

North Carolina School Psychology Association



Position Statement

Grade Retention and the Student Accountability Standards in North Carolina

In the current climate characterized by legislation such as No Child Left Behind and an increasing emphasis on accountability in education, “social promotion” has been identified as a major contributor to the nation’s educational woes. (Social promotion refers to the practice of sending to the next grade students who have not yet mastered all the skills of the current grade.) In this context, grade retention has increased markedly for those children who do not meet promotion standards. A growing number of states and large school districts are adopting “get tough” policies that mandate students who do not obtain certain benchmark scores on state tests be required to repeat their grade. This occurs despite decades of research indicating that retention does not improve achievement and is the single most powerful predictor of school dropout. In an era advocating *leave no child behind*, more and more of America’s children are quite literally being left behind. Every year, 5-10% of students in the US are retained in grade. Overall retention rates have increased by 40% over the past 20 years, and in some regions 30-50% of students are retained at least once before entering high school. North Carolina retains over 60,000 students each year; and children who can least afford another strike against them (i.e., the poor, the disabled, and the disadvantaged), are retained at the highest rates.

The North Carolina School Psychology Association (NCSPA) finds it disconcerting that our state policy makers are reemphasizing and recycling this failed approach through the NC Student Accountability Standards. Retaining students who have not met the cut-off scores on the NC End of Grade tests is not the solution to improving student outcomes. This is especially true for at-risk children. While it is not possible for schools to control many of the factors that put children at risk for dropping out to begin with, retention is one variable that we *can* control. Given that retention has proven to be the most powerful predictor of who will drop out, it only makes sense that we, as educators, stop increasing the odds that these students will leave school without a diploma.

NCSPA supports accountability, high standards and high expectations for all students and commends the NC Department of Public Instruction’s efforts to provide a sound educational foundation in all of its school districts. NCSPA does, however, take issue with the use of high-stakes testing and retention as methods to improve student achievement in North Carolina. It turns out that retention is not a “gift of time” as might be intended, but a year-long sentence to be served. Under the guise of accountability, retention is being used both as a threat to motivate students to perform and as a punishment for those who do not measure up.

Overwhelming evidence demonstrates that retention is an ineffective, discriminatory and expensive practice. NCSPA recommends that it be eliminated as a viable option for most students yet does not endorse merely moving low-achieving students through the system. Instead, NCSPA advocates a Promotion with Remediation

approach whereby struggling students are provided with research-based, empirically supported interventions that promote the social and cognitive competence of students at risk of academic failure. Further, it is incumbent on each school system to provide its teachers with the resources and supports *they* need to implement these interventions. To this end, NCSPA encourages the funding and utilization of sound, research-based interventions for all students, as well as the funding of professional development and training for all teachers. The cost of retention and its demoralizing effects are too steep a price for our students and our communities to pay.

Highlights of Retention Research

- Retention is an ineffective intervention for improving achievement over time and is not the solution to social promotion.
- Early retention is not any more effective than retention in the later grades.
- Retention is associated with negative effects for academic achievement, motivation/attitude, behavior/substance abuse, emotional health/self-esteem, and employment outcomes.
- Retention is the most powerful predictor of who will drop out; one retention increases the likelihood by 4 to 5 times; two retentions increase the likelihood of dropping out to almost 100%.
- Retention most adversely affects students who can least afford another strike against them (i.e., the disadvantaged, low-achievers and minorities)—yet these are the students who are retained at the highest rate.
- Retention rates are rising across the nation and in North Carolina; over 319,000 students were retained in NC over the last five years.
- Retention is expensive—over \$450 million dollars annually in North Carolina for the extra year of education. These resources should be invested in empirically supported interventions to promote academic success.

Effective Alternatives to Retention and Research-based Strategies to Improve Student Outcomes

- Effective early childhood programs for at-risk children provide comprehensive services, including medical care and support for families. These services must follow children into elementary school to produce significant, long-term effects.
- Quality early childhood programs provide a rich language environment in a structured setting.
- The essential components of effective reading instruction are phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.
- Children with persistent reading problems require an intensive application of the same principles by highly trained teachers over a longer period of time.
- Effective teaching practices include differentiated instruction, multi-age grouping, cooperative learning, attention to learning styles, and direct instruction.
- Class sizes of 15-18 students are necessary to get significant effects on achievement, and the greatest effects occur when children are in small classes for the first three to four years of school.
- At-risk children (lower income, inner city, minority) are most positively affected by class size, and these effects last throughout their school careers.

- Class size reduction, without enough classroom space and qualified teachers, is costly and ineffective.
- Students in year-round schools achieve as well as students in traditional schools, and in some studies they perform better. There is a positive impact on at-risk students.
- Summer school has a positive effect on achievement, particularly when the program provides small group or individualized instruction and includes parent involvement.
- Summer school can help at-risk students achieve on grade level and prevent loss of learning, but treatment effects diminish over time.
- After-school programs positively affect achievement when they provide communication with regular classroom teachers, use highly qualified instructors, and individualize instruction.
- Parent involvement in schools is associated with higher test scores, higher self-esteem, improved social skills, better attendance, improved work habits, and better behavior.
- Successful school systems forge partnerships with the community to provide volunteer and financial support, advocate for effective educational policies, support teachers, and bring community services to at-risk children at school.
- Effective school-based mental health programs acknowledge the interrelated, complex nature of psychosocial problems in our society, and provide a comprehensive continuum of services. Many at-risk students will not receive mental health services unless they are provided by the school.

Recommendations for Policy Makers

- Require that test scores be used for their designed purpose—to direct instruction, not to make promotion/retention decisions about individual students.
- Use the large body of research about the positive effects of specific intervention efforts and the negative impact of retention and its lack of efficacy to make informed decisions regarding educational policy.
- Eliminate mandated retention policies for elementary and middle school students.
- Require that low-performing students have a purposeful plan for remediation to maximize their academic progress each year: **Promotion with Remediation.**
- Invest in remediation vs. retention by using research-driven, targeted strategies which have proven to be effective for low-performing students.
- Fund teacher training programs, professional development, national certification programs, reimbursement for advanced degrees, and provide incentives to attract and retain highly qualified personnel.
- Provide all students with the opportunities and necessary conditions for academic achievement by ensuring strong support of the entire community: parents, businesses, health care providers, mental health service providers, colleges, and service groups.
- Fund comprehensive early childhood programs that are vital to ensuring that all children enter school ready for academic learning.

The Supporting Paper establishing the empirical foundation for this position statement is available in pdf format at <http://www.ncschoolpsy.org>.

References to this paper should be:

North Carolina School Psychology Association (2005) Position Statement: Grade Retention and the Student Accountability Standards in North Carolina. Available online at <http://www.ncschoolpsy.org>

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