

# Social Promotion

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Social promotion is the practice of passing students along from grade to grade with their peers even if the students have not satisfied academic requirements or met performance standards at key grades. It is called "social" promotion because it is often carried out in the perceived interest of a student's social and psychological well-being. Research suggests that promoting unprepared students does little to increase their achievement or life chances. At the same time, research also shows that the practice of having students repeat a grade—retention—often has negative educational consequences, such as increasing their chances of dropping out of school (U.S. Department of Education, 1999).

In most states and school districts, promotion and retention decisions are made on a case-by-case basis, under guidelines developed by states or districts. A 1997 survey of large public school districts in the United States by the American Federation of Teachers suggests great variation on how factors such as attendance, teacher recommendations, test results, and performance are used to make promotion and retention decisions. According to *Education Week's Quality Counts 2004*, in nine states—Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina, Texas and Wisconsin—grade-to-grade promotion in certain grades depends on student performance on a statewide exam.

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It is difficult to measure how prevalent the practice of social promotion is; it isn't a practice school systems like to admit to using. Some indicators, however, are suggestive. According to the American Federation of Teachers (1997), a majority of teachers reported that they had promoted unprepared students in the past year. Retention, while still complicated, is easier to measure. According to a 1996 study by the National Center for Education Statistics, approximately 17 percent of high school seniors had repeated at least one grade since kindergarten. The most frequently repeated were kindergarten through 2nd grade. Another study suggests the rate of retention may be higher than that. The researchers tracked 6- to 8-year-old students in the 1980s and early 1990s and found that by the time the students were 12 to 14 years old, 31 percent weren't in the appropriate grades for their age groups (Heubert and Hauser, 1999). Some experts suggest that since retention is a measure of last resort, social promotion is likely to happen in even greater numbers than retention.

Research suggests that neither social promotion nor retention is effective for improving student achievement. The U.S. Department of Education concludes that the results of both are unacceptably high dropout rates, especially for poor and minority students, and inadequate knowledge and skills for students (1999). That may be partly because retention often involves leaving a student to repeat a grade with little or no changes in the academic content or way the student is taught. Retention policies also appear to disproportionately affect low-income and minority children (Karweit, 1991). Research by C.T. Holmes (1989) suggests that retention harms students' achievement, attendance records, personal adjustment in school, and attitudes toward school.

At the same time, public opinion is strongly behind ending social promotion. About three-quarters of parents, and more than 80 percent of teachers and employers, think it is worse for a child struggling in school to be promoted to the next grade than to be held back. Only 24 percent of parents and 15 percent of teachers think it is worse for a student to have to repeat a grade. A full 87 percent of parents surveyed said they would approve of policies that require students to pass a test to be promoted, even if it meant their child would be left back (Public Agenda, 2003).

With neither social promotion nor retention being an attractive option for improving student achievement, some support the development of more personalized, alternative options to help ensure that all children succeed in school (AFT, 1997; Darling-Hammond, 1998; Wheelock, 1998). Such approaches include practices that support intensive learning, ongoing professional development for teachers, appropriate prevention and early-intervention strategies, and student assessment that better informs and shapes teaching and learning.

Extended learning time, summer and after-school programs, alternative schools developed specifically to address the needs of low-performing students, and class-size reduction also have been advocated as interventions that will help reduce the practice of social promotion and grade retention.

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## How to Cite This Article

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