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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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The research described in this report was prepared for the New York City Department of Education and conducted within RAND Education, a unit of the RAND Corporation.

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Published 2009 by the RAND Corporation
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1200 South Hayes Street, Arlington, VA 22202-5050
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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.