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TECHNICAL REPORT

Retaining Students in Grade

Lessons Learned
Regarding Policy Design
and Implementation

Julie A. Marsh, Daniel Gershwin,
Sheila Nataraj Kirby, Nailing Xia

Prepared for the New York City Department of Education



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PREFACE

Many states and districts are moving toward test-based requirements for promotion at key transitional points in students' schooling careers, thus ending the practice of "social promotion" — promoting students without regard for how much they have learned. The rationale for retention is that repetition of the grade will give students an additional year to master the academic content they failed to master the previous year, and, thus, students should be less at risk for failure when they go on to the next grade. Opponents of grade retention argue that prior research has shown that grade 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.

In 2003–2004, the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) implemented a new promotion and retention policy for 3rd-grade students in New York City (NYC) public schools. The policy was extended to grade 5 in 2004–2005, grade 7 in 2005–2006, and grade 8 in 2008–2009. NYCDOE asked the RAND Corporation to conduct an independent longitudinal evaluation of the 5th-grade social promotion policy and to examine the outcomes for two cohorts of 3rd-grade students. This four-year study—conducted between March 2006 and August 2009—examined (1) policy implementation, 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 and desired outcomes.

The study included a review of states and districts (other than NYC) that had implemented grade retention policies that were similar to the NYC promotion policy, featuring interviews with state and district officials regarding their successes, challenges, and lessons learned regarding policy design and implementation. This report presents the results of that effort and is one in a series of reports documenting the findings of the evaluation of the NYC promotion policy. Xia and Kirby (2009) and McCombs, Kirby, and Mariano (2009) provide a review of the literature on grade retention and findings from the overall evaluation, respectively. These three reports should interest policymakers, practitioners, and researchers involved in designing, implementing, or studying interventions to improve outcomes for low-performing students.

This research was conducted by RAND Education, a unit of the RAND Corporation.

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SUMMARY

In 2003–2004, the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) implemented a new promotion and retention policy for 3rd-grade students in New York City (NYC) public schools. The policy was extended to grade 5 in 2004–2005, to grade 7 in 2005–2006, and to grade 8 in 2007–2008. NYCDOE asked the RAND Corporation to conduct an independent longitudinal evaluation of the 5th-grade social promotion policy, with a follow-up of outcomes for 3rd-grade students. To situate the NYC promotion policy in a broader context and to identify lessons learned that might inform the work of policymakers and administrators in NYC and elsewhere, RAND examined the design and implementation of policies to end social promotion in a sample of states and districts with policies and programs in grades K–8 that are similar to those of NYC.

METHODS

This research was conducted in two phases. In our first round of data collection in 2006, we identified a group of states and districts with test-based promotion policies. Where possible, we also identified at least one large, urban district in each of the states in our sample. Our sample of states and districts for the first round of data collection included six states and six districts that had policies relevant to NYC’s policy. In our second round of data collection in 2008, we started with the 2006 sample and added several additional districts that were either located in a state from our original sample or that our research indicated may have had relevant policies (some of which did not respond to our 2006 request for interviews). The combined sample for both rounds of interviews numbered 18: six states (Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, North Carolina, and Texas) and 12 districts (Broward County, Atlanta, Gwinnett County, East Baton Rouge, Wake County, Houston, Boston, Chicago, Detroit, Long Beach, Milwaukee, and Philadelphia).

In both rounds of interviews, respondents included top-level administrators with responsibility for overseeing and monitoring some or all aspects of the promotion and retention policies and programs in their state or district. Interviews were guided by a semistructured, open-ended protocol developed for this review and lasted between 45 minutes and one hour. In both years, we also reviewed promotion policy documentation available on state and district Web sites (e.g., policy documents, parent guides) as well as other relevant studies, newspaper articles, and reports we gathered or respondents provided to us.

This report summarizes findings from this effort. The final report (McCombs, Kirby, and Mariano, 2009) presents details about the design and implementation of the NYC promotion policy.

OVERVIEW OF STATE AND DISTRICT PROMOTION AND RETENTION POLICIES

Among our sample of six states and 12 districts, promotion and retention policies varied along several key dimensions:

- **Grade level.** The states in our sample most often target their promotion policies at grades 3, 5, and 8, though not all states have policies for all three grades. At the district level, many of the locales in our sample include a wider range of grades in their promotion policies than the states do.
- **Subjects.** Promotion policies in 17 of the 18 locales focus on reading/English language arts and mathematics (Florida includes reading only), which is not surprising since these are the two subjects in which all states have been required to develop assessments under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB).
- **Main criteria.** The six states in our sample all use student performance on the state assessment as the primary or sole criterion in promotion decisions. While the state test plays a large role in promotion policies in most of the districts, some districts utilize local assessments. Promotion criteria in 10 of the 12 districts also include other indicators besides the state assessment, such as alternate assessments, passing report card grades, student discipline, or attendance.
- **Alternative criteria.** All 18 locales in our sample provided for some type of appeal, review, waiver, or exemption that could result in promotion for students even if they did not meet the specified promotion criteria.
- **Identification of at-risk students.** Formal identification of students at risk of retention is based solely on standardized assessment results in all six states and six of the districts in our sample, while the other districts include other factors, such as classroom assessments or course grades, in their identification processes.
- **Required Intervention.** Summer school is the most common type of intervention used across the sites. Three of the states in our sample—Florida, Georgia and North Carolina—leave it up to local education agencies to determine the type of intervention they will offer. Delaware required districts to offer summer school for at-risk students, and Texas and Louisiana provide for both summer school and school-year interventions. At the district level, 11 of 12 sites provide summer school for students failing to meet promotion criteria;

promotion policies in Boston, East Baton Rouge, Houston, Milwaukee, and Philadelphia also require schools to provide school-year interventions through after-school programs, pull-out, or other means of instruction. The states and districts in our sample vary considerably in the specifications for summer school and other interventions. In general, districts are much more prescriptive in their requirements for support programs than the states in our sample (e.g., standardized curriculum, required hours/duration, student-teacher ratios). Most locales also require continuing support in the following year for students retained or promoted via alternative criteria without meeting the formal promotion criteria (e.g., individual learning plan).

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS: PERCEIVED CHALLENGES AND PROMISING STRATEGIES

Interviews with state and district officials in 2006 and 2008 provided further insights into the design and implementation of policies to end social promotion. Specially, they identified challenges and promising strategies in six broad categories:

- **Stakeholder support.** In both years, some officials cited the difficulty of building parent understanding and confronting preexisting beliefs and attitudes about retention. Many, however, identified successful strategies to communicate and build stakeholder support and roll out policies early, with enough time to gain credibility and buy-in. In 2008, several administrators noted the importance of investing in strategies to maintain stakeholder support over time, especially when changes are introduced or leaders face pressure to alter the policy.
- **Criteria for promotion.** In both years, several respondents mentioned challenges pertaining to the use of reliable measures of student performance, and even more cited tensions over providing local discretion and alternatives without undermining policy intent. Others provided examples of potentially promising strategies to manage the tension over potential loopholes and to provide incentives to students and schools.
- **Identifying at-risk students.** In both years, some officials noted that states' timelines for reporting test results made it difficult to identify and support at-risk students, while others provided positive examples of identifying students early, focusing on individual students, and using interim assessment data and data systems to identify and monitor at-risk students.
- **High-quality intervention and support.** Many respondents in both years reported specific challenges with the provision of support to at-risk students—including maintaining student attendance, ensuring consistency of quality, implementing after-school and summer programs, identifying best practices for high-needs students, supporting students who have

been retained, and sustaining the progress of at-risk students. A few officials provided examples of what they believed to be effective, high-quality supports for students.

- **Building capacity and staffing.** In both years, several officials noted great difficulty in providing adequate professional development to teachers, while a few provided innovative examples of how to build teacher capacity. In 2008, respondents raised concerns about their ability to adequately staff summer and school-year intervention programs and/or gateway grades.
- **Monitoring.** In 2006, all but three respondents reported an inability to adequately monitor the implementation and effects of their social promotion policies and programs. By 2008, the respondents were more mixed, with some reporting progress in monitoring their programs and effects on students.

Finally, a reported lack of funding cut across many of these categories. In both years, at least half of respondents mentioned that insufficient funding affected their state or district's ability to implement high-quality interventions, to adequately monitor policies, to scale up policies to multiple gateway grades, or to enact key design features (e.g., develop performance measures, provide retesting opportunities). Given the current state of the economy, this may turn out to be a larger problem in the future.

LESSONS TO CONSIDER

As policymakers and administrators continue to struggle with how to best design and implement policies to ensure that all students achieve high standards and that no student is promoted before achieving grade-level benchmarks for proficiency, they might consider the experiences of locales described in this report. Readers should keep in mind that the following lessons derive from a limited set of interviews and primarily self-reported data. Further empirical analyses of the various policies and outcomes are needed to assert a more definitive set of policy recommendations. These ideas are not intended to inform the debate about whether retention "works," but instead to provide a set of practical insights into implementation for those who have adopted or are considering changes to promotion and retention policies.

Invest in building support and ongoing communication with parents and educators. To alleviate potential concerns and resistance on the part of parents and educators, officials should invest in communication strategies not only when developing a new promotion policy but also throughout the period of implementation to gain and sustain widespread support. Some ideas mentioned by our respondents included dedicating a phone line and support staff to

answer questions, creating a teacher council to provide input on the policy, and providing ongoing “fluff-up or rev-up” training for new and veteran staff.

Consider incentives and consequences at all levels. Across interviews, officials often noted the importance of providing proper incentives for students, educators, and schools as a whole. Officials should consider several aspects of this issue, such as (1) how to ensure meaningful incentives for students and educators and (2) how to align accountability incentives (e.g., between promotion policies and federal standards). Positive incentives (e.g., recognition, rewards) for students, educators, and schools exceeding standards or doing exemplary work might also be useful.

Anticipate the need to handle requests for exceptions to the policy. To avoid the possible exploitation of “loopholes,” officials should, before the policy is enacted, clearly define alternative criteria and specify the rules around how they are to be used. Monitoring of these appeals processes or application of exemptions (e.g., tracking how decisions were made, requiring documentation of evidence, conducting random audits) may also help in managing this tension.

Expand the timeline for identification and support of at-risk students. Officials should consider identifying at-risk students and providing them support early in their school careers and paying careful attention to students in the years after promotion and retention decisions have been made.

Focus on multiple facets of student interventions and support. Officials should consider several facets of these programs and services that appear to be important, including encouraging participation among eligible students; encouraging student attendance; recruiting qualified teachers and instructors; establishing enough time in extended-learning programs for instructors to adequately cover the material and for students to absorb and retain it, while not exceeding the attention spans and patience of students; providing age-appropriate alternatives for students retained multiple times; and ensuring adequate support for mobile students.

Link the policy to a broader set of supports for at-risk students. Several policies reviewed were embedded in a larger reform agenda and set of policies that not only considered an expanded timeline but also a broader set of supports necessary for improving teaching and learning for low-performing students. If policymakers are serious about ending social promotion and the need for retention altogether, then it may be worth coupling such policies with efforts that systematically address the classroom and school environment, time available for instruction, the quality of instruction, and other conditions affecting learning for at-risk students.

Provide adequate professional development for teachers. Another area in which many respondents saw a great need was the support provided to teachers. Officials should assess

whether teachers to whom at-risk and retained students are assigned understand these students' needs and how to address them, and they should provide professional development opportunities that familiarize teachers with effective instructional techniques for at-risk students. Officials also should consider providing professional development opportunities focused on other aspects of the promotion policy, such as how to conduct classroom assessments in ways that are aligned with standards and consistent across the district or state.

Identify and share best practices. Educators are eager for guidance on how to support students struggling to meet grade-level standards, particularly those who are multiple holdovers, and how to best design effective after-school or summer programs. The funding, policy, and research communities could assist in these efforts by sponsoring more research to identify best practices in these areas. Once identified, officials should help disseminate best practices throughout the locale and consider peer-to-peer means of spreading ideas.

Invest in monitoring implementation and effects. Officials should consider allocating resources to collect data on implementation and to track effects on students. In addition, it is important to understand the nature of appeals processes and the basis for decisions occurring in this process, the development and use of individualized learning plans, and the support provided to students once retained. Officials may want to consider conducting random audits of these activities or, if resources permit, systematically tracking data on these processes.

Provide adequate funding. If policymakers are serious about ending social promotion and the need for retention, they need to understand up front the costs of implementing and sustaining these policies and programs. They must consider and plan for the resources needed to identify and provide comprehensive support services for at-risk and retained students, to recruit staff and provide them with adequate professional development, to conduct ongoing parent outreach and communication, and to monitor the implementation and effects of the policy and programs.

The NYC policy incorporates many of the design elements and lessons regarding implementation outlined here (see McCombs, Kirby, and Mariano, 2009, for a detailed description). For example, the policy emphasizes early identification of at-risk students and provides them with additional instructional services, both in school and out of school; offers several opportunities and means for students to meet the promotion standards; was rolled out in stages; and emphasizes open communication with parents, including sending out letters and materials 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 professional development and supportive services was provided. Other states and districts considering the adoption of promotion policies would do well to consider the key components of the NYC policy.

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ABBREVIATIONS

AYP	adequate yearly progress
ELA	English language arts
ESL	English as a second language
GPA	grade point average
GPC	Grade Placement Committee
IEP	Individualized Education Program
ITBS	Iowa Tests of Basic Skills
NCLB	No Child Left Behind Act
NYC	New York City
NYCDOE	New York City Department of Education
RTI	Response to Intervention

I. INTRODUCTION

In an era emphasizing educational standards and accountability, many states and districts are moving toward test-based requirements for promotion at key transitional points in students' schooling careers, thus ending the practice of "social promotion"—promoting students without regard for how much they have learned. The U.S. Department of Education (1999) defined social promotion as "the practice of allowing students who have failed to meet performance standards and academic requirements to pass on to the next grade with their peers instead of completing or satisfying the requirements" (p. 5). Opponents of social promotion argue that such practice creates many problems: It can frustrate unprepared but promoted students by placing them in grades in which they are not ready for the work; it sends the message to all students that they can get by without working hard, adversely affecting student motivation and work effort; it forces teachers to deal with underprepared students while trying to teach those ready to learn; it gives parents a false sense of their children's progress; it leads employers to conclude that diplomas are meaningless; and it "dumps" poorly educated students into a society in which they are not prepared to perform (Hartke, 1999; Thompson and Cunningham, 2000).

Retention, in contrast, is a practice that holds back or retains students who have failing grades or who fail to meet the promotion criteria, which are often linked to standardized assessments. The rationale is that repetition of the grade will give students an additional year to master the academic content they failed to master the previous year and that, "by catching up on prerequisite skills, students should be less at risk for failure when they go on to the next grade" (Shepard and Smith, 1990, p. 84). Researchers studying Chicago Public Schools—a district that implemented grade retention policies in 1996—describe the underlying theory of action of such policies as follows:

[B]y setting standards for performance and using the threat of retention, students would work harder, their parents would pay more attention to their education, their teachers would focus on students at risk of retention and students would be required to demonstrate mastery of basic skills before progressing to the next grade. The administration provided substantial resources to schools through an after school program and summer program, Summer Bridge, that gave students at risk of retention extra support and a second chance to pass the test. Presumably, then, much of the effects of high-stakes testing would take place before the retention decision, when students are working harder and getting more support in raising their skills to meet the promotional requirements. (Nagaoka and Roderick, 2004, p. 8)

Given that many states and districts are adopting such policies, and given that such policies have important consequences for the most disadvantaged children, it is important to understand how best to design and implement a comprehensive approach to ending social promotion—one that would ensure that the objective of helping all students meet academic expectations and perform to high standards is met.

PURPOSE OF THIS REPORT

In 2004, the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) implemented a new promotion and retention policy for 3rd-grade students in New York City (NYC) public schools. The policy was extended to grade 5 in 2005 and to grade 7 in 2006. NYCDOE asked the RAND Corporation to conduct an independent longitudinal evaluation of the 5th-grade social promotion policy, with a follow-up of outcomes for 3rd-grade students. This four-year study—conducted between March 2006 and August 2009—examined (1) policy implementation, 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 and desired outcomes.

To set the NYC promotion policy in the context of what other states and districts are doing in the area of promotion and retention and to distill lessons learned from their experience with policy design and implementation, we undertook several tasks at the start of the project in the summer of 2006. We reviewed the literature on the implementation of promotion policies; searched state and district Web sites to gather information on their promotion policies; conducted semistructured interviews with state and district officials from a sample of six states and six districts, and analyzed the interview data.

As discussed in the next section, the literature on promotion policy implementation is sparse. Most of this literature tended to address more generally the elements of a successful promotion policy, often using exemplars rather than generalizable and rigorous research. The research reported here is also primarily descriptive. Our purpose was to situate the NYCDOE policy in a broader context and to distill lessons learned about implementation from the experiences of states and districts undertaking similar policies.

The results of the 2006 interviews and analysis were reported in an earlier working paper (Marsh et al., 2006). In 2008, we expanded our sample to six states and 12 districts to gain additional insights into the challenges and successes of sites that were now farther along in their implementation as well as to add some new locales that might offer useful and interesting information regarding policy implementation. During September–November 2008, we conducted a second set of interviews with many of the individuals we interviewed in 2006 as well as a handful

of new respondents to further examine how well key design features had been implemented over time. This report builds on the earlier working paper and synthesizes findings from both sets of interviews to describe what other states and districts are doing, their successes and challenges, and the lessons they have learned about designing, implementing, and sustaining promotion policies.

To set the context for this report, we first present some overview findings from the review of grade retention and policy implementation.

WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT THE EFFECTS OF GRADE RETENTION AND PROMOTION POLICY DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION¹

As part of a larger evaluation of the NYCDOE 5th-grade promotion policy, we conducted a systematic search of the literature on grade retention and implementation to identify relevant studies published since 1980. Three selection criteria were used for inclusion: relevance, methodological rigor, and time of publication. The study had to be either empirical in nature, using well-established statistical methods, or a systematic and rigorous review of past research. Studies based mainly on simple, descriptive statistics were excluded. Only studies published between 1980 and 2008 were included in the review.

Effect of Grade Retention on Proximal and Future Outcomes

The converging evidence indicates that grade retention *alone* is not an effective intervention strategy for improving academic and longer-term life outcomes. Retention appears to close the achievement gap between retained and promoted students during the retention year and, sometimes, for one to two years following retention (see, for example, the four studies of Florida's promotion policy conducted by Greene and Winters, 2004, 2006, 2007, 2009). However, these gains are typically short-lived and tend to fade in subsequent years (Alexander, Entwisle and Dauber, 2003; Baenen, 1988; Jacob and Legfren, 2002; Jimerson et al., 1997; Jimerson, 2001; Karweit, 1999; Lorence and Dworkin, 2006; Lorence et al., 2002; Mantzicopoulos and Morrison, 1992; Nagaoka and Roderick, 2004; Peterson, DeGracie, and Ayabe, 1987; Roderick and Nagaoka, 2005). Several studies reported that academic gains found in the short term among retained students disappeared several years later and retained students eventually fell behind again

¹ This section draws on a technical report that is one of three reports documenting the RAND evaluation of the NYCDOE promotion policy. The report offers a comprehensive and rigorous review of the literature on grade retention and its effects on students. See Xia and Kirby (2009).

(Baenen, 1988; Mantzicopoulos and Morrison, 1992; Nagaoka and Roderick, 2004; Peterson, DeGracie, and Ayabe, 1987; Roderick and Nagaoka, 2005).

Furthermore, although studies on student motivation and attitudes toward school among retained students have been largely inconclusive, two meta-analyses reported that retained students scored lower than promoted students on measures of social, emotional, and behavioral adjustment (Holmes and Matthews, 1984; Jimerson, 2001).

Effect of Supportive Interventions on Student Achievement

While grade retention essentially requires students to repeat a grade, the experiences of students who are retained or at risk of being retained can differ in important ways, depending on whether and how additional programs are designed to support struggling students. Examples of supportive programs include early identification of at-risk students, individualized education plans, small-group instruction, after-school programs, summer school, and continuous evaluation of student performance. We found very few studies that evaluated the effects of the supportive programs directly, especially in a rigorous manner. Only four studies examined the effects of summer school on student achievement, as discussed next.

Three empirical studies examined the effects of summer school on academic achievement in districts that have adopted a test-based promotion policy, and a meta-analysis reviewed 93 studies of the effects of summer school. All four papers reported increases in student achievement as a result of attending summer school.

Jacob and Lefgren (2002) attempted to disentangle the effects of retention from summer school attendance and reported mixed findings. Retention appeared to increase the short-term performance of retained students in the 3rd grade but had no impact on mathematics and a negative effect on reading for those in the 6th grade.² They found “that summer school increased academic achievement in reading and mathematics and that these positive effects remain substantial at least two years following the completion of the program” (Jacob and Lefgren, 2002, p. 3). When the effects of summer school and retention were combined, the authors reported academic benefits to third graders and zero effects to 6th graders. The authors hypothesized that the zero net effects for 6th graders mask a small positive summer school effect and a negative retention effect.

² The authors argued that the negative effects on reading among the 6th graders may be due to differential test incentives faced by retained and promoted students.

A second study evaluated Chicago's summer school program, Summer Bridge, mandated for at-risk and retained students, and concluded that students in Summer Bridge, especially those in the 6th and 8th grades, experienced significant increases in their test scores over the summer (Roderick, Engel, et al., 2003). However, no evidence was found that "Summer Bridge affected school year learning rates nor did it address the fact that participating students continued to show low performance" during the school year (Roderick, Engel, et al., 2003, p. 3).

Matsudaira (2008) examined the effects summer school in another large, urban school district. He found a small average positive effect of summer school on both mathematics and reading achievement the following year. However, the overall estimates masked differences between 5th graders and 3rd graders in achievement in the two subjects. For example, he estimated an effect of 0.24 standard deviations for 5th graders mandated to summer school for mathematics, compared to 0.13 standard deviations for 3rd graders. The results were reversed for those mandated to summer school for reading. Here, the effect was larger for 3rd graders than for 5th graders (0.20 versus 0.10 standard deviations).

Cooper et al. (2000) conducted meta-analyses of 93 evaluations of summer school programs and found "a positive impact on the knowledge and skills of participants" (p. v). The meta-analyses included summer school programs focusing on a variety of goals, including remedial interventions and accelerated learning. Although all students appeared to benefit from attending summer school, students from middle-class households showed larger positive effects than students from disadvantaged households. In terms of remedial summer programs, results indicate that students in the earliest grades and in secondary school benefited most. Moreover, remedial programs appeared to "have more positive effects on mathematics than on reading" (p. v) and had larger effects when programs were relatively small and instructions were individualized.

Given the enormous resources being spent on support services and the equally enormous potentially adverse consequences to students who are at risk of being retained, it is important to understand how to design and implement promotion policies to maximize the benefits to at-risk students.

ORGANIZATION OF THIS REPORT

The remainder of this report is divided into six chapters. Chapter Two presents a brief overview of NYC's promotion policy. Chapter Three explains our sample selection and methodology. Chapter Four presents information about the policies in the states and districts in our sample. Chapter Five discusses respondents' opinions about challenges and successes in the design and implementation of their policies. Chapter Six presents conclusions.

2. A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF NYC'S PROMOTION POLICY

New York City, under the leadership of Mayor Bloomberg and Chancellor Klein, launched an ambitious new reform initiative, Children First, in 2002 "to create a system of outstanding schools where effective teaching and learning is a reality for every teacher and child" (NYCDOE, undated[a]). To make the vision a reality, NYCDOE undertook a host of reforms, from radically reorganizing the district's management structure to instituting a new systemwide approach to reading, writing, and mathematics instruction, reinforced with annual testing in grades 3 through 8.

New York State established cut scores for the state assessment and created four performance levels:

- 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.

Performance at or above Level 3 is considered "proficient" under the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). In response to the requirements of NCLB, New York State began administering state assessments in grades 3 through 8 in English language arts (ELA) and mathematics in 2006. Each year, the ELA assessments are administered in January, and the mathematics assessments are administered in March (New York State Testing Program, 2005).

As part of Children First, NYCDOE implemented a new promotion and retention policy for students in grades 3, 5, and 7. General education students in these grades are required to score at or above performance Level 2 on the mathematics and ELA assessments or demonstrate Level 2 performance through a portfolio review in order to be promoted.

CRITERIA FOR PROMOTION

The 5th-grade promotion policy, the focus of this study, is not based on a single criterion; students may demonstrate basic proficiency in ELA and in mathematics either through their performance on standardized tests administered during the school year or in August or through a review of a portfolio of their work.

As noted, to be promoted, 5th-grade students must achieve Level 2 or higher on both the ELA and the mathematics standardized tests. Students who do not meet the promotion criteria in the spring are encouraged to attend Summer Success Academy and retake the test in August.

There is an automatic appeals process for students who do not meet the promotion criteria through the standardized assessments. The work of all students who score at Level 1 in ELA, mathematics, or both is collected in a portfolio by their teachers using standard criteria. Principals then submit evidence of student work to their local instructional superintendent or community superintendent who is responsible for making the final promotion decision. Students' work is reviewed in June and again in August for those who still do not achieve Level 2 performance after the administration of the summer assessments.

All 5th-grade students are held to the new promotion policy with two exceptions: (1) promotion decisions for students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) are based on the promotion criteria specified in their IEP, and (2) English-language learners enrolled in an English-language school system for less than two years are not held to promotion standards.¹

KEY COMPONENTS

The new 5th-grade policy places considerable emphasis on identifying at-risk students early, providing them with additional instructional time, and continuously monitoring their progress.

Early Identification. Students who might be at risk of being retained are identified through prior-year test results, in-class assessments, and teacher/principal recommendations, and their parents or guardians are informed of their children's status.

Support Services. Students who have been identified as in need of services are to receive additional instructional support in school, including differentiated instruction in the classroom and other intervention services targeting specific student areas of difficulty with small-group instruction. In addition to receiving instructional support in school, schools may offer a variety of out-of-school support services, including Saturday school. In 2005–2006 and 2006–2007, NYC directly

¹ Such students enrolled in an English-language school system for more than two years and less than three years must make satisfactory progress based on a comprehensive assessment. They must score at level 2 on the mathematics assessments and/or have student work that shows satisfactory progress in English as a second language (ESL) development and/or meet NYC performance standards in mathematics (taught in the native language and/or using ESL methodologies) and/or 90-percent attendance. English-language learners enrolled in an English-language school system for three years or more are expected to meet the typical 5th-grade promotional standards unless they have prior approval.

supported the Saturday Preparatory Academy, but in 2007–2008, principals decided whether to offer Saturday school sessions to students. Students who scored Level 1 on the mathematics or ELA assessment during the school year are encouraged to enroll in the Summer Success Academy, which offers four hours of additional intensive instruction in mathematics and ELA four days a week for five weeks in the summer.

Ongoing Monitoring. Student progress is to be monitored by Academic Intervention Services teams using pre- and post-assessments in reading, writing, and problem solving; periodic progress reports; and student portfolio assessment. Particular attention is to be given to monitoring students who have already been retained and are at risk of being held over again.

3. SAMPLE SELECTION AND METHODOLOGY

For this report, we identified states and districts with promotion and retention policies and programs in grades K–8 that are similar to those of NYC to see whether their experiences offered useful insights both for NYC and for other states and districts considering such policies. We then collected and analyzed the data in two phases.

First, in 2006, we identified states in which promotion policies were specified at the state level and in which state test results served as primary indicators of performance in high-stakes decisions for student promotion. A review of state promotion and retention policies by the Education Commission of the States (Zinth, 2005) and our own review of state-level promotion policies revealed substantial variation in the nature of state policies. For example, states varied as to whether the promotion policy was defined as a state or local responsibility, as well as whether education officials were required to develop such policies or simply authorized to do so at their discretion.¹ Where the promotion policy was a local responsibility, states varied in the level or nature of criteria prescribed for such policies.² The use of state test results in promotion and retention decisions also varied considerably from state to state. In some cases, state test scores were the primary criterion specified in state-level policies.³ Other states specified the use of district-developed assessments.⁴ Some states authorized the use of state test results in local promotion policies, but may limit their weight in the ultimate decision; in other places, the use of state test results was prohibited.⁵ Finally, states varied in the level of consequences embedded in their promotion policies—in some cases, demonstration of proficiency was required for promotion (a significant consequence and, thus, a “high-stakes” policy), while in other states, students who did

¹ See Table 2 in Zinth (2005).

² State law in California, for example, provides fairly prescriptive guidance to local education agencies for developing their local promotion policies, outlining the grade levels and subjects that must be covered by the policy and specifying requirements for appeals processes and remediation services.

³ The six states in our sample are all of this type.

⁴ Missouri, for example, requires students’ grade-level proficiency to be assessed using district designated methods.

⁵ California and Rhode Island, for example, both allow districts to include state test scores as one criterion, though in neither case can they be the sole criterion; in Rhode Island, the weighting must be less than 10 percent. Wyoming, on the other hand, prohibits the use of state assessment results in promotion decisions.

not demonstrate proficiency could still be promoted so long as they participated in remediation (lower-stakes policy).⁶

In our first round of data collection, we identified 21 states as possible candidates for inclusion in our review: 12 states that the Education Commission of the States report (Zinth, 2005, p. 1) identified as having “promotion gate” policies—defined as “a performance threshold that a student is expected to meet prior to grade promotion”—and nine states that legislatively directed or authorized state officials to develop statewide promotion and retention policies. To complement this sample of 21 states, we sought out districts with relevant promotion policies that had been mentioned in the education literature or media as having or considering promotion policies. We also identified at least one large, urban district in each of the states in our sample (with the exception of Delaware, which had no districts large enough to be included in the sample).

For each state and district identified, we conducted a review of promotion policy documentation available through the state or district Web site. Where this review showed the policy to be relevant (criteria and exceptions are discussed next), we then scheduled telephone interviews with state or district officials in each locale. Further examination of the policy in each place, however, sometimes led us to exclude the locale from consideration. We found, for example, that several locales that had been identified in the Education Commission of the States report as having promotion gate legislation on the books were not implementing those policies in a way that resulted in actual retentions;⁷ in other cases, formal policies had been required legislatively but were still under development.⁸ A handful of states and districts did not respond to our inquiries after multiple attempts and so were excluded for nonresponse.

Our sample of states and districts for the first report (Marsh et al., 2006) included six states and six districts that had policies relevant to NYC’s policy (Table 3.1). Two additional states—Colorado and Oklahoma—turned out not to have formal retention policies but provided useful information about intervention programs and were also included in that analysis.

⁶ The six states in our sample, for example, all require students to demonstrate proficiency, either by passing the state test or through some form of review, before being promoted. In Arkansas, on the other hand, students who do not pass the state test are retained only if they do not participate in remediation.

⁷ State law in Arizona, for example, directs the state board of education to develop competency criteria for promotion of 3rd and 8th graders, but beyond setting state performance standards as required under NCLB, the board has not implemented measures for formal assessment of competency or processes for actual retentions.

⁸ The District of Columbia, for example, is identified in Zinth (2005) but is still in the process of developing a policy.

Table 3.1. State and District Sample

States and Districts Within States	2006 Interviews	2008 Interviews
Delaware	1	1
Florida	1	1
Broward County	—	1
Georgia	1	1
Atlanta	1	—
Gwinnett County	—	1
Louisiana	1	1
East Baton Rouge	—	1
North Carolina	1	1
Wake County	—	1
Texas	1	1
Houston	1	1
Other Districts		
Boston, Massachusetts	—	1
Chicago, Illinois	1	1
Detroit, Michigan	—	1
Long Beach, California	1	1
Milwaukee, Wisconsin	1	1
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania	1	1
Total	12	17

In 2008, we conducted a second round of data collection. We started with the original sample identified in 2006 and added several additional districts that were either located in a state from our original sample or that our research indicated may have had relevant policies (some of which did not respond to our initial request for interviews in 2006). As Table 3.1 illustrates, only one of the original 12 sites did not respond to our request for interviews in 2008, and we added several new districts. In total, we interviewed 17 individuals in 2008: Some were the same individuals from 2006; in other cases, the original respondent was no longer working at the state or district, so we interviewed the replacement or another administrator with oversight of the policy.

The combined sample for both rounds of interviews numbered 18: six states and 12 districts.⁹ Table 3.2 presents descriptive data on these states and districts, including size and demographic information about students.

In 2008, we also reviewed promotion policy documentation available on state and district Web sites (e.g., policy documents, parent guides, evaluations) as well as other relevant studies, newspaper articles, and reports published between 2006 and 2008.

In both rounds of interviews, all respondents were promised anonymity and included top-level administrators with responsibility for overseeing and monitoring some or all aspects of the promotion and retention policies and programs in their state or district. Interviews were guided by a semistructured, open-ended protocol developed for this review and lasted between 45 minutes and one hour.

Protocol questions asked for descriptions of major design features of promotion policies and programs—criteria for promotion, appeals processes and exemptions, processes for identifying at-risk students, types of interventions/support provided to at-risk and retained students, training for staff, and monitoring—as well as perceptions about the implementation of and responses to these policies and programs. The protocol also included questions about what was working well, what challenges the respondents faced, and what lessons they had learned. Protocols for sites included in the 2008 round of interviews were adjusted to include several new questions that probed for changes over time. To verify the accuracy of our descriptions of each locale’s policy, in advance of the 2008 interviews, we developed and sent each respondent a one-page summary of our understanding of the main features of the policy and programs, and, at the start of each interview, we asked him or her to indicate any inaccuracies or changes that had occurred that were not reflected in the document.

The interview protocol topics guided the analysis of data from our interview notes and transcripts, information collected from state and district Web sites, evaluation studies, and other documentation provided to us by respondents. We analyzed all data to develop an accurate description of each locale’s policy—creating detailed tables that specified core dimensions of the policy and support programs. We also analyzed all data relevant to the main topic areas to identify cross-cutting

⁹ As of 2008–2009, Delaware no longer has a mandatory test-based retention policy. We nevertheless include it in this report because its experiences implementing the policy up until the final year were extremely relevant. When referred to throughout this report, findings from Delaware are generally based on the 2006 interview and on the administrator’s retrospective reflections during our 2008 interview.

themes regarding perceived challenges and promising strategies. Although some of the evidence to support these themes came from interview responses to final reflective questions about what was and was not working well with the implementation of the promotion policies and programs, much of the evidence came indirectly from interview responses to more descriptive questions about the nature of the policies and programs (as well as data from other documents).

To protect potentially sensitive or negative information (and the sources of this information), throughout this report, we generally do not link respondents to their particular locale but instead refer to them as state or district officials or respondents. The only exceptions are when the information we report can be found on public Web sites or published documents, or when we highlight particular strategies that are reported to be successful, innovative, and worthy of note—in these cases, we identify the respondent's state or district by name. Given that our analysis generally did not reveal significant differences in the responses of state officials compared with district officials, we report themes using evidence from the combined sample instead of reporting separately by level. Differences between states and districts are noted in the text.

Table 3.2. Sample State and District Demographic Data

State	Total Number of Regular School Districts	Total Pre-K-12 Enrollment	Percent Non-White	Percent Eligible for Free or Reduced-Price Lunch	Percent with IEP	Percent English-Language Learners
Delaware	19	120,937	44.9	36.1	14.7	4.9
Florida	67	2,675,024	50.4	45.8	14.9	8.3
Georgia	180	1,598,461	50.8	49.8	12.4	5.4
Louisiana	68	654,526	48.5	61.2	13.0	1.8
North Carolina	115	1,416,576	43.4	42.6	13.6	5.2
Texas	1,035	4,525,394	63.5	48.2	11.3	15.7
District	Total Number of Schools	Total Pre-K-12 Enrollment	Percent Non-White	Percent Eligible for Free or Reduced-Price Lunch	Percent with IEP	Percent English-Language Learners
Atlanta	103	50,770	91.7	75.5	9.3	2.6
Boston	139	57,349	86.4	73.1	18.8	16.0
Broward County (FL)	285	271,630	66.5	41.5	11.5	9.8
Chicago	633	420,982	91.9	74.2	12.8	Not reported
Detroit	235	129,093	97.4	75.5	14.7	7.7
East Baton Rouge (LA)	97	49,945	83.0	77.2	12.3	3.2
Gwinnett County (GA)	122	144,598	57.4	37.2	12.0	15.4
Houston	312	210,292	91.5	80.2	9.8	27.9
Long Beach	90	93,589	83.1	68.5	8.1	23.6
Milwaukee	235	92,395	83.7	72.4	17.8	6.7
Philadelphia	270	183,836	86.7	71.1	13.3	Not reported
Wake County (NC)	138	120,996	44.7	28.2	14.7	6.3
<i>New York City^a</i>	<i>1,450</i>	<i>1,042,277</i>	<i>86.0</i>	<i>75.0</i>	<i>17.1</i>	<i>13.0</i>

SOURCE: Data from the Common Core of Data, 2005–2006 School Year, National Center for Education Statistics.

^a New York City is included for comparison only. Data come from Broad Prize for Urban Education (2007). The percentage of students with IEPs was calculated from data drawn from NYCDOE (undated[b]).

4. OVERVIEW OF STATE AND DISTRICT PROMOTION AND RETENTION POLICIES AND PROGRAMS

In our sample of states and districts, promotion and retention policies varied along several key dimensions pertaining to the policy design and interventions for at-risk students, although there were a fair number of similarities as well. This chapter presents the main elements of these promotion policies and discusses the factors that might account for the variation in policies across our sample. Supporting tables are presented in the appendix.

DESIGN FEATURES

The design features of the promotion and retention policies of the states and districts in our sample include the grade levels and subject areas covered; the required criteria for promotion; opportunities for retaking required assessments; alternative criteria and opportunities for appeal and review of retention decisions for regular education students; and limitations on the number of times a given student can be retained. See Tables A.1 and A.2 in the appendix for a summary of these features by state and district, respectively.

Grade Level. The states in our sample most often targeted their promotion policies at grades 3, 5 and 8, though not all states had policies for all three grades. Third grade is the first year in which students are required to take the state assessment under NCLB, and it seems to be regarded as an early “checkpoint” for student progress. Grades 5 and 8 are, in most cases, “transition grades,” as they often mark the end of elementary school and middle school, respectively. Promotion policies in these grades are intended to help ensure that students are prepared to make the transition to the next schooling level.

At the district level, many of the locales in our sample included a wider range of grades in their promotion policies than the states did. Philadelphia, Broward County, Wake County, Houston, and Atlanta, for example, include grades 1–8 in their promotion policies, while Long Beach includes grades 1–5. Notably, Houston, Atlanta, and Wake County operate under state-level promotion policies focused on grades 3, 5, and 8, but have chosen to expand their local policies to cover additional grades. Gwinnett and Broward Counties have also expanded their local policies beyond the grade levels required by state policy. In most cases, the criteria for promotion in non–state-mandated grades tend to differ from those applied to state-mandated gateway grades.

Subjects. Promotion policies in 17 of the 18 locales focus on reading/English language arts and mathematics (Florida includes reading only), which is not surprising since these are the two subjects in which all states have been required to develop assessments under NCLB. In some locales, including Delaware, Georgia, and Texas, promotion in the lower grades is dependent on reading only, while mathematics plays a role in promotion decisions for 5th or 8th grades. Several districts, including Boston, Detroit, Milwaukee, Gwinnett County, and Philadelphia, also include science and/or social studies/history in their promotion policies. Chicago recently added writing to its policy for 8th graders to help prepare them for the writing demands in high school.

Main Criteria. The six states in our sample all use student performance on the state assessment as the primary or sole criterion in promotion decisions. At the district level, however, there are some notable differences. First, while the state test plays a large role in promotion policies in most of the districts, some districts utilize local assessments. In Long Beach, only local assessments are used for promotion. The district administrator with whom we spoke told us that Long Beach had opted for its own assessment because it provided greater control over the policy and allowed the district to make changes over time. The assessments were also favored over state tests for providing more timely and useful information to teachers. “Part of the foundational thinking of the early years of a retention policy in Long Beach,” she explained, “was really [to] give teachers something that they feel responsible for and that’s useful to them, even when you’re talking about retaining a student.”

Some districts utilize district tests to supplement in places where state tests are not available or viewed as insufficient. For example, Gwinnett County relies on its own locally developed assessment in math because leaders did not feel that the state test “went far enough in the area of having students generate some original thinking,” explain their reasoning, or use “higher-level thinking skills” (although they rely on state tests for other subjects). Chicago developed local “writing prompt” assessments to serve as indicators for their writing requirements for 8th-grade promotion. In Boston, students must pass at least one test from a menu of tests in mathematics and ELA, including some that are locally developed. In Milwaukee, the state test can help promote students who do not achieve proficiency on classroom assessments (the main criterion), but it cannot be used as the sole basis for retaining students. Given that the test is administered in November and essentially measures previous year’s skills, administrators felt strongly that it should not be used for holding students back. In contrast, Detroit *does* use state test results from early in the school year for promotion and retention decisions.

Promotion criteria in 10 of the 12 districts also include other indicators besides the state or local assessment, such as alternate assessments, passing report card grades, student discipline, and/or

attendance. In some cases, such as Milwaukee, these other indicators are options that can be used to promote a student in place of state assessment results; in other locales, however, the other indicators are additional criteria that must be met along with state or local assessment criteria. Houston, for example, requires students to pass the state test, earn passing course grades, *and* compile an adequate attendance record, while Chicago offers a sliding scale system according to which students must meet one of several possible combinations of criteria for report card grades, test results, and discipline.

Retest. Five states and eight districts offer students the opportunity to retake the state or district assessment if they do not pass on the first try. Two states—North Carolina and Texas—offer students two additional opportunities. These retests are motivated by two different rationales. In some cases, students are given a second chance to ensure that the first score was reliable and did not just reflect a bad testing day for the student. North Carolina, for example, requires a first retest to be offered within 10 days of receipt of students’ scores from the first administration, prior to any remediation efforts. In most cases, however, the retest is offered later in the spring or summer, after students have been provided with remediation and instructional support, and is intended to remeasure their achievement after these additional learning opportunities.

At the district level, retest opportunities depend, in part, on state-level considerations. In Milwaukee, for example, there is no state retest option because Wisconsin does not offer a second administration of the state test (however, in theory, students are given multiple opportunities to pass classroom assessments, which are the primary measures used for promotion). Chicago offers a “retest” on an alternate assessment because Illinois similarly does not provide for a retest on the state assessment.

Appeals, Reviews, Exemptions, and Alternative Criteria. All 18 locales in our sample provide for some type of appeal, review, waiver, or exemption that could result in promotion for students even if they do not meet the main promotion criteria. These alternative criteria vary in a number of ways.

First, policies vary as to whether review of students’ academic record is automatic for all who fail to meet the primary promotion criteria, as in Delaware, or, more commonly, is triggered only by an active appeal from a student’s parents or teacher.

Second, the basis or criteria for appeals and reviews differs significantly across the states and districts. In some places, state or district policy provides strong guidance for such reviews. Florida, for example, specifies six categories of “good-cause exemptions” and requires that students failing to achieve the state testing benchmarks meet criteria in one of these categories in order to be

promoted. Texas provides a detailed manual on the review process and expectations for Grade Placement Committees, suggesting that local school boards adopt standards that include, according to the Texas administrator, “evidence of satisfactory student performance, including grades, portfolios, work samples, level assessments, and individual reading and mathematics diagnostic tests or inventory.” Louisiana provides fairly tight parameters for appeals, with criteria for attendance, grade point average, and other factors that must be met for a student to be promoted. However, several waiver provisions in the policy allow opportunities for students who have not achieved testing standards to be promoted. Delaware allowed districts to determine their own set of “additional indicators” for appeals but these had to be reviewed and approved at the state level. In other locales, however, appeals and reviews are left more open-ended, with few specific criteria that must be met. North Carolina and Georgia, in particular, allow for great local discretion in the appeals/review process, although North Carolina has tried to include more specific guidance for the process in recent years.

The membership of appeal and review committees also varies from place to place. In most cases, the committee includes the student’s teacher(s), principal, and parent(s). Some locales also include a counselor and/or district-level administrator in discussions. Parents are sometimes included as voting members of the committee; in other cases, they are permitted to advocate for their child but not take a role in the final decision. Some states, such as Georgia and Texas, also specify that promotion decisions require unanimous consent among committee members. A few states and districts, however, depart from this general model in interesting ways. North Carolina, for example, requires representation on the committee in the form of educators from another school in the same district, which is intended to provide greater objectivity to the discussions. Chicago uses retired district principals and other central office administrators to oversee the process. Atlanta places on the appeals committee representatives from the middle school or high school to which students in transition grades would be advancing, providing the receiving school an opportunity for a “black ball,” or negative vote against promotion. The district administrator noted that this provision was intended to prevent committees from simply passing unprepared students to another school to handle. It is also worth noting that, in many locales, the IEP team is often responsible for appeals for students with disabilities.

The level of authority of the review committee’s decision varies as well. While the committee is the ultimate arbiter of promotion and retention in most locales, in North Carolina, the committee’s decision is simply a recommendation to the school principal, who under state law has final authority.

Finally, many promotion policies include various waiver and exemption clauses. Typically, these exceptions include considerations for English language learners and students with special

circumstances (e.g., family tragedy, health problems). Others provide alternative means for promoting students who have not met the primary criteria. For example, in Louisiana, an 8th-grade waiver allows students who have achieved Level 2 on both the math and reading tests (the policy requires Level 3 on at least one), attended summer school, and taken the summer retest to be promoted. The state administrator explained that the waiver came about in response to some concerns that the state standard for 8th grade may have been unnecessarily restrictive and that retention in 8th grade represented a much more significant action—preventing a student from moving to another campus—than what such retention represented in 4th grade. Administrators also conducted research that found that students who scored at Level 2 on both subjects in 8th grade “had a pretty good chance of success in high school.” Leaders in East Baton Rouge made their local requirements more stringent, adding to the state 8th-grade waiver policy a requirement that students not only attend but also pass summer school.

Number of Retentions Allowed per Student. In the interest of keeping students close to their chronological peers and avoiding the potential psychosocial toll of repeated retentions, some locales place limits on the number of times any given student may be retained. Delaware, for example, provided for two retentions over a students’ entire academic career and prohibits a second retention in any particular grade, while Chicago specifies that students may be retained only once in each of three grade-level spans. Louisiana holds students who have already been retained once to a lower standard for promotion than that required of other students. In three states and eight districts, however, no limitations have been specified.

Policy Changes from 2006 to 2008. In the two years between interviews, some states and districts made changes to their promotion policies. The most significant was the repeal of mandated test-based promotion in Delaware. Philadelphia also removed end-of-grade tests in 8th grade. Nevertheless, some sites expanded their policies to include additional grades (e.g., Texas added 8th grade, Long Beach added 2nd and 4th grades) and subjects (e.g., Chicago added writing). Several sites also changed the criteria, in some cases raising the standards for promotion. Long Beach increased the cutoff scores on assessments in certain grades and plans to increase the cutoff scores even further in 2009–2010. Chicago raised expectations for course grades, now requiring students to receive a C or better in the required subjects (previously, a D was sufficient). In Georgia, the criteria did not change, but decisions were based on new math tests that had been revised to align with new state standards (which many view as more rigorous than previous standards). Finally, Houston actually lowered the cutoff scores for the SAT because the test administration had been moved back earlier in the year and thus earlier norms were more appropriate.

IDENTIFICATION AND SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS AT RISK OF RETENTION

How states and districts identify and support students at risk of retention also varied across locales. These differences included criteria for identification, the type of intervention required, specifications regulating the intervention, and the types of follow-up support provided in the following school year.¹ See Tables A.3 and A.4 in the appendix for a summary of this information by state and district, respectively.

Identification of At-Risk Students. Formal identification of students at risk of retention is based solely on standardized assessment results in all six states and six of the districts in our sample, while the other districts include other factors, such as classroom assessments or course grades, in their identification processes. Important differences in the timing of such identification, however, are reflected across the sites. Two locales—Philadelphia and Louisiana—use test scores from the end of the grade prior to the gateway grade (e.g., 2nd-grade test results when 3rd-grade proficiency is required to be promoted to 4th grade) in order to identify at-risk students and support them for the entire gateway year. In most places, however, formal identification of at-risk students does not occur until test scores for the gateway grade are received, which is often in the late spring or early summer. The state administrator in Georgia noted a particularly tight timeline for identification and support of at-risk students, as state test results are not returned until late spring, leaving a very small window to notify parents, enroll students in summer school, and provide summer school instruction before the required retest.

Required Intervention. Summer school is the most common type of intervention used across the sites. Three of the states in our sample—Florida, Georgia, and North Carolina—leave it up to local education agencies to determine the type of intervention they will offer. Delaware required districts to offer summer school for at-risk students, and Texas and Louisiana provide for both summer school and school-year interventions. At the district level, 11 of 12 sites provide summer school for students failing to meet promotion criteria. Promotion policies in Boston, East Baton Rouge, Houston, Milwaukee, and Philadelphia also require schools to provide school-year interventions through after-school programs, pull-out, or other means of instruction.

¹ Most states and districts offer a wide variety of programs aimed at helping struggling students. However, our focus here is on formal identification of and intervention for students at risk of retention as specified in the promotion policies of each site. Although not described here, most policies also require notification (e.g., in letters or on report cards) to parents whose children are at risk of being retained of the various interventions available or required, as well as retesting opportunities (where relevant).

Specifications for Intervention. The states and districts in our sample vary considerably in the specifications for summer school and other interventions. In general, districts are much more prescriptive in their requirements for intervention programs than the states in our sample, though Louisiana’s policy details a number of specific requirements.

The districts in our sample vary by the level of discretion over summer school curriculum. Five districts—Broward County, Chicago, Long Beach, Atlanta, and Milwaukee—require a standardized curriculum for their summer school programs. Houston, Atlanta, Boston, and Philadelphia, on the other hand, emphasize individualized and differentiated instruction tailored to students’ needs and do not provide a standardized curriculum. At the state level, all six sites grant districts discretion to select their own summer school curriculum, although Louisiana provides optional lesson plans for after-school programs.

Some sites specify the number of hours of remediation required or the length of summer school programs. Atlanta, Chicago, Detroit, and Long Beach require summer school programs to last five to six weeks; Gwinnett County and East Baton Rouge both offer three-week summer school; Louisiana requires 40 contact hours for after-school programs and 50 contact hours in summer school; and Philadelphia requires 90 hours of after-school and 90 hours of summer school remediation. In contrast, the state administrator in Georgia noted wide variation in the length and hours of summer school programs in his state, in part a result of issues related to the timing of identification discussed earlier, and in part a result of the state’s long-standing tradition of local control over education. A few districts allow older students to attend portions of these intervention/summer school programs exclusively for the subject(s) they are failing (e.g., Boston and East Baton Rouge allow middle school students failing math to opt out of the summer school hours devoted to reading/ELA). In contrast, most sites require elementary school students to attend all portions of the programs, even if they are deficient only in one area.

Though less common across our sites, student-teacher ratios and teacher qualifications are also specified in some policies. Policies in Texas and Boston specify a ratio of 10 students per teacher in their summer school programs. Chicago specifies substantially larger classes, with 18 students per teacher in its summer school. In Texas, Louisiana, Boston, and Broward County, policies require that teachers in summer school programs be fully certified or highly qualified.

Finally, sites vary in the extent to which they require students to pass a test after receiving interventions in order to be promoted. States like Texas and Florida, for example, require students attending summer school to pass the final administration of the test to be promoted. Similarly, Philadelphia now administers end-of-summer assessments that summer school students must pass for promotion. Boston also requires passage of certain tests at the end of summer school for students in

certain grades. Third-grade summer school students must pass a reading test to be promoted: If they do not pass the math test, they can still be promoted but must receive extra assistance during the school year. In contrast, Detroit requires attendance and passage of the summer school program (based on grades, attendance, and work) to be promoted, while Milwaukee requires its 8th-grade summer school students to attend and complete a project.

Support in the Next School Year. Recognizing that students who have been retained or who have been promoted via appeal/review or exemptions without meeting the formal promotion criteria are in need of ongoing support, all 18 sites include provisions for continuing support in the following school year for such students. Most sites require that students retained and/or promoted on appeal or exemption be provided with an individual plan for the next school year that specifies particular instructional programs and strategies targeted at that student's particular needs, as well as ongoing assessments and other means of monitoring progress. Some sites further specify particular types of follow-on support to be provided to all students, either in addition to or in place of individual plans. For example, Florida requires the assignment of a "high-performing" teacher and at least 90 minutes of daily reading instruction for all students retained under the state promotion policy, while Long Beach requires students who are retained or promoted on appeal to attend after-school remediation programs. Philadelphia's "Next Grade" program similarly continues after-school and summer school programs for students in the year following the gateway grades. In some cases, students retained or promoted to the next grade are placed in separate classrooms—in Atlanta, for example, students promoted to 4th grade on appeal are placed in a transition classroom that features remediation of 3rd-grade objectives as well as accelerated instruction in 4th-grade material. Chicago uses separate "Achievement Academies" for retained 8th graders who are 15 or more years old, in order to keep these students closer to their chronological peers. East Baton Rouge places overage students who have been retained in grade 3 in alternative centers; 8th graders who are two or more years overage are placed in special classes located on high school campuses.

Policy Changes from 2006 to 2008. In the two years between interviews, some states and districts made changes to their identification procedures and support provided to at-risk students. Philadelphia appears to have made the most significant changes. For summer school, administrators no longer use a standardized curriculum, now require students to pass an end-of-summer assessment to be promoted, and have decreased the number of students eligible to attend due to budget cuts. They also decreased the class size requirements for their after-school programs. Long Beach developed new summer school math curricular units for each grade level, targeting areas in which students tend to struggle the most. Chicago also revamped its summer school program for

8th graders, most notably by locating it on high school campuses and providing optional enrichment activities in the afternoons.

ACCOUNTING FOR VARIATION IN POLICIES

In some cases, the policy variation described in this chapter reflects contextual differences. The grades covered by the promotion policy and the provisions for retest administrations of the state assessment, for example, are strongly influenced by details of the state-level testing program in place in each site. State- and district-level cultures and traditions around local versus centralized control of educational issues also play an important role in many places. For example, the variance in the length of summer school programs in Georgia and the ability of school principals to override promotion and retention decisions in North Carolina are both reflective of strong local control contexts in these two states.²

In many other cases, however, the policy variations that we note are based on seemingly well-reasoned but opposing views on a number of important issues surrounding promotion and retention. Differences in the prescriptiveness of criteria for promotion appeals and reviews, for example, reflect differing solutions to a tension between ensuring that the promotion policy is consistently implemented and has “teeth” and allowing for some local discretion to consider students’ individual circumstances. Two additional examples further illustrate that variants in policy design are often quite purposeful and based on thoughtful (though sometimes opposing) rationales regarding important educational issues:

- **Appeals process.** North Carolina’s policy specifies that appeals be handled by a committee of educators from a different school, while in Texas, appeals are handled by a committee of the student’s own teachers and principal. Yet officials from both states provide compelling rationales for their opposing policy designs: The state official with whom we spoke in Texas underscored the importance of placing the decisionmaking process in the hands of those “who really know the kid,” while in North Carolina, the emphasis is on the objectivity of the process. The administrator in Wake County, North Carolina, articulated a similar understanding of the state’s rationale for assembling external appeals committees: “There’s no personal interest or bias in it for the school. ... That external review is sort of a check and balance.”

² Officials in Colorado and Oklahoma cited a history of local control as reasons why their states have not legislated promotion policies and instead grant local boards power over retention.

- **Summer school curriculum.** Representatives from Long Beach and Atlanta offered strong justification for the curriculum of their summer school programs. Long Beach uses a highly prescriptive curriculum for reading (with supplemental material) because it provides teachers with strategies and a strong pacing guide to help them teach to standards; the official with whom we spoke remarked that teachers felt “very effective” as they recognized that they “can have an impact.” In Atlanta, by contrast, there is no standard curriculum— “Not all students get the same thing in summer school.” The focus in this district is on differentiation of instruction and targeting each student’s individual demonstrated deficiencies.

These tensions around consistency of policy implementation versus discretion over decisionmaking, objectivity in reviewing student retention status versus in-depth knowledge of the student, and standardization versus differentiation of curriculum all reflect important considerations in the development of promotion policies. However, our review of the literature has shown that very little research, and almost none of it comparative, has been conducted to evaluate the relative effectiveness of these various components of promotion policies and intervention strategies.

5. PERCEIVED CHALLENGES AND PROMISING STRATEGIES

Interview respondents provided insights that fall into six broad categories of policy design and implementation:

- building and sustaining stakeholder support
- setting criteria for promotion
- identifying at-risk students
- providing high-quality student interventions and support
- building capacity and staffing
- monitoring implementation and outcomes.

We use these six categories as an organizing principle for the remainder of this section. Within each category, we discuss the challenges respondents faced and promising strategies or successes they reported. While none of the findings are new and many are echoed in the more general policy implementation literature, the comments and examples provided by the respondents offer rich insights that may be helpful to state and local school systems considering or currently implementing similar promotion policies.

BUILDING AND SUSTAINING STAKEHOLDER SUPPORT

Several themes emerged with regard to stakeholder support, including the importance of investing in strategies to build stakeholder support and preparing for and gradually phasing in the policy. Respondents also commonly discussed the challenges of parents not understanding and supporting the policy, beliefs, and biases against retention, and pressure to alter and repeal policies.

Investing in Strategies to Build and Sustain Stakeholder Support

In both years, more than half of the respondents identified the importance of building and sustaining educator and parent support for promotion and retention policies, realizing that, without their buy-in, it would become extremely difficult to carry out the policy and retain students. Respondents described an array of strategies to achieve this goal.

Some emphasized the importance of communication, such as disseminating clear explanations of grade-level expectations and the mechanics of the policy, including the criteria, appeals process, and available supports. While many described these strategies as particularly useful for rolling out

a new policy, others stressed their importance for maintaining support over time and communicating policy changes that are made. Some common strategies include the following:

- **Online and hard-copy materials.** Many sites send out brochures at the start of the year to parents of gateway-grade students, and some send the information to parents in the prior grades, to prepare them for the subsequent year. In Houston, administrators send an explanation of the policy along with the first report card to ensure that parents and students understand expectations. The official in Wake County noted that sending annual letters and keeping parents “informed along the way really helps people accept the process.” Some of these materials include “tips” to parents on “how to prepare students for success” (e.g., Texas, Florida). A Milwaukee official reported that the district had produced what he believed to be a highly effective one-page, parent-friendly brochure describing promotion-gate expectations and policies and answering a list of common questions. He believed that this brochure was critical for keeping parents informed and “on our side.” Delaware administrators developed brochures for parents, teachers, and administrators, altering the content slightly for each group. The official explained the importance of mounting a “good communication campaign to make sure that people understand what you’re doing, why you’re doing it, and [that] it isn’t about punishment ... [but] about making sure your child can succeed.” Similarly, the Texas official emphasized the importance of making the promotion policy “transparent” so that everyone understands how decisions are made. According to Florida’s official, publishing the promotion policy and disseminating it to parents made the policy “public” and helped “set it in stone.” Some locales even publish flowcharts illustrating the various decision points and opportunities for intervention (e.g., Atlanta, East Baton Rouge).
- **Public meetings and professional development.** In Long Beach, communication was said to be critical for conveying changes made to the policy in 2008–2009. Central office administrators sent letters to parents and teachers, held parent forums, and spoke at back-to-school nights. According to the North Carolina official, communication is needed not only for new staff and parents but also for veterans to refresh their memory. The administrator urges districts to provide “fluff-ups or rev-ups” for both veteran teachers and the large number of new teachers and principals who join the school systems each year.
- **“Train-the-trainers” dissemination.** Two states, North Carolina and Delaware, employed a “train-the-trainers” model to disseminate information about the policy broadly in a cost-effective way. State officials trained specific regional, district, or school leaders on the provisions of the law and then expected these individuals to share the information with

and serve as “expert” resources for local staff, colleagues, and stakeholders. To roll out the new policy in Boston, administrators provided information to school-based math and literacy specialists who were then asked to communicate the information to their campuses and explain it to teachers.

- **Responding to questions.** When Louisiana first implemented its policy, administrators assigned and trained a separate set of staff members on how to answer telephone calls and explain the policy—freeing up curricular and program staff to perform their instructional duties while maintaining open lines of communication with stakeholders. To date, the state maintains a toll-free number for all questions regarding testing and several full-time employees dedicated to answering questions about testing, remediation, and promotion. Other sites have developed frequently asked questions that are included in brochures or on Web sites (e.g., Wake County).
- **Other strategies.** A Florida official believed that “sticking to your policy” helped build support, “because it tells me that in this aspect, the state of Florida means what they say and says what they mean. We’ve had this promotion policy for a long time. We believe in it.” According to the Texas respondent, other factors perceived to sustain buy-in for the policy include state and economic support (“You’ve got to commit to it not just educationally but sort of morally and economically.”) and demonstration of results (“If they can see that it’s making a difference with their kids ... that’s been key. I think they’ve seen their kids be more successful.”).

According to many officials, early communication and notification were particularly critical to gaining public and educator support. For example, Louisiana reportedly publicized the new policy when it was first developed one year in advance of its enactment. The state used billboards, pamphlets, and letters home to parents to describe the new policy as well as changes made to the policy over time. In other interviews, respondents focused on the importance of communicating early on with parents of students at risk of retention to avoid surprises and to inform them of proactive steps they could take to further support their children’s learning. The Long Beach administrator attributed high levels of participation in summer school to the early notification of parents, who receive paperwork and applications long in advance of the end of the school year.

Finally, a handful of respondents cited stakeholder involvement in policy design as a critical strategy for gaining widespread support for new policies. Officials in Long Beach and Louisiana, for instance, believed that providing opportunities for teacher and parent input into the development of promotion policies helped secure buy-in and “get the word out” about the new expectations and regulations. In Long Beach, district officials convened a teacher council of representatives from

schools that they supervised, which met regularly to discuss concerns and recommendations about the policy as it was rolled out. Council members also provided the impetus for changes made in 2008–2009, when they decided that the former standards for promotion were too low. These teachers gathered additional teacher input on proposed changes and helped draft the new policy and present it to the school board. According to respondents in Long Beach and Louisiana, when stakeholders feel that policymakers have listened to their views, they are more likely to endorse the new policies, and the policy itself gains credibility. In 2008, the official in Long Beach stressed the need to “continue to engage those who are really on the front line of the work in the conversation.” In 2006, the Delaware respondent noted that involving teachers in setting grade-level expectations helped defend the policy against critics:

We’ve been criticized by a variety of different folks that our standards are set too high ... [and] that the state did it. Well, the state didn’t do it. This is what teachers think that all students should be able to know and be able to do by the end of 3rd grade, or 4th grade, or 5th grade, or 6th grade. And then the other thing that we do is, periodically, we bring them back to look at that and say, “Are we still on target?” You need to revisit these policies about every five years.

An official in one district identified a missed opportunity to engage stakeholders in planning for the implementation of the policy. This individual believed that had they obtained parent input on the planned notification process—when notification should occur, how to convey the information—the policy itself would have been clearer to parents and they would have avoided a lot of the misunderstandings that existed early on.

Preparing for and Gradually Phasing in the Policy

Half of the respondents reported that having “the pieces” in place prior to rollout and implementing the policy gradually over time enabled successful implementation of retention policies and programs. Some believed that this gradual phasing-in provided much-needed time to ensure proper understanding and awareness of the policy and that strong planning for all policy components built credibility and support for the policy. Others noted that a gradual rollout provided time to develop proper structures and procedures (e.g., appeals committees, detailed rules) and to motivate educators to focus on students early on and to build up their skills.

Several respondents reported that a slow and careful rollout greatly facilitated the implementation of promotion policies. For example, the Long Beach official spoke proudly about the decision to “ease into” the state’s requirement that districts develop social promotion policies. Unlike other districts that went “whole hog when the state requirement came down” and “fell flat,” he believed the district was very wise to not “bite off more than we could chew.” In the first year, the policy covered 3rd-grade students and performance in the area of reading only. In the following six

years, the district gradually added additional grade levels and mathematics criteria in selected grades, continually examining data on these students and reflecting on the impact of the policy. The district official felt strongly that it was critical to “go slow to go fast” and to be in control so that the district could “pull back or push forward.”

The Texas state official similarly identified the importance of phasing in the policy gradually over time (first in 2003, then 2005, and then 2008). By not expanding the policy to include 5th graders until the first cohort of 3rd graders covered under the policy became 5th graders two years later, the state hoped to give districts time to put all of the “pieces” in place. Similarly, by waiting three additional years to phase in the 8th-grade policy (i.e., once the first cohort of 3rd graders entered 8th grade), the state hoped to give students and schools time to improve and prepare. As discussed later, prior to implementing the policy, the state also provided training to early elementary school teachers on instructional strategies for early readers. According to the state administrator, this support greatly enhanced statewide capacity to prepare students for the new policy. Similarly, Georgia announced its policy two years prior to its enactment in the hopes that educators would begin targeting support to 1st graders who would become the first cohort subject to the 3rd-grade policy.

In a few locales, inattention to these issues reportedly proved to be a considerable barrier to implementation. For example, one district official lamented the decision to enact the policy prior to gaining consistency in the quality of local assessments used in making promotion decisions. “If I can give any bit of advice ... it is to have that in place before they roll out any policy because it is critical,” he warned, noting that the misunderstandings and confusion resulting from implementing the policy prior to putting in place all of the pieces “pretty much killed us. We are still kind of reeling from that four, five years later.” Similarly, another district reported struggling with annual changes to their policy and a lack of time (and resources) to properly plan for these changes.

Lack of Parent Understanding and Support

In some sites, parents posed a challenge to fully implementing the policy. In a few cases, communicating the complexity of the policy to parents was difficult and exacerbated by language barriers. For example, one state official questioned whether parents who did not speak English were aware of their option to appeal retention decisions and, if not, whether this explains why certain subgroups of students were more likely to be retained than others. Many officials simply noted the difficulty of communicating to parents the intricate details of the policy (particularly over time as new rules and regulations are layered on to the existing policy to address questions that inevitably arise) and the intent that the policy be supportive rather than punitive. In fact, when

asked to give advice to others considering the development of promotion policies, many respondents urged administrators to reduce the complexity of the policy. One official advised,

Simplify it. Don't do so many appeals and waivers. Just follow your policy so that it can be understood by all. ... I feel like some kids fall through the cracks because their parents maybe aren't the most vocal and they don't get the waiver or they don't get things they should be getting. ... Don't make the rules so difficult that people can't understand them.

In one locale, the administrator reported facing parent "denial" that their child failed to meet grade-level standards, as well as resistance to the idea of their children missing out on vacation to attend summer school. This push-back worked against administrators' remediation efforts. A newspaper article in Georgia also pointed to many cases across the state in which students did not participate in retesting opportunities, in part because of parent resistance (Vogell and Perry, 2008). The state superintendent explained, "There are just honestly a lot of folks who really push back at high-stakes testing. They say, 'You know what? I'm not going to put my child through that again.'" In another site, the official reported that, due to parent anger over retention decisions, they had to hire a guard for the official overseeing the promotion policy. "You get a lot of traumatized kids and traumatized parents," the official reported. Another official wished they had done more timely outreach to parents when the policy was first instituted, such as visiting community centers.

In Delaware, the state official described one innovative strategy to confront and potentially ease parent resistance. State administrators allowed parents to come into the department of education office to examine their child's test booklet and results. According to the respondent, once parents see what their kids are writing and how they are responding to questions, "it is a whole different story," and parents can no longer deny that their children are not performing at grade level and that they need support. Although this process is very time-consuming for state administrators, the official believed that the effort was worth the "PR benefit." The state received about 500–600 requests a year—primarily from parents of low-performing students—and asked parents to sign a nondisclosure statement to maintain the security of the test.

Beliefs and Attitudes About Retention

In a handful of sites, administrators noted that biases against retention made it difficult to implement the policy. One district administrator explained that the "social stigma" of retention discouraged some administrators from retaining students and may have contributed to the high number of students being promoted via appeals even though they did not meet the test criteria for proficiency (discussed further in a later section). Similarly, an administrator from another district acknowledged that

There are many of us who feel that retention is a really bad intervention for a kid ... it's not an intervention for a kid. We'd rather see a kid assigned to the next grade and immediately start to get ... support. In other words, we want to keep providing extra hours of instruction to the child in an accelerated way until that child functions [at] grade level, which is more important to us than having a child retained two, three, four times. Because all of the research we have looked at says that retention doesn't help and it just puts a child on a fast track to dropping out. And we really want to avoid that.

A state administrator echoed this sentiment: "Schools don't necessarily want to hold them back because, I mean, to be honest, we know what all the research suggests. Being retained twice—that's a really huge indicator for dropout."

Many sites appeared to invest in communication strategies to counteract these beliefs and biases. The Long Beach official, for instance, reported spending years building a common understanding of retention as a "positive intervention." The district's parent guide explains, "The goal of retention/intervention programs is to give each child the optimum chance to attain grade level standards" (Long Beach Unified School District, 2006). After years of communicating to parents that students learn at different rates, and that some students may need more time after school, in the summer, or in a repeated year of the same grade, parents and teachers started reporting back to the district that these efforts were having positive effects. The Texas administrator similarly noted that it was important to convince parents and teachers that the promotion and retention policy was not a punitive measure, but instead a means to help children be successful in school. "You have to make people believe that this is a good thing for kids," the administrator noted, "and it's not just another top-down state deal that doesn't really help kids." Brochures and literature on state and district Web sites also reflect careful attention to the framing of and language used to describe retention policies. For example, the Florida "Read to Learn" brochure for parents emphasizes the positive aspects of retention policies:

This law means, "We are not going to give up on struggling students; we are going to invest in them." This will have a positive effect on our whole state. It will reduce the need for remedial education in middle and high school and may lower dropout rates and juvenile delinquency. It will also help Florida develop the highly skilled workforce needed in a strong economy. ... Retention does not mean that the child has failed. It does not mean that teachers or parents are not working hard enough. It does mean that the child needs more time and help to catch up in reading. (Florida Department of Education, 2008)

Pressure to Revise and Repeal Policies

In some locales in 2008, momentum was building to alter the promotion policy. As noted, Delaware repealed its promotion policy because of a combination of fiscal constraints, waning public support, and the general feeling that NCLB and other related policies were already

providing incentives for improving student achievement. Other sites experienced calls for change. For example, a Texas state legislative committee was seriously considering a proposal to remove mandatory test-based promotion and make it a local district decision. A Texas official interviewed for this study was not surprised by this news, noting that the promotion policy “is one of those policies that has a tendency to swing one way or another over time.” In response to a variety of concerns (e.g., lack of flexibility and local autonomy, special education student needs), a policy advisory group to the state board of education in Louisiana was scheduled to begin a “full-scale” review of the state’s promotion policy starting in 2009. Similarly, an administrator in one district predicted changes in the future, noting that parents of special education students, in particular, had been pushing for revisions to the promotion policy. Another official simply noted that future leadership changes were likely to bring policy adjustments.

Several officials noted that “holding the line” on a promotion policy over a long period of time is a significant challenge and requires “a lot of political will.” As one state administrator explained,

For this to be put into place in the late ‘90s, the observation was that it took a legislature, a governor, a state superintendent, and a state board who were all really in agreement about ... what should be done. And that has remained that way to date. If any one of those parties begins to think a different way, I think having that kind of policy may be more difficult. ... On the political side, it takes a lot of consistent thinking across those different kinds of players to make it happen. ... It’s a tough policy to put in place and maintain. I think it’s been good for us, but you’ve got to have a lot of backbone.

Similarly, another state official explained that, to sustain a policy over time, “you’re going to have to have somebody who is consistently with the initiative, somebody whose top priority it is and continues to be.”

While in some locales, the public pushed for repealing promotion policies, one district leader identified competing pressure on officials to adhere to the policy. He noted that from the public’s perspective, altering retention policies, even slightly, amounted to lowering standards, which made it difficult for administrators to consider changes to the policy: “Every time someone suggests that changes should be made, it gets put out there as lowering standards and, of course, no public official wants to be the one who lowered the standards.”

Finally, many sites reported signs of strong support for sustaining and even expanding the policy. In Long Beach, revisions to the promotion policy—expanding it to more grades and raising cutoff scores—received unanimous board approval in September 2008. Others noted that the policy had the continued support of leaders and the public. According to one state leader, “This policy has been in place long enough that people are just kind of used to it. There’s an expectation.” One district official reported that the board of education intended to raise the bar on promotion

standards in the coming year and that, in advance of these changes, the district planned to revise its summer school program to better prepare students for higher expectations.

SETTING CRITERIA FOR PROMOTION

Another set of themes emerged with regard to setting criteria for promotion decisions, including the challenges of identifying reliable measures of student performance on which to base decisions and providing local discretion and alternative promotion criteria without undermining the policy. Many respondents also discussed ways to managing the “loophole” tension and the importance of providing and aligning incentives for schools and students.

Basing Promotion on Reliable Measures of Student Performance

Several respondents noted the importance of basing promotion on “strong” measures. When advising others, a few officials recommended that the tests on which decisions are made be “worthy of being gate-keeping devices.” One administrator advised, “You need to make sure your test is good. ... At times, you see these huge effects and you just wonder, ... ‘Here I am playing with these kids’ lives and is this a test effect that’s holding them back or is this really honestly them?’” In some cases, however, administrators would have preferred to use state tests because of their reliability and rigor but chose not to because of the timing of administration (discussed further in a later section). Although using external measures—such as scores on a state exam—ensured consistency and perceived objectivity, many respondents also felt that promotion decisions should not be based on a single measure alone or that local indicators—such as teacher grades and local assessment results—provided more useful information to inform interventions and actions throughout the year. Yet, if a state or district relied on local measures of proficiency, it often encountered problems maintaining consistency in the quality of these measures and the definition of proficiency.

For instance, in one district that provides students the option of demonstrating proficiency via classroom assessments, the official reported that teachers have struggled to understand how to develop standards-aligned assessments. “We’ve got teachers that are using all different kinds of assessments for their classroom assessments, some of which are aligned [with standards], some of which are not, and some of which are hit and miss. ... They’re not really knowing if what they’re assessing is what they taught.” The official noted that the district was working hard in 2006 to provide better models and support to teachers to improve consistency. Although some progress was reported in 2008 (e.g., new district-purchased data bank of test questions), the official nonetheless admitted that it remained a “weak point” of the policy and that the quality of assessments still varied across schools. Although teachers were said to be more familiar with understanding “what

proficient is," they were still "struggling with how to measure that." Similarly, in one state that allows each district to select the assessment used to determine which students need to be promoted with an individualized learning plan and interventions, the official reported that one of the biggest challenges is the inconsistency of these assessments. "If you go from one district to another, you might be considered at grade level by one district and not at grade level by another."

In other locales, the source of inconsistency was teacher grades. In fact, in 2006, one district administrator reported widespread problems with teacher grading and voiced a preference for using standardized test results as the criterion for promotion:

I'd rather there be some kind of standardized test at the end of the year because teachers don't always align what they are doing with standards and it worries me a little bit. I sometimes wonder where they got their grade from. And there have always been incidents of grade inflation, where the parents get really floored when the child has been getting As and Bs all year but then takes some kind of standardized test and "oops," they are at below basic. We haven't gotten to that point yet where we're really demanding a lot of documentation from the teachers [describing the basis on which they are promoting students].

He also acknowledged that the district had not adequately prepared or trained teachers on how to instruct and grade in ways that aligned with standards. In 2008, the challenges remained for this district: The official noted that district marking guidelines needed updating to ensure greater consistency in the formula used for grading and weighting the various criteria (e.g., homework, attendance). Similarly, an official in another district reported that they had been unable to monitor the quality and consistency of teacher grades and hoped that the district's new data information system would allow them to do so. New district policy also called on central office staff to more closely monitor classroom instruction and conduct "unannounced classroom visits" to ensure that "instruction at grade level is occurring and that the assignment of student grades for classroom work is consistent with [district] policy." Yet another district official admitted that the district's summer requirements gave teachers and principals a lot of discretion. "It muddies up when it gets there. ... We rely on the teacher's recommendation" based on teacher-made tests, not standardized instruments. The administrator noted that the district is working on developing an end-of-summer assessment to make end-of-summer promotion decisions more objective.

In at least one locale, however, administrators have reportedly worked hard to achieve consistency in the quality of local measures by continually evaluating and recalibrating their instruments every few years. For example, officials in one district compared student results on the state test with district-level test results and found that their "internal benchmark was not high enough." In response, they adjusted the test to make it more rigorous. Similarly, Chicago conducted extensive pilot tests of new writing assessments, trying them out in the 7th grade one year prior to their

official use in 8th grade. The pilot testing included training for teachers on how to score the writing prompts.

Providing Local Discretion and Alternatives Without Undermining the Policy

In about half of our 2006 interviews, officials identified a tension between their desire to provide some local discretion that allows for decisions to be made in the best interest of each student—via appeals, exemptions, and the use of alternative criteria—and the potential risk of allowing too much discretion that serves to undermine the intent of the policy. When asked about these issues in 2008, most agreed that this was still a significant challenge. One district administrator explained,

Sometimes kids don't show what they know on assessments. And so, you run into situations where a principal or a parent and teachers will say, "But, he really does know it, but he hasn't been able to show it on any of the ... assessments that we've given [him] the opportunity to show us on." ... And yet, if we open it up and we make it a more subjective determination, in terms of "Well, I know he can do it or I can show you this, this, this and this," the inconsistencies are so great that I think it would be hard for us to stand by.

Similarly, a state administrator discussed the need for a "commitment to consistency" when making decisions on indicators other than tests:

You have to be deliberate and diligent about the consistency of the decisions that are being made. And ... that occurs at the state level and at the district level. So, somewhere along the line, the state has to have some sort of checks and balance on the districts that are making these decisions. And it's not that you don't trust the districts. Certainly we do. It's that, over time, it's very, it's very easy to succumb to parent pressures or ... in the short term it's sometimes easier to take the easy way out. And so, you have to keep the pressure on ... you've got to follow through, and you've got to collect the data that goes along with them ... to make sure that the policy that you're implementing is implemented as intended.

Several examples from published data help illustrate the tension between providing local discretion and alternatives and ensuring strict promotion standards.

In North Carolina, a long-standing state law gives principals the ultimate right to grade and promote students. As a result, students who fail to meet the promotion standards after the final retest and who are recommended for retention after consideration by a review committee may still be promoted at their principals' discretion. A 2005 report noted that 79 percent of students who failed to meet the gateway criteria were promoted in 2004–2005, and of those, half were at the principal's decision (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction Accountability Services Division, 2005). The state report acknowledged that the state law gives principals "considerable latitude to use his/her personal judgment" (p. 2). A 2007 report stated that the numbers of gateway-grade students promoted who did not meet standards had increased even more over time, from 64 percent in 2001–2002 to 91 percent in 2005–2006 (North Carolina Department of

Public Instruction Accountability Services Division, 2007). The report noted that the number of students retained represents “smaller and smaller percentages of tested students” (p. 5). In 2005–2006, 1.1 percent of tested students failing the promotion standards in grade 3 were retained, 0.3 percent at grade 5, and 0.6 percent in grade 8—compared with 5.2 percent, 2.2 percent, and 2.1 percent, respectively, in 2001–2002. Similar to earlier reports, in 2005–2006, principal decision is cited as the main reason for half of the promotions of students who fail to meet standards.

In other states, reports indicate that decisions by local appeals/review committees are frequently used to promote students who have not met promotion criteria. In Georgia, large numbers of students are promoted via the appeals process. In 2004, 68 percent of 3rd graders who failed the spring and summer administrations of the state test were promoted to the 4th grade (Henry et al., 2005). According to a 2007 in-depth analysis by the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 92 percent of 8th graders statewide who did not pass the mathematics test were promoted (Vogell and Perry, 2008). These statistics varied from district to district: In one district, 97 percent of students who either failed or did not take the rests were promoted; in another, this figure was 61 percent. A Georgia Department of Education (2006) publication indicated that three-quarters of 3rd graders who were promoted despite failing the retest in 2004 were still not meeting grade-level standards the following year.

Similarly, a 2005–2006 report in Texas indicated that 81 percent of 5th graders failing the reading and math test were promoted to the 6th grade (Texas Education Agency, 2007). Reported in different terms, 5.5 percent of promoted 5th graders did not pass the test and were promoted by Grade Placement Committees (GPCs). The numbers were significantly smaller for 3rd grade: Fifty-six percent of students failing reading were promoted to the next grade, and 1.3 percent of all promoted 3rd graders did not pass the test and were promoted via GPC decisions. A newspaper article reported that districts in Texas varied widely in the degree to which they promoted students who failed the test in 2005: In one district, 98.5 percent of 5th graders who failed the tests were promoted, compared with 4.8 percent in another district (Benton, 2006).

Some respondents attributed this tension to a lack of specific criteria for these decisions. For example, one district official acknowledged that they did not have set guidelines on the criteria that principals were expected to apply to appeals and exceptions but simply asked them to rely on their knowledge of the students. Finding a balance is clearly a challenge. If guidelines become too prescriptive, they may undermine the intent of providing local flexibility to base decisions on a more nuanced, personal knowledge about each child. If guidelines are too lenient, officials open up the

possibility that large numbers of students get promoted without solid evidence of being ready to perform at the next grade level.

Several respondents cited a disposition against retention (discussed earlier), especially in the later grades, as a possible explanation for why potential loopholes are being exploited. When asked why schools are using the appeals process to promote students so frequently, one administrator responded, “Anecdotally, I think they say, ‘I need to get this kid out of this school.’ I suspect there is an awful lot of that going on.” The administrator further identified a “disposition against holding students back” in the district, as well as the practical considerations that holding students back becomes an “academic disadvantage” for the school system. According to one newspaper account, a district administrator in one Georgia district that promoted 90 percent of students who did not pass the state test explained that research demonstrates that retention is not beneficial, adding, “We just feel we have a procedure in place to not let them fall through the cracks” (Vogell and Perry, 2008).

Not surprisingly, the incentives to promote via alternative means appear to vary by grade level. The low retention rates reported in the 5th and 8th grades in some sites suggest that incentives are greater in these transition grades to promote students for nonacademic reasons—either from the conviction that students benefit socially from staying with their peers as they move schools or from the simple desire to pass along a potentially difficult or low-performing student to another campus. In contrast, these incentives are not as great in the lower elementary grades, in which educators often feel that students are more likely to benefit from being held back to address their academic deficiencies early or educators simply do not yet have the option to move them to another campus. One district official reported that many more students were retained in the 3rd grade than in the 5th grade, in large part due to educators’ desire to keep 5th-grade students with their chronological peers as they move to a new campus. As another official explained, “It’s a major repercussion for the student to be left behind at that point [when moving to a middle or high school campus], socially and emotionally as well as academically.” Yet another district administrator reported that students were more often promoted via appeal or by the district’s option of “assignment to next grade” at the end of summer school in the 8th grade than in other grades because “no principal wants to retain an eighth grader and have them come back—the little ones they are more okay with.”

In several interviews, the conversation about the challenge of providing flexibility without undermining the policy centered on the notion of consequences. Some respondents noted that, due to a lack of monitoring and substantive repercussions for promoting a student when he or she is

not academically ready to move on, there were few incentives for administrators not to pursue potential loopholes and alternatives to retention. Another explained,

Really cynically here, I think [principals have] found, “Well, you know what, we can deal with this. ... Oh, well there’s a loophole here, we’ll just step through it. We’ll just promote most of them and won’t worry about it because what is the consequence of doing that if they don’t make it?” Because there isn’t one. I mean, I hate to say that, but that’s how it feels, I guess.

In other cases, when asked why more school administrators did not push to promote more of their students via appeals or alternative means, respondents reported that such decisions had important consequences that acted as deterrents, such as potential harm to the student who may continue to struggle in future years and potential harm to the school’s accountability rating. For example, in Texas, the state official noted that he had cautioned districts that it was not worthwhile to promote students when they are not ready. He warned that repeatedly promoting such students would increase the “gulf” between what they know and what they should know to be on grade level and that an underperforming student promoted to the next grade could jeopardize that grade’s and school’s ability to meet the accountability requirements for adequate yearly progress (AYP) and their state’s accountability system.

In sum, several factors may contribute to this challenge of providing local discretion and alternative indicators without weakening the policy. In cases in which this tension was salient, there tended to be a lack of specificity in the policy around what constitutes a proper appeal or reason for overriding the decision to retain, general attitudes against retention, and/or a lack of consequences for promoting a student when they have not achieved grade-level standards or proficiency. As discussed later, in other cases, the countervailing pressures for a school to meet state and federal accountability requirements, the belief that social promotion is harmful to children, the ability to monitor implementation, and/or greater levels of specificity around appeals seemed to help curb the tendency to exploit loopholes.

Strategies to Manage the “Loophole” Tension

Some states and districts are using various strategies to counter the tendency to exploit loopholes to avoid retaining students. For example, Atlanta added the requirement for middle and high school representatives to participate on the appeals committees for 5th and 8th graders as a potential means for curbing this tendency to promote students for nonacademic reasons. Central office leaders had heard about potential coercion occurring in appeals meetings for students who had already been retained once. In elementary schools, staff did not want “a six-foot-tall student” in their school and thus tended to promote regardless of the child’s performance or readiness to move

on to the next grade. Allowing the receiving school an opportunity to offer a “black ball” or negative vote against promotion was intended to counteract these types of decisions. Other locales have created separate instructional programs for “overage students.”

Some sites seemed to manage the tension in ways that provided local discretion without threatening the overall integrity of the social promotion policy. For example, Louisiana provides several alternative routes to promotion, including an appeals process and the use of alternative measures. In 2006, the state official reported that, unlike some other states where “you’re just back to another version of a local decision,” in Louisiana, there are “tight parameters” within which these decisions can be made and there is not a loophole that is “left wide open.” For example, only students whose scores fall within 20 scaled score points of the cutoff for “basic” and who have a 3.0 grade point average in the subject(s) for which the appeal is being considered, have attended summer school, have taken the retest at the end of the summer, have met attendance regulations during the year and the summer, and have the support of the school principal (after reviewing student work samples) and superintendent can be promoted via appeal. The Louisiana official could not recall the exact numbers of students statewide who had been promoted via appeals but estimated that the figure was somewhere between 3 and 7 percent. He attributed these lower rates to the specificity of the requirements. This same respondent reiterated these beliefs in 2008, explaining that waivers and appeals were “a matter of factual information” and that there are built-in guidelines that serve as a “check” to ensure that it is not a “judgmental decision.”

Similarly, in 2006, the administrator in Delaware reported that educators in his state were not taking advantage of any potential loopholes by promoting a lot of students using the “other indicators” provisions of the state law. The state’s tracking system had not detected unusual patterns in any particular district. The administrator believed that the reason for this was because the state “did a lot of work ahead of time and did not implement our policy until we had all of the pieces in place.” By “doing our homework,” he felt they gained the trust of local administrators and teachers who saw the correlation between state test results and classroom grades and who felt that the state was listening to their input and, therefore, had no reason to seek avenues to circumvent the policy. The state’s tracking of promotion decisions and the fact that the state regulated what constituted valid “other indicators” may also account for Delaware’s reported ability to better manage this tension. Looking back on the policy in 2008, this same administrator once again noted the value of having various “checks and balances” in the system—including careful review of the state-approved other indicators, specific regulations around how to promote using these indicators, and monitoring of the process. For example, the state established cut scores for

alternative tests on this state-approved list of other indicators, so that promotion would “not ... be easier in one district than it is in another.”

Other locales attested to similar checks and balances and attempts to manage potential loopholes:

- In Milwaukee, administrators developed “standard guidelines” and a specific portfolio process to help teachers understand what it means to be proficient in reading using classroom assessments as the basis for promotion (their main criteria). Unlike in years past, when teachers could use any assessment, the district was, for the first time in 2008–2009, providing teachers “recommended pieces for scoring along with rubrics and anchor papers” to help them assess students in ELA. Similar development efforts were under way in the area of math.
- In Broward County, administrators defined the portfolio option allowed by state “good-cause exemptions” to promotion. Given that the state did not define this option in much detail, the official explained that teachers had been asking for more guidance. In response, the district contracted with an outside vendor to create graded reading passages to serve as the portfolio assessment.
- The Texas GPC manual provides specific guidelines on how to “review all facts and circumstances” and includes “scenarios” to help school committees identify which students are subject to requirements and which are not (Texas Education Agency, 2008). Suggested standards for review include relying on evidence of “satisfactory student performance” (e.g., grades, portfolios, diagnostic assessment results), gains in student test results over the three testing administrations, and “extenuating circumstances” that may have inhibited student participation in the testing or interventions (p. 24).
- In Long Beach, school-based teams granting appeals must follow a structured process, using a district-developed template that requires them to demonstrate proficiency with specific evidence. The official there acknowledged that the relatively small size of the district also enables central office administrators to monitor the process (e.g., documentation and plans for how to support students promoted via appeals must be approved by the district and are often sent back with requests for more information).
- North Carolina administrators have tried to provide more specific guidance on the review process, including “suggested procedures,” such as example forms for how to demonstrate evidence supporting promotion via portfolio or waiver and guidelines for the review hearings (e.g., examples of “documentation” that should be provided, including student work samples, other test data, and information supplied by parents).

- The official in Wake County noted that, when promoting students who do not meet the main criteria, principals are required to defend their decisions with evidence. Similarly, the official believed that a sense of responsibility to colleagues who may be receiving these promoted students serves as another “check and balance” to the state law allowing principals the final authority over promotion decisions.
- The official in Chicago argued that transparency would ensure the proper balance between providing flexibility to meet the needs of different students (“so that it’s not this universal blind policy that doesn’t account for differences and types of kids”) and opening up possibilities of skirting the intention of the law:

[The alternative criteria] should get built into policies. It shouldn’t be some back-end loophole. It should be [stated] up front ... because the best-laid policies of man often come with unintended consequences. We have a procedure in place to look at exceptional situations on a case-by-case basis. It’s transparent and people know who to go to and what the procedures are, and those procedures are applied universally to those cases so that it’s not, “Who called?” but it’s, “What are the circumstances around it?”

Providing and Aligning Incentives for Schools and Students

A few respondents identified the importance of designing criteria that link to meaningful incentives for educators and students. In some cases, officials identified the importance for *school-level incentives* and the alignment of multiple incentives offered at various levels of the system—particularly alignment with school accountability policies. The official in Texas, for instance, reported that educators in this state may, in fact, be more motivated to intervene and support at-risk students because test and retest results count toward state ratings and AYP determinations under NCLB.¹ Similarly, Georgia officials lobbied for and ultimately amended their plan for NCLB to include retest scores in calculating AYP, which went into effect in 2007–2008. As a result, the official reported, “Those summer school retest scores took on a lot more value,” and schools had greater incentive to “invest time and money and better people into our [summer] programs.” There were even speculations that the “bigger success rate” of students passing the test at the end of summer school could be attributed to this change in policy. Delaware’s accountability system also readjusts school ratings at the end of the summer to include retest results. And, although the plan approved by the federal government did not allow for an adjustment of sanctions using these new

¹ Similar incentives may be missing in certain states and districts, such as NYC, because not all grade levels’ test results currently factor into AYP determinations.

ratings (i.e., schools identified for improvement at the end of the school year are subject to sanctions even if their status changes when ratings are recalculated at the end of summer), the official believed that the change in school rating alone “was important to [teachers and principals]” and “the acknowledgement that ... they truly were helping students grow.”

Other officials also noted that the alignment of NCLB incentives and promotion policies helped advance the goals of ending social promotion. For example, Chicago’s decision to drop the use of the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS) and adopt the state standards-based exam as one of its measures for promotion decisions enhanced overall district efforts. In 2006, the district official explained,

We are starting to feel like a lot of the accountability measures and incentives are lined up from state to school to district. ... In the past, I always felt like you had to have two conversations about what schools needed to do: one for the state test and one for the ITBS. Now it’s one conversation. ... Most people think that’s pretty powerful.

In recent years, Detroit also changed from using results from national norm-referenced tests to the state test as the basis of promotion policies because “it makes more sense to use the data from the test for which your AYP status is determined.” The official in Broward County noted that the state’s pilot of a differentiated accountability system (merging the state’s school grading system with NCLB’s AYP) has pushed that district’s adoption of Response to Intervention (RTI)² and the use of data to identify at-risk students early and tailoring interventions to their specific needs.

However, not every locale reported perfectly aligned policies and incentives. Most notably, one official believed that the state’s class size reduction policy may provide incentives for socially promoting students. Funding for the policy is closely tied to class sizes, and late-in-the-year decisions to retain large numbers of students could have difficult budgetary and pragmatic consequences for schools. Thus, some administrators may opt to promote for these reasons:

Part of the problem for the systems is we have a very tough class size law. And if you go below certain minimums per teacher, you lose funding. If you go above the threshold on the top end, you lose funding. So, they have to stay, in some cases, in a three- or four-student range per class, and that’s really tough to balance. And so, I think you get to August or September ... for most schools, ... they’ve done their budgeting, they’ve done their hiring, they’ve done their teacher placement and resource placement, and now, if we’re going to retain a bunch of kids, we’ve got to move a whole bunch of things around,

² RTI originated as an approach to teaching special education students but is widely used as an approach to identifying and helping all low-performing students. It involves assessing students and providing support in three tiers—tier 1 to all students, tier 2 to groups of students, and tier 3 to individual students.

which is really problematic. Now, I don't know if that's the single reason for some of these kids being promoted, but I suspect that's part of it.

In a few cases, officials identified the threat of retention as an effective *incentive for students*. One district administrator, for example, noted that many students need "that extra kick" or "wake-up call" of being told that they are at risk of being retained and must attend summer school. He believed that without that feeling of "it is now or never," some students may not put forth the effort to become proficient and demonstrate their full potential. In another district, the administrator believed that the policy rightly signaled to teachers, "We hold everybody accountable, meaning that kids are also responsible for their learning [and] that it's not all on teachers." He believed the signal to students was particularly important, telling them, "You're also responsible. You've got to show up. You've got to get good grades, and you've got to perform at a certain level before you move on to the next grade." Yet another district official speculated that the effects of the student incentive are evident when comparing math and reading scores (which count for both school performance and promotion) with science and social studies scores (which count for school performance but not promotion). "Science scores are the worst scores in the district," he observed. "In that sense, I think that push [of student promotion] does result in increased student achievement."

In 2008, the Delaware official wondered how the repeal of the high-stakes promotion policy would affect student achievement results in coming years. Although leaders pushing for the repeal argued that NCLB provided adequate incentives for educators to help improve student performance and that high-stakes promotion policies were no longer needed, this official nevertheless acknowledged that past experience has shown that students sometimes need "a little bit of an extrinsic motivation to perform up to [their] potential" — particularly at the high school level, where students anecdotally have told administrators that "they really didn't try because the test had no meaning, it didn't count for anything." The official acknowledged that it might be possible that the state will witness a decrease in student test scores in 8th grade "once the student accountability has been lifted." She concluded, "That will be an interesting phenomenon to watch."

The Oklahoma state administrator identified another potential student-level incentive in state law requiring 8th graders to pass the state reading and math tests in order to obtain their drivers' license. "Now that's a real incentive," explained the official. "That is a real-life gate keeper." The official reported that student test scores increased significantly the first year after the drivers' license law passed (the first-year students were only required to pass the reading test; in 2005, the state added math to the requirements, but by 2008, it appeared to apply once again only to reading) and noted that even though the state did not allocate funding or initiate programs to

support instruction in the 8th grade, the incentive alone appeared to contribute to improved student performance.

IDENTIFYING AT-RISK STUDENTS

Several themes emerged with regard to identifying students at risk of being retained. While some respondents highlighted the challenges posed by the late timing of their state's release of test results, others identified promising approaches to early identification and intervention and the benefits of using data and data systems to identify and support at-risk students.

Timing of Receipt of Test Results. Some respondents expressed frustration and concern over scheduling challenges resulting from the state's timeline for reporting test results. The late receipt of these results often left a very small window of time for administrators to notify students/parents that the student failed to achieve promotion standards and needed to attend summer school, to execute a thorough appeal or review process, and/or to provide adequate time for interventions for students. For example, in 2006, one district official reported that because they received the results from the second administration of the state test after the school year ended, the district had to enroll in summer school all students who did not meet the standards on the first administration of the test, even though some would later be told they were not required to attend. In addition, the district did not receive the results from the third administration of the test until "well after summer school was over," which provided very little time for administrators and parents to conduct reviews and appeals prior to the start of the new school year. In 2008, this same official acknowledged that timing remained a challenge. Another official reported that state test administration was moved earlier in the school year to ensure that results could be used in local promotion decisions, yet results were still arriving too late in the year to be of use. Moreover, now that the test is administered at the beginning of the school year, this administrator questioned the value of having a measure of students' prior-year grade-level skills and knowledge.

Some respondents reported that the state's timing for reporting test results negatively affected the quality and duration of summer interventions. One state official acknowledged that "the timeline has always been a concern" and has created many problems for districts. Given that district calendars vary considerably, that some districts start their school year early, and that it often takes two weeks for the vendor to send out results from the retest, some districts are left with less than a month for summer school. The state official cited an example of one district that provides all-day summer school for just two weeks. Although students perform well in this district, the official questioned the efficacy of this intervention: "Two weeks? They seem to be doing okay with it, but wow, that's not a lot of time. And you've got to wonder, how much do those kids really retain after

the fact? And for how long?” A district official in this state reiterated the problem, noting that because they receive the retest results just before school starts, district staff often do not have sufficient time to conduct the appeals process. As a result, some students are in school for almost one month before the appeals have been resolved. According to this official, “That is way too long!”

Resolving this scheduling problem, however, was complicated in some places by the competing pressure from teachers to postpone the testing dates to as late as possible in the school year in order to maximize the time they had to teach students the content to be tested or provide the needed interventions to bolster their performance. For example, in one district, teachers urged district leaders not to offer the retest any earlier because they wanted to have adequate time to teach all of the objectives covered on the test. The competing administrative pressures on district administrators—to send off the tests to be scored, to wait for the state to send them back to districts, to send these results to hundreds of schools, and to notify parents about the need for students to attend summer school—created a “problematic” situation for administrators, who would have preferred to administer the test a week earlier.

Finally, one respondent observed that one challenge of implementing a high-stakes promotion policy is that it places “tremendous pressure” on the assessment program and staff to turn around results quickly and accurately. “We always want to be accurate, but any mistake would be really devastating because we might be failing a child who should have been promoted.”

Early Identification and Intervention. Several respondents attributed their success to identifying and supporting students at risk of retention early in the school year and/or in their school careers.³ Some talked about the importance of intervening in the early elementary grades. In Texas, for example, state programs have emphasized interventions and professional development for teachers in the early elementary grades as a means to prepare students prior to the first promotion gate in third grade. In years prior to the enactment of the retention policy, the state paid teachers in grades K–3, one grade per year, to attend summer training on how to teach early

³ Evaluators of Chicago’s promotion and retention policies have similarly recommended that policymakers “focus on earlier identification of learning problems.” Based on data indicating that many students just above or just below the cutoff for promotion started substantially behind the average student in the first grade, and that this achievement gap widened substantially between the first and third grade—before the district’s promotion policy took effect—the researchers conclude that “school systems must invest in developing effective early assessment, instruction, and intervention approaches that identify students who are not moving forward and provide appropriate supports” (Nagaoka and Roderick, 2004, p. 53).

reading.⁴ The state respondent reported in 2006 and 2008 that this “frontloading” greatly enhanced their success because, without improved instruction in the early grades, students would not have attained 3rd-grade promotion benchmarks. The state also provides funding to support students not reading at grade level in the early grades. For example, in Houston, district officials notify parents at the end of 2nd grade if their child has not reached a specific level on reading tests and is at risk of failure on the first administration of the 3rd-grade test. The district then uses state funds to provide summer school for these students prior to entering the 3rd grade. As further commitment to early identification, the district also expanded promotion policies beyond the grades required by the state to include all grades 1–8.

Similarly, after implementing promotion policies in the 3rd grade for one year, Long Beach realized “that it was critical to have [promotion policies] in place earlier.” The next year, the district added 1st grade to the promotion policy.

Based on a very small sample of 10 elementary schools, a 2006 Florida report found that one characteristic of schools that succeeded in improving the achievement of retained 3rd graders was the provision of “earlier and more frequent student assessments,” often starting in kindergarten, to identify student reading deficiencies (Florida Legislature’s Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability, 2006).

In Georgia, the state respondent pointed to early identification as both a facilitator and an outcome of social promotion policies. State officials encourage districts and schools to identify students performing below grade-level standards at the beginning of the school year and provide funding for intervention programs to support these students in grades K–5. The Georgia respondent also noted that the promotion and retention policies themselves have encouraged educators to “look earlier” and support students not only in the year prior to the gateway grade but also in the early elementary grades in order to provide needed interventions.

A few officials, however, admitted that they needed to do a better job at identifying students at risk of being retained earlier in the year—“as opposed to waiting for magic to happen during the ... weeks of the summer,” in the words of one official. Similarly, another official acknowledged that one major problem has been “waiting too long to start working with the children” and reported efforts under way to develop more assessments and tools to help with early identification.

⁴ In later years, the state established summer training in math for upper elementary grade teachers and in 2004–2005, the state changed these summer math and reading “academies” to an electronic format.

Using Data and Data Systems. Several respondents indicated that the use of local, interim assessments facilitated instructional support for students at risk of retention—allowing for early identification of students and their needs, enabling teachers to take actions throughout the year instead of waiting for the end-of-year test results, and allowing educators to monitor progress throughout the year. In Long Beach, local assessments aligned with state exams are the basis of promotion decisions. In 2006, the district official believed that a once-a-year test was not useful for teachers trying to help at-risk students and that more timely local assessment results contribute to teachers’ sense of efficacy because teachers receive information with enough time to address potential problems. The official also noted that by using its own internal measure, the district could continually change and adjust the policy, which also contributed to its reported success.

In other locales, local assessment results were not a formal part of the promotion policies, but officials identified them as important for supporting students, particularly those at risk of retention. For example, in 2006, the Chicago administrator noted that educators greatly appreciated the district’s use of formative, benchmark assessments as tools for monitoring student progress. He explained, “Rather than the end-of-year test to determine whether or not the students are behind and having that as your only information ... we really did need the two- or three-times-a-year feedback throughout the year so that students could make corrections along the way.” Similarly, Texas developed the Texas Primary Reading Intervention—a formative assessment to measure students’ readiness to read in grades K–2—to further bolster the state’s goal of ending social promotion. According to the state official, schools are encouraged to administer the test, and the results help teachers track students and intervene early in their school career. In Broward County, educators were also said to use benchmark assessments to predict how students would perform on state tests and identify interventions. Similarly, when asked what is working well with their promotion policy, the Wake County official responded, “The common assessments and looking at data throughout the year and ... continuing to improve on ways to intervene before the end of the school year ... that’s the thing that’s making the most difference.”

In 2008, officials in Delaware, Detroit, Broward County, East Baton Rouge, and Milwaukee identified data systems as enablers of implementation of their promotion policies. For example, Milwaukee’s data warehouse allows teachers to see information about their students’ performance and history, making them much better able to identify, for example, students who have been retained multiple times. Similarly, Detroit’s data system theoretically allows teachers on the first day of school to identify students’ performance level on the state test and the current grade-level expectations, thereby enabling teachers to tailor instruction and develop interventions suited to

student needs. The official in East Baton Rouge also praised the state’s data system for providing rich performance data and histories on all students, linked to instructional resources.

Although several respondents cited data-driven practices as enablers of promotion policies, two raised cautionary notes. One district official acknowledged that, despite significant progress made by teachers to use local assessment results to identify students who need help and to identify their strengths and weaknesses, the results alone do not “tell them what to do.” According to this official, the district was planning to assist teachers with this next step of identifying how to target interventions and instruction to address student deficits. Another district administrator observed that the “downside” of these data-driven practices—identifying students early for support, testing students to see where they have weaknesses, intervening, and then testing them again—is that “we spend an inordinate amount of time testing and preparing to test, and we put a lot of focus on student performance on the testing instrument.”

PROVIDING STUDENT INTERVENTIONS AND SUPPORT

Respondents identified another set of themes pertaining to the provision of student interventions and support during the school year and summer months. Respondents highlighted a host of challenges to the provision of sustained, consistent, and high-quality support to students at risk of retention and those who had been previously retained. Others cited successful efforts to ensure continuity and concentrated support through summer programs. Several also noted challenges related to student mobility and lack of funding.

Providing Sustained, Consistent, and High-Quality Support

Although most state and district policies explicitly require support for students at risk of being retained—often called “acceleration,” “remediation,” “interventions,” and “differentiation”—administrators commonly struggled with various aspects of implementation.

First, some respondents reported problems maintaining adequate student attendance at after-school and summer programs. For example, one district struggled with attendance at extended-day programs, particularly in the fall and winter months, when it became dark outside early in the afternoon and parents did not want their children out. The official noted that they could not require attendance and that there were no consequences for absenteeism. Another district official noted, “It is one thing to enroll, it’s another to attend.” This district gives all principals rosters of their students eligible for after-school tutoring and encourages principals to ensure that these students attend. The district also works hard to track attendance data because they know that “a lot of kids just need more time on task, so attendance is important.”

Reports in Louisiana identify attendance as a problem, particularly for after-school programs. In fact, the authors of a 2007 study reported that an increasing number of schools have provided remediation exclusively during the day (e.g., remedial instruction scheduled during electives or “extra” work or instruction in the regular classroom) because of the low numbers of students attending after-school programs in past years (Louisiana Department of Education, 2007).⁵ These reports also showed that better attendance during summer programs is associated with more positive student performance outcomes (i.e., test score gains, attaining promotion standards).⁶ In 2006, the Louisiana official reported that research on the state’s summer school programs demonstrated that “the more they come, the more they benefit.” In contrast, however, more hours of remediation did not appear to be linked to higher passing rates for students in school-year remediation programs.⁷

Second, several respondents expressed concerns about ensuring the consistency of quality in these support programs. For example, one official described summer school programs as “all over the place,” varying widely in their duration, from two weeks to seven. A few respondents wanted to be more prescriptive in the requirements for interventions due to the variation in quality they observed but realized that, in an environment valuing local control, this would not be possible. One state official questioned the efficacy of allowing certain schools and districts that are “in trouble” to

⁵ Interestingly, one “area of concern” cited by districts visited by researchers was the fact that remediation programs provided during the day and in regular classrooms “do not seem to be as effective as other strategies” because of “little focus on individual needs and specific feedback for students” (Louisiana Department of Education, 2007, p. 16). So, districts appear to face a catch-22 situation: If they provide remediation after and before school or on weekends, they risk low attendance, yet if they provide it during the day, it may not be as effective as those other options.

⁶ An online attendance-reporting system allowed the state to examine the correlation between student attendance at the state’s summer remediation program and retest results. In 2005, students in the “high-attendance” group—attending more than 65 percent of the remediation hours offered—demonstrated greater improvements on the test from spring to summer (retest) across grades and subjects compared with the “medium-attendance” group—attending 35 to 65 percent of the hours offered (Louisiana Department of Education, 2006). In addition, the percentage of grade 4 and grade 8 students meeting the promotion standard increased when students attended more remediation hours. Researchers found similar results for summer remediation in 2006–2007. Students with higher rates of attendance showed larger scale score improvements in English language arts and mathematics in grades 4 and 8 than students with lower rates of attendance (Louisiana Department of Education, 2007).

⁷ For example, 4th-grade students who received 20–40 hours of remediation performed better on the state test than students who received more than 40 hours (Louisiana Department of Education, 2007). Similarly, 8th graders receiving 30 hours or less of school-year remediation performed better than students who had more than 30 hours. It is worth noting that they were using slightly different measures when looking at school-year remediation (“hours offered by the school”) than at summer school (actual days attended). These measures are likely to be different if students are absent from school or failed to participate for other reasons.

operate summer school programs. Comparing this situation to the rules under NCLB that prohibit districts in need of improvement from providing supplemental educational services, the official asked:

What happens if a school is on the needs-improvement list? We didn't make those kinds of ties, and that is something other states need to consider. Would you want schools in need of improvement to provide remediation for kids who are already failing if they are failing them? If they can't do it in the school year, what makes us think they are going to do it in the summer time?

One state was trying to address potential weaknesses in certain local programs by asking districts in which less than 40 percent of gateway-grade students were meeting promotion standards after attending summer school to develop "improvement plans" that identify the reason for the low pass rates and changes they would make to reconcile these issues in the future.

Third, a few officials reported specific challenges with their after-school programs. Some felt that younger students struggled to sit through these extra hours of instruction. In fact, one district shortened its tutoring program to address this problem but inadvertently created another problem: Instructors reported not being able to accomplish much in such a short period of time. A staff person in this district's research office reported that "you get minimal bang for the buck" with the after-school program because "it is hard to get it going in the afternoon. After you give them a snack and clean up there just isn't a lot of time." He added that there is little evidence that these after-school interventions are aligned with what students are doing during the school day.⁸ (By 2008, the district had made some changes to its tutoring program to allow for greater flexibility to tailor the program to student needs.) The district's 2003–2004 evaluation of its after-school program found minor differences between the academic achievement of students in the program and comparison groups. The evaluators concluded that there was "minimal" or "debatable" practical significance to these results and that "a cost-benefit analysis is warranted to determine if outcomes justify the continued expenses" of the program. Similarly, one state official reported that "there is not strong evidence of success" with the state's after-school tutoring programs, especially when compared with the results of its summer school programs.

Fourth, other administrators identified specific challenges with summer school programs. A few officials reported that the short duration of summer programs made it difficult to fit in a lot of

⁸ Of course, some argue that after-school programs should, in fact, use strategies and curriculum that differ from the regular classroom instruction because it is perhaps the regular classroom instruction that is not working for the at-risk student who could benefit from a new approach.

content, forcing them to be “selective” in what they teach. One respondent noted the challenges of differentiating summer programs to meet the vastly different needs of students. For example, some students are asked to attend due to low test scores, while others may be there as a result of low attendance; some may have a deficiency in reading, while others in math or both. Yet, it is often difficult to tailor summer programs to address those particular needs at a school level because these subgroups of students become relatively small in number. And to then centralize summer programs for these various sets of students pooled from across the district would require transportation that becomes overly complex and expensive, particularly in an urban setting. He concluded, “How do you differentiate when you wind up with lots of different cuts and not too many kids in lots of schools?”

Fifth, one state respondent noted that the biggest challenge facing districts was identifying best practices to use with “challenging” students. The official wanted more research on what works for students who are behind in reading and math and reported that districts in the state were eager for this information and guidance on what to do in their classrooms to support these students. In 2008, several programs or strategies were commonly cited by respondents as promising interventions. A few sites reported using Read 180 in middle schools to help struggling readers (Chicago, Boston). Several other sites are using or piloting RTI to identify students at risk of being retained and customize levels of support (Milwaukee, Broward County, Long Beach). Further, in 2008, some sites reported developing resources to assist with remediation and interventions. For example, Wake County officials were creating “learning and teaching guides” and curriculum documents that included activities targeting remediation. They recognize that teachers do not have time to create those lessons and activities. East Baton Rouge officials reported that the state department of education provides very useful materials and tools for remediation.

Sixth, more than half of all respondents in 2006 and about a third in 2008 reported struggling to know how to support students who are retained. Virtually all of these officials felt strongly that “more of the same does not work”⁹ but admitted to not knowing exactly what supports were necessary. One district official explained, “Retaining a student is a big decision, and you owe that student something different and something to make sure that it was worth the time of being

⁹ The Florida Department of Education explains in its document of “common questions and answers” that students who are retained must receive a “different program” and that “the intent is that the student not repeat the same experiences and environment as he or she experienced in the year that expectations were not met. Examples might include a program with intensive remediation or a different teacher or a different program in a different setting” (Florida Department of Education, undated, p. 2).

retained.” Although most officials urged their districts and schools to implement different strategies during the year in which a student is retained, some reported finding that schools were not “doing everything they should be doing” or that teachers or schools simply did not know which new interventions to try or how to effectively work with multiple ability levels in the same class. Some officials made particular note of the challenges of supporting overage students. One official mentioned the difficulty of “keeping them appropriately engaged in instruction” and addressing some of the discipline problems that arise because “their social and emotional development is not the same as the majority of students in the grade level” and “they’re physically larger, in many cases.”¹⁰

In one district that was seemingly aware of these problems, principals were told that “if they are not planning to do anything dramatically different the next year for that child, there is really no need to retain that child.” Some locales have experimented with various systemwide methods to support retained students—some with more reported success than others. For example, one district tried a nongraded transition program, described by the official as a “pull-out mezzanine program” with a maximum of 11 students per class, a specially trained teacher, and technology-based curricular software. Although students reportedly enjoyed the software programs and many made significant progress in “catching up,” the official noted that some students continued to struggle and that the district faced significant implementation problems, such as maintaining the hardware to support the technology programs and locating teachers comfortable with using technology. The program was later discontinued when the state testing system was initiated and made it no longer possible to declare a student in between grades (i.e., they have to be identified as in either 3rd or 4th grade). Other locales have approached the challenge from a resource perspective, providing additional support to schools with high concentrations of retained students. For example, Chicago provides

¹⁰ A Broward County follow-up study of 2002–2003 3rd graders who had been retained or promoted via “good-cause” exemptions found that these students experienced “more difficulties as they transitioned into middle school”—including lower promotion rates in the 6th grade, high mobility rates, decreased attendance rates and increased levels of unexcused absences and suspensions, and 6th-grade learning gains that were significantly lower than those of regularly promoted students (School Board of Broward County, 2008). Researchers suggest that being overage may have contributed to behavior problems they observed among retained students. They also concluded that “[r]etained students and those promoted with good cause may need even more assistance and additional targeted research-based interventions than what has been provided by instructional and guidance staff, along with a comprehensive system of support that involves parents and the community” (p. 14). A statewide study of 2002–2003 and 2003–2004 3rd-grade students found that “success in subsequent years is mixed” for students scoring at level 1 on the state test and promoted with good-cause exemptions (Florida Legislature’s Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability, 2006). In fact, the subsequent performance of these students was lower than that of retained level 1 students.

schools with high retention rates in 3rd grade with more professional development and centralized resources to support reading and math instruction.¹¹

Another approach to helping retained students that was cited by several respondents was to provide nonacademic, “holistic” supports that address social, emotional, and behavioral problems that may be affecting their success at school—including bullying programs (Milwaukee) and counselors (Broward County) or teams of counselors, social workers, and truancy officers (East Baton Rouge) to meet with students. Georgia employs “graduation coaches” in every middle and high school to “identify kids who are at academic risk and then sit down and help that child and the parents and come up with a plan for that child to be successful.” The hope is that these coaches will meet with 8th graders who fail to be promoted and identify ways for them to succeed the next year. Still other sites have created special programs for overage students. As noted, East Baton Rouge places overage students who have been retained at grade 3 in alternative centers and 8th graders who are two or more years overage in special classes located on high school campuses. By locating these overage 8th graders at high schools with their peers—and providing them with small classes and support from multiple professionals—officials hope to foster greater success. In Houston, a new district charter school was developed for overage students in grades 5 and 6.

Finally, a few officials cited the difficulty of sustaining the progress of promoted students who had received significant interventions and support to achieve grade-level proficiency. One state official reported that, in some schools, the “work is not continued” with those students once they are promoted. He feared that without that continued attention and intervention, these students would once again fall behind. Similarly, another state official advised that any locale looking to implement promotion policies should consider providing support to students in the grades following the gateway grades:

There may be a lesson that we have learned ... if others are looking at, as you say, a particular gateway year, what are you going to put in place before that year and after that year—particularly after that year? I would be hard pressed to think that the iron gate is going to drop down and really you’re going to hold all those kids back. So we’ve had a lot of questions about “What do you want me to do with these kids? What kinds of support do we have past the third grade?”

¹¹ Past evaluations in Chicago noted a lack of structure in the support provided to students in the retained year and considerable local variation in the nature of this support. Evaluators have found that most retained students received few extra supports. They concluded that “the educational experience of retention amounted to going through the policy a second time with the same curricular and instructional experience” (Nagaoka and Roderick, 2004, p. 15). The district’s decision to provide more support and resources to schools with high retention rates appears to be one response to these findings.

According to this official, although principals and teachers frequently urge the state for more support in these grades, the state is unable to provide additional resources. Another state official doubted the sustainability of learning gains made by students as a result of a short summer school experience, noting that students who pass the retest in the summer may still need ongoing support the following year: “How do you help someone pass a test in two or three weeks and expect that to stick?” As noted previously, researchers in Broward County also conclude that students promoted with good-cause exemptions (as well as those who have been retained) may need more assistance over time.

Ensuring Continuity and Concentrated Support Through Summer School Programs

Some respondents reported successfully implementing high-quality, continuous interventions for students. For example, the Louisiana state administrator reported that the state’s summer school program for students at risk of being retained has “given us more bang for the buck” than the after-school tutoring programs. In 2006 and 2008, he reported that their research indicated that students who regularly attended summer school demonstrated greater gains on tests than those attending only tutoring (as discussed in the previous section). The official speculated that, unlike tutoring for one hour per week, the 50 hours of daily instruction for one month of summer school provides more continuity and concentrated support. An evaluation of Georgia’s summer school also indicated that the duration of these programs made a difference in student performance (Henry et al., 2005). Controlling for other individual and program characteristics, summer programs offering more hours of instruction were correlated with greater improvements in student test scores.¹²

In 2006, the Delaware official also noted that summer school was working well in his state. Although in the first few years they faced some resistance from parents either “in denial of what their kids can and can’t do” or adamant that their children have a summer vacation, most parents were now “on board” and satisfied with the program. In 2008, the official acknowledged that they could have done more to reach out to community service providers to strengthen other nonschool summer programs. He explained,

¹² The researchers found that students who received an additional hour of instruction gained, on average, an increase of 0.11 points on their state reading test score from spring to summer (retest), holding other variables (e.g., gender, race/ethnicity, limited English proficiency status, spring test scores) constant. They note, however, that “the wide range in the total number of hours that children participated in programs, from under three hours to over 178 hours[,] may have contributed to this effect” (Henry et al., 2005, p. 31). The evaluation also found that students enrolled in the summer program scored, on average, four points higher than non-enrolled students on the summer reading test and were more likely to pass this test.

It's not only schools that can provide extra services to children in summertime. There's also some excellent, excellent programs that kids are attending in the summer, for the whole summer—probably longer than they are in summer school. Programs like Boys and Girls Club. ... I would think, "Oh golly, what a great mechanism. Why can't we get some certified teachers into some of those programs, helping some of these kids?" ... We have a huge Latino-American community center where a lot of kids spend most of their waking hours in the summertime. You know, why not put some certified people in there and let them provide some tutoring services. ... If they know the standards and they know the curriculum that's being taught, ... give them the access to the data that they need to help the kids that they're serving.

In Milwaukee, the administrator explained that the district-designed summer school program has been very successful and integrates instruction in all disciplines, with an emphasis on math and reading, and requires students to produce a culminating project at the end of the program in order to be promoted. In 2008, the Chicago administrator was particularly enthusiastic about the new summer school program for 8th graders, which was held for the first time on high school campuses and included "team-building" and "exploratory" enrichment activities in addition to the academic morning program. Locating it on high school campuses was intended to motivate students to do their best to be promoted and attend this new school:

It's about saying, "Life isn't over. You're not going to be back at your 8th-grade school. Actually, here's one more reason why you really want to go to summer school. ... This is where you want to be, right? You want to be at this high school. Here's an opportunity to actually see what this is going to be like." And so, we think that it [incentivizes] them to want to do better. That's the theory around it.

Although the district encountered some attendance problems due to scheduling "glitches," it was planning to learn from this first-year experience and improve the program for the future. Finally, the official in Boston was also very proud of that district's summer program and attributed its success to the "intensity" of the program: 16 days, five hours a day, with highly qualified teachers and very small class sizes of 10 students. He believed that this structure allowed students to make connections with teachers in ways that are just not possible during the school year. In the end, 80 percent of students attending on a regular basis passed and were promoted (in some grades, this included passing a test). In some schools, the district has also tried to partner with other city organizations to provide enrichment activities in the afternoons to add to "the richness" of the summer program.

Nevertheless, some respondents were more skeptical about the value of summer programs, particularly for the most challenging students. One local official said that summer school was good for students "on the cusp," but that "it's not the solution to kids who are struggling in reading." Similarly, another local official explained that 10 percent more students pass the test after attending

summer school. He believed, however, that these students were primarily those “on the fence,” who benefited from a brief “shot in the arm.” Still another explained, “We shouldn't think it's going to save the kids in [required number of] days. It supplements the year. ... If they come into this program really low, hopefully they'll get some buoying up, but it's not going to save them from being retained.”

Student Mobility

In a few locations, high mobility among at-risk students made it difficult to provide them with adequate interventions and monitor their progress. Interestingly, this theme was much more prevalent in our 2006 interviews than those in 2008. According to one state official, student mobility is particularly high in the summer—due to families who are migrant workers or due to divorce that causes students to reside in another location for the summer months—which creates challenges for the summer school and retesting provisions of the state law. The state tries to keep track of these students and asks districts to allow out-of-district students to attend their summer programs and be retested. Another state official reported that in 2005–2006, 11,000 students fleeing the aftermath of hurricane Katrina and the multitude of other regular transfers may have contributed to the high numbers of students promoted despite failing to achieve proficiency on the state exam. “Some may feel that it was in their best interest not to be retained,” the official explained. Another state official cited mobility as an obstacle to obtaining accurate data on the effectiveness of state interventions. In highly mobile districts, the official said, the students identified in the fall for interventions are not always the same students who remain in the district in the spring, and the state lacks the capacity to track students as they move to other districts.

Lack of Funding

In both years, many officials noted that limited funding constrained efforts to implement high-quality summer school and other interventions. In some cases, locales were required to provide summer school to students at risk of retention but were not provided with direct funding for such programs. In Georgia, for example, districts were said to be “screaming bloody murder” because they “almost ran out of money” to fund the unexpectedly large number of students who failed the 8th-grade tests and were required to attend summer school in 2008. In response, the state ultimately provided some financial support. In one state, funding for summer school depended on a tobacco tax and other sources of funding that changed from year to year, making it difficult to plan for such programs. One district lacked adequate funding to maintain the state-recommended teacher-student ratio throughout the summer school day. Others noted the high cost of keeping campuses open for summer school and of providing transportation (which is not always covered by the state). Some also questioned whether summer school salaries were adequate enough to attract the “best”

teachers. Still others were forced by budget cuts to offer summer school programs to fewer numbers of students than they had in the past or that they felt could have benefited from the support.

In other interviews, officials lamented an inability to provide extra support during the year for students at risk of being retained due to a lack of resources. For example, one administrator had hoped to provide more tutoring programs, but the district could not afford to do so. As we discuss next, other officials attributed their inability to adequately monitor promotion policies and programs to a lack of funding. One state official also questioned whether districts had adequate funding to scale up promotion policies to all gateway grades. He suspected that many districts had reallocated resources to the newest grade covered by the policy and wondered whether they were still allocating resources to the other grades and what services they were cutting back on to focus on this newest grade level.

In one district, insufficient funding was reported to severely dilute the intended promotion policy. Although the policy called for end-of-grade tests at every grade level as one of the measures used to make promotion decisions, the district did not have enough funding to do so. As designed, the policy also called for formal retesting of students at the end of summer school, but a lack of funding led administrators instead to base final promotion decisions on summer school teachers' judgments about whether the student had met the requirements and demonstrated reason to be promoted. Lack of funding was also cited as a factor contributing to the decision to repeal Delaware's mandatory high-stakes promotion policy. The "urgent" financial situation in the state led to budget cuts and the decision to provide block grants (instead of specific funds earmarked for "extra-time" programs, for example) and greater flexibility to districts with regard to spending. In turn, policymakers felt that it was "prudent to ... relinquish the policy of mandatory summer school."

BUILDING CAPACITY AND STAFFING

Another set of themes identified by respondents related to staff capacity and staffing. Although some officials reported challenges in providing adequate professional development to teachers of at-risk and retained students, other respondents shared innovative ideas about professional development for teachers and administrators. Many respondents, particularly in 2008, cited challenges in staffing remediation programs and gateway grades; however, some described innovative approaches to addressing such challenges.

Providing Teacher Professional Development

Although a few sites—such as Texas (see previous discussion of early identification and intervention in the section "Identifying At-Risk Students")—allocated significant resources to the provision of professional development for teachers in conjunction with their promotion and retention policies,

several others cited a need for better training and support to ensure that teachers knew how to support students at risk of retention. As noted earlier, educators are eager for information on how to effectively support struggling students, particularly retained and overage students. A few respondents strongly asserted that without these professional development opportunities for teachers, it would be difficult to adequately achieve the goals of ending social promotion.

For example, one district official reported that teachers needed more training on how to align instruction and classroom assessments with standards, as well as more information and training on how to support at-risk students. Given that promotion decisions in this district derive in large part from teacher assessments of proficiency, the official noted that many teachers simply did not know how to think in terms of proficiency levels instead of As, Bs, and Cs and have “had a hard time hashing it out.” As discussed earlier, this district official also noted that, although teachers knew how to use data to identify struggling students and their weaknesses, they needed more professional development to learn how to effectively address those weaknesses.

Similarly, according to an official in another district, teachers needed more guidance on how to tailor instruction to individual student needs. The district recently focused its professional development efforts on differentiated instruction in response to feedback it received from teachers who were claiming that it was not their responsibility but the responsibility of specialists to help students at risk of being retained. District leaders believed that formal training was needed to convey the right message that, in fact, regular classroom teachers bore this responsibility and to equip them with the proper skills and knowledge to provide this instruction. Several state officials made a similar observation that teachers need more support to differentiate instruction for retained students, explaining that teachers are generally not trained in how to teach students at multiple levels. One of these individuals suggested that some of the change may need to occur in teacher preparation programs. Another state administrator reported that professional development needs were greatest at the secondary level, where teachers generally were not trained in how to teach reading (a subject area covered by this state’s promotion policy). Others simply noted the importance of investing in teachers. One local official described teachers as “the greatest hope” for improving promotion rates, noting that “the biggest change in practice has to come in the classroom. ... It’s not somebody who magically spreads intervention dust over everybody.” Similarly, another state official explained, “If you’re going to have these promotion requirements, you first of all ... have to train teachers. Right? Instruction has to improve.”

Innovative Ideas for Professional Development. Several officials cited examples of professional development opportunities that they believed assisted teachers and administrators and facilitated the implementation of policies to end social promotion. The Oklahoma state official

reported what he believed to be a successful and cost-effective strategy that is helping to build the instructional capacity of teachers, particularly when faced with limited resources and a geographically dispersed workforce. The Master Teacher Project invites a select group of teachers to the state department of education a few times each year for professional development on reading strategies. The master teachers are paid a stipend to then facilitate monthly “book study” groups with their colleagues around reading instruction. Texas also established master reading and master mathematics teacher certification programs, which provide stipends to master teachers to mentor other teachers on high-needs campuses.

The Long Beach official noted that summer school was a meaningful professional development opportunity for teachers. He described it as “incredible professional development” that provides teachers the opportunity to try out new methods, to work with students in different grade levels, and to interact with teachers from different schools. The curriculum and pacing guides also help teachers understand what is feasible to do in one and a half hours, which they can then use in their practice throughout the regular school year.

In Louisiana, the state sponsors “best-practices” workshops, in which districts that have had success with remediation programs share their experiences and practices with others. The state official believed that these sessions have been well-received, particularly because the delivery of information or sharing came from district educators: “Rather than hearing it from us, they heard it from peers. That went off really well.” Without solicitation, the East Baton Rouge administrator mentioned these state-sponsored workshops, noting that it helped to learn about creative strategies from other districts, because “you don’t want to reinvent the wheel.”

Staffing Remediation Programs and Gateway Grades

In 2008, half of the respondents raised concerns about staffing summer and school-year remediation programs and/or gateway grades (some of these comments were unsolicited and emerged in response to a general questions about challenges in general; others were solicited in response to direct questions about whether staffing posed a challenge). A few officials described the challenges of recruiting teachers to summer programs, noting that some teachers do not want to work in the summer (e.g., they want to spend time with their families). According to several other officials, teacher union seniority rules often constrain schools’ abilities to staff summer programs with what some view as the most qualified teachers. One district complained about the difficulty of finding certified math teachers for summer school. A state administrator noted that districts with lower pay scales had a difficult time attracting summer staff. Another local official explained that teachers in the summer often take a week off in the middle and have a “different kind of sense of fidelity to the program.”

In contrast, two administrators reported that they had a more than adequate supply of teachers for summer school programs. One attributed this to the economic climate; the other believed that young teachers simply had more energy and desire to make money in the summer.

As for staffing during the school year, a few officials mentioned the difficulty of attracting teachers into gateway-grade levels. "Nobody wants to be a [gateway] grade teacher," said one local administrator. "That's a hot potato job. It puts undue amount of stress, the way we have it." He also noted that not only do they have higher turnover in these grades, they often end up with younger teachers because more experienced teachers are not willing to take on these positions. Others simply acknowledged that those positions are "tough jobs" and teachers experience "immense pressure" in those grades. A Florida administrator reported that he rarely heard about problems hiring or retaining teachers in the gateway grades, although he was aware that smaller districts often struggled to assign all retained students to "high-performing" teachers, as required by the policy.

Innovative Practices. Several officials reported implementing innovative practices to address potential staffing challenges and barriers. For example, one district intentionally limited its summer program to four days a week in order to attract teachers who wanted some time off in the summer. The official also felt that teachers were attracted to the program because of the union hourly rate (characterized as "pretty good money") and the opportunity to teach in one's classroom. The district also had a lot of flexibility because the union contract did not cover summer school. "I think it's a huge piece of it," he acknowledged, "because I don't think we'd be doing quite as well if we had to use seniority as the criteria for hiring teachers." Similarly, another district's labor contract stipulated that a teacher could not teach summer school for more than one consecutive year, which removed seniority constraints.

Finally, according to the Delaware official, the state's accountability system was designed to remove disincentives for teachers to seek positions in particular gateway grades. Although no longer applicable to grades 4–8 (it was prior to 2006), the system calculates school performance or proficiency for grade 3 based on a weighted formula that allocates some portion of each student's test results to the school(s) that he or she attended in prior grade levels. Thus, a certain percentage of a 3rd grader's score is attributed to his or her current school and a certain percentage to the school at which he or she attended 2nd, 1st, and kindergarten grades. Prior to 2006, the same was true for grades 4–5 (weighting was 50 percent for the grade 4 school and 50 percent for the grade 5 school) and 6–8 (33 percent for each grade's school). As a result, the Delaware official explained, "the onus was not on grade 3 or grade 5 or grade 8. Everybody shared in the responsibility" for students' test scores.

MONITORING OF IMPLEMENTATION AND OUTCOMES

Finally, respondents commonly cited significant challenges in their ability to monitor the implementation and outcomes of promotion policies and programs.

Inability to Adequately Monitor Implementation and Effects

In 2006, the most common challenge interviewees identified was the difficulty of monitoring the implementation and effects of promotion policies and interventions. In many interviews, respondents raised the issue without solicitation, citing it as one of their most significant areas of concern or as a major barrier to achieving their ultimate goal of ending social promotion and supporting students to achieve grade-level standards. In other interviews, respondents voiced their concerns in response to specific questions about monitoring and evaluation. Regardless, all but three respondents in 2006 reported that their state or district could not adequately oversee and evaluate one or more aspects of the law, such as the extent to which individualized plans were being followed, the basis for appeals decisions, the types of support provided to retained students, and the effectiveness of interventions and support. In 2008, however, the reports were more mixed. While seven officials reported facing difficulty in this area, several others indicated signs of progress.

First, some respondents reported an inability to oversee and understand how some promotion decisions were being made at the local level. One state administrator acknowledged that the state was unable to determine which criteria local school systems used for promoting large percentages of students who had failed the state test and retest:

Is it really based on other indicators? I don't know. It's supposed to be. Is it based on their grades, grade-level performance, or how the teachers feel they are doing? We don't know. That's another big question out there.

Similarly, another state official explained that it is up to districts to monitor local decisions and that they do not have the resources to monitor or ensure that students are promoted "properly." Confirming this, a district official in this state explained, "They leave it up to the district to monitor and a lot of times ... we get people from some districts that are outrageous. So I don't think they've cracked down too much about the policy." Another state administrator acknowledged that, without the ability to monitor, the state does not know, in fact, whether appeals/review committees are meeting or whether principals are "making the call."

Second, many respondents admitted their inability to monitor the implementation of student interventions and individualized plans. One official, for instance, characterized their level of monitoring as "not nearly what it needs to be." State staff are able to visit some low-performing

schools and districts on an ongoing basis throughout the year in order to examine the individualized plans required for students at risk of retention and are able to work with staff on how to tailor instruction and support these students. However, they do not have the capacity to do so with all schools. As a result, the state is not able to track how all schools are using the plans and whether they are providing adequate support to address student weaknesses identified in those plans. Ideally, the administrator would like to have enough resources to be able to dispatch staff to conduct random audits around the state. Another administrator in a large state noted similar challenges in both years he was interviewed. In 2006, he reported, "We haven't done a lot of auditing or monitoring of what kind of individual education plans systems and schools are providing, if they're providing them at all." In 2008, he added that the state had not been able to evaluate the summer programs or collect basic information about them. He believed that it would be interesting, for example, to understand why some summer programs have higher student retest pass rates than others and what they are doing to achieve these results. Another large state noted that it did not have the capacity to monitor certain requirements of interventions, such as the teacher-student ratio for summer programs. In one district, administrators have reportedly struggled to monitor one aspect of their policy that allows parents of students at risk of retention to opt out of the required, district-provided after-school program and receive services elsewhere. According to the respondent, the district has found it challenging to ensure that students/families provide adequate documentation to prove that they had received the equivalent of the required hours of the district program.

Many respondents specifically noted the inability to monitor the supports and services provided in the subsequent year to students who were either retained or were promoted but still demonstrated academic weaknesses. For example, in one district, students promoted or retained on the basis of teacher recommendations alone (i.e., not on the basis of classroom or state assessments) are supposed to be provided with concrete instructional recommendations that the subsequent year's teachers can follow. The administrator noted, however, that the district has not been able to follow up on those recommendations or track what supports are provided to these students. Similarly, one state official acknowledged that the state is not able to audit or monitor the types of plans provided to students who have been promoted via appeals (a requirement of the policy) or whether they receive plans at all. Even the respondent in a state that professed to having a strong individual tracking system to monitor other aspects of the law (e.g., specific criteria used for promoting and retaining individual students) admitted that they were not able to adequately monitor the extent to which districts and schools provided individualized plans to students who were held back or promoted with low test scores. As a result, parents often called the state claiming that their child did not receive a plan or did not receive the services specified in the plan. This official explained, "A

lesson learned would be that if we had to do it again, we would monitor it more closely” — not to be on the “gotcha side,” but to ensure that districts are “doing what they are supposed to be doing.” Other respondents acknowledged that, while they know some schools are not providing retained students adequate interventions to be successful, the district or state does not have the resources to address this problem. Another state respondent cited the top challenge as “watching the multiple retention issue” and being able to better monitor what happens to students who have been retained more than once “because chances are they’re not going to make it past ninth or tenth grade.” He suggested that they needed to “have flags that go up” that ask administrators, “This child’s been retained before, are you sure you want to do this? And what plans are you putting in place to ensure their success?” The official also admitted that the state has not been able to track what services retained students have received or whether they have received the required individualized instruction plans: “I don’t know how many of them really have a plan or what’s entailed in that plan or if that plan is followed. ... We don’t know any of those things, and we should.”

Finally, some respondents cited a limited ability to monitor the effectiveness of interventions and supports. For example, when asked how the district’s intervention and remediation programs were working, one district respondent admitted, “I don’t have a clue as to how it is actually working because we haven’t had time yet to start observing the results of that process.” This was also a particular concern to the official in one state that does not have an explicit retention policy, but does require and provide funding for interventions to ensure that all students can read at grade level by 3rd grade. He noted that the “capacity to monitor success” was their number one challenge. The state provides districts with funding for programs to support early reading during the school year and summer but does not have the data to determine “the efficacy of these purchases.” Aside from the results of criterion-referenced tests given to students at the end of the year and some anecdotal evidence, the state lacks qualitative data to determine how effective the various interventions and supports have been. The administrator deeply regretted that “we have no good way to identify if we’re having an impact.” Similarly, a district official lamented the inability to evaluate “what works and what doesn’t work” with regard to interventions and regretted that they were “not as informed by data as we should be.”

Constraining Factors

Eight respondents in 2006 and four in 2008 attributed their inability to adequately monitor and evaluate their policies and programs to insufficient resources and capacity. Overall, a lack of human and fiscal resources appeared to account for sites’ inability to monitor the implementation and effectiveness of learning plans and interventions. Most respondents reported not having the

funding, staff, or time to read through plans submitted to the central office or state, to visit or audit schools, or to evaluate interventions and programs. One state official advised that any new promotion policy implemented elsewhere should build in funding for evaluation up front: “Without a feedback loop to inform practice and make policy course corrections, they’re asking for trouble.”

For some, limited technology also constrained the ability to adequately monitor the policy and its implementation. According to one district administrator, the district’s “clunky and aging” data system did not allow administrators to capture specific statistics on appeals and promotions. Although schools enter information about grades and attendance, he reported that the system “doesn’t capture all of the interesting things that happen.” In contrast to other sites that were working to improve their student information and data systems and were hopeful that this would enhance monitoring efforts, the administrator in this site did not indicate that improvements in this area were imminent.

Promising Practices. Despite these challenges, in 2008, we learned about some state and district efforts to monitor policy implementation and effects. For example, Wake County was planning to hire an “academic auditor” to visit a random sample of schools and evaluate the fidelity of implementation of many policies, including the promotion policy. According to the district official, they had learned about this audit process from a district in Georgia. As noted, several officials also touted data management systems that can “flag” students who have been retained or promoted via alternative criteria and allow easy identification and follow-up by teachers and administrators. In Milwaukee, administrators conduct Learning Walks of their summer programs and provide feedback to instructors. Some research offices appear to be systematically tracking important information regarding policy implementation—such as attendance at intervention or summer programs (e.g., Philadelphia, Louisiana) or the specific reasons for promoting students who have not passed the tests (e.g., Florida)—and effects (e.g., Broward County).

SUMMARY

Interview respondents identified numerous challenges to and potentially promising strategies for implementing promotion and retention strategies and programs. These key findings fell into six main categories and are summarized in Table 5.1.

Table 5.1. Summary of Perceived Challenges and Promising Strategies

Aspect of Policy Design/Implementation	Perceived Challenges	Promising Strategies
Building and sustaining stakeholder support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of parent understanding and support • Beliefs and attitudes about retention • Pressure to revise and repeal policies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Investing in strategies to build and sustain stakeholder support, including communication efforts, such as brochures • Preparing for and gradually phasing in the policy
Setting criteria for promotion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Basing promotion on reliable measures of student performance • Providing local discretion and alternatives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategies to manage the “loophole” tension • Providing and aligning incentives for schools and students
Identifying at-risk students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Timing of receipt of test results 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early identification and intervention • Use of data and data systems
Providing high-quality student interventions and support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing sustained, consistent, and high-quality support, including summer and after-school programs • Identifying best practices to use with students • Sustaining support after retention and gateway grades • Student mobility • Lack of funding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Additional support for schools with high retention rates • Holistic supports that address social, emotional, and behavioral problems (e.g., graduation coaches) • Continued support through summer school
Building capacity and staffing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing adequate training on aligning instruction and assessments with standards and on differentiating instruction • Staffing remediation programs and gateway grades 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professional development aimed at sharing best practices, experimenting with new methods, having mentors • Creating incentives to attract teachers to staffing positions
Monitoring implementation and outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited ability to adequately monitor implementation and effects • Insufficient resources (funding, technology) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Systematic tracking • Academic auditor • Learning walks

6. CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this report was to examine how states and districts have designed and implemented policies similar to those in NYC to end social promotion in grades K–8 and to identify lessons learned that might inform the work of policymakers and administrators across the nation.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Among our sample of six states and 12 districts, promotion and retention policies varied along several key design dimensions, including the grade levels and subject areas covered, the required criteria for promotion, opportunities for retaking required assessments, alternative criteria and opportunities for appeal and review of retention decisions for regular education students, and limitations on the number of times a given student may be retained. We also found variation across these locales in the nature of interventions and support programs—including criteria for identification, the type of intervention required, specifications regulating the intervention, and the types of follow-up support provided in the following school year. As discussed, the different approaches taken by these locales seemed quite purposeful and included thoughtful rationales. These policies are also best understood within each local context, where state testing regimes under NCLB and norms of local control greatly influence design choices.

Interviews with state and district officials in 2006 and 2008 provided further insights into the design and implementation of policies to end social promotion. Specially, they identified challenges and successes in six broad categories:

- **Stakeholder support.** In both years, some officials cited the difficulty of building parent understanding and confronting preexisting beliefs and attitudes about retention. Many, however, identified successful strategies to communicate and build stakeholder support and roll out policies early with enough time to gain credibility and buy-in. In 2008, several administrators noted the importance of investing in strategies to maintain stakeholder support over time, especially when changes are introduced or leaders face pressures to alter the policy.
- **Criteria for promotion.** In both years, several respondents mentioned challenges pertaining to the use of reliable measures of student performance, and even more cited tensions over providing local discretion and alternatives without undermining policy intent. Others provided examples of promising strategies to manage the tension over potential loopholes and to provide incentives to students and schools.

- **Identifying at-risk students.** In both years, some officials noted that states' timelines for reporting test results made it difficult to identify and support at-risk students, while others provided positive examples of identifying students early, focusing on individual students, and using interim assessment data and data systems to identify and monitor at-risk students.
- **High-quality intervention and support.** Many respondents in both years reported specific challenges in the provision of support to at-risk students—including maintaining student attendance, ensuring consistency of quality, implementing after-school and summer programs, identifying best practices for high-needs students, supporting students who have been retained, and sustaining the progress of at-risk students. A few officials provided examples of what they believed to be effective, high-quality supports for students.
- **Building capacity and staffing.** In both years, several officials noted great difficulty providing adequate professional development to teachers, while a few provided innovative examples of how to build teacher capacity. In 2008, respondents raised concerns about their ability to adequately staff summer and school-year intervention programs and/or gateway grades.
- **Monitoring.** In 2006, all but three respondents reported an inability to adequately monitor the implementation and effects of their social promotion policies and programs. By 2008, the respondents were more mixed, with some reporting progress in monitoring their programs and effects on students.

Finally, a reported lack of funding cut across many of these categories. In both years, at least half of respondents mentioned that insufficient funding affected their state or district's ability to implement high-quality interventions, to adequately monitor policies, to scale up policies to multiple gateway grades, and/or to enact key design features (e.g., develop performance measures, provide retesting opportunities). Given the current state of the economy, this may turn out to be a larger problem in the future.

LESSONS TO CONSIDER

As policymakers and administrators continue to struggle with how to best design and implement policies to ensure that all students achieve at high standards and that no student is promoted before achieving grade-level benchmarks for proficiency, they might consider the experiences of locales described in this report. Readers should keep in mind that the following implications and lessons derive from a limited set of interviews and primarily self-reported data. Further empirical analyses of the various policies and outcomes are needed to assert a more definitive set of policy recommendations. These ideas are not intended to inform the debate about whether retention

“works,” but instead to provide a set of practical insights into implementation for those who have adopted or are considering changes to promotion and retention policies.

Based on our interviews and limited document review, we offer the following set of lessons to consider. These lessons emerge from the six areas of policy design and implementation examined in the previous chapter.

Invest in building support and ongoing communication with parents and educators. To alleviate potential concerns and resistance on the part of parents and educators, officials should invest in communication strategies not only when developing a new promotion policy but also throughout the period of implementation to gain and sustain widespread support. In some locales, parents were viewed as particularly critical and potential obstacles if not properly informed of the intent of the policy, the details of the policy and changes made over time, their responsibilities, and their options (e.g., for appeals). In other locales, officials viewed teachers and administrators as key stakeholders who would not support the policy without the opportunity to provide input into its design. To ensure ongoing communication with and involvement of all key stakeholders during the design and adjustments to the policy over time, officials should consider some of the innovative ideas reported here (e.g., dedicating a phone line and support staff to answer questions, allowing parents to view their child’s exam, teacher council, “fluff-up or rev-up” training for new and veteran staff, train-the-trainer dissemination).

Consider incentives and consequences at all levels. In our interviews, officials often noted the importance of providing proper incentives for students, educators, and schools as a whole. Officials should consider several aspects of this issue, such as (1) how to ensure meaningful incentives for students (e.g., convincing students that promotion matters) and educators (e.g., establishing consequences for individuals or schools that continually make appeals decisions to promote or retain without strong documentation of the reasons or without providing proper interventions), and (2) how to align accountability incentives (e.g., ensuring that indicators for student promotion align with school-level indicators for meeting AYP or state or local ratings). Officials may also want to consider establishing positive incentives (e.g., recognition, rewards) for students, educators, and schools exceeding standards or doing exemplary work.

Anticipate the need to handle requests for exceptions to the policy. The more clearly exceptions—and the grounds for denial of exception requests—can be defined in advance, the more likely all the students for whom they are intended will benefit. Although most officials agreed that flexibility was needed to ensure that promotion decisions are made in the best interest of each student, they also acknowledged the potential for local discretion and various “alternative promotion criteria” to be applied in ways that lead to inconsistencies in decisionmaking and threats

to the fundamental intent of the policy. To avoid the possible exploitation of “loopholes,” officials should clearly define these alternative criteria before the policy is enacted and specify the rules around how they are to be used. Monitoring of these appeals processes or application of exemptions (e.g., tracking how decisions were made, requiring documentation of evidence, conducting random audits) may also help in managing this tension.

Expand the timeline for identification and support of at-risk students. Implicit in the comments of respondents was an understanding that, to realize the goal of ending social promotion, states and districts needed to expand their focus beyond gateway grades and take a more holistic approach to supporting at-risk students. As such, officials should consider identifying at-risk students, providing them support early in their school careers, and paying careful attention to them in the years after promotion and retention decisions have been made—in particular, students who receive significant intervention in order to be promoted and who may continue to struggle in future years without continued support and those who have been retained but who may continue to struggle without different types of interventions and support.

Focus on multiple facets of student interventions and support. As these interviews and the literature indicate, incentives and the threat of retention alone may not achieve the goal of ending social promotion. Although there is no consensus on what type of support or intervention works best for at-risk students, officials should consider several facets of these programs and services that appear to be important, including

- encouraging participation among eligible students (e.g., parent outreach)
- encouraging student attendance (e.g., offering rewards, including activities that appeal to students, such as computer-based curricular activities and extracurricular programs; locating summer programs on the campus of the school to which students hope to be promoted as a way to motivate both attendance and performance)
- recruiting qualified teachers and instructors (e.g., marketing summer school as not only an opportunity to supplement income but also as an effective professional development opportunity, considering ways to make these positions more attractive to highly qualified teachers—such as altering summer school schedules to accommodate teachers’ possible desire to work part time)
- establishing enough time in extended-learning programs for instructors to adequately cover the material and for students to absorb and retain it, while not exceeding the attention-span and patience of students

- providing age-appropriate alternatives for students retained multiple times (e.g., achievement academies in Chicago)
- ensuring adequate support for mobile students (e.g., students who change schools or move out of the district mid-year or during the summer).

Link the policy to a broader set of supports for at-risk students. Several policies reviewed were embedded in a larger reform agenda and set of policies that not only considered an expanded timeline but also broader supports necessary for improving teaching and learning for low-performing students. If policymakers are serious about ending social promotion and the need for retention altogether, then it may be worth coupling such policies with efforts that systematically address the classroom and school environment, time available for instruction, the quality of instruction, and other conditions affecting learning for at-risk students (e.g., socioemotional issues).

Provide adequate professional development for teachers. Another area in which many respondents saw a great need was the support provided to teachers. Officials should first assess whether teachers to whom at-risk and retained students are assigned understand these students' needs and how to address them. Second, officials should develop and provide professional development opportunities that familiarize teachers with effective instructional techniques—strategies that have been used elsewhere or proven to be effective locally. This professional development should not only focus on instruction for at-risk students (e.g., how to “differentiate,” “remediate,” and “accelerate”; how to support students who have been retained or retained multiple times; how to apply information gained from interim assessment results to instruction), but also other aspects of the social promotion policy. For example, in locales that rely on local indicators of proficiency for promotion decisions, such as classroom assessments and grades, administrators may want to consider training staff on how to conduct these in ways that are aligned with standards and consistent across the district or state.

Identify and share best practices. There is a strong reported need for more information and research about what interventions work best for at-risk students. Educators are eager for guidance on how to support students struggling to meet grade-level standards, particularly those who are multiple holdovers. They are also eager for information on how best to design effective interventions (e.g., after-school or summer programs). The funding, policy, and research communities could assist in these efforts by sponsoring more research to identify best practices in these areas. Once identified, officials should help disseminate best practices throughout the locale and consider peer-to-peer means of spreading ideas (e.g., having administrators of “successful” programs present their ideas to colleagues, setting up networks).

Invest in monitoring implementation and effects. As many respondents noted, an inability to monitor key aspects of the policy greatly limited their ability to achieve their goals of ending social promotion. In particular, officials should consider allocating resources to track and become better informed about aspects of the policy with which respondents were least familiar: the nature of appeals processes and the basis for decisions occurring in this process, the development and use of individualized learning plans, and the support provided to students once retained. Officials may want to consider conducting random audits of these activities or, if resources permit, systematically tracking data on these processes (e.g., identifying schools in which students promoted via appeals or reviews continue to fail in future years). Data systems also appear to be potentially beneficial for monitoring purposes.

Provide adequate funding. States and districts may not be able to implement these policies well without adequate investments, which presumably will yield dividends in the future. If policymakers are serious about ending social promotion and the need for retention, they need to understand, prior to enactment, the costs of implementing these policies and programs up front and the costs of sustaining them over time. They must consider and plan for the resources needed to identify and provide comprehensive support services for at-risk and retained students, to conduct ongoing outreach and communication with all stakeholders, to recruit staff and provide them with adequate professional development, and to monitor the implementation and effects of the policy. The NYC policy incorporates many of the design elements and lessons regarding implementation outlined here (see McCombs, Kirby, and Mariano, 2009, for a detailed description). For example, the policy emphasizes early identification of at-risk students and provides them with additional instructional services, both in school and out of school; offers several opportunities and means for students to meet the promotion standards; was rolled out in stages; and emphasizes open communication with parents, including sending out letters and materials 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 professional development and supportive services was provided. Other states and districts considering the adoption of promotion policies would do well to consider the key components of the NYC policy.

APPENDIX. SUPPORTING TABLES FOR CHAPTER FOUR

Table A.1. State Promotion Policies (K–8), 2008–2009

State	Grades	Subjects	Main Criteria	Retest	Appeals, Reviews, Waivers, and Alternative Criteria	Number of Retentions Allowed per Student
Delaware* (As of 2008–2009, no longer mandated)	3, 5, 8 8	Reading Math	At least Level 2 (of 5) on state test	Yes—End of summer	Committee of administrator, counselor and teachers, including a teacher from grade student would be promoted to, automatically reviews student’s performance on district-developed, state-approved additional indicators (e.g., district tests, grades)	Students cannot be retained more than twice in their school career or more than once in the same grade
Florida	3	Reading	At least Level 2 (of 5) on state test	No—Students may demonstrate proficiency on alternate assessments	“Good-cause exemptions” allow for demonstration of proficiency through alternative standardized assessment (SAT9/10), portfolio review, other special circumstances	Students cannot be retained more than twice in grades K–3
Georgia	3, 5, 8 5, 8	Reading Math	At least Level 2 (of 3) on state test	Yes—District selects date in June or July or early August	Appeal option—committee of principal or designee, parent or guardian, and teacher(s) of subject(s) in which student failed to meet grade-level standard reviews student’s overall academic record; promotion requires unanimous decision	No limits set at state level

State	Grades	Subjects	Main Criteria	Retest	Appeals, Reviews, Waivers, and Alternative Criteria	Number of Retentions Allowed per Student
Louisiana	4, 8	Reading and math	At least Level 3 (of 5) in either math or reading and Level 2 in the other subject on state test	Yes—End of summer	Appeal option—committee of principal and other school personnel review student work against specific criteria from state law (e.g., GPA, attendance, test scores); Special waiver for 8 th graders allowing promotion at lower standard; One-time waiver for limited English proficiency students	Student cannot be retained more than once in the 4 th grade; students who have already been retained are held to a lower set of criteria for promotion
North Carolina	3, 5, 8	Reading and math ¹	At least Level 3 (of 4) on state test (or within 1 standard error of measurement) in reading and math	Yes—Two	Appeal option—committee of teachers as well as a principal from another school in the same district or a central office administrator make recommendation to student’s principal, who has final authority	No limits set at state level
Texas	3, 5, 8 5, 8	Reading Math	At least Level 2 (of 3) on state test	Yes—Two	Appeal option—committee of parent, teacher, and principal may promote with unanimous decision; state-approved alternative test can be taken at the final retest (grade 3 reading only)	No limits set at state level

¹ Students must demonstrate “adequate progress” in writing by the end of grades 5 and 8; this is not the basis for retention but instead remediation.

Table A.2. District Promotion Policies (K–8), 2008–2009

District	Grades	Subjects	Criteria	Retest	Appeals, Reviews, Waivers, and Alternative Criteria	Number of Retentions Allowed per Student
Atlanta	1–8	Reading and math	For all grades: Grade level on report card, teacher and principal recommendation For grades 3, 5, and 8: grade level on state test	Yes—End of summer	Appeal option—committee of principal, parents and teachers reviews student’s overall academic record; includes representative from middle school for 5th graders or high school for 8th graders; promotion requires unanimous decision	None specified
Boston	2–8 4–8	ELA/ESL and math Science, history (grades only)	Passing course grades (subjects vary by grade level), passing score on at least one test from district-approved menu for ELA and math (grades 2, 3, 5, 6)	Yes—End of summer (for those attending summer school)	Parents can appeal to principals, who have the final say; waivers are possible for overage students.	Once in grades 1–5, once in 6–8, and once in 9–12
Broward County	1–8 4–8	Reading Math	Grade level on state assessment or alternative standardized assessment (SAT for grades 1–3, FCAT for grades 3–8); passing grades in minimum of four subjects (grades 6–8)	No state retest—Students may demonstrate proficiency on alternate assessments (end of reading camp) and portfolio	State “good-cause exemptions” apply to grade 3 (allow for demonstration of proficiency through alternative standardized assessment, portfolio review, other special circumstances); other exemptions for extenuating circumstances (all grades)	Per state policy: Students cannot be retained more than twice in grades K–3; students with disabilities can be retained only once in grades K–3

District	Grades	Subjects	Criteria	Retest	Appeals, Reviews, Waivers, and Alternative Criteria	Number of Retentions Allowed per Student
Chicago	3, 6, 8 8	Reading and math Writing	Sliding scale— combination of report card grades, national percentile ranking on norm-referenced portion of state assessment, and discipline; also attendance	Yes—Alternative form of state norm-referenced test offered at end of summer for students below the 25th percentile	Appeal option—Retired principals and other central office administrators oversee appeals	Once in grades 1–3, once in 4–6 and once in 7–8
Detroit	3, 5, 8 5, 8	Reading and math Science	Level 1 or 2 (of 4) on state test, passing grades, attendance	No	No appeals, but schools have some discretion to consider and make exceptions	None specified

District	Grades	Subjects	Criteria	Retest	Appeals, Reviews, Waivers, and Alternative Criteria	Number of Retentions Allowed per Student
East Baton Rouge	4, 8	Reading and math	At least Level 3 (of 5) in either math or reading and Level 2 in the other subject on state test	Yes—End of summer	State policy: Appeal option—committee of principal and other school personnel review student work against specific criteria from state law (e.g., GPA, attendance, test scores); one-time waiver for LEP students. Local: B average in failed subject and portfolio of LEAP-like work also required for appeals; waiver for 8th graders more stringent than state, but still allows promotion at lower standard	Student cannot be retained more than once in the 4th grade; students who have already been retained are held to a lower set of criteria for promotion
Gwinnett County	3,4,5,7,8 4,5,7,8 5, 8 4, 7	Reading/ELA Math Writing Science, social studies	At least Level 2 (of 3) on state test (grades 3, 4, 5, 7, 8—reading/ELA; grades 4, 5, 7, 8—math; grades 4, 7—science); passing state writing test (grades 5, 8); passing local math reasoning test (grades 4, 7); ² passing grades	Yes—once	Reviews by student support team and board of education; “transition status” option for promoting students who fail test or retest	None specified

² The district Web site indicates that these local math assessments will not be used for promotion in 2008–2009, “giving students and teachers one more year to become more familiar with the open-ended testing format” (Gwinnett County Public Schools, undated).

District	Grades	Subjects	Criteria	Retest	Appeals, Reviews, Waivers, and Alternative Criteria	Number of Retentions Allowed per Student
Houston	1–8 4–8	Reading Math	Passing score on state test (grades 3–8) or local test (grades 1–2) and national norm-referenced test (Stanford or Aprenda), passing course grades, attendance	Yes—Two for state test (grades 3, 5, 8) and once for local test (grades 1, 2)	Appeal option—Committee of parents, teachers, and principal reviews overall academic record; promotion requires unanimous decision	None specified
Long Beach	1–5 2–5	Reading Math	Proficiency on local assessments	Yes	Appeal options—Committee including parents and teacher reviews students’ overall academic record; parents can also directly appeal to central office; waivers for special circumstances.	None specified but age requirements in place (13-year-olds are exempt from staying on elementary campus)

District	Grades	Subjects	Criteria	Retest	Appeals, Reviews, Waivers, and Alternative Criteria	Number of Retentions Allowed per Student
Milwaukee	4, 8	Reading, writing, ELA, math, science, and social studies	Proficiency on classroom assessments (main criterion) or basic or above on state test (only if not meeting first criterion)	No—state test Retesting built in to classroom assessment main criteria	Committee of teachers and principals automatically reviews social, behavioral and academic factors of student not meeting the two primary criteria	None specified
Philadelphia ³	1–8 2–8 8	Reading/ELA and math Science Social Studies	Passing grades, service learning project for grades 3 and 8	NA	Regional superintendent has final authority; “assignment to next grade” available for students who complete in-school and summer interventions but still do not meet promotion criteria	None specified
Wake County	K–8 K–5	Literacy/ELA Math	At least Level 3 (of 4) on state math (grades 3–5) and reading comprehension tests (grades 3–8); passing local literacy assessment (K–5); end of grade tests; passing grades	Yes—two (state tests)	Review committees can recommend waivers to student’s principal, who has final authority (external review committee for grades 3, 5, 8 and school-based committee for grades 4, 6, 7)	None specified

³ As of 2008, Philadelphia no longer required the passage of end-of-grade tests for promotion at the end of the school year (it existed for grade 8 in 2006). However, the policy still requires students attending summer school to pass the test in order to be promoted.

Table A.3. State Identification and Intervention (K–8), 2008–2009

State	Required Identification	Required Intervention	Specifications for Intervention	Support in Next School Year
Delaware	Level 1 on first administration of state test	Summer school (no longer required as of 2008–2009)	Curriculum at districts’ discretion; must be aligned with state standards; no length specified	Individual plan for all retained students and for promoted students scoring at Level 1 or 2
Florida	Level 1 on state test	District-designed interventions, including Summer Reading Camps	Curriculum at districts’ discretion; no length specified; must be “research-based”	Individual plan, at least 90 minutes of daily reading instruction for all retained students, assignment of high-performing teacher
Georgia	Level 1 on first administration of state test	District must provide “accelerated, additional, or differentiated instruction”	Curriculum at districts’ discretion; no length specified	Individual plan for all students retained or promoted on appeal
Louisiana	Level 1 and 2 on state iLEAP test in 3rd or 7th grade	School-year remediation (pull-out or extended-day tutoring encouraged)	Local flexibility: prescriptive curricular lesson plans available but not required; minimum of 40 hours required; certified teacher and pupil-tutor ratio no greater than 7 to 1 suggested	District-designed “additional instructional strategies”/“focused remediation” for all retained students
	Level 1 or 2 in math and/or reading on first administration of state test	Summer school	Curriculum at districts’ discretion; may use prescriptive tutoring lesson plans; minimum of 50 hours in reading and/or math required; certified teacher required; 10 to 1 ratio recommended	
North Carolina	Level 1 or 2 on second administration of state test	District-designed interventions	Curriculum at districts’ discretion; no length specified	Individual plan for all students retained or promoted on appeal

State	Required Identification	Required Intervention	Specifications for Intervention	Support in Next School Year
Texas	Level 1 on first administration of state test Level 2 on second administration of state test	Pull-out or after-school small-group instruction Summer school	Curriculum at districts' discretion with emphasis on individualized and differentiated instruction; student/teacher ratio no greater than 10 to 1; certified teacher required	Individual plan for all students retained or promoted on appeal—to include accelerated instruction

Table A.4. District Identification and Intervention (K-8), 2008-2009

District	Required Identification	Required Intervention	Specifications for Intervention	Support in Next School Year
Atlanta	Below grade level on state test	Summer school	Curriculum at schools' discretion with emphasis on individualized and differentiated instruction; 6 weeks required	Individual plan and enrollment in Early Intervention Program for all students retained or promoted on appeal; students promoted on appeal to 4th grade placed in transition class
Boston	Failing course grades or not passing one reading and one math assessment required for the grade	Summer school (recommended)	16 days (5 hours per day); 10-to-1 ratio; highly qualified teachers; tailored to needs of students	Determined individually by schools; often depends on resources available
	Level 1 or 2 on state test	Individual plan and school year interventions	School discretion	
Broward County	Level 1 or 2 on state test	Third-Grade Summer Reading Camp (offered/encouraged); Research-based interventions suggested in school year	Summer camp is 3 weeks, 4 hours a day, 5 days a week; standardized curriculum; highly qualified teacher; low student-teacher ratio	Progress Monitoring Plan; 90-minute uninterrupted reading block; high-performing teacher
Chicago	Not meeting sliding scale promotion criteria	Summer school	Standard curriculum required; 6 weeks with 3 hours per day required; student/teacher ratio no greater than 18 to 1	Individual plan for all retained students, separate Achievement Academies for retained 8th graders older than 15
Detroit	At Level 3 or 4 on state test and receive marks of D or below in that subject	Summer school (must pass to be promoted)	6 weeks: 4.5 hours a day; 15-to-1 ratio; personalized instruction	Transition program for 8th-grade students who are promoted but scored at Level 3 or 4 on state test

District	Required Identification	Required Intervention	Specifications for Intervention	Support in Next School Year
East Baton Rouge	Level 1 or 2 on state test	State-funded summer school for 8th graders (must pass to be promoted) District-funded school year remediation	State guidelines: 50 hours, 15 days; certified teacher; tailored to needs of students 40–50 hours; local discretion	Intensive remediation; special programs for overage students
Gwinnett County	Level 1 on first administration of test (grades 3, 4, 5, 7, 8)	Summer school	Curriculum at schools' discretion with emphasis on individualized and differentiated instruction; 15 days	Transition programs for students who do not pass the summer retest but move up a grade (grades 4, 7); instruction tailored to student needs
Houston	Failing course grades; below standard on state/local test for grades 2–8	Summer school required in grades 3, 5, 8 for students who did not pass second administration and offered to all who do not meet promotion standards; also school year interventions	For summer school, standard curriculum provided but differentiation encouraged; each student provided with an individual plan from spring teacher; pupil-teacher ratio no greater than 10 to 1; certified teacher required; interventions during school year at school's discretion.	Individual plan for all 3rd-, 5th-, and 8th-grade students (promoted or retained) who failed to meet grade-level standard on the state test by the third administration and added support
Long Beach	Below proficient on local assessments	Summer school; school-year interventions expected	Standard curriculum based on Open Court (and supplemental reading materials) and district-developed math curriculum required; 24 days with 4.5 hours per day required; features multiage groupings by ability	Students who do not meet proficiency requirements are required to attend after-school tutoring program, may also be placed in all-day literacy program
Milwaukee	Up to schools; reports issued in January on classroom assessment proficiency	Summer school for 8th grade; other school-designed interventions for 4th and 8th grades	Project-based standard curriculum required for summer school; 5 weeks (varies from year to year)	Individual plan for students retained or promoted by committee review is recommended

District	Required Identification	Required Intervention	Specifications for Intervention	Support in Next School Year
Philadelphia	Below Basic on Pennsylvania System of School Assessment from previous year's administration	Extended-day program during school year plus summer school for those not meeting promotion criteria in June (students must pass end-of-summer assessment to be promoted)	School-determined extended day curriculum; standard summer school curriculum required; 90 hours required for extended-day program, 90 hours required for summer school; passage of end-of-summer test required for promotion	Students retained and promoted via "assignment to next grade" receive extended-day and summer school interventions (180 hours); individualized plan; follow up with Comprehensive Student Assistance Process
Wake County	Level 1 or 2 on second administration of state test	School-designed interventions	Varies by school	Students can be "retained with intervention" or "promoted with intervention"; individualized plan developed

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