaching of reading. However, a recent analysis of all available research by the National Research Council concludes that the best results in teaching children to read result from a balanced approach, which combines:

- A literacy-rich environment with multiple opportunities to read with understanding and to enjoy reading.
- A structured program for explicitly teaching word analysis skills (including phonics), comprehension skills, and spelling skills.
- Multiple opportunities to write, speak, and listen that are an integral part of reading activities.
- Reading skill and strategy instruction that is woven into the process of student reading and writing.¹⁴

It is also critical that the reading program be coherent from grade to grade, with pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, first, second, and third grade teachers constantly planning together and coordinating their work and operating from a common understanding of the process of learning to read.

Examples

Kinzie School, Chicago, Illinois
Norwood School, Chicago, Illinois
Oriole Park School, Chicago, Illinois

Middle and High School Grades. Many urban students who master the basics of reading in primary grades fall behind in their reading competence as they move through school. All middle and high school teachers must see themselves as reading teachers. The staff members of middle and high schools should have shared objectives for the reading and writing development of their students, as well as shared understanding about how to teach reading so that reading instruction is coherent and consistent across these grades.

Middle and high school teachers must also be prepared to explicitly teach reading strategies for comprehension and word identification. Most of the practices that are effective for primary students are still relevant, although phonics instruction (understanding the basic connection between letters and sounds) is typically replaced by “word analysis” (for example, understanding that “ed” at the end of a word usually signals the past tense). Other important practices include, for example:

- Teachers explicitly teach the structure of stories and the ways that different types of written materials are organized¹⁵
- Teachers provide opportunities for students to choose literature and topics they find interesting and meaningful.¹⁶
- Students are given opportunities to tie reading to drama and art, to relate reading experiences to their lives, and to discuss and share reading experiences.¹⁷
- Teachers provide activities before, during and after reading that teach and activate students' knowledge from their past experience and from other materials that they have read.¹⁸
- Students are taught to consciously read for a specific purpose, to actively determine what they want to get out of what they are reading.¹⁹

Examples

Middle Schools

Canton Middle School, Baltimore, Maryland

Central East Middle School, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

High School

Lincoln High School, Dallas, Texas

Strategy 5. Smaller Learning Communities That Use Effective Educational Practices

What Research Says

In the last twenty years, there has been a nationwide movement toward small free-standing public schools, breaking large schools down into separate “houses” in which a team of teachers educates a specific group of students, and creating “multi-plex” school buildings that house several small schools.

Small schools may be organized around a particular educational philosophy or focus. However, small schools that effectively educate students who are at risk of school failure serve a diverse student body. They are not academically selective. Nor do they separate out low-achieving students into a separate program or building.²⁰

It is certainly possible to have an ineffective small school. The key to success is that the school, whatever its size, carries out the educational practices that have been shown through research to lead to higher achievement (Strategy 1) and that the school helps all students master critical skills (Strategy 4).

However, research indicates that small schools are, on the average, significantly more effective in avoiding student failure,²¹ because small size makes it much easier to carry out practices that boost student achievement. In small schools, teachers can build strong personal bonds with students, press students to excel, and provide appropriate extra help. And it is much easier for teachers to collaborate and communicate, build trust among each other, and reach out to families.²² Small schools have been shown, on the average,

to bring about higher student achievement for low-income students.²³ In Chicago, the Consortium on Chicago School Research has found that a variety of desirable practices to be more prevalent in small schools, including more effective Local School Councils, principals who act as educational leaders, more teacher collaboration, higher levels of student safety, and wider use of innovative instructional practices.²⁴

Examples

Best Practices High School, Chicago, Illinois
The Metropolitan Career and Technical Center, Providence, Rhode Island
Turner Technical High School, Miami, Florida

Strategy 6. Family and Community Involvement Focused on Educational Improvement

What Research Says

A series of ongoing reviews of the research about family involvement in schools conclude that:

The evidence is now beyond dispute: parent involvement improves student achievement. When parents are involved, children do better in school, and they go to better schools.²⁵

Schools can help families be productively involved in their children's education in a number of major ways: maintaining regular two-way communication between school and family, teaching families how to aid their children at home, encouraging families and community to be involved as volunteers at school, linking with community agencies to provide a range of educational and social services, and encouraging family involvement in school decision making.²⁶ Good schools do not see these various ways to involve families as mutually exclusive, but rather as the spokes of a wheel, each one of which strengthens the school's effectiveness.²⁷

Family and community involvement is one aspect of the Five Essential Supports for Student Learning (Strategy 1), but it deserves extra emphasis in its own right.

Examples

Funston School, Chicago, Illinois
Fratney School, Milwaukee, Wisconsin

Strategy 7. Connecting Students with Real Futures

School-to-work is a high school reform strategy that grounds student learning in both a rich academic curriculum and active workplace or community projects. This strategy is an effort to address three key problems that plague high schools: one, the disengagement of students in any high school curriculum track from learning, expressed in an "as if I care" student attitude toward required assignments; two, the disconnection between youth and adults, expressed in poor communication and weak relationships; and, three, segregation of students into a traditional vocational education track, experienced as a dead-end preparation for non-existent jobs.²⁸

School-to-work is designed to detrack high schools, engage all students in meaningful and challenging work, and to prepare them to make informed and capable choices about future work and education. Key practices in the school-to-work strategy are:

- Using real-world contexts to teach rigorous academics, with an emphasis on higher order thinking skills.
- Expanding academic instruction to include problem-solving and other cross-cutting competencies vital to further study and future careers.
- Extending learning beyond the classroom through work internships, field-based investigations, and community projects linked to academics.
- Providing students with adult mentors and coaches for project work.
- Emphasizing high-quality student products through regular exhibitions, portfolios, and other assessments, informed by real-world students.
- Offering regular opportunities for students to explore their interests and develop personal plans for future learning and work.²⁹

Examples

Central Park East Secondary School, New York, New York
The Metropolitan Career and Technical Center, Providence, Rhode island
Turner Technical High School, Miami, Florida
Oakland Health Academy at Oakland Technical High School, Oakland, California
Fenway Middle College High School, Boston, Massachusetts
School of Environmental Studies at the Minnesota Zoo, Rosemount, Minnesota
St. Louis Career Academy, St. Louis, Missouri

Strategy 8. Promotion with Extra Help

What the Research Says

When the seven strategies described above are consciously carried out at the same time, the number of students who fail to meet grade-level standards will be minimized, and the decision about whether to promote or retain a student will come up much less often.

However, research indicates that low-achieving students do better academically and are less likely to drop out later on, if they are promoted but provided extra help in summer school or in the next grade, rather than being retained. This approach is not the same as “social promotion”; it requires that the school diagnose a students’ problems and provide intensive extra help. Providing this help is not only more effective; it is much cheaper than providing a full additional year of school for a retained student.³⁰

Teachers, trained tutors, and students themselves can provide different kinds of extra help throughout the school year to those students who need it . In order to target help to the particular needs of an individual student, teachers may need to modify and adapt the curriculum.³¹ Intensive reading tutoring for first grade reading students using Reading Recovery methods effectively brings students up to grade level.³² Peer tutoring and peer

sharing in which older and younger students or higher-achieving and lower-achieving students read and talk together proves to be an effective learning experience for both students in the pair.³³

Related to the strategy of “promotion with extra help” are two methods for minimizing the need to make the promotion-retention decision, through the way that the school staff are organized:

- Multi-Age Grouping. In a school with multi-age grouping, combined classes are created, such as a kindergarten-first grade class; a first-, second-, and third-grade class; a third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade class. Thus, for example, a student in a first-, second-, and third grade class stays in that classroom for three years, and the decision to promote or retain does not come up at the end of each year.
- Looping. In a school that employs “looping,” the same teacher or the same team of teachers remains with a group of students for two, three, or four years. The student group remains intact as long as they are working with these teachers. The focus is not on labeling students as being in a certain grade, but on achieving grade level standards for all students over a multi-year period.

It should be emphasized that multi-age grouping and looping are not, in themselves, solutions to the retention-social promotion dilemma, unless the school staff is carrying out the effective instructional practices described under the other strategies above. For example, students must receive immediate intensive help if they are not mastering the skills appropriate for their grade level, in a multi-age classroom.

Examples

Saundra Graham and Rosa Parks Alternative Public School, Cambridge, Massachusetts
Garden Homes Elementary School, Milwaukee, Wisconsin

So Take Heart

You don't have to choose between retention and social promotion. There are research-based strategies for changing the way that schools are organized and that students are taught that can enable urban schools to reach their goal of graduating a high percentage of students with the academic skills to lead a productive life.

¹G.A. Hess and D. Lauber (1985). Dropouts from the Chicago Public Schools. Chicago: Chicago Panel on Public School Finances.

²R. J. Murnane and F. Levy (1996). Teaching the new basic skills: Principles for educating children to thrive in a changing economy. New York: The Free Press.

³L. A. Shepard and M.L. Smith (Eds.) (1989). Flunking grades: Research and policies on retention. New York: The Falmer Press.

⁴D.U. Levine and L W. Lezotte (1990). Unusually effective schools: A review and analysis of research and practice. Madison, WI: The National Center for Effective Schools Research & Development.

⁵C. Teddlie and S. Stringfield (1993). Schools make a difference: Lessons learned from a 10-year study of school effects. New York: Teachers College Press.

⁶P. B. Sebring, et al. (1996) The students speak. Chicago: Consortium on Chicago School Research, p. 80.

⁷Designs for Change (1998). What makes these schools stand out: Chicago elementary schools with a seven-year trend of improved reading achievement. Chicago: Author.

⁸A. Wheelock (1998). Everybody has to get it: Extra help and support to meet standards and prevent grade retention. www.middleweb.com/WhlckRenten.html

⁹J.J. Pikulski (1996). Preventing reading problems: Factors common to successful early intervention programs. www.eduplace.com/rdg/res/prevent.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹A.S. Epstein, et al. (1996) Models of early childhood education. Ypsilanti: High/Scope Press.

¹²L.E. Ayres, Phonological awareness training of kindergarten children: Three treatments and their effects (1998). In C. Weaver (Ed.), Reconsidering a balanced approach to reading. Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English.

¹³A.J. Reynolds (1994). Effects of a preschool plus follow-on intervention for children at risk. *Developmental Psychology*. Vol. 30. No. 6: 787-804.

¹⁴C. E. Snow, M. S. Burns, and P. Griffin, (Eds.) (1998). Preventing reading difficulties in young children. Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press.

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¹⁷P. Oldfather (1993). Students' perspectives on motivating experiences in literacy learning. Perspectives in Reading Research No. 2. Universities of Georgia and Maryland: National Reading Research Center.

¹⁸E.H. Hiebert (1998). Becoming literate through authentic tasks: evidence and adaptations. In R.B. Ruddell, M.R. Ruddell, and H. Singer (Eds.), Theoretical models and processes of reading. (Fourth Edition). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

¹⁹R.F. Flipppo (1998). Points of agreement: A display of professional unity in our field. *The Reading Teacher*, 52, 30-40.

²⁰M. Fine and J.I. Somerville (1998). Small Schools: Big Imaginations. Chicago: Cross

City Campaign for Urban School Reform.

²¹Ibid.

²²Ibid.

²³W.J. Fowler, and H.J. Walberg (1991). School size, characteristics, and outcomes. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 13: 189-202.

²⁴See, for example, Steering Committee, Consortium on Chicago School Research (1993). *A View from the elementary schools: The state of reform in Chicago*. Chicago: Author.

²⁵A. Henderson (1987). The evidence continues to grow: Parent involvement improves student achievement. Columbia, MD: National Committee for Citizens in Education.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸A. Steinberg (1998). Real learning, real work, School-to-work as high school reform. New York: Routledge.

²⁹ K. Cushman, A. Steinberg, and R. Riordan (1998). Rigor and relevance, Essential ideas about connecting school and work. Boston: Jobs for the Future.

³⁰M.L. Smith and L.A. Shepard (1989). Flunking grades: A Recapitulation. In L. A. Shepard and M.L. Smith (Eds.). Flunking grades: Research and policies on retention. New York: The Falmer Press.

³¹R.L. Allington (1989). Coordination, collaboration, and consistency: the redesign of compensatory and special education interventions. In R.E. Slavin, N.L. Karweit, and N.A. Madden (Eds.), Effective programs for students at risk. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

³² D.L. Spiegel (1995). A comparison of traditional remedial programs and Reading Recovery: Guidelines for success for all programs. *The Reading Teacher*, 49, 86-96.

³³ J.R. Paratore and R.L. McCormack (Eds.) (1997). Peer talk in the classroom, learning from research. Newark, DE: International Reading Association.