

# Grade repetition

Jere Brophy

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Education policy

series



International Academy of Education

International Institute for Educational Planning



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# Preface

## Education Policy Series

The International Academy of Education and the International Institute for Educational Planning are jointly publishing the Education Policy Series. The purpose of the series is to summarize what is known, based on research, about selected policy issues in the field of education.

The series was designed for rapid consultation “on the run” by busy senior decision makers in Ministries of Education. These people rarely have time to read lengthy research reports, to attend conferences and seminars, or to become engaged in extended scholarly debates with educational policy research specialists.

The booklets have been (a) focused on policy topics that the Academy considers to be of high priority across many Ministries of Education – in both developed and developing countries, (b) structured for clarity – containing an introductory overview, a research-based discussion of around ten key issues considered to be critical to the topic of the booklet, and references that provide supporting evidence and further reading related to the discussion of issues, (c) restricted in length – requiring around 30-45 minutes of reading time; and (d) sized to fit easily into a jacket pocket – providing opportunities for readily accessible consultation inside or outside the office.

The authors of the series were selected by the International Academy of Education because of their expertise concerning the booklet topics, and also because of their recognised ability to communicate complex research findings in a manner that can be readily understood and used for policy purposes.

The booklets will appear first in English, and shortly afterwards in French and Spanish. Plans are being made for translations into other languages.

Four booklets will be published each year and made freely available for download from the websites of the International Institute for Educational Planning and the International Academy of Education. A limited printed edition will also be prepared shortly after electronic publication.

## This booklet

“Grade repetition” (sometimes referred to as “grade retention”) occurs when students are held in the same grade for an extra year rather than being promoted to a higher grade along with their age peers. In some school systems grade repetition is seen as a valid corrective action that should be taken in cases of academic failure. In other school systems grade repetition is not permitted, and instead the policy for all pupils is “social promotion” whereby students pass automatically to the next grade with their peers and – if required – receive remedial academic assistance.

The booklet takes a close look at the issues surrounding the implementation and effects of grade repetition. This analysis commences with an examination of the five major reasons for the decision to repeat and the sources of that decision (students, families, and schools). The author also points out that the reasons for applying grade repetition often differ across developed and developing countries.

The booklet then moves on to examine the effects of grade repetition along three important dimensions: (a) the effects on academic achievement – where research has indicated short-term gains and long-term problems because grade-repeaters eventually fall further behind; (b) the effects on student self-esteem, peer relationships, and attitudes towards school – with negative outcomes in these areas leading to increased risks of dropping out; and (c) the effects on school operations – whereby high levels of grade repetition can lead to increased class sizes and classroom management problems (due to large age differences among pupils in the same classroom).

The overall conclusions of the booklet suggest that the application of grade repetition brings extra costs and long-term negative academic and social consequences.

However, the author notes that this should not be taken as a signal to approach policy development on the basis of a simplistic “grade repetition versus social promotion” dichotomy. Rather, the strategy should be to prefer automatic promotion – provided that this is supplemented with a range of initiatives (early intervention, remedial instruction, parent involvement, etc.) that are specifically designed to help struggling students to achieve at acceptable levels.

## **Jere Brophy**

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*is University Distinguished Professor of Teacher Education at Michigan State University and a Fellow of the International Academy of Education. He is well known both for his personal contributions to educational research and for his policy-oriented syntheses of work on various aspects of classroom teaching.*

*He was one of the developers of process/product research, which examines relationships between teaching practices and student outcomes. Also, he has contributed to research and scholarship concerning teachers' attitudes, beliefs and expectations, including self-fulfilling prophecy effects; the interpersonal dynamics of teacher/student interaction; classroom management; student motivation; the analysis of instructional materials and learning activities; and the teaching of school subjects for understanding, appreciation and life application.*

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*Jointly published by:*

*The International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP)  
7-9 rue Eugène Delacroix  
75116 Paris  
France*

*and:*

*The International Academy of Education (IAE)  
Palais des Académies  
1, rue Ducale  
1000 Brussels  
Belgium*

*Design and layout by: Sabine Lebeau*

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ISBN: 92-803-1297-9

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# Introduction

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- ***Grade repetition takes several forms.***
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Grade repetition occurs when students begin a new school year in the same grade as the previous year, instead of moving to a higher grade. It takes five major forms, depending on the source and reasons for the decision to repeat. This decision may be initiated by the students themselves (or their families acting on their behalf) or by the school. When repetition occurs because of decisions made by the students or their families, it is usually voluntary – undertaken willingly because it is viewed as serving the students’ best interests.

One voluntary form of grade repetition occurs when students want to continue schooling but do not have access to a school that offers the next grade. In remote regions of developing countries, schools sometimes only teach the first few grades.

A second type of voluntary repetition reflects family perceptions that the student did not learn much the previous year and therefore ought to repeat the grade. It is most common in developing countries in areas where attendance is sporadic because schooling itself is sporadic or because many children spend much of their time working rather than attending school.

The third form of repetition is common in areas where the language used at school differs from the language that many students speak at home. Repeating early grades may enable these students to gain fluency in the language of instruction so that they can begin to learn efficiently. Grade repetition for this reason is often family-initiated in developing countries but school-imposed in developed countries.

The fourth type of repetition occurs at higher grade levels in countries that require students to pass examinations to qualify for secondary or post-secondary education. Students who fail to qualify must either drop out of school and enter the workforce, pursue vocational training, or prepare to retake the examination. The latter students might work with tutors, take test preparation classes, or voluntarily repeat the previous grade.

The fifth form of repetition is primarily involuntary, initiated by the school rather than students or their families. It is most common in developed countries where school attendance is mandatory until some point in the adolescent years. Here, schools sometimes require or at least strongly advise failing students to repeat the grade.

## Grade repetition as a policy issue

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- ***Grade repetition represents***
- ***inefficiency and wastage of resources***
- ***for society, but its voluntary forms***
- ***may be beneficial to students in***
- ***certain circumstances.***
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Grade repetition has been analyzed both as a macro-level societal problem (indicating ineffective use of resources) and as a micro-level individual option (occurring for one of the reasons described in the previous section).

From a societal economic perspective, schooling is most efficient if every student moves up a grade every year. Each student who repeats has the economic effect of adding a new student (at that grade and subsequent grades). This translates into larger class sizes and the need for additional desks and supplies. If many students repeat each year, the school system will need more teachers and classrooms.

Repetition also represents wastage of resources. The society provides schools, teachers, and other resources presumed sufficient to enable all students to make expected advances in achievement. Failures to do so suggest that these resources were insufficient or that some students failed to take advantage of the opportunities provided.

Although macro-level economic analyses depict repetition as undesirable, micro-level psychological analyses suggest a mixed picture. Voluntary repetitions that enable students to pass examinations or learn content that was not learned the year before will be viewed by students

and their families as rational decisions that led to desired outcomes. However, school-imposed grade repetition has negative effects on achievement and is associated with social adjustment problems and increased likelihood of school dropout.

These findings have led some countries and school systems to adopt automatic promotion policies which mandate that all students who complete a given school year be promoted to the next grade, regardless of their levels of achievement. However, automatic promotion is often opposed by people who believe that it lowers school expectations and student achievement. They want to allow or even to require schools to retain in grade all students who fail to meet specified promotion criteria. Analyses typically conclude that neither automatic promotion nor grade repetition addresses the problems of low achievers satisfactorily, so that potential solutions lie in providing these students with more and better learning opportunities.

## Incidence and variability across countries

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- ***Grade repetition is more common in developing countries than in developed countries, and is especially common in remote rural areas.***
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Several complications make it difficult to compile precise statistics on grade repetition rates. Typical definitions of repetition are difficult to apply to special situations such as the multi-grade classes found in rural primary schools in many developing countries or in the “developmental” or “transitional” primary programmes in the United States. Also, it is important to verify that over-age students have repeated a grade, because some parents delay their children’s enrolment in formal schooling in order to give them an extra year in preschool or kindergarten before they begin first grade (Corman, 2003; Eisenmon, 1997).

Underreporting of repetition is common in countries that have official policies of automatic promotion but do not enforce them systematically, especially if students must pass examinations to qualify for advancement. Here, families may arrange for children to repeat grades in ways that do not show up in the records (for example, by shifting to private schools or enrolling under assumed names). Despite these complexities, it is clear that, except for countries with enforced automatic promotion policies, grade repetition occurs with sufficient frequency to merit research attention and potential policy formulation in both developing and developed countries.

Eisenmon (1997) reported that repetition rates in developing countries often are quite high. The highest rates were in the sub-Saharan African countries, where

each year, about 22 percent of primary students and 21 percent of secondary students were repeating their grade. The North African and Middle Eastern countries averaged about 12 percent for the primary grades and 21 percent for the secondary grades. The Latin American and Caribbean countries averaged 9 percent and 8 percent. The data from East and South-East Asia were too sporadic to support meaningful averages, but the available numbers appeared comparable to those for Latin America.

Grade repetition rates are almost nonexistent in developed countries that enforce automatic promotion policies, and relatively low (in the 1-5 percent range) in most other developed countries. However, they rise to 10 percent or more when opinion swings away from automatic promotion, especially if repetition becomes mandated for students who fail to meet promotion criteria.

Eisenmon (1997) noted that cross-national variation is associated with contrasting systems of schooling. Scandinavia and the English-speaking countries (and developing countries influenced by them) emphasize universal education to higher levels, and grade repetition rates are low. France, Portugal, and Spain (and developing countries influenced by them) emphasize universal education at lower levels but limit admittance to secondary and post-secondary levels, so repetition rates are higher (especially in the grades preceding the examinations).

In the United States, only a small percentage of students are repeating in any given year, but 15-30 percent repeat at least one grade by age 15 (Corman, 2003; Jimerson, Carlson, Rotert, Egeland, and Sroufe, 1997; Karweit, 1999). Eide and Showalter's (2001) data are typical. In their national sample of high school sophomores (age 15), 16 percent of the white boys, 21 percent of the black boys, 10 percent of the white girls, and 17 percent of the black girls had repeated at least one grade.

Studies in countries as diverse as Brazil (Gomes-Neto and Hanushek, 1994), Lebanon (El-Hassan, 1998), and Pakistan (King, Orazem, and Paterno, 1999) have found that repetition is most frequent in rural areas.

The low achievement patterns of grade repeaters tend to be associated with poverty indicators, at both the school and the family levels. Schools in poor areas (especially remote rural areas) often feature limitations: short school years, frequent teacher absence, limited supplies, poorly qualified teachers, large classes, multi-age classes, or double shifts. Within any given school, students from the poorest families are more at risk for repetition because their home backgrounds leave them less well prepared to succeed and because they are likely to miss more school days.

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## Grade repetition in developing countries

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- ***Grade repetition in developing countries occurs for a variety of reasons and is often voluntary.***
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Most research on grade repetition's relationships to educational outcomes has been done in developed countries. Its findings may not generalize well to developing countries, where repetition occurs more frequently and is more likely to be initiated or at least accepted by the family rather than imposed by the school.

There are other differences as well. In developed countries, students ordinarily are not absent from school more than a few days each year (mostly due to minor illnesses). However, in developing countries (especially rural areas), many children miss many days of school because of more serious health or nutrition problems or because their families require them to assume child care or work responsibilities. Here, many students repeat a grade because they did not attend school frequently (if at all) the previous year. Although the situations that create them are undesirable from a societal perspective, these repetition choices are understandable, even productive, from the family's perspective (Gomes-Neto and Hanushek, 1994).

There also are exceptions to the usual association between grade repetition and low achievement. In Burundi and Kenya, where most repetition occurs in the final years of the primary cycle, students allowed to repeat are selected for their high academic potential, as a way to prepare them to compete for limited secondary openings (Eisenmon and Schwille, 1991).

Despite these differences, findings from developing countries mirror those from developed countries: Grade repetition is associated with low achievement and early dropout. Yet, needless repetition persists because many school administrators, teachers, and parents believe that repeating the grade is preferable to promotion when students have achieved poorly (Eisenmon, 1997).

Teachers in developing countries ordinarily are not trained to make promotion/repetition decisions and do not have access to detailed achievement standards and aligned assessment instruments, so concerns have been expressed that many decisions may be based on arbitrary observations or beliefs rather than justified criteria. However, studies done in rural Brazil (Gomes-Neto and Hanushek, 1994) and in rural Pakistan (King, Orazem, and Paterno, 1999) found that promotion decisions were closely related to measured achievement. Even so, when these decisions are made locally by individual teachers, they are subject to the “frog pond” effect: Students’ achievement progress is judged relative to that of their immediate classmates rather than to national norms. As a result, many students in generally high achieving schools are retained when they would be promoted if they attended generally low-achieving schools (Ikeda, 2005).

## Conclusions regarding developing countries

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- ***Some forms of voluntary grade repetition appear productive under current conditions, but long-run goals should include improving these conditions and eliminating grade repetition.***
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Any conclusions about policies relating to grade repetition in developing countries must be tentative (because of the limited research base) and differentiated (because different forms of repetition have been reported). In most cases, promising policy initiatives will address economic and other factors that lead to grade repetition, rather than repetition itself.

This is particularly true of repetition that occurs because accessible schools only offer a few grades. This problem will disappear as developing countries become able to offer instruction in all grades at all elementary schools.

Repetition that results from sporadic school attendance related to health or nutrition problems or family work expectations also should recede as developing countries make improvements in general health, nutrition, and economic opportunities. Pending such improvements, repetition appears productive for students who did not experience enough of the previous grade to enable them to acquire the expected learning.

Grade repetition also appears to make sense for students who come to school with little exposure to the language of instruction, if it enables them to develop fluency in that

language. A bilingual programme targeted to their needs would be preferable, but in its absence, grade repetition appears to be a viable strategy.

For students who miss school because their families want them to earn money, a simple but effective approach is to provide cash stipends to the families in exchange for ensuring their child's school attendance. In rural Mexico, this approach has dramatically increased attendance and reduced grade repetition and school dropout rates (Bando G., Lopez -Calva, and Patrinos, 2005).

Voluntary grade repetition undertaken as preparation for qualifying examinations will recede as countries provide more opportunities for secondary and post-secondary education. However, this depends not only on what countries can afford, but on their public education policies. Whenever a country (whether developing or developed) limits access to higher levels of education, students who are not confident of their ability to pass the qualifying examination (or who have failed it but can take it again) will pursue strategies believed to enhance their chances of qualifying. Repeating grades is one such strategy.

Mandating automatic promotion or limiting opportunities to retake the examination would reduce this form of grade repetition. However, most analysts would recommend broadening opportunities for secondary and post-secondary education rather than seeking to prevent voluntary grade repetition. If a country does impose qualification requirements, they should include a range of achievement indicators. Using just one test leads to test-specific preparation curricula that produce higher but less valid test scores.

Finally, any imposed qualification standards must be realistic rather than overly stringent, especially standards for promotion through the primary cycle. Given the relationship between grade repetition and school dropout, policies that increase repetition in these grades are counterproductive for countries that aspire to universal basic education.

## Grade repetition in developed countries

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- ***Most grade repetition in developed countries is imposed by schools on low-achieving students who have made poor progress despite regular attendance.***
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Grade repeaters are more likely to come from families that rank lower on measures of socioeconomic status and related variables (income, parental years of education completed, etc.). They also are more likely to be male than female. Their parents are less likely to be involved with the school and to advocate effectively for their children.

Repetition occurs most often at kindergarten or first grade. Subsequently, it occurs more often at grades preceding transitions to middle school, junior high school, or high school than at other grades. Repetition decisions are almost always initiated by the school rather than the parents, although they may be communicated as recommendations rather than requirements (in which case, the final decision is left up to the parents).

Recommendations that preschool or kindergarten children repeat a grade are usually based on teachers' assessments of intellectual and social maturity (attention span, direction following, social adjustment), whereas retention recommendations in first grade and beyond are usually based mostly on indicators of achievement progress. Grade repeaters tend to be younger than their classmates and more often absent from school. Otherwise, however, comparisons of repeaters with other low-achievers who either were promoted or recommended

for placement in special education usually do not show significant group differences in intelligence, achievement, or even social competence (Beebe-Frankenberger, Bocian, MacMillan, and Gresham, 2004; Corman, 2003; Martin, Foels, Clanton, and Moon, 2004; Jimerson, Carlson, Rotert, Egeland, and Sroufe, 1997).

In recent years, educational policies in the United States have featured increased emphasis on mandated standards, sometimes including requirements that students at certain grade levels pass tests to qualify for promotion. In states that implemented these requirements, grade repetition rates increased noticeably, especially in grades preceding those in which the tests were administered. States and large school districts that established “promotional gates” in certain grades often found that 20 to 40 percent of the students in these grades did not qualify for promotion.

## Effects on academic achievement

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- ***School-imposed grade repetition improves achievement temporarily, but over time, grade repeaters fall further and further behind other low achievers who were promoted.***
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Grade repetition in developed countries is primarily involuntary, imposed by the school on students who have made unsatisfactory achievement progress. Most research relating repetition to achievement has been done in the United States, although researchers from other developed countries such as Belgium (Pustjens, Van de gaer, Van Damme, and Onghena, 2004) and France (Paul, 1997) have reported similar patterns and concerns.

The American findings seem to conflict at first, because different research designs yield contrasting outcomes. When placed into perspective, however, the findings converge on the conclusion that school-imposed grade repetition is counterproductive.

The most relevant studies compare the progress of grade repeaters with that of promoted students with similarly poor achievement records. Many studies are limited to the grade repetition year, but some follow the students through subsequent grades. Also, some studies compare grade repeaters to peers in the same grade (same-grade comparisons), but others compare them to same-age peers in higher grades (same-age comparisons).

Studies limited to same-grade comparisons in the repetition year typically show that grade repeaters' relative achievement (for example, rank in class) has

improved (Hong and Raudenbush, 2005; Karweit, 1999). This should not be surprising, because the repeaters are a year older than most of their classmates and are working through the same curriculum a second time. Nevertheless, such findings sometimes are used to argue that grade repetition is an effective response to low achievement.

Other kinds of studies, however, show that these achievement improvements are temporary and misleading. First, studies with longer time spans indicate that the improvements seen in the repetition year soon fade away. Repeating the grade enables the retained students to do better on tests of material they are studying for the second time, but it does not produce more general advances in knowledge or cognition that would enable them to make more satisfactory achievement progress in subsequent grades.

Studies that feature same-age comparisons carry this conclusion further by indicating that involuntary repetition is not merely ineffective but counterproductive to students' long-term achievement progress. Retained students tend to fall further and further behind promoted peers who had very similar achievement profiles in the year prior to grade repetition.

Proponents of repetition sometimes acknowledge that it is counterproductive for older students but claim that it is helpful for kindergarten or first-grade students, especially those who may be younger or less mature than their peers. However, repetition in kindergarten or the early grades shows the same pattern of negative outcomes as repetition at higher grades (Hong and Raudenbush, 2005; Jimerson, 2001; Shepard, 1989).

## 8 Effects on school attitudes, adjustment, and completion

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- ***School-imposed grade repetition is stressful to students and associated with reduced self-esteem, impaired peer relationships, alienation from school, and sharply increased likelihood of eventual dropout.***
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Involuntary grade repetition also has negative effects on social, emotional, and behavioural aspects of adjustment to school. Although their teachers and sometimes even their parents view it as an enabling opportunity, students experience it as a personal punishment and social stigma. From the beginning, but increasingly with age, they view “flunking” or “being held back” as embarrassing and stressful. By the time they are sixth graders, they rate it as among the most stressful things they can imagine (Yamamoto and Byrnes, 1987; Anderson, Jimerson, and Whipple, 2005).

Commonly reported problems associated with involuntary grade repetition include reduced self-esteem, impaired peer relationships, and increases in behavioural problems, negative attitudes toward school, and absences from school. The combination of low achievement and alienation from school makes grade repeaters much more likely than other students to drop out of school once they become old enough to do so (Corman, 2003; Hacsı, 2002; Holmes, 1989; Hong and Raudenbush, 2005; Jimerson, 2001; Shepard and Smith, 1989).

## Effects on classrooms, schools, and school systems

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- ***School-imposed grade repetition makes classes larger and harder to manage for teachers and creates budgetary and equity problems for schools and school systems.***
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One rationale sometimes advanced for grade repetition is that it should make classes more homogeneous in achievement levels and thus easier to teach. Therefore, whether or not it benefits the repeaters, it should improve achievement for the majority who never need to repeat. Hong and Raudenbush (2005) evaluated this hypothesis and found the usual negative effects on grade repeaters but no evidence of positive effects on other students.

Such findings should not be surprising, because teachers are not trained or even expected to do anything different with either individual grade repeaters or the class as a whole. Consequently, grade repeaters literally repeat the same lessons and activities they experienced the previous year (Karweit, 1999), and teachers at the next grade do not make adjustments based on the notion that their classes are now more homogeneous.

Except in schools where repetition is very rare, any potential advantages to increased homogeneity are likely to be nullified by grade repetition's collateral effects. First, class sizes throughout the school will be larger than they would have been if promotion were automatic. Second, although teachers in the next grade do not get the students who are held back this year, they will get them next year. Classes that include significant numbers of previously

retained students present more serious student motivation and classroom management challenges to teachers. These problems become compounded with increases in grade level, as teachers (and parents) become concerned about 15-year-olds in the same classes as 12-year-olds, or 18-year-olds in the same classes as 14-year-olds.

Another school- and district-wide problem is that grade repetition is imposed disproportionately on poor and minority students. This adds concerns about equity and social effects beyond the negative effects on individual grade repeaters (Hacsi, 2002; Rothstein, 1998).

In summary, when taken as a whole, research done in the United States indicates that low achievers who are retained in grade become even less likely to achieve satisfactorily, as well as more likely to drop out of school, compared to similarly low-achieving peers who are promoted (Corman, 2003; Hacsi, 2002; Holmes, 1989; Hong and Raudenbush, 2005, Jimerson, 2001; Thompson and Cunningham, 2000).

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## False claims of new trends in recent findings

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- ***Despite claims to the contrary, recent research continues to indicate that school-imposed grade repetition is counterproductive.***
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In the United States, proponents of mandated grade repetition policies commonly call automatic promotion “social promotion”, to emphasize that most low achievers get promoted, not because their achievement merits it, but because they are being kept together with their age peers to protect their self-esteem and social adjustment. They typically depict automatic promotion as part of a larger pattern of supposed laxity and ineffectiveness of American schooling. As they built momentum for their ideas in recent decades, “ending social promotion” became one of their slogans.

This resonated with the public, but scholars began calling attention to persistent findings indicating that school-imposed retention is counterproductive. Most reform proponents ignored these warnings but a few attempted to defuse them by claiming that although the unsystematic grade retention of the past may not have been effective, recent research on grade retention tied to performance on tests was showing positive results.

However, a meta-analysis of studies conducted between 1990 and 1999 yielded the same familiar findings: significant negative effects on subsequent achievement and social adjustment. The few seemingly supportive findings came from studies confined to same-grade comparisons during the retention year or studies in which retention was part of a larger package of interventions (for

example, special tutoring, summer school). In the latter studies, progress shown by repeaters almost certainly was due to the special help they received, not to grade repetition (Jimerson, 2001).

Proponents of mandated grade repetition often pointed to studies conducted in two large school districts as examples of the success of the policy. Alexander, Entwisle, and Dauber (1994) followed a cohort of students in Baltimore from first grade through eighth grade. They initially reported that the grade repeaters did better (in same-grade comparisons) and did not suffer damage to their self-esteem or attitudes toward school. However, some of these findings were based on invalid analyses (Shepard, Smith, and Marion, 1996), as they later acknowledged. Their corrected data heavily favoured promotion over retention (Jimerson, 2001), but they described their findings as mixed and suggested that in urban schools, where retention is common, it might not carry the stigma that it carries in schools where it is less common. Eventually, however, when follow-up data showed the usual effects on dropout rates, they conceded that retention is counterproductive (Alexander, Entwisle, and Kabbani, 2001).

Chicago made a high-profile commitment to grade retention policies and reported early success, but later analyses began showing the usual findings (Roderick, Nagaoka, and Allensworth, 2005). The Chicago experiment typifies a predictable cycle that unfolds in American school districts that begin requiring students to pass tests in order to be promoted. Typically, administrators announce the new policy with fanfare, then over the next few years call attention to any data suggesting that the policy is working. However, it soon becomes clear that too many students are being retained (many repeatedly). Confronted with angry parents, frustrated teachers, upset students, and rising costs, the administrators begin lowering the test scores required for promotion and exempting certain categories of students (for example, non-English speakers, special education students). Eventually, they or their successors quietly drop the policy.

At this point, it is clear that current American experiments with mandated grade repetition are producing the same familiar results (no achievement benefits, social costs, higher dropout rates). Furthermore, because promotion typically is tied to performance on a single specified test, school administrators and teachers focus on preparing students to pass this test, as contrasted with attempting to improve the general quality of their education. The result is a narrowing of the curriculum. More time is devoted to tested subjects than to other subjects; the emphasized subjects become more focused on content likely to be included in the test; and special programmes for low achievers focus on test preparation (Roderick, Nagaoka, and Allensworth, 2005). These efforts succeed in raising scores on the targeted test, yet produce little gain on other achievement tests (Amrein and Berliner, 2003; Heubert and Hauser, 1999).

## Conclusions regarding developed countries

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- ***Automatic promotion is clearly preferable to school-imposed grade repetition, although it needs to be supplemented with initiatives designed to help low achievers.***
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School-imposed grade repetition is harmful to grade repeaters and does not benefit non-repeaters. Even the most recent research continues to show that it is counterproductive. It is not justifiable except for students who have missed a great deal of schooling due to illness or injury.

Automatic promotion is clearly preferable. It does not help low achievers catch up to their peers, but it spares them the self-esteem and social adjustment problems associated with retention. It also makes it likely that they will achieve at higher levels and be exposed to a richer curriculum and a greater range of learning opportunities.

Automatic promotion is more feasible than it may seem at first, because there is considerable overlap from one grade to the next. Also, two key assumptions underlying arguments for imposed retention do not hold up. First, most students failing in school are low achievers who must work hard even to make the progress they are able to make, not underachievers who do not apply themselves and need the threat of retention to motivate them to do so. Threats of punishment are actually demotivating to students who are failing despite persistent efforts (Brophy, 2004). Second, repeating the grade does not confer the assumed benefits on retained students. It

enables them to do better the second time, but does not bring about broader advances that will position them to begin to achieve at higher levels.

American opponents of automatic promotion claim that it lowers the performance of American students relative to that of students from countries with presumably higher standards. However, some of the countries that do very well in international comparisons emphasize automatic promotion (for example, Denmark, Japan, Korea, Norway, and Sweden). This should put to rest any concerns that automatic promotion policies will lead to mediocre schooling.

In conclusion, a rich research literature indicates that, for developed countries, automatic promotion is better than allowing individual school administrators or teachers to retain selected students, which in turn is better than mandating grade repetition for students who fail to qualify for promotion (especially if qualification involves passing a single test). However, although automatic promotion avoids the problems associated with retention, it does nothing to address failing students' low achievement problems or help them to catch up with their peers. Consequently, automatic promotion supplemented with intervention strategies designed to help low achievers is preferable to automatic promotion alone.

## Assisting low achievers

*Early intervention, collaboration with parents, supplementary instruction, and several other initiatives are commonly recommended for students at risk of school failure.*

The intervention strategies most often mentioned by reviewers of the grade repetition literature tend to focus on helping struggling students to achieve at acceptable levels. Reduced repetition rates are by-products, rather than direct goals, of these efforts (Eisenmon, 1997; Fager, and Richen, 1999; McCay, 2001; Owings and Kaplan, 2001). Commonly suggested strategies include:

1. Focus on prevention and early intervention rather than waiting until chronic patterns of school failure and frustration have solidified. Provide preschool and kindergarten programmes for poor and minority students most at risk for school failure. Build fluency in the language of instruction for students who do not already speak it.
2. Form partnerships with parents by maintaining close communication, inviting them to visit the classroom, and providing them with instructional materials to use in tutoring their children at home. Keeping students with the same teachers for consecutive school years enhances close relationships with students and their families.
3. Create positive classroom climates and cultivate supportive personal relationships with struggling

students. These students should see their teachers and parents as collaborating resource people who work together to help them succeed and who appreciate their efforts and progress even if they lag behind most of their classmates.

4. Provide smaller classes for at-risk students, especially when they are mastering basic literacy skills.
5. Closely monitor low-achievers' participation in lessons and work on assignments. Make sure they understand what to do and get off to a good start. Check back periodically and intervene if necessary. Arrange for them to get extra in-class individualized or small-group instruction from the teacher, an aide, or a volunteer.
6. Provide at-risk students with additional learning opportunities through extended day or extended year school schedules, summer school programmes, or tutoring outside of regular school hours.
7. Educate teachers to enable them to understand and meet special needs, and give them access to resource persons with expertise in remediation and special education. However, focus on meeting struggling students' needs within the regular classroom rather than sending them for pull-out instruction.
8. Educate teachers to view and implement assessment as an ongoing component of the curriculum, designed to evaluate the effectiveness of their own instruction and track continuous progress in their students' learning. Teachers should assess not only through tests but through monitoring students' participation in lessons and performance on assignments, and use this information to identify learning gaps or misconceptions. The point of assessment is to identify and follow up on unmet instructional needs, not just document failure and move on.
9. To minimize the degree to which students are younger than their classmates, set the birthdate cut-off for eligibility for kindergarten or first grade near the

beginning of the school year. Schools that use later cut-off dates (allowing students to begin at younger ages) have higher grade repetition rates than other schools (Corman, 2003).

- 10.** Make sure that achievement expectations for each grade are realistic. Setting curriculum standards and achievement benchmarks is an imprecise, trial-and-error enterprise. Many standards are set too high, in that most students will not be able to meet them even if they consistently apply reasonable effort to their studies.

One commonly mentioned strategy is controversial: Loosen the age/grade linkage to create multi-age classrooms that allow students to “progress at their own pace.” This strategy is favoured by educators with special interests in “developmentally appropriate practices” and in fostering students’ self-esteem and social adjustment. However, reviewers of the grade repetition literature, especially those who focus on achievement progress and dropout rates, typically conclude that multi-age or transition programmes amount to school-imposed grade repetition under other names, and are counterproductive for the same reasons. Some have noted that being older than one’s classmates increases dropout risk even for students who never repeat a grade (Roderick, 1994, 1995).

# 13

## Closing the books on school imposed repetition

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- ***Informed professionals need to educate policy makers and the general public about the evidence against school-imposed grade repetition.***
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School administrators, teachers, parents, and even students in developing countries often believe that grade repetition is in the students' best interests in many situations. Similar beliefs also are common in developed countries, but with less justification. In the United States, calls for policies requiring students to repeat grades when they cannot pass qualifying examinations reemerge every 10 years or so, despite clear evidence that these policies are counterproductive.

Unfortunately, it appears that many if not most politicians, administrators and teachers remain unaware of the evidence against school-imposed retention or misled by false claims that recent findings support it. Politicians and administrators often believe that grade retention will make classrooms more homogeneous and motivate underachieving students to apply themselves. Teachers often believe that it will help these students begin to achieve more satisfactorily (Byrnes, 1989; Smith, 1989; Tomchin and Impara, 1992). These beliefs usually are based on philosophical and logical arguments that have strong face validity and thus seem compelling.

Beliefs in grade repetition are strongest among teachers in the early grades, where the collateral damage (reductions in self-esteem and social adjustment, increases in

behavioural problems and alienation from school) is less severe. These teachers often recommend repetition for students who are young for the grade or socially immature, believing that repeating will allow time for maturation to occur and position the child for academic success in the future.

The most compelling reason for the persistence of teachers' beliefs in grade repetition, however, is their personal experience with it. They see the temporary advantages that appear during the retention year, when the grade repeaters are still in their classes. However, they do not see these temporary advantages fade away as the repeaters move on and begin studying new material. Nor do their experiences enable them to recognize that over the long run, the repeaters would have achieved more, stayed in school longer, and had more positive personal and social adjustments if they had been promoted.

The repeated resurgence of calls for school-imposed grade retention underscores the need to educate the public in some developed countries about the consistently negative findings. This should be done with sensitivity (acknowledging that the rationales seem compelling and that claims of research support create confusion), but also with assertive insistence that school-imposed grade retention repeatedly has been shown to be counterproductive in the long run, both for the grade repeaters and for the school system as a whole. Theoretical arguments can be made for grouping either by age or by achievement level as the way to create relatively homogeneous classes of students. However, empirical data clearly favour grouping by age. It is time to close the books on grade retention as a response to low achievement, and formulate policies that combine automatic promotion with interventions to improve the progress of students at risk for school failure.

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