Failing In-Grade Retention

How an ineffective practice with lasting consequences, high price tags and civil rights implications can be wiped out by schools doing what schools do best: Teaching today's children

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The practice of in-grade retention has a long, storied history in the United States. Many educators have ostensibly good motives behind the practice – some believe that if students are struggling in academic or with their behaviors, then the best solution is to keep them back to help them. For others, it has been an unfortunate by-product of the need to meet their states' performance measures (Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012).

Despite any good intentions held by staff and educators, the reasoning behind in-grade retention is inherently discouraging to children. Policymakers look to retention as a method of trying to increase student achievement by squarely placing the blame on the student and hoping that the fear of consequences, being held back, will scare them into compliance and satisfactory achievement.

Retention of a student in the same grade from one year to the next usually occurs for one of three reasons: (1) poor performance on standardized proficiency or achievement tests at the end of specific years; (2) emotional immaturity that results in disruptive behavior; or (3) developmental immaturity resulting in learning difficulties, such as limited reading ability. Many times, absenteeism due to truancy and medical issues can play a role in a student being held back. (Johnson, 2018)

The United States saw an increase in retention with the introductions of education policies that hold schools accountable for student performance in ways that harm students. For many, the response to the pressure has been to either hold back students suspected to be unlikely to pass an upcoming standardized test or to impose consequences after students do poorly on a test.

The idea that repeating a grade with the same material as a method of improving learning is already flawed, especially if nothing about the academic environment changes. Generally, upticks in retention can be tied to redoubled efforts by states to increase academic standards and testing in search of improved public schools (Allen, et al., 2009).

Yet, laws in 16 states and Washington, D.C., require retention for students who are not reading at a certain level by the end of third grade (ECS, 2016). And eight other states allow retention, but don't mandate it.
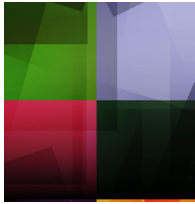
U.S. General Trends

Between 1994 and 2015, the retained rate decreased from 2.9 to 2.2 percent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015).

Students are most likely to be retained in first grade, followed by second and third grades (Warren & Saliba, 2012). A longitudinal study completed in 2014 analyzing patterns and trends in retention rates in the United States from 1995 to 2010, concluded that this pattern holds among all groups of students and across all geographic areas in the study (Warren, et al., 2014).

In addition, student retention rates occur more often among boys than girls, particularly in the later grades; are found to be highest among Black students and Hispanic students; and are higher among immigrant children.

Warren, et al., found that rates are "higher among children of less well-educated parents and among children in the South and Northeast" (2014).

Students at the highest risk for being retained have the following characteristics (NASP, 2003; Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012):
- Male
- African American or Hispanic
- Late birthday
- Developmental delays
- Attention problems
- Behavioral issues
- Difficulties with peer relationships
- Low socioeconomic status, or in a single-parent household
- Parents with low educational attainment

Retention Rates have Declined Slightly Between 1994 and 2015
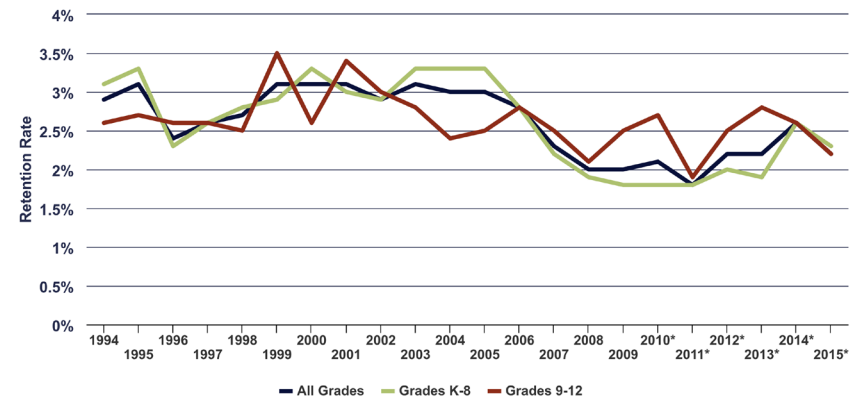
Data source: U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, October, 1994 through 2015. See Digest of Education Statistics 2016, table 225.90. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/raceindicators/indicator_rda.asp

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- Frequent school changes
- High absenteeism
- Reading problems
- Speaking a language other than English (EL students)

The decision to retain a student at any grade is one that teachers do not take lightly. While students in secondary school have the ability to repeat individual courses and potentially catch up to their peers, elementary school children must repeat an entire year. That is a great personal cost to a child who is 5 to 10 years old.

Elementary School Trends

According to the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP), regardless of the educational outcome, in-grade retention has numerous health and emotional risks for elementary school children, especially because students with emotional problems are more likely to be retained in the first place (2003). Retention is associated with increases in behavior problems and issues with peer relationships, self-esteem, problem behaviors, and attendance (NASP, 2003; Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012).

Secondary School Trends

Impact on students at the secondary level includes a higher risk of dropping out, and this probability increases with multiple retentions (NASP, 2003; Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012).

Students who are retained in middle or high school also face higher risks of emotional distress, tobacco use, alcohol use, drug abuse, driving while drinking, early onset of sexual activity, suicidal intentions, and violent behaviors (NASP, 2003; Tingle, et al., 2010; Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012).

These students are also less likely to receive a diploma by age 20 and be enrolled in post-secondary education, and they are more likely to be paid less per hour and receive poorer employer competence ratings as compared to lower-achieving students who were promoted (NASP, 2003).

Ninth grade is a turning point for numerous students who eventually drop out of high school. Students may experience tough transitions from middle school, harder academic courses, new social stressors, and new standardized tests (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010).

Clearly, numerous aspects can influence poor academic performance and the potential to drop out, so it is imperative that struggling students are identified and helped early on in their academic careers so that they can successfully make the transition to high school and not have to repeat courses. Though repeating a year is not the only reason students drop out, it does greatly increase the chances, especially with added stress on the student.

Civil Rights Concerns

On average, both Hispanic and Black students across grade levels are one and one half times more likely to be retained than White students (U.S. Census, 2015).

Additionally, English learners are retained at disproportionate rates nationally. In fact, except for kindergarten, English learners are overrepresented among retained students. In 11th and 12th grades, the percentage of retained students who were ELs was more than double the percentage of ELs enrolled in each grade. (U.S. Department of Education, 2016)

In-grade retention has been linked to increased rates of disciplinary actions and limited access to rigorous educational programs for students of color (Jimerson, et al., 2005). These disparities alone do not constitute a civil rights violation but they are a concern. It is critical that we investigate and address the underlying causes of these inequalities.

For example, students of color tend to have less access to quality instruction. Many times, they are under the care of teachers with little cultural competence and limited experience with the subject matter (Harris, et al., 2017). Racial bias impacts all areas of education, from policy to practice.

Hispanic Students and Black Students are One and One Half Times More Likely to be Retained, 2015

Legend: ● All Grades ● Grades K-8 ● Grades 9-12
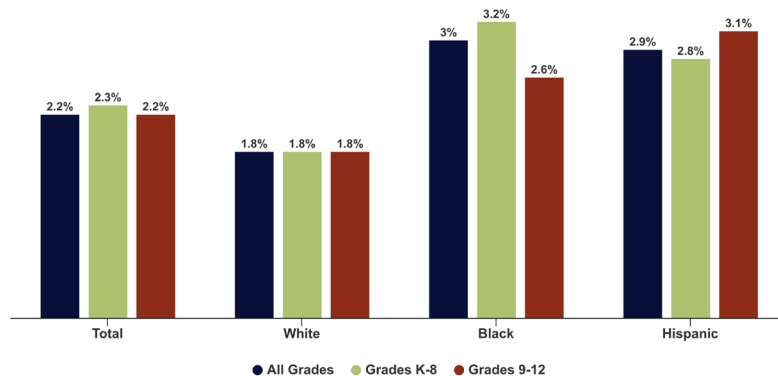
2018, Intercultural Development Research Association   Data source: U.S. Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, October, 2015. See Digest of Education Statistics 2016, table 225.90. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/raceindicators/indicator_rda.asp

EL Retention Rates are More than Double their Proporation of the Student Population in 11th & 12th Grades
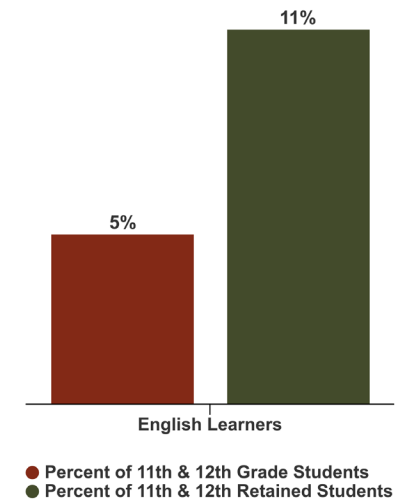
Legend: ● Percent of 11th & 12th Grade Students ● Percent of 11th & 12th Retained Students

Data source: U.S. Department of Education. (March 2016). Extant Data Analysis – Educational Experiences of English Learners: Grade Retention, High School Graduation, and GED Attainment, 2011-12. https://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/title-iii/crdc-retention-completion.pdf

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The Cost of Retention

In addition to the impact holding children back has on the lives of the students, retaining a student is a costly educational intervention. For example, the cumulative costs of retaining 546,213 pupils over four years (from 1993-94 to 1996-97) total a staggering $2.48 billion in expenditures (TEA, 1998).

Today, the average annual cost for a state with a 2.3 percent retention rate exceeds $12 billion annually. Society is expending these funds "on a practice that research indicates is not only ineffective, but also counterproductive" (West, 2012).

- Most students who repeat a grade do no better the second time, and many actually do worse.

- The threat of retention is not a motivating force for students to work harder.

- Retention is strongly associated with dropping out of school in later years. A second retention makes dropping out a virtual certainty.

- Retained students suffer lower self-esteem and view retention as a punishment and a stigma, not a positive event designed to help them.

Effects of Retention

Students who are retained do not receive long-term benefits from the practice and usually perform more poorly than low-achieving peers who were not retained (Johnson & Rudolph, 2001; Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012). Even if in-grade retention has helped some students, it is practically impossible to know who will benefit from the practice and who will not.

Students who are retained suffer lower self-esteem and view retention as a punishment and a stigma, not a positive event designed to help them improve their academic performance (Andrew, 2014).

Studies comparing retained and comparable non-retained control group students found that retained students do more poorly on follow-up measures of social adjustment, attitudes toward school, behavioral outcome, and attendance (Holmes, 1989; Meisels & Liaw, 1993; Rumberger, 1995).

Studies from the National Center for a Statistics (NCES) about the impact of retention in secondary school can attempt to trace the issue back to elementary school with sometimes questionable results, while studies that focus on elementary school students do not always follow up on their students' progress beyond elementary grades (Warren, et al., 2014).

A rarely mentioned consequence is a sharp rise in summer school enrollment for students who fail to meet promotion standards. Summer school can function as the educational system's "release valve" for dealing with large numbers of primarily minority, low-income students who have not met the new standards.

Considering that the majority of students who are required to attend and pass summer school as a condition for promotion are low-income minority students, it becomes obvious that the requirement of summer school attendance tends to be financed by those who are least able to pay. Such a policy also calls the policy of a free public education into question.

Traditional offerings for students who are retained in grade include two year kindergartens, transitional rooms or "half grades" and tutoring programs. Two-year kindergartens and transitional rooms operate on the premise that students just need more time to mature and develop appropriate skills.

An ancillary line of thinking is that curricula should be presented in a linear fashion. In general, the purpose of these traditional responses to improving retained students' achievement is to give them a larger dose of what failed to work the first time. There is also a tendency to place students in remedial tracks that often become permanent. The approach is deficit in nature and places the blame for failure on the child, ignoring the possibility that the educational program, the instructional approach or the teacher played a major part in the child's failure.

Strategies for a Better Course

Rather than pretending in-grade retention is effective, we should instead focus on how to help children excel in the first place. Johnson & Rudolph (2001) discuss five strategies: intensify learning, provide professional development to ensure skilled teaching, expand learning options, assess to inform teachers, and intervene early and often.

A key element to many of these strategies is to work and identify children who need extra help or who learn differently early in the academic process. The earlier that all educational stakeholders can be aware of issues to resolve, the better it will be for the student. Improving the school environment, better preparing teachers, and allowing parents full participation in the process of student learning also lessens the burden on young learners.

The most effective strategies address students' academic, social and mental health issues, are evidence-based, and meet students' unique needs (Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012). Increased teacher capacity to serve the needs of diverse learners, rigorous instructional programs for all students, and early intervention are powerful ways to ensure successful student outcomes (Kenneady, 2004). Specific strategies include early warning systems, special needs testing early intervention, intensified learning, and performance assessments instead of high-stakes standardized testing.

There is a need to abandon the deficit model, which places the problem of poor achievement within the child, and to acknowledge that classroom and school practices contribute to a child's failure.

IDRA's Quality Schools Action Framework is a comprehensive action model for graduating and preparing all students for college. Developed by IDRA president and CEO Dr. María "Cuca" Robledo Montecel, it (1) outlines the elements that must be in place to create schools that work for all children, (2) describes strategies that most often lead to change, and (3) shows how people can work together across sectors and around key information to leverage change. (See *Courage to Connect: A Quality Schools Action Framework* for more information. http://www.idra.org/change-model/courage-to-connect)
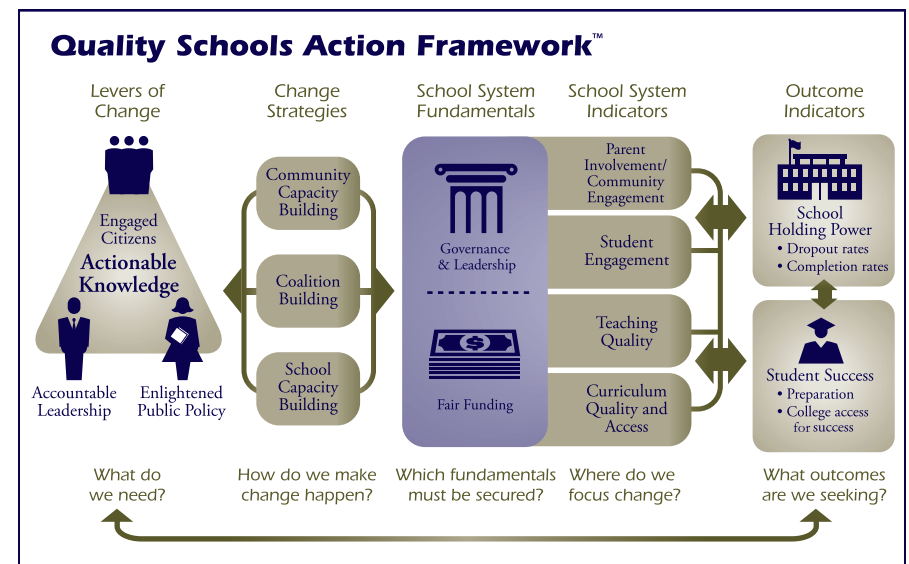
Identify Problems Early through Systemic Assessment

In order to know that students need help and to be able to structure lessons appropriately, teachers should use performance-based or informal assessment techniques to understand how students approach learning. Informal assessment techniques, such as keeping anecdotal records and using checklists and rubrics as part of the instruction, provide information on the process of learning rather than just the product (i.e., standardized test scores). Once teachers identify the problems, schools should provide opportunities for students to receive instructional support or resources as they need it.

Schools can use systematic assessment to facilitate ongoing adaptation of instruction and support. All members of a campus must have a system in place to identify students who are at risk and provide the appropriate, data-driven, interventions to help them succeed.

Retention Audit – Review the data on your district or school to determine retention rates across grades, racial-ethnic groups, genders and socio-economic status. Publish retention rates along with standardized test scores at the campus and district level as well as the cost per pupil to repeat a grade. Other factors to examine include:
- the district's promotion policy,
- parent engagement regarding student retention and academic success,
- campus retention patterns,
- assistance provided to students who are considered at risk of being retained,
- collection of follow-up data for retained students, and
- classroom instructional focus for retained students.

Early Warning Systems – Schools with the highest achievement on academic progress of struggling students tend to have "early warning" systems in place to identify and help students before they fail. This involves the use of learning plans and student support teams (Protheroe, 2007).

Special Needs Testing – Ensure that student struggles are not caused or exacerbated by learning disabilities. For example, one in five students have learning disabilities such as dyslexia or ADHD (NCLD, 2017). For students who continually experience difficulties in the classroom, the teachers' and/or administrators' observations sometimes lead to special education testing. In some cases, such testing has provided important insights into the students' difficulties

and has made it possible for campuses to provide those students with valuable resources, including, where necessary, special education resource classes.

In cases not involving special education referrals, the testing data helped identify specific pupil needs. Schools can provide the appropriate interventions for all disabled or special needs students to ensure their academic success and support.

Performance Assessments – Permit teachers to check on student progress that moves away from standardized testing with high stakes. Assessments can take on many forms – from essays to student presentations and they enable educators to get a real glimpse of how students apply their knowledge and skills in unique, beneficial ways (Darling-Hammond, 1998; Krier, n.d.). Educators also should have informal assessments available, such as anecdotal records, checklists, and rubrics to give a clearer picture of how students are learning over time.

Reflection and Evaluation – Continuously monitor student progress to enable teachers to modify their instruction when necessary (NASP, 2003). Educators and administrators should also keep and update data about retention and intervention to monitor potential patterns in who is retained, and which students may need more help.

Reshape School Structures

Helping all students succeed requires reform beyond the classroom to encompass policy, funding and the responsiveness of the campus itself. School policies for assessment, instruction and staff training should be based on research that points to strategies that support student's academic and emotional success.

School Policies – Establish a goal for reducing the number of retentions in grade and set limits on the number of times a student can be retained in grade. Establish multiple criteria for determining whether a student should be retained or promoted to the next grade. Decisions should be made on multiple criteria rather than solely on test scores or individual teacher recommendations. Students should not be held back to escape the pressures of academic standards placed on schools and students. (Robledo Montecel, M., & A. Cortez, 2001)

Review Committees – Establish a mechanism for determining whether a student should be retained or promoted to the next grade. Such mechanisms should include campus review committees (that include teachers, parents, administrators, counselors and other specialized staff) that review multiple criteria (see Page 16). These committees should have a role in influencing decisions regarding possible retentions rather than responding to them. Set up or enhance vertical communication between schools in a feeder pattern.

Multi-age Classrooms and Looping – Adjust to the needs of students through the arrangement of the classroom itself. Multi-age classrooms can "accommodate variations in learning style, paces of learning," while looping classrooms allow children to remain with one teacher for longer periods of time. Research has shown that fostering relationships between students, teachers and their peers improves the learning environment and achievement (Johnson & Rudolph, 2001; Darling-Hammond, 1998; Krier, n.d.; Protheroe, 2007).

Another example of structural change that might support learning is cross-grade grouping. Students do not have to be locked into their appropriate age-grade group for all of their instruction. For example, a fourth grade student who has trouble with reading could attend reading instruction with the third graders; likewise, more advanced readers could attend a reading class with the fifth graders. Some students may only perform poorly in one subject but excel in others. In these cases, repeating an entire grade deprives them of learning new academic material.

Extended Academic Programs – Provide opportunities for students to participate in free afterschool or summer programs (NASP, 2003). In the same vein, changing the arrangement of the school year itself could lead to better outcomes for students if programs were year-round (Johnson & Rudolph, 2001; Krier, n.d.; Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012).

For many low-performing students, increasing the amount of time spent for instruction alone does not improve achievement. Getting a second dose of what did not work the first time does not make sense. An example of redesigning school structures to support more intensive learning in different ways is language immersion classes. Here, students receive intensive instruction in reading and language arts in a block format instead of getting greater doses of remedial reading.

Pre-Kindergarten Programs – Finance and promote programs that help students who are most at risk of being retained early in life; this includes Pre-K programs (NASP, 2003; Krier, n.d.). Some schools offer their own Pre-K programs while others work with child care providers. Early childhood programs must employ strategies that are instrumental in supporting learners through their first decade of life (Reynolds, et al., 2006) as they transition through critical grades in school.

Help Teachers Increase their Effectiveness

Some teachers may need training that they did not receive in their preparation programs to help them alter their instructional approaches to support their lowest-achieving students. And all effective teachers are constantly learning about their students and how they respond to each instructional strategy used in the classroom.

With the powerful impact quality teaching has on the success of students, teachers need access to quality professional development. But many traditional styles of teacher training and support often are attempts at quick fixes that in theory are designed to work across the board. IDRA's experience, on the other hand, and that of others demonstrates that professional development works best when it is ongoing, when it values the teachers themselves and when it is designed for each school's unique context.

Professional Development – Providing quality professional development helps teachers and students learn and succeed. This includes providing educators the support they need through mentoring and high-quality professional development programs (Johnson & Rudolph, 2001; Darling-Hammond, 1998). Strategies that are effective for students who are at-risk are effective for other students as well.

Coaching and Mentoring – Set up ways for teachers to support each other in engaging the material and in testing new strategies for teaching their students, especially any who are struggling. This also can be designed to support teachers who are newly teaching low-income and diverse students and in individualizing curriculum to meet their unique students' needs (Protheroe, 2007).

Active Learning – Engage teachers directly in designing and trying out teaching strategies, engaging them in the same style of learning they are designing for their students. Active learning uses authentic artifacts, interactive activities and other strategies to provide deeply embedded, highly contextualized professional learning (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2017).

Professional Learning Teams – Provide ways for teachers to share ideas and collaborate in their learning, often in job-embedded contexts. By working collaboratively, teachers can create communities that positively change the culture and instruction, and identify and help students who need the most support (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2017).

Implicit Bias and Cultural Competency Training – Create an environment for teachers to investigate and facilitate conversations about societal norms and build cultural competencies to increase our capacity to be more inclusive. Through reflective activities, educators dialogue about their own past and educational experiences and the socio-emotional barriers that can prevent positive interactions with individuals of other races or cultural backgrounds. This knowledge increases our ability for making personal connections with all students. (Johnson, 2017)

Learning Behavior Management and Cognitive-Behavioral Strategies – These strategies can help teachers address behavior problems and increase "prosocial behavior" in the classroom (Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012).

Provide Supports that Accelerate Learning

Students should not be given less academically demanding work just because they have struggled in the past. Rather, students should be challenged to achieve at a high level from day one and be given the support to ensure that they do (Robledo Montecel & Goodman, 2010; Smink, 2001; Johnson & Rudolph, 2001; Darling-Hammond, 1998).

Early Intervention – Prevention, early intervention and targeted interventions can help head off issues with students' academic careers before they get to the point of frustration or failure. "In many schools, response to intervention (RTI) and positive behavior interventions and supports (PBIS) models facilitate the kind of problem-solving and progress monitoring approaches needed" (Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012). Generally, teachers should evaluate their students' progress and intervene immediately if a student is struggling with his or her studies.

Subject-specific Programs – For students who are struggling in specific subjects, like reading and math, provide focused programs that are intensive and incorporate direct instruction strategies. Educators in such programs should have specialized skills in working with struggling students.

Student Support Teams – Support teams should be set up to assess and identify specific problems students are having, implement data-driven interventions and evaluate the effectiveness of these interventions (Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012).

Double Dosing – This is the practice of having students who are not doing well in a particular subject take two periods of the class each day or on certain days during the week. Block scheduling may offer students struggling with certain subjects more time to work on materials in-depth.

Tutoring – Implement tutoring and mentoring programs that use peers or cross-age programs that benefit both tutors and students (NASP, 2003). Set up regular schedules for tutoring by classroom teachers before and after school, so that any student needing assistance knows when it is available to them. Encourage students to meet with other teachers in their grade or content area to benefit from hearing different ways of presenting concepts.

Access Family and Community Resources

Parents should be included in all decisions related to the promotion or retention of their child and should voice their concerns to the teacher and school (Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012), and be aware of their school district's policies on retention.

Enhancing parent engagement in their child's education is the first step to making sure that the school is successful, and it facilitates communication and collaboration when students are struggling (NASP, 2003; Krier, n.d.).

Working Together – It's vital that educators discuss with parents concerns as they arise. They can help parents by providing materials and guidance to help their children outside of the classroom (Matrix, 2015; Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012). Parents should have ways to update teachers when children are not understanding certain assignments. This helps teachers review and adjust instruction.

Culturally- and Linguistically-Appropriate Communication – Educators should communicate with parents in a culturally- and linguistically-relevant manner. This involves flexibility on the part of educators, to include office hours and methods of reaching out to parents (face to face, over the phone, through fliers sent home, email) (Jimerson & Renshaw, 2012). Lines of communication between the family and school should be open, and parents should be notified at the first signs that their student is struggling academically so that appropriate plans can be put into motion with the help of all stakeholders. After all, parents are an emotional support and point of stability for their children.

Consider Underlying Learning Disabilities – Educators and parents should first seek a professional assessment to learn why their child struggled with the grade level work. Parents should be informed that they can request that their local public school conduct an assessment to see if their child is eligible for special education.

Data Monitoring – Work with a group of parents or community members to monitor retention data in your school or district (along with data on dropout rates, discipline rates and student academic success). Through collaboration, trouble spots or trends can be identified and acted upon at the local level. (Posner & Bojorquez, 2008)

Decision Making – Parents can ask for the evidence that is being used in support of a retention decision, including examples of their child's academic performance, standardized test results, and other related measures, including the student's history of behavior in class and emotional maturity. But a pro-active school should not wait for parents to ask. (Montemayor, 2016)

NASP advises parents to advocate for their child early on if the student is falling behind. Pro-active interventions can range from requesting instructional assistance, such as tutoring, to an evaluation to identify potential learning disabilities.

Retention Decision Making

When retention is being considered for a student, the decision should not be made by a single teacher or other individual. A team should look at the various data sources. Jimerson, et al. (2005), outline a set of factors to consider when retention has been recommended.

- Previous and current assessments of academic skills and behaviors
- Previous intervention efforts and the effectiveness of those interventions
- Previous retention
- Teacher assigned grades (math, reading, language, science and social studies)
- Standardized test scores
- Developmental factors (also including physical attributes)
- Teacher observations, informal assessment and recommendations
- Current supports and the duration and effectiveness of those supports

- Community resources
- The student's family context (e.g., frequent moves, divorce, poverty, abuse)
- The extent or likelihood of parent involvement in school
- The student's after-school life and peer group
- Health issues
- Risk behaviors

Jim Grant developed a 50-item checklist to be used when considering having a student repeat a grade (1997). He explained: "Too often educators search for an 'either/or' answer to difficult school-related problems. One such issue is that of retention and social promotion. No one we know is 'for' either of these options. What is needed is an informed decision-making process, where a recommendation is made for each student, based on his or her individual circumstances."

IDRA has nearly 50 years of successful partnerships with schools to address these concerns. Our capacity-building technical assistance, training and professional development has assisted hundreds of schools and districts in addressing civil rights-related complaints and equity issues, including:

- Increasing access to advanced courses for all students,
- Improving teaching quality for English learners,
- Creating positive school climates and reducing bias, and
- Countering opportunity gaps and resource inequities.

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