

# In Comparison to Grade Retention, Advantages and Disadvantages, Different Perspectives

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## Social Promotion

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Social promotion is the most common name for the policy of promoting students to the next grade level despite poor achievement at their current grade level. It is motivated by a desire to protect the social adjustment and school motivation of struggling students, as well as a belief that these students will get more from exposure to new content at the next grade than they would from repeating their current grade.

## In Comparison to Grade Retention

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Social promotion is usually studied and discussed in comparison to its opposite: grade retention. A grade retention policy calls for requiring students who have failed to achieve satisfactorily to repeat their current grade the following year, instead of moving on to the next grade. This policy is motivated by the belief that an extra year in the grade will give struggling students an opportunity to master content that they failed to master the first year, and consequently leave them better prepared to succeed in higher grades in the future. Those who favor grade retention policies also tend to believe that it is important for schools to maintain high standards, and that social promotion policies fail to do this and instead send students the message that little is expected of them.

Grade retention and social promotion occur because many students fail to achieve at desired levels. If assessed using norm-referenced tests that yield grade-level equivalence scores, almost half of all students necessarily will score "below grade level" (although with considerable variation across schools and districts). More students will pass the criterion-referenced minimum competency tests used by many states, but even here, significant percentages of students will fail to meet standards. This forces schools to choose between socially promoting these students and retaining them in the grade for another year.

Retention in grade is common, with about a third of all students retained at least once before high school. Students retained in a grade are more likely than other students to be small in stature or youngest in the grade, to be from lower socioeconomic status or minority backgrounds, to have parents with lower educational attainment, to be boys rather than girls, and to have moved or been absent frequently. Presumably these same generalizations also would be true of socially promoted students, simply because these categories of students are represented more heavily among low achievers. It is not possible to collect

social promotion statistics the way it is possible to collect grade retention statistics because school districts usually do not distinguish in their records between regular promotions and social promotions.

At any given time, both grade retention and social promotion have their adherents, probably because each policy is based on an appealing rationale. Attitudes toward the two policies tend to flow in cycles, with first one and then the other gaining ascendancy for a decade or so, and the same essential arguments repeated on both sides. Grade retention was ascendant in the 1990s and early 2000s, with U.S. Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, many state governors, and many state-and district-level policymakers calling for eliminating social promotion as part of their plan for reforming schools. These policymakers tend to believe that unless poorly achieving students are faced with the prospect of flunking and being forced to repeat the grade, they will have little incentive to apply themselves to their studies. Most teachers also favor grade retention as a potential option for occasional use, especially in the early grades. Teachers tend to view it less as a motivational stick with which to threaten underachieving students, however, than as a way to enable them to catch up and begin to achieve more successfully. Barring information to the contrary, it is reasonable to believe that the threat of grade retention might motivate students who do not apply themselves to invest more effort in their studies, and that an extra year to catch up might benefit students whose low achievement is due to limited maturity or readiness.

However, a great deal of information to the contrary exists. Research comparing retained students with similar students who were socially promoted repeatedly shows that most students do not catch up when held back; that even if they do better at first, they fall behind again in later grades; that they are more likely to become alienated from school and eventually drop out; and that these findings hold just as much for kindergarten and first-grade students held back because they were presumed to lack maturity or readiness as they do for older students. By itself, retention provides either no achievement advantage or only short-lived advantages relative to social promotion, and it imposes costs on the retained students, their teachers, and the school system.

What typically happens is that administrators announce a "no social promotions" policy with a great deal of fanfare, then over the next couple of years call attention to any data that appear to suggest that the policy is working. Later, however, when it becomes clear that too many students are being retained (some repeatedly) and the administrators are confronted with angry parents, frustrated teachers, upset students, and rising costs, they quietly begin to back off by lowering standards (i.e., the test scores that will be required to earn promotion to the next grade) and by exempting certain categories of students from the policy (e.g., those who are learning English as their second language or have been assigned a special education diagnosis). Eventually they or the administrators who succeed them quietly drop the policy (without, of course, admitting that all of the problems that it created could have been foreseen if attention had been paid to the relevant research literature).

## Advantages and Disadvantages

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Costs to the retained students include the shame and embarrassment of being held back and the separation from age mates in the short run, as well as alienation from schooling as an institution and a much greater propensity to drop out prior to graduation in the longer run. Costs to teachers include increases in the student motivation and classroom management challenges that are involved in teaching classes that include a significant number of retained students, as well as the problems that ensue in junior high and high school when physically more mature older students are in the same classes with less developed younger students. For school districts, there are costs in both expense (grade retentions translate into higher class sizes and related logistical problems) and effort (increased administrative responsibilities for establishing and maintaining mechanisms to implement grade retention policies and for defending them when students or their families challenge them).

Occasionally, research, such as that of C. Thomas Holmes in 1989, appears to suggest that grade retention is helpful, at least to some students. Usually these data are confined to short-term findings that the retained students showed higher achievement during the year that they repeated the grade than they had the year before. Longitudinal data, however, typically show that grade retention is not helpful. For example, in 1995 Karl Alexander and colleagues reported findings from Baltimore indicating that retainees did somewhat better after retention than they had before (although with diminishing advantage over time) and even displayed positive attitudes toward self and school. This study was frequently cited by proponents of grade retention as evidence that newer studies were beginning to show a different pattern of findings from the conventional wisdom. However, an update six years later indicated that the earlier reported advantages to grade retention had washed out and that the retained students proved to be much more likely to drop out of school than the socially promoted students. Reports from Chicago, another district that had made a high-profile commitment to grade retention policies, also indicated that initially mixed findings had turned negative within three years, according to Melissa Roderick and colleagues in 2000. More generally, a meta-analysis that focused on studies published between 1990 and 1999 once again proved unfavorable to grade retention, refuting the claim that newer studies were showing a different pattern of findings.

In 1989 Holmes completed a meta-analysis of sixty-three comparisons of grade retention with social promotion. He reported that fifty-four of the sixty-three studies yielded overall negative effects for grade retention but nine showed positive effects. The latter studies involved suburban settings and middle-class families, and usually not retention alone but also efforts by the school to identify struggling students early, involve the parents, and provide special assistance such as placement in classes with low student-teacher ratios. Even so, the advances made by the retained students during their repetition year tended to diminish over time.

## Different Perspectives

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In 1998 Richard Rothstein put social promotion, grade retention, and related issues into perspective by noting that the dilemma of what to do with students who don't progress "normally" is endemic to compulsory education. As long as all students are required to stay in school until they reach a certain age (e.g., sixteen), the decision on what to do with those who are less advanced will remain. Research throughout the twentieth century repeatedly indicated that, on the whole, age is a better grouping principle than academic achievement.

Researchers and reviewers who have focused on grade retention and social promotion typically conclude that neither policy is an effective treatment for unsatisfactory achievement, but if one must choose between them, social promotion is preferable. This is because grade retention imposes too many social and motivational costs, and students appear to get more out of a year spent in the next grade than they do out of a year spent repeating a grade, even though they are likely to continue to achieve less successfully than their classmates. However, social promotion does not help low achievers to begin to catch up with their age peers. Therefore, better than either social promotion or grade retention are policies that mobilize schools to identify struggling students early and provide them with special forms of assistance that might allow them to achieve more satisfactorily (placement in smaller classes, provision of tutoring or other special assistance, enrollment in after-school or summer school programs, and so on). Organizations such as the International Reading Association and the National Association of School Psychologists have published policy statements advocating this approach to students who are not achieving satisfactorily. Some ideas about intervention alternatives to both grade retention and social promotion mentioned by McCay (2001) and U.S. Department of Education (1999) include setting clear performance standards at key grades, emphasizing early childhood literacy, providing high-quality curriculum and instruction and professional development, reducing class sizes in the primary grades, keeping students and teachers together for more than one year, and using effective student grouping practices.

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