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;
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
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.

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

Date: 5/16/2004 Submitted By: Mike Muir, Maine Center for Meaningful Engaged Learning
http://www.principalspartnership.com/

This is provided as a service to educators by The Principals Partnership and Union Pacific Foundation, neither of which assumes any responsibility for the content of the brief or the positions taken by the authors or the Web sites or other authors whose works are included. This research brief reflects information currently available and is not the official position of The Principals Partnership or Union Pacific Foundation.

Disclaimer: All URLs listed in this site have been tested for accuracy, and contents of Web sites examined for quality, at the time of addition. Content accuracy and appropriateness, however, cannot be guaranteed over time as Web sites and their contents change constantly. The author takes no responsibility for difficulties which may result from the use of any Web site listed herein. Please notify the Webmaster if you find any dead links or inappropriate material.

Permission: You may use or download content for research or educational purposes, or for your personal, noncommercial purposes, provided you keep unchanged all copyright and other notices with them. No other use of any content is permitted. You agree that you will make only lawful use of this research brief, and will only use these briefs in compliance with all federal, state and local laws and regulations. You agree that you will make no use of the research that violates anyone else's rights, including copyright, trademark, trade secret, right of privacy, right of publicity or other rights.