Student Retention: Intentional Decision Making

Each year principals, teachers and parents make the decision to retain a student based on a set of assumptions that are not supported by research or the experiences of the students who have been retained. This paper is designed to provide a summary of the research literature on the short-term and long-term impact of retention on student achievement, data on the practice within the Schenectady City School District and recommendations for the intentional decision making for the future on this issue.

“Grade retention is the practice of keeping students in their present grade because they have not mastered the skills necessary to progress to the next grade. “Because there are often short-term gains, many educational professionals view retention as a success because they do not see the later difficulties that the large majority of retainees experience” (Schnurr et al., 2009, p. 416).”
So, who are these students? Some groups of children are more likely to be retained than others. Ferguson, P., Jimerson, S. R., & Dalton, M. (2001) summarized the risk factors to include the following:

- “Being from a high-poverty or a single-parent household
- Being an English language learner
- Being a Black or Hispanic/Latino male
- Being younger than same-grade peers
- Having parents with low educational attainment
- Having parents who are not involved in school activities and do not interact with teachers
- Making frequent school changes
- Having chronic school absences
- Having delayed development or attention problems
- Having low self-perceptions of academic or social competence
- Displaying behavior problems or aggression
- Having difficulty with peer relationships
- Having low academic achievement (especially in reading and language arts)
- Having high-conflict relationships with teachers
- Displaying multiple risk characteristics”
Retention Myths

Jimerson and Renshaw have researched and debunked a number of myths regarding retention over the last 10 years (See References for list of studies conducted by these researchers). We have all subscribed to one or more of these myths in our careers.

**Myth #1:** *Retention is a gift of time and helps students catch up.* Research reveals that students who are struggling academically do not typically catch up to comparable promoted peers.

**Myth #2:** *Repeating the grade will help students achieve and adjust.* In fact, research says retention is associated with negative outcomes in reading, math, science, and language arts and also in peer relationships, self-esteem, and behaviors that cause problems.

**Myth #3:** *Retention does no harm.* Quite the contrary, studies have found that retention is correlated with emotional distress, low self-esteem, poor peer relationships, cigarette smoking, alcohol and drug abuse, early sexual activity, and violent behaviors.

**Myth #4:** *Retention prevents further school failure.* In fact, retained students are 5-10 times more likely to drop out of high school than non-retained students.

**Myth #5:** *Retention in early elementary school is okay; it’s later retention that causes problems.* Actually, research has found no difference in negative consequences between students who are retained early on versus later. True, some students benefit from retention, however, “there is no proven method for predicting who will and who will not.”
State of Retention in Schenectady City School District

Our students are at significant risk of retention and meet a number of the previously identified risk factors. In 2013, a Schenectady City School District social worker looked at the risk factors from one classroom selected at random. In this classroom:

- 42% of the students had been referred to Child Protective Services
- 38% had at least one parent incarcerated
- 31% had at least one parent with a chronic & severe mental illness
- 23% of the students had both parents incarcerated

A review of the 2013 cohort of District students revealed that the District has a history of using retention for a significant number of students, as demonstrated by the following:

- 605 students were retained out of an average cohort size of 750-900 students.
- The greatest number of students were retained at grades 1 (52), grade 6 (47), grade 7 (75), grade 8 (53), grade 9 (108) and grade 12 (105).

The questions this data raises deserve a deeper look. Who are these students? Could the District’s use of retention be a contributing factor to the dropout rate, graduation rate and achievement rate? The research says that the use of retention as an intervention is a significant factor for all of these outcome measures. In July 2013, the District analyzed retention data from the 2010-11 school year for 9th graders. The analysis showed that retention is often used more than once for a significant number of students:

- 68% (178 out of 261 total students) had been retained once,
- 23% (60 students) had been retained twice, and
- 9% (23 students) had been retained three times.

Problem Statements:

The District has developed a culture of using retention as an intervention without understanding the impact of this decision. The District is making decisions regarding student retention at all grade levels that directly impact the graduation rate, dropout rate, and achievement of students.

Teacher attitudes about retention do not necessarily reflect the research. In a study of teacher attitudes about retention, it was concluded that most teachers believe that grade retention between kindergarten and fourth grade is beneficial for the child (Witmer et al., 2004). Teachers are either not informed of the research regarding grade retention or are choosing to go by their own professional opinions.
Review of the Literature

Sometimes children are recommended for retention when their academic performance is low or if they fail to meet grade-level performance standards established by the district or state. Some children may be recommended for retention if they seem socially immature, display behavior problems, or are just beginning to learn English. Occasionally, students who have missed many school days because they were ill or because of frequent moves are recommended for retention.

Research indicates that grade retention is not likely to enhance a child’s learning. Research and common sense both indicate that simply having a child repeat a grade is unlikely to address the problems a child is experiencing.

The National Association of School Psychologists summarized the research in a series of meta-analysis summaries published in the last 10 years. Specifically:

- Children with the greatest number of academic, emotional, and behavioral problems are most likely to experience negative consequences of retention. Subsequent academic and behavioral problems may result in the child being retained again.
- Retention is associated with significant increases in behavior problems, with problems becoming more pronounced as the child reaches adolescence.
- Grade retention has a negative impact on all areas of achievement (reading, math and language) and socio-emotional adjustment (peer relationships, self esteem, problem behaviors, and attendance).
- Students who are retained are more likely to drop out of school compared to students who were never retained, even when controlling for achievement levels. The probability of dropping out increases with multiple retentions. Even for single retentions, the most consistent finding from decades of research is the high correlation between retention and dropping out. Grade retention is one of the most powerful predictors of high school dropout.
• Retained students have increased risks of health-compromising behaviors such as emotional distress, cigarette use, alcohol use, drug abuse, driving while drinking, use of alcohol during sexual activity, early onset of sexual activity, suicidal intentions, and violent behaviors.

• Retained students have a greater probability of poorer educational and employment outcomes during late adolescence and early adulthood. Specifically, in addition to lower levels of academic adjustment in eleventh grade and a greater likelihood of dropping out of high school by age 19, retained students are also less likely to receive a diploma by age 20. Retained students are also less likely to be enrolled in a post-secondary education program and more likely to receive lower education/employment status ratings, be paid less per hour, and receive poorer employment competence ratings at age 20 in comparison to a group of low achieving, promoted students.

• Grade repeaters as adults are more likely to be unemployed, living on public assistance or in prison than adults who did not repeat a grade.

• Evidence of the psychosocial effects of grade retention is apparent in studies examining children's perceptions of twenty stressful life events. In 2001, 6th grade students rated grade retention as the most stressful life event, followed by the loss of a parent.
Interventions for Students

“When faced with a recommendation to retain a child, the real task is not to decide to retain or not to retain but, rather, to identify specific intervention strategies to enhance the cognitive and social development of the child and promote his or her learning and success at school (National Association of School Psychologists www.nasponline.org).

Jimerson, Pletcher, and Kerr (2009, p. 13-14) describe the intentional decision-making that must occur when retention is being discussed:

“There is clearly no single silver bullet intervention that will effectively address the specific needs of all low-achieving students. Systematic, evidence-based interventions should be used to facilitate the academic and socioeconomic development of low-achieving students…It is important to note that the literature indicates that effective practices for at-risk students tend to be very similar to the best practices of general education but at a more intense, individualized level.” The following strategies are examples of evidence-based alternatives to grade retention…Parent involvement through frequent contact with teachers, supervision of homework, and continual communication about school activities that promote learning.

“Age-appropriate and culturally sensitive instructional strategies to accelerate progress in the classroom. Tutoring programs and individual enrichment strategies may be valuable tools in advancing the skills of students. Systematic assessment strategies, such as continual progress monitoring and formative evaluation, that enable ongoing modification of instructional efforts…Reading programs that provide developmentally appropriate, intensive, and direct instruction strategies to promote the reading skills of low-performing students with reading problems.

“School-based mental health programs that promote the social and emotional adjustment of children…Behavior management and cognitive-behavior modification strategies to reduce classroom behavior problems. • Extended year, extended day, and summer school programs that facilitate the development of academic skills.”

“Tutoring and mentoring programs with peer, cross-age, or adult tutors that promote specific academic or social skills. • Comprehensive school-wide programs to promote the psychosocial and academic skills of all students.”
Decision-Making on Retention in Schenectady City School District

Retention is a decision for the School Based Support Team, not individual teachers, psychologists or administrators. The decision making team must be the SBST for a number of reasons. This team is constituted as a multi-disciplinary team that reflects the skills of teachers, administrators and parents. The SBST is also the decision-making arm of a mature, well-integrated and effective Response-to-Intervention model (RtI). RtI is a decision-making process by which teachers can provide early, systematic intervention and monitoring to all students. It is the practice of providing high quality instruction/intervention matched to student needs and uses learning rate over time and level of performance to make important educational decisions about an individual student.

Retention is one of the most serious interventions that the SBST considers. This intervention requires the same intentional decision-making as other Tier III interventions, such as referral for special education. If it is to be used, it must be preceded by Tier I and II interventions and, most importantly, it must include a “recovery plan”. Progress monitoring must accompany the decision (See the District’s School Based Support Teams: Helping Struggling Students for specific information on Tier III interventions).
Tier III Recovery Plan for Retention

The concept of a recovery plan for retention as a Tier III intervention is supported by the research. The intent of a recovery plan is to monitor student progress intensively during the retention year and, within the plan, help the student gain the skills to return to the previous cohort. The format for the plan is the Tier III Intervention Plan (See p. 66-68 in the District’s School Based Support Teams: Helping Struggling Students for the plan format). The District Office of Pupil Personnel Services in collaboration with the Office of Curriculum and Instruction and the Office of Planning and Accountability will be monitoring the use of retention and the results of this intensive Tier III intervention for all students.

It is not the intent of this procedure to eliminate retention but, rather, to make it an intentional decision by the SBST and to develop a plan that allows the student to recover from this intensive Tier III intervention. It is the intent for all staff to understand the impact of the retention decision and to do intentional decision making through the SBST.
Schenectady City School District Retention Procedure

The District will implement the following procedure for the use of retention for any student, at all grade levels, beginning in September 2014.

- All schools will use the SBST referral process for any student considered for retention.
- The SBST will review Tier I and Tier II interventions and the results of these interventions to determine if retention is an appropriate Tier III intervention.
- The Tier III intervention plan will be designed to help the student recover academically, socially and behaviorally. The plan may focus on academic deficits, social skill needs, behavioral interventions or attendance.
- Progress will be monitored biweekly.
- The intent of this intervention is to help the student rejoin his/her appropriate student cohort.

Next Steps

- SBSTs will be provided ongoing assistance to continuously improve team effectiveness.
- The District will review the current alternative programs (e.g., SAMSS, WIEC, GED programs) to evaluate their effectiveness as a Tier III intervention for students who have either been retained or are at risk of retention.
- The District will conduct a comprehensive review of the literature to identify models that successfully help students avoid retention or recover from retention. District staff will visit selected programs.
- The District will develop a set of alternatives that are research-based, successful and will address the unique needs of the student population.
- The District will implement professional development to assist staff in working effectively with students with mental health, academic, and or behavioral needs.
References


**Online Resources**

Beyond Grade Retention and Social Promotion  
www.education.ucsb.edu/jimerson/retention

National Association of School Psychologists www.nasponline.org