

**AN OVERVIEW OF NATIONAL
RESEARCH ON THE
EFFECTIVENESS OF RETENTION ON
STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT**

A review of the research on the efficacy of retention- the blanket strategy the Board of Education plans to use to help students meet the new high standards set out by the Board of Regents - demonstrates that retention impedes the progress of children in learning the material they have missed and leads primarily to drop out and educational failure.

The recent National Research Council study found that although grade retention policies are intended to motivate students to learn and enable them to learn the knowledge they need at each grade level, their effect is often the opposite. High Stakes: Testing for Tracking, Promotion, and Graduation 285(Jay P. Heubert and Robert M. Hauser eds., 1999).

After reviewing the many controlled studies of grade retention the study concluded that:

Low performing students who have been retained in kindergarten or primary grades lose ground both academically and socially relative to similar students who have been promoted. In secondary school grades retention leads to reduced achievement and much higher rates of school dropout. At present, the negative consequences of grade retention policies typically outweigh the intended positive effects.
Id. at 285 (citations omitted).

Robert Hauser, the Chair of the National Research Council Study, recently stated the proposition even more directly:

We should know that a new policy works before we try it out on a large scale. . . Is holding students back in grade--flunking them--good for students? The research evidence shows that it is not. . . . Students who have been held back typically do not catch up; in fact, low-performing students learn more if they are promoted--even without remedial help--than if they are held back.

"What if We Ended Social Promotion?" Education Week (April 7, 1999) at 2.

As support for his conclusions, Hauser summarized several of the significant controlled studies of the effects of retention. Among these, for example, was Thomas Holmes' scientific summary of 63 controlled studies of retention, which concluded that "[o]n average, retained children are worse off than their promoted counterparts on both personal-adjustment and academic outcomes." *Id.* at 4 (quoting Thomas C. Holmes, "Grade level retention effects: A meta-analysis of research studies," in *Flunking Grades: Research and Policies on Retention* (Lorrie A. Shepard & Mary L. Smith eds., 1989) at 27.

Dr. Hauser also summarized a recent major longitudinal study of Chicago children. That study also found that "grade retention was significantly associated with *lower* reading and math achievement at age 14 and above" even when controlled for "a comprehensive set of explanatory variables." *Id.* (quoting Arthur Reynolds et al., *Grade Retention and School Performance: An Extended Investigation*, Institute for Research on Poverty (1998) (emphasis added).

Dr. Hauser also cited the results of New York's own, failed, Promotional Gates program of the 1980s. In the program, Fourth and Seventh grade students who did not achieve a minimum score on a reading test were required to attend summer school, and were retained if they did not pass the score after summer school. The retained students were provided remedial help in classes of eighteen students. One thousand one hundred new teachers were hired to help these students. Ernest R. House, *The Predictable Failure of Chicago's Student Retention Program (Summary)* (Nov. 1998) at 1-2. Despite these extra services, a blue ribbon panel reviewing the New York program found that in the long term, the retained students achieved no better than similar students who had been

promoted before the program, and were much more likely to drop out than similar students who had not been held back. Hauser at 4.

Similar statistics are being replicated in Chicago. Since 1997 in a much hailed program the Chicago Public School System has held back third, sixth and eighth graders who did not meet a promotional test-score cut off after attending summer school to make up their scores.

A panel has recently published a comprehensive study of the first two years of the program. *See* Melissa Roderick et al., *Ending Social Promotion: Results from the First Two Years* (1999). The evidence found was that even Chicago's much lauded Summer Bridge program doesn't work, for either the students retained or the students promoted, and that the students retained achieved less than similar students who were promoted. The study found that only half of students marked for failure in the spring received passing grades after attending summer school. *Id.* at 19-23 and Fig. 1-5 (1999). But even those children that did progress with the summer program and were then promoted did not carry their improvement into the next year: "While Summer Bridge raised students' performance briefly, there is no evidence that it altered the overall pattern of school-year achievement for these students." *Id.* at 55.

Retention, however, was even less effective. Only a small minority of students retained were able to meet promotion standards at the end of the retained year. One in four eighth graders and one in three third and sixth graders met promotion standards after their second year in the same grade. *Id.* at Fig. 1-5. These dismal figures do not even include the 10% of retained students who were exempted from the promotional policy during their retained year. *Id.* at 20.

In addition, the academic gains over the intervening two years for third and sixth graders retained in 1997 were in fact lower than those for students who were socially promoted in 1995 or who did not meet the criteria but for whom the criteria were waived in 1997. *Id.* at 37. For example, third graders who were retained in 1997 improved their reading scores by only 1.2 Grade Equivalent years (G.E.s) over the two year period. Students who did not meet the cut off but for whom promotion criteria were waived after summer school improved their scores by 1.6 G.E.s. Children who were similarly at risk but promoted in 1995 improved a similar amount, by 1.5 G.E.s. *Id.*

The study concluded that "retained students did not do better than previously socially promoted students. . . . In short, Chicago has not solved the problem of poor performance among students who are retained." *Id.* at 55-56.

A 1994 study of data regarding 5,500 high school students, demonstrated that even after controlling for sex, race/ethnicity, social background, test scores, adolescent deviance, early transitions to adult status, and other school related measures, students who were currently repeating a grade were 70 percent more likely to drop out of high school than students who were not. *See* What if We Ended Social Promotion? at 4.

Even more disturbing are the results of a 1998 study analyzing longitudinal data for almost 12,000 students. Even after controlling for social and family background, school characteristics, student engagement, and 8th grade test score and grades, the study found that students held back before the 8th grade were 2.56 *times* as likely to drop out before reaching the twelfth grade as those that had not. *Id.* at 5 (citing R.W. Rumberger and K.A. Larson, American Journal of Education (1998)).

There is already evidence that Chicago's retention policy may be increasing the likelihood that children will drop out of school. Ending Social Promotion at 37-39. Sixteen percent of eighth graders who were retained or sent to Transition Centers in 1997 dropped out by the fall of 1998. *Id.* at 39. Only eight percent of eighth grade students with comparable scores who were promoted in 1995 dropped out in the following year. *Id.* at 39. Proportionally, therefore, twice as many students dropped out in the year after being retained than did similar students who had been socially promoted. The above figures do not even include most children in Chicago eligible for special education, who were largely exempt from the promotional standards. *Id.* at 1-1.

With such overwhelming evidence as to the lack of efficacy of retention it is puzzling from an educational policy perspective why New York City wishes to implement a program of social retention. The program failed to help New York City students in the 1980s, as it has failed to assist students in school districts across the country for the last twenty years. Nevertheless, the Board of Education is poised to repeat its own history of failure in this area.