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Ending Social Promotion Without Leaving Children Behind

The Case of New York City

Jennifer Sloan McCombs, Sheila Nataraj Kirby,
and Louis T. Mariano, *Editors*

Prepared for the New York City Department of Education

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Summary

The decision to retain students in grade when they fail to meet promotion criteria on standardized tests remains a controversial and hotly debated policy, but the practice of “social promotion”—promoting students who fail to meet academic standards and requirements at the same pace as their peers—has come under increasing attack and criticism. The rationale behind retention policies is that repetition of the grade will give students an additional year to master the knowledge and skills needed for that grade and, thus, “students should be less at risk for failure when they go on to the next grade” (Shepard and Smith, 1990, p. 84). However, opponents of grade retention point out that research has shown that retention disproportionately affects low-income and minority children and is associated with low self-esteem, problem behaviors, and an increased risk of dropping out of school.

As part of an ambitious reform initiative, the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE), the largest school district in the country, implemented a new promotion and retention policy for students in grade 3 in 2003–2004. The policy was extended to grade 5 in 2004–2005, grade 7 in 2005–2006, and grade 8 in 2008–2009. The policy bases promotion decisions on students’ scores on the New York State assessments, which established four levels of performance:

- Level 4—exceeds the standards
- Level 3—meets all the standards
- Level 2—meets some of the standards or partially meets the standards
- Level 1—shows serious academic difficulties.

Under the NYCDOE promotion policy, general education students in the gateway grades are required to score at or above performance Level 2 on both the English language arts (ELA) and mathematics assessments in order to be promoted (i.e., “passing” the promotion benchmark). Performance at or above Level 3 is considered “proficient” under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), a higher standard than the promotion benchmark.

The policy places considerable emphasis on identifying struggling students early, providing them with additional instructional time, and continuously monitoring their

progress. Students who have been identified as in need of services at the beginning of the school year (based on their performance on the previous year's assessments, teacher recommendations, or being previously retained in grade) are mandated to receive academic intervention services (AIS) in school. In addition, schools can offer a variety of out-of-school support services, including Saturday school (previously called Saturday Preparatory Academies). Students who fail to score Level 2 or higher on the mathematics or ELA assessments administered in the spring are offered several opportunities to meet the promotion standards and can be promoted based on (1) a review of a portfolio of their work in the spring, (2) performance on the summer standardized assessment, (3) a review of a portfolio of their work in August, or (4) an appeal process. Students who do not meet the standards when their portfolios are reviewed in the spring are required to enroll in the Summer Success Academy, which offers additional hours of intensive instruction in mathematics and ELA for several weeks in the summer.

This Study Examined Several Aspects of NYC's Promotion Policy

NYCDOE asked the RAND Corporation to conduct an independent longitudinal evaluation of the 5th-grade promotion policy. This study—conducted between March 2006 and August 2009—examined several aspects of the policy: (1) factors affecting implementation and implementation progress over time; (2) the impact of the policy on student academic and socioemotional outcomes; and (3) the links between implementation, components of the policy, and desired outcomes. This monograph reports the results of the overall study and is one of three reports documenting the overall evaluation of NYC's 5th-grade promotion policy. The two other reports—Marsh et al. (2009) and Xia and Kirby (2009)—help situate the policy in the broader national context and in the context of prior literature on similar policies and their outcomes.

This monograph is one of only a few longitudinal studies that examine the implementation and effects of a promotion policy on both academic and nonacademic outcomes for a large group of students. Using both qualitative and quantitative data, it provides a rich portrait of the implementation and effects of a promotion policy in the largest public school system in the country. It also highlights the factors that enabled or hindered the implementation of New York City's (NYC's) promotion policy, and it uses data from NYC and other locales to draw lessons for the design and implementation of promotion policies.

In this monograph, we focus on two groups of low-performing students:

- The first group includes students who scored Level 1 or low Level 2 on the 4th-grade assessments or had been retained in grade. These students were identified as needing additional help and likely targeted for AIS in schools and offered services

through Saturday programs or Saturday Preparatory Academies. We refer to this group as “students needing services.”

- The second group consists of students who failed the spring assessments (i.e., scored Level 1 on at least one of the spring assessments) and so were “at risk of retention” in 5th grade. This second group was mandated to attend sessions in the summer through the Summer Success Academies and offered other chances to meet the promotion standards (through a portfolio review or summer assessments). We refer to this group as “students at risk of retention.”

We tracked four cohorts of 5th-grade students: three cohorts (2004–2005, 2005–2006, and 2006–2007) that were subject to the policy and a comparison cohort (2003–2004) that was not held to the policy. To improve readability and make clear the distinction between the policy and comparison cohorts, we refer to the policy cohorts as the P1, P2, and P3 cohorts and the comparison cohort as the C0 cohort.

The Study Used a Variety of Data and Methods

The study used a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods to examine the implementation and impact of NYC’s 5th-grade promotion policy on the immediate and future academic and socioemotional outcomes of students.

To understand the implementation of the policy, we collected and analyzed data from 80 case studies of schools, Saturday Preparatory Academies, and Summer Success Academies; interviews with 16 leaders of organizations or agencies responsible for providing support to schools (or regions, prior to 2007); and census surveys of principals, administrators of Saturday Preparatory Academies and Summer Success Academies, and school AIS team leaders (weighted to adjust for nonresponse, where feasible). We also reviewed a variety of documents from NYCDOE and from city and state Web sites.

To track trends in the performance of at-risk students, we obtained and analyzed demographic and achievement data for four cohorts, each with approximately 60,000 5th-grade students,¹ until 2007–2008.

To analyze the effectiveness of the various supports offered under the policy to eligible students in terms of 5th-grade and future outcomes, we employed multiple analytic methods. First, we analyzed the links between various school instructional strategies and other implementation measures and conducted further analyses of the relationship between 5th-grade achievement outcomes and participation in out-of-school instructional services (Saturday Preparatory Academies and Summer Success Academies). To

¹ We also tracked outcomes for two 3rd-grade cohorts held to the policy (2003–2004 and 2004–2005) and one comparison cohort (2002–2003).

estimate the effects of supportive interventions and of being retained in grade, we used two quasi-experimental methods to define plausible comparison groups that could be used as controls in our models. These models were coupled with a “difference-in-difference” approach that allowed us to estimate the effect of the promotion policy separately from other concurrent reform efforts.

We tracked the performance of students in different cohorts into the 6th and 7th grades. We estimated the effect of being mandated to attend the summer academy and being retained in grade on future outcomes using same-grade comparisons. (For example, we compared these students’ outcomes in 6th grade with the 6th-grade performance of promoted students from their cohort, though retained students took the assessment one year later.) Such comparisons explicitly estimate the effect of the additional year of schooling that retained students receive.

To understand differences in the socioemotional status of three groups of students held to the promotion policy—at risk and retained, at risk but promoted, and not at risk—we surveyed students in our study cohorts in the fall of the 2006–2007, 2007–2008, and 2008–2009 school years regarding their attitudes and beliefs about school belonging, mathematics, and reading.

To understand what was known about the design and implementation of promotion policies more generally, we conducted interviews in 2006 and 2008 with officials from a sample of six states and 12 districts with policies similar to that of NYC. We analyzed the data to identify promising strategies and challenges and to draw lessons learned about the design and implementation of such policies.

The Study Faced Two Challenges

The first major challenge stemmed from data constraints and a change in test administration that limited our ability to compare outcomes across cohorts and over time. In response to the requirements of NCLB, New York State began administering new state assessments in grades 3 through 8 in ELA and mathematics in spring 2006. This meant that we lacked comparable data over time for some cohorts in certain years, which restricted our ability to compare longitudinal outcomes over time for some cohorts in certain years.

The second challenge arose from the fact that the promotion policy was only one piece of a larger set of reforms adopted by the city and state—reforms that were set against the larger backdrop of the federal NCLB mandates regarding student proficiency and annual goals for school progress. These reforms were associated with substantial improvements in test scores in both NYC and the rest of the state during the course of our study. Across the board, between 2006 and 2008, in almost every grade, the percentage of students scoring at the proficiency level (Level 3 or higher) in NYC schools increased dramatically, while the percentage of students scoring Level 1

declined equally dramatically. This same trend was evident across the rest of the state as well. It was beyond the scope of this study to determine whether this upward trend is a result of true learning or other factors.²

To isolate the effect of the promotion policy, we adjusted for the estimated upward trajectory in overall test scores to determine the “net” effect of the promotion policy on student outcomes. If we have not been entirely successful in this adjustment, then our estimated effects still reflect some of these confounding influences.

Findings Showed Improved Student Performance Under the Policy

Few Students Were Retained Under the Promotion Policy

Overall, approximately 60,000 5th-grade students were held to the promotion policy in each of the three cohorts subject to the policy, accounting for 75–78 percent of students in each of the cohorts. Special education students, those classified as English-language learners for three or fewer years, and those in charter schools were exempt from the policy. Between 19 and 24 percent of 5th graders were categorized as needing services at the beginning of the school year. Among entering 5th graders, more students needed services in ELA than in mathematics but students were more likely to be retained for failing to meet promotion criteria in mathematics.

Few students were retained under the policy, and the percentage of retained students dropped over time. About 2–3 percent of students in the first two policy cohorts were retained in grade. By the P3 cohort, this number had fallen to 1 percent (about 600 students out of approximately 58,000 students in the cohort compared to more than 1,700 in the previous two cohorts).

Capacity Limited Some Schools’ Ability to Provide Services

Students needing services were not evenly distributed across schools; their numbers ranged from 0 to 80 percent of a school’s 5th-grade students in 2005. Schools seemed to provide academic intervention services to as many students as they had the capacity to serve. Schools with high levels of need (those with larger percentages of in-need students) were less likely to serve all students needing services, compared to other schools. However, high-need schools were significantly more likely than low-need schools to

² We relied on the assumption that all scale and level scores provided were reasonable and consistent measures of achievement over time. Technical documentation about the assessments indicates that level scores are equated within grade and across years. However, the number of questions a student had to answer to score Level 2 on the state assessment declined over time, which increased the probability that a student could “guess” his or her way into Level 2. For the grade levels in our study years (2006–2008), this probability remained quite low—less than 1 percent, with one exception (7th-grade ELA in 2008, which was 5 percent). In 2009, the probability of scoring Level 2 by “guessing” increased, but this occurred after the period of our study.

have additional resources for students, such as mathematics specialists, reading coaches, and mathematics coaches.

Schools provided additional services to students both during the school day and outside the school day. Across the three survey years (2006–2008), almost all schools reported serving students in need of services through small-group tutoring during the school day. Fewer schools were able to offer one-on-one tutoring during the school day (64–80 percent). Exploratory models found that being in a school that offered one-on-one tutoring in mathematics (to some or all in-need students) increased in-need students' probability of meeting promotion standards in mathematics. Results for ELA one-on-one tutoring were promising as well. While in-school services were valuable to students, our case-study visits suggest that services may not have been offered consistently when AIS providers were pulled away for other duties. Teaching test-taking strategies using professionally compiled test-preparation materials (such as those produced by Kaplan) or teacher-generated test-preparation materials was a focus to a moderate or great extent both during and outside the school day.

Supports Offered Under the Policy Helped Students Meet Promotion Standards

Our analyses found small, positive effects of supportive services on the achievement of in-need students during the 5th-grade year. In-need students in the P1 cohort increased their 5th-grade spring assessment scores by between 0.10 and 0.20 standard deviations in ELA and by less than 0.10 standard deviations in mathematics over their expected performance in the absence of the policy. However, for the small group of students entering 5th grade at low Level 1, we found that additional promotion-policy services during the school year had little effect on performance.

More frequent attendance at the Saturday Preparatory Academies did not appear to have an impact on ELA outcomes in the P2 and P3 cohorts. However, in mathematics, there was a small benefit to attending 14–15 sessions compared to 6–7 sessions (about 0.10 standard deviations).

Summer Success Academies under the promotion policy had smaller class sizes and were more structured than summer schools offered prior to the policy. In addition, they were accompanied by an additional potential motivator for students—the very real and near-term threat of being retained in grade. We found that, relative to summer school prior to the policy, the Summer Success Academy option offered in the first policy year was somewhat more effective in improving student performance in mathematics (about 0.20 standard deviations) but not in ELA. In addition, we found that more frequent attendance at Summer Success Academy was associated with a small increase in mathematics performance but had no effect on ELA achievement. Prior studies also reported that summer school appears to have more beneficial effects in mathematics than in reading.

Positive Effects of Promotion-Policy Services Continued Into Later Grades

We examined how specific groups of low-performing students subject to the promotion policy performed in later grades relative to comparable groups of students. Overall, our estimates show small to moderate positive effects of components of the promotion policy in the 6th and 7th grades:

- *Small, positive effects of early identification and intervention.* Students in the P1 cohort who needed services at the beginning of 5th grade scored higher on the 7th-grade assessments than comparable students in the comparison cohort (by 0.10–0.20 standard deviations in ELA and mathematics).
- *Small, positive effects of summer school.* Compared to students who were just above the Level 2 cutoff on the spring assessment, students in the P1 cohort who scored just below the cutoff and were required to attend summer school scored somewhat higher in both subjects (0.10–0.15 standard deviations higher) in both the 6th and 7th grades.
- *Moderate, positive effects of an additional year of instruction due to retention.* Compared to the students in the C0 cohort, retained students in the P1 cohort did considerably better on the 7th-grade assessments (by 0.60 standard deviations in ELA and 0.40 standard deviations in mathematics). Our analyses that focused on the highest Level 1 retained students in the P1 and P2 cohorts (compared to their peers scoring immediately above the Level 2 cutpoint) also point to moderate, positive effects of retention over time (approximately 0.40 standard deviations in ELA and mathematics). The results imply that these students, after an additional year of 5th-grade instruction and intervention, would be expected to score well within the Level 2 range on the 7th-grade assessments.

Retained Students Did Not Report Negative Socioemotional Effects

Our student surveys showed that retention did not have negative effects on students' sense of school belonging or confidence in mathematics and reading; retained students reported comparable or higher levels than those of their at-risk promoted peers. In addition, retained students reported a greater sense of school connectedness than at-risk promoted students and not-at-risk students, even three years after the retention decision. The mean differences were small but statistically significant. These results mirror what other studies have found.

School Staff Tended to Be Positive About the Policy and Its Supports

Principals and teachers tended to be positive about many aspects of NYC's promotion policy, and approximately three-quarters of AIS leaders and principals agreed that the policy focused their schools' instruction efforts in a positive way and that it made parents and guardians more concerned about their child's progress. However, the majority of respondents thought that the promotion policy relied too heavily on state

assessment scores and, interestingly, that the policy made it more difficult to retain students who should be retained but passed the test.

Across the three years, the majority of principals reported receiving useful support from their region or school support organization as part of the policy.

Near-Term Benefits Hold Promise for the Possibility of Longer-Term Benefits

We found positive near-term benefits of NYC's promotion policy. Students affected by the 5th-grade promotion policy performed better than they would have in absence of the policy in the 5th grade and into 7th grade. In addition, the study found no negative effects of retention on students' sense of school belonging or confidence in mathematics and reading over time.

However, the effectiveness of the promotion policy will ultimately be judged by whether the benefits of the policy outweigh its costs in the long term. This question has two components. First, from an individual student's point of view, the question is whether these short-term gains will persist into high school and result in improved probability of graduation and higher proficiency at graduation. Of particular concern is that prior studies have shown that retained students have an increased probability of dropping out. Second, from a societal point of view, the question is whether the overall benefits associated with implementing a promotion policy and holding students back a year outweigh the costs. Eide and Goldhaber (2005), for example, focused strictly on the economic consequences of retention and concluded that the overall longer-term benefits from retention fall far short of covering the costs to society in terms of financing an extra year of education and loss of future earnings. While the NYC policy has not been in place long enough to address these larger, long-term questions, the near-term benefits found by the study hold the possibility of longer-term benefits as well.

The Study Identified Lessons for the Design and Implementation of Promotion Policies

We analyzed NYC's experience along with results from our interviews with officials from states and districts with similar promotion policies to identify lessons and practical insights into implementation for those who have adopted or are considering changes to promotion and retention policies.

With respect to design, the National Research Council (Heubert and Hauser, 1999, p. 135) pointed out that the validity and fairness of test-based promotion decisions can be enhanced by identifying at-risk or struggling students early so they can be targeted for extra help, providing students with multiple opportunities to demonstrate

their knowledge through repeated testing with alternative forms or other appropriate means, and considering other relevant information about individual students.

NYC’s promotion policy follows these tenets: It emphasizes early identification of at-risk students and provides them with additional instructional services both in school and out of school, and it offers several opportunities and means for students to meet the promotion standards, including the summer assessment, the spring portfolio review, the August portfolio review, and an appeals process that allows other information to be taken into account.

Additional lessons from NYC and other states and districts regarding design and implementation include the following:

- Invest in building support and maintaining ongoing communication with parents and educators.
- Anticipate the need to handle requests for exceptions to the policy.
- Identify students early and expand support beyond the promotion gateway grades.
- Provide adequate professional development for teachers.
- Invest in monitoring implementation and effects.
- Link the policy to a broader set of supports for at-risk students.
- Provide adequate funding.³

NYC, for example, rolled out its policy in stages—starting with students in grade 3 and then expanding it to higher grades as it gained more experience with the policy. NYC emphasized the need for open communication with parents, including sending out letters to parents in nine different languages to overcome language barriers. In addition, the policy was linked to a broad set of supports for schools and students, and considerable funding for both teacher professional development and student supportive services was provided.

Several Policy Recommendations Emerge from the Findings

Based on our findings, we offer some recommendations for policymakers and administrators in NYC at the city, district, and school levels. While targeted at NYC, these recommendations may be of use to other districts and states considering or implementing test-based promotion policies.

Continue early identification of students and provision of academic intervention services. Our findings suggest that the process of early identification and support helped students meet promotion standards and had positive effects on student achievement in

³ See Marsh et al. (2009) for a full description of these and related findings.

future grades. Results from exploratory models suggest that the provision of one-on-one tutoring may be a particularly helpful form of AIS and should be continued and expanded when possible.

Enable AIS providers to work consistently with students who need services. Our qualitative findings suggest that the AIS provision was inconsistent because providers were pulled away for substitute teaching, lunch duty, or proctoring assessments. Teachers we interviewed considered AIS important and helpful for their students' academic growth, but they noted that AIS could be more effective if provided on a consistent basis.

Consider the expected duration and participation when planning Saturday programs. Principals now have the authority to choose whether to operate a Saturday program for their students. Our results suggest that students attending at least six to seven sessions typically have higher achievement outcomes. Thus, principals who decide to offer the program need to pay careful attention to ensuring more frequent student attendance to maximize the program's benefits.

Continue to encourage struggling students to attend summer school. Summer school attendance appears to have a positive relationship with achievement on the summer assessment, particularly in mathematics, and summer school may also have a positive impact on future achievement in grades 6 and 7. Our results suggest that these benefits accrue, in particular, for students close to the Level 2 cutoff. Thus, principals may want to encourage high Level 1 and low Level 2 students to attend summer school programs.

Collect and use data on the interventions being provided to at-risk students. Our study highlighted a few instructional strategies that appeared to hold promise for helping low-performing students. Under the current structure, principals have considerable autonomy over the supports provided to these students, and there is no centralized data-collection effort to track what individual students are receiving. However, it is important to collect and analyze these data to determine what works. The school data system implemented by NYC—the Achievement Reporting and Innovation System—may enable the collection of such data.

Continue to monitor the effects of retention on students. One of the most important questions regarding the effects of retention on students is whether short-term positive effects persist over the longer term and whether the policy is cost-effective, compared to alternatives. We could not answer these questions with our data, but they remain important topics for NYC to address in the future.