Retention Literature Snapshot

WHO GETS RETAINED?

Risk factors for retention, in addition to poor academic performance, span a range of student characteristics. Younger students and boys are much more likely than other students to be held back, even when all else is equal. Other risk factors include low household income, English language learner status, and being Latino or African American. Students with several of these risk factors have a one-in-nine chance of being retained (Cannon and Lipscomb, 2011). Large family size, low parental education and low family involvement are also related to retention (Anderson et al, 2002). Other facts:

- In many large urban districts close to 50 percent of students who enter kindergarten are likely to be retained at least once.
- The most frequently repeated grades are kindergarten through second.
- Retained students are more likely to have parents who did not graduate from high school (Westchester Institute for Human Services Research).

WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH SAY?

Research on retention is overwhelmingly negative.

<u>Benefits are short term</u>

- Most studies suggest that retention benefits disappear after 2 or 3 years (Westchester Institute for Human Services Research, Wu et al).

<u>Negative effect on student achievement and behavior</u>

- Retention has a negative effect on student achievement, attitude toward school, and school attendance (Rudolph).
- When retained and promoted peers are compared at the same age, retained students achieve at a slower rate (Wu et al).
- One of the largest studies on the effects of retention comparing students who were retained with those who were not, suggests that students who were retained were almost 1/3 of a standard deviation behind their same age counterparts, demonstrating that the students who were retained improved far less than those who were not (Balitewicz). Hong et al. found a difference of 2/3 of a standard deviation which is equivalent to almost half a year's expected growth).
- Retained children are subsequently overage for each grade, which is associated with negative outcomes, particularly as retained children approach middle school and puberty (National Research Council).

<u>Dropout rates are increased</u>

- Students who are retained one grade are up to twice as likely to drop out (Shepard and Smith; Kenneady). Students who repeat two grades have an 80-90 percent chance of dropping out (Westchester Institute for Human Services Research).

Interventions matter

- Retention usually duplicates an entire year of schooling instead of targeting needed areas of support (Fletcher and Vaughan; Kenneady).
- Without early diagnosis and targeted intervention, struggling students are unlikely to catch up whether they are promoted or retained (Fletcher and Vaughan).
- Interventions are effective such as 1-on-1 assistance and small student to teacher ratios (Fletcher and Vaughan).

Overrepresentation by males and minorities

- Retention is more likely administered to students who are younger, male, poor, of racial minority, in an urban district and with behavioral problems (Rudolph).

A costly policy

- The actual cost of retention is greater, requiring more classroom space and an increased need for teachers (Kenneady). Retention hurts taxpayers who must pay for an additional year of school—with no evidence that those dollars make a difference (Westchester Institute for Human Services Research).

Research does not support "redshirting" and "extra year" programs

- Raising the age of entry to kindergarten does not eliminate the variations in readiness for school (West et al).
- Research suggests that "extra year" programs, such as *prefirst grades* where unready children spend an extra year in kindergarten before being promoted to first grade are not effective. These programs have not been found to help students catch-up or improve their academic standing relative to low-performing students who are directly promoted to the next grade (Westchester Institute for Human Services Research).

WHAT ABOUT FLORIDA?

Florida's retention policy

Florida requires third graders to reach a minimum threshold on the reading portion (level 2 benchmark) of the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) in order to be promoted to fourth grade. Retained students attend summer school, are placed with a "high performing" teacher, have academic improvement plans, and receive additional daily reading instruction. Florida started retaining students in 2002-2003.

Study shows short term positive impact

The latest study on Florida's retention effort uses a regression discontinuity design (estimating the impact by comparing children above and below the proficiency cutoff). The authors conclude that third grade retention has a positive short term impact on measures of reading and math but the impact becomes statistically insignificant within five years (The Effects of Early Grade Retention on Student Outcomes over Time: Regression Discontinuity Evidence from

Florida, June 18, 2012). Both groups (promoted and retained) are equally likely to be absent, and placed in special education.

Criticism of positive study findings

The use of the regression discontinuity design is criticized by University of Chicago researchers at the Economic Research Center (How the Timing of Grade Retention Affects Outcomes: Identification and Estimation of Time Varying Treatment Effects, October, 2011). According to the University of Chicago authors, the regression discontinuity study used to study Florida's retention effort (estimating the impact by comparing children above and below the cutoff) is the only study that demonstrates any positive effects of retention and is in contrast to the rest of the research on retention. They assert that the regression discontinuity study overestimates the positive impact of retention. In their analysis of the data, they found that positive effects are greatest for children who have test scores close to the cutoff, with negative effects for children well below the cutoff, which are the majority of the students. In other words, retention has negative effects for most children who are retained. If there is any positive effect, it would be for retaining only those students who are closest to the average.

WHAT ARE THE ALTERNATIVES TO RETENTION AND SOCIAL PROMOTION?

Retention and social promotion are undesirable choices. Schools can reduce the need for these either-or options by using alternative approaches, and starting as soon as children begin to learn to read (Westchester Institute for Human Services Research, National Association of School Psychologists, Fletcher and Vaughan, Pianta, Lauer et al) A summary is provided below.

Clear Standards

- Provide teachers and administrators with clear standards– Uniform standards that define expectations for success provide an external check on the teaching and learning process. They give educators a reliable, rather than arbitrary, basis for decisions about student progression and instruction.

Use Assessment Wisely

- Use multiple assessments for decision-making– Multiple sources of information about students should include standardized tests, performance-based assessments, teacher recommendations, grades, and so forth.
- Identify at-risk students and intervene early– Screen, use progress monitoring.
- Assess both instructional practices and student skills.

Prepare Teachers

- Provide teacher training and intensive professional development with in class support on differentiation and literacy.
- Change teacher assignments when children are not successful.
- Show teachers how to use targeted instruction through programs like Response to Intervention

Consider New School Structures

- Personalized and more intensive instruction can be achieved through smaller class sizes and schools, multi-age classrooms, looping, block scheduling and a coordinated system of comprehensive support services aimed at addressing the academic, socio-emotional, behavioral and psychological needs of the child.
- Provide opportunities to learn outside of typical school day/year including remediation (tutoring, extended day/year, Saturday classes, summer programs)
- Create ways for parents to be meaningfully engaged.

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