WORKING
PAPER

Ending Social Promotion in Grades K-8

Insights Regarding Policy Implementation

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WR-424-NYCDOE

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Prepared for the New York City Department of Education

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EDUCATION

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Abstract

In 2006, the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) contracted with the RAND Corporation to conduct a longitudinal evaluation of its 5th grade social promotion policy. 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 within a sample of states and districts with policies and programs in grades K-8 that are similar to those of NYC. The following paper presents findings from reviews of state and district websites and an analysis of data from semi-structured interviews with officials from selected states and districts. Among our sample of 12 states and districts, promotion and retention policies varied along several key design dimensions (e.g., the grade levels and subject areas covered; the required criteria for promotion; appeals processes) and in the nature of interventions and support programs (e.g., criteria for identification; specifications regulating the intervention; and follow-up support provided in the next school year). Interviews with state and district officials provided further insights into the challenges, successes, and lessons to consider within six categories of policy design and implementation, including: building stakeholder support; setting promotion criteria; identifying at-risk students; providing student interventions and support; building capacity; and monitoring implementation and outcomes.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Many states and districts are moving towards test-based requirements for promotion at key transitional points in students' schooling careers, thus ending the practice of "social promotion"—promoting students without regard to 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 where 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 under-prepared 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 where 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 the next grade" (Shepard and Smith, 1990: 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).

Eliminating social promotion has considerable intuitive and political appeal, but raises important concerns. First, if standardized assessment results are factored into promotion

decisions, the process of setting cutoff scores that define passing should meet existing standards for appropriate test use. Standardized test scores have measurement error and often fail to accurately define a student's achievement in a subject area. Moreover, a single measure may not adequately describe a child's progress (Hartke, 1999; Thompson and Cunningham, 2000). Second, there is evidence that students do not benefit from being retained in grade and that retention is associated with an increased risk of dropping out of school. Retained children often have low self-esteem, get into trouble, and dislike school (National Association of School Psychologists, 1996). It is also troublesome that grade retention disproportionately affects low-income and minority children. Given that many states and districts are adopting such policies and given that such policies have important consequences for our 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 Paper

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. In an effort to gather reliable and valid evidence of the effectiveness of its promotion policy, 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 third-grade students. This four-year study—which is being conducted over the period March 2006 through August 2009—will examine: (1) policy implementation, factors affecting implementation, and implementation progress over time; (2) the impact of the policy on student academic and socio-emotional outcomes; and (3) the links between implementation and desired outcomes.

One of the first tasks of the study was to set the NYC promotion policy in the context of what other states and districts are doing in the area of promotion and retention. This would help policymakers understand the national context and highlight successes and challenges that these locales faced in designing and implementing promotion policies. This task, which was conducted during June through August 2006, encompassed a review of the literature on the implementation of promotion policies; a search of state and district websites to gather information on their promotion policies; semi-structured interviews with state and district officials from selected states and districts, and analysis of the interview data. This working paper documents the results of this task.

Our preliminary review found that the literature on promotion policy implementation was sparse and not very rigorous. Most of this literature tended to address more generally the elements of a successful promotion policy, often using exemplars rather than generalizeable and rigorous research. As such, we do not include it here. There is an extensive (and often hotly-debated) literature on the outcomes of grade retention policies that is being reviewed as part of the larger study and will be reported elsewhere.

This paper is limited in its scope. At this point, we report findings from a set of interviews we were able to complete during June-August 2006. We offer some initial thoughts about lessons to consider regarding what has worked well and the challenges that states and districts face in implementing promotion policies. Future work will link these lessons to the key components of NYCDOE's policy, once we have more information on how well key design features have been implemented and what their outcomes are. We intend to update the paper in the last year of the study, when states and districts will be further along in their implementation. Nonetheless, the paper is useful in that it offers a broad-brush picture of what other states and districts are doing, their successes and challenges, and the lessons they have learned thus far about designing and implementing promotion policies.

Organization of the Paper

The remainder of this paper is divided into six sections. Section 2 presents a brief overview of NYC's promotion policy. Section 3 explains our sample selection and methodology. Section 4 presents some summary tables characterizing the policies being implemented in these states and districts. Section 5 discusses respondents' opinions about challenges and successes in the design and implementation of their policies. Section 6 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."[1] To make the vision a reality, NYCDOE is undertaking a host of reforms, from radically reorganizing the district's management structure to instituting a new system-wide approach to reading, writing and mathematics instruction, reinforced with annual testing in grades 3 through 8.

[1] http://www.nycenet.edu/childrenfirst/

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 requirement 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.[2]

In addition, NYC has begun to administer interim assessments in ELA and mathematics in grades 3 through 8. These interim assessments are formative, low-stakes tests that are given to students two to three times a year. The results are intended to help teachers and administrators monitor student progress on an ongoing basis and differentiate instruction to meet individual student needs.

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 English language arts 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 above, 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 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 promotion criteria through the standardized assessments. The work of all students who score at Level 1 in either ELA or

[2] http://www.emsc.nysed.gov/3-8/intro.pdf

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 (LIS) or Community Superintendent-LIS who is responsible for making the final promotion decision. Students' work is reviewed in June and, for those who still do not achieve Level 2 performance after the administration of the summer assessments, again in August.

All 5th grade students are held to the new promotion policy with two exceptions: (a) Promotion decisions for students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) are based on the promotion criteria specified in their IEP, and (b) English language learners (ELL) enrolled in an English language school system for less than two years are not held to promotion standards.[3]

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. At-risk students[4] whose promotion is in doubt are identified through prior year test results, in-class assessment, and teacher/principal recommendations, and their parents are informed of their status.

Support Services. At-risk students 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, at-risk students are invited to attend the 5th grade Saturday Preparatory Academy. The Preparatory Academy includes 24 Saturday sessions beginning in October. Each five-hour session includes free breakfast and lunch, three hours of targeted class work focusing on ELA and mathematics instruction, and either arts or physical education enrichment. Small classes with no more than 15 students are intended to enable teachers and students to focus on individual needs and difficulties. In addition, attention is paid to study and organization skills to help students prepare for middle school. Students who score at Level 1 on the mathematics or ELA assessment during the school year are mandated to enroll in

[3] ELL 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. ELL students 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 meets NYC performance standards in mathematics (taught in the Native Language and/or using ESL methodologies) and/or 90 percent attendance. ELL students enrolled in an English language school system three years or more are expected to meet the typical 5th grade promotional standards unless they have prior approval.

[4] Throughout this paper we refer to students who are at risk of being retained as "at-risk" students.

a Summer Success Academy, which offers four and a half hours of additional intensive instruction in mathematics and reading four days a week.

Ongoing Monitoring. Student progress is to be monitored by the in-school 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 paper, 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.

First, we identified states in which promotion policies are specified at the state level and in which state test results serve 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 investigation of state-level promotion policies revealed substantial variation in the nature of state policies. For example, states vary as to whether promotion policy is defined as a state or a local responsibility, as well as whether education officials are required to develop such policies, or simply authorized to do so at their discretion.[5] Where promotion policy is a local responsibility, states vary in the level or nature of criteria prescribed for such policies.[6] The use of state test results in promotion and retention decisions also varies considerably from state to state. In some cases, state test scores are the primary criteria specified in state-level policies.[7] Other states specify the use of district-developed assessments.[8] Some states authorize the use of state test results in local promotion policies, but may limit their weight in the ultimate decision; in other places, the

[5] See Table 2 in Zinth (2005).
[6] State law in California, for example, provides fairly prescriptive guidance to local education agencies (LEAs) 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.
[7] The six states in our sample are all of this type.
[8] Missouri, for example, requires students' grade-level proficiency to be assessed using district designated methods.

use of state test results is prohibited.[9] Finally, states vary in of the level of consequences embedded in their promotion policies – in some cases, demonstration of proficiency is required for promotion (a significant consequence and thus a "high-stakes" policy), while in other states students who do not demonstrate proficiency can still be promoted so long as they participate in remediation (lower stakes policy).[10]

Ultimately, we identified 21 states as possible candidates for inclusion in our review: 12 states that the ECS report (Zinth, 2005) identified as having "promotion gate" policies—defined as "a performance threshold that a student is expected to meet prior to grade promotion" (2005: 1)—and 9 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 website. Where this review showed the policy to be relevant (criteria and exceptions are discussed below), 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 it from consideration. We found, for example, that several locales that had been identified in the ECS report as having promotion gate legislation on the books were not implementing those policies in a way that resulted in actual retentions;[11] in other cases, formal policies had been required legislatively but were still

[9] California and Rhode Island, for example, both allow districts to include state test scores as one criteria, though in neither case can it be the sole criteria; 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.

[10] 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.

[11] 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.

under development.[12] A handful of states and districts did not respond to our inquiries after multiple attempts, so were excluded for non-response.

Our sample of states and districts for this paper includes six states and six districts that have policies relevant to NYC's policy (Table 1). Two additional states—Colorado and Oklahoma—turned out not to have formal retention policies but provided useful information about intervention programs. Thus, we include insights from these two states in our analysis.

All respondents were promised anonymity and included top-level administrators with the responsibility of 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 semi-structured, open-ended protocol developed for this review and lasted between 45 minutes and one hour. We analyzed the data from our interview notes, information collected from state and district websites, evaluation studies, and other documentation provided to us by respondents.

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

Among 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 (Tables 2-5). While the following discussion and tables show a fair number of similarities across jurisdictions, they also display significant variation on a number of dimensions discussed below, including the scope of the policies, criteria for promotion, the appeals process, provisions for retesting, the timeline for identifying at-risk students, the specifications for interventions, and the nature of support provided the following school year.

Design Features

Tables 2-3 examine the design features of the promotion and retention policies for states and districts respectively. These 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.

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

Table 1. Sample State and District Demographic Data

State	Total Regular School Districts	Total PK-12 Enrollment	Percent Non-White	Percent Free and Reduced Price Lunch Eligible	Percent with IEPs	Percent English Language Learners
Delaware	19	117,777	42.8	33.8	14.6	3.4
Florida	67	2,600,203	49.0	45.8	15.4	7.5
Georgia	180	1,522,611	47.9	46.4	12.2	4.3
Louisiana	68	727,709	51.6	61.4	13.9	1.7
North Carolina	117	1,360,209	41.7	44.5	14.2	4.5
Texas	1040	4,331,751	61.3	46.7	11.8	15.3
District	**Total Schools**	**Total PK-12 Enrollment**	**Percent Non-White**	**Percent Free and Reduced Price Lunch Eligible**	**Percent with IEPs**	**Percent English Language Learners**
Atlanta	105	52,103	92.4	70.0	8.6	4.2
Chicago	633	434,419	90.9	78.9	12.7	Not Reported
Houston	308	211,499	90.9	75.3	10.1	28.9
Long Beach	91	97,560	83.1	65.5	8.0	29.1
Milwaukee	233	97,359	82.7	72.2	16.5	6.6
Philadelphia	263	188,530	85.3	71.6	12.5	Not Reported
New York City	*1225*	*942,270*	*84.0*	*64.8*	*Not Reported*	*13.6*

Data from the Common Core of Data, 2003-04 School Year, National Center for Education Statistics. New York City included for comparison only; data for NYC Percent Free and Reduced Lunch and Percent English Language Learners from 2004-2005 Annual Regional Report Cards, available at http://www.nycboe.net/daa/SchoolReports/default.asp.

Table 2. State Promotion Policies (K-8), 2005-2006

State	Grades	Subjects	Main Criteria	Retest	Appeals, Reviews, and Alternative Criteria	Number of Retentions Allowed per Student
Delaware	3, 5, 8	Reading, math (varies by grade)	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	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 assessment or portfolio review	Students cannot be retained more than twice in grades K-3
Georgia	3, 5, 8	Reading, math (varies by grade)	At least Level 2 (of 3) on state test	Yes – District selects date in June or July	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
Louisiana	4, 8	Reading, 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)	Students who have already been retained are held to a lower set of criteria for promotion

State	Grades	Subjects	Main Criteria	Retest	Appeals, Reviews, and Alternative Criteria	Number of Retentions Allowed per Student
North Carolina	3, 5, 8	Reading, math, writing (varies by grade)	At least Level 3 (of 4) on state test (or w/in 1 SEM) in reading and math; adequate progress on local writing assessments	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	Reading, math (varies by grade)	At least Level 2 (of 3) on state test	Yes – Two	Appeal option – committee of parent, teacher and principal may promote with unanimous decision	No limits set at state level

Table 3. District Promotion Policies (K-8), 2005-2006

District	Grades	Subjects	Criteria	Retest	Appeals, Reviews, and Alternative Criteria	Number of Retentions Allowed per Student
Atlanta	1-8	Reading, 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	No limit
Chicago	3, 6, 8	Reading, math	Sliding scale combination of report card grades, national percentile ranking on norm-referenced portion of state assessment, and discipline; also attendance	Yes – Alternate local assessment offered at end of summer	Appeal option - Retired principals oversee appeals	Once in grades 1-3, once in 4-6 and once in 7-8
Houston	1-8	Reading, math (varies by grade)	Passing score on state or local test and national norm-referenced test, passing course grades, attendance	Yes – Two for state/local test	Appeal option - Committee of parents, teachers and principal reviews overall academic record; promotion requires unanimous decision	None specified
Long Beach	1-5	Reading, math (varies by grade)	Proficiency on local assessment	Yes – End of summer	Appeal option – Committee including parents and teacher reviews students' overall academic record	None specified but age requirements in place

District	Grades	Subjects	Criteria	Retest	Appeals, Reviews, and Alternative Criteria	Number of Retentions Allowed per Student
Milwaukee	4, 8	Reading, writing, ELA, math, science, social studies	Proficiency on classroom assessments or basic or above on state test	No	Committee of teachers and principals review social, behavioral and academic factors	None specified
Philadelphia	1-8	Math, reading, science social studies (varies by grade)	Passing grades, grade level standard on local assessment for 8th grade, service learning project for 3rd and 8th grade	No	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

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 seems to be regarded as an early "check point" 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, Houston and Atlanta, for example, include all grades 1-8 in their promotion policies, while Long Beach includes grades 1-5. Notably, both Houston and Atlanta operate under state-level promotion policies focused on grades 3, 5 and 8, but both districts have chosen to expand their local policies to cover additional grades.

Subjects. Promotion policies in all 12 states and districts focus on reading and mathematics, 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 North Carolina, promotion in the lower grades is dependent on reading only, while mathematics plays a role in promotion decisions for 5th or 8th grades. Only one state includes an additional subject – writing in North Carolina – but the criteria for passing this subject are significantly less stringent than for the other two subjects. Two districts, Milwaukee and Philadelphia, also include science and social studies in their promotion policies.

Main Criteria. The six states in our sample all use student performance on the state assessment as the primary or sole criteria 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, Long Beach uses a local assessment instead. The district administrator we spoke to told us that Long Beach had opted for its own assessment because it gave them greater control over their policy and allowed them to make changes over time.

Promotion criteria in five of the six districts also include other indicators besides the state 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 the state 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

where students must meet one of several possible combinations of criteria for report card grades, state test results, and discipline.

Retest. Five of the six states and four of the six 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 ten 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 re-measure 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 retest option because Wisconsin does not offer a second administration of the state test. Chicago offers a "retest" on an alternate assessment because Illinois similarly does not provide for a retest on the state assessment. The district administrator we spoke to in Philadelphia indicated that his district had intended to provide a retest opportunity, but was prevented from doing so by a lack of funding.

Appeals, Reviews, and Alternative Criteria. All 12 locales in our sample provided for some type of appeal or review process that could result in promotion for students even if they did not meet the specified promotion criteria. These processes varied 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 and Atlanta, 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 differed significantly across the states and districts. In some places, state or district policy provided strong guidance for such reviews. Florida, for example, specifies six categories of "good cause exemptions," and requires that students promoted on appeal meet criteria for one of these categories. Louisiana provides fairly tight parameters for appeals, with criteria for attendance, grade point average, and other factors that all must be met for a student to be promoted. Delaware allows districts to determine their own set of "additional indicators" for appeals, but reviews and approves these indicators 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 process. As we will discuss below, such differences reflect a tension between providing for some local discretion that can take into account the unique circumstances of individual students, and attempting to close loopholes so that promotions actually adhere to the written policy.

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, but in other cases 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 decisions 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 from educators from another school in the same district, which is intended to provide greater objectivity to the discussions. Chicago uses retired district principals 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 for a "black ball" vote from the receiving school. The district administrator noted that this provision was intended to prevent committees from simply passing off unprepared students for another school to handle.

Finally, 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 must have final authority.

Number of Retentions Allowed Per Student. In the interest of keeping students close to their chronological peers and avoiding the potential psycho-social toll of repeated retentions, some locales place limits on the number of times any given student may be retained. Delaware, for example, provides 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 half of our states and districts, however, no limitations have been specified.

Identification and Support for Students at Risk of Retention

Tables 4-5 examine how states and locales identify and support students at risk of retention for states and districts respectively. These include criteria for identification; the type of

Table 4. State Identification and Intervention (K-8), 2005-2006

State	Identification	Required Intervention	Specifications for Intervention	Support in Next School Year
Delaware	Level 1 on first administration of state test	Summer school	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 2 and below on state test	District-designed interventions	Curriculum at districts' discretion; no length specified	Individual plan and at least 90 minutes of daily reading instruction for all retained students
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	Below 35th percentile on Iowa test in 3rd or 7th grade	Pull-out or extended day tutoring	Prescriptive curricular lesson plans available but not required; 40 hours required; pupil/tutor ratio no greater than 7 to 1	District-designed "additional instructional strategies" 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; 50 hours in reading and/or math required; certified teacher required	
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	Identification	Required Intervention	Specifications for Intervention	Support in Next School Year
Texas	Level 1 on first administration of state test	Pull-out or after-school small group instruction	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
	Level 2 on second administration of state test	Summer school		

Table 5. District Identification and Intervention (K-8), 2005-2006

District	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
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
Houston	Failing course grades; below standard on state test for 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th graders	Summer school; also school year interventions for students failing state test in 2nd and 4th grades	For summer school, standard curriculum provided, but differentiation encouraged; each student provided with an individual plan from spring teacher; student/teacher ratio no greater than 10 to 1; certified teacher required	Individual plan for all 3rd and 5th grade students (promoted or retained) who failed to meet grade level standard on the state test by the 3rd administration
Long Beach	Below proficient on local assessment	Summer school	Standard curriculum based on Open Court required; 21 days with 4.5 hours per day required; features multi-age 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	Project-based standard curriculum required for summer school; no length specified	Individual plan for students retained or promoted by committee review

District	Identification	Required Intervention	Specifications for Intervention	Support in Next School Year
Philadelphia	Below 26th percentile on Terra Nova from previous year's administration	Extended day program during school year plus summer school for those not meeting promotion criteria in June	Standard curriculum required; 40 hours required for extended day program, 80 hours required for summer school	Students promoted via "assignment to next grade" receive extended day and summer school interventions (120 hours)

intervention required; specifications regulating the intervention; and the types of follow-up support provided in the following school year.[13]

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 half of the districts in our sample, while the other three districts include other factors such as classroom assessments or discipline records in their identification processes. Important differences in the timing of such identification, however, are reflected across the sites. Several locales – Texas, Philadelphia, and Louisiana – use test scores from the end of the grade prior to the gateway grade (e.g., 2nd grade test results in places where 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 May, leaving a very small window to notify parents, enroll students in summer school, and provide summer school instruction before the required retest.

Several state and district administrators noted that they encouraged schools and teachers to identify at-risk students through other means besides state test results earlier in the year or in their careers, although such identification was generally not explicitly required by the sites' promotion policies. As the Georgia state administrator, for example, told us,

> We said [to districts and schools] "Look, we know you have limited resources [and] summer school is probably not appropriate, but" we're saying, "you know who these kids are much earlier than their 3rd grade failure, that if you're doing your job you probably know way back in 2nd grade even. Some of our kids are at risk and if we don't do something now they aren't going to make it."

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 LEA's to determine the type of intervention they will offer, but Delaware requires districts to offer summer school for at-risk students, and Texas and Louisiana provide for both after-school or pull-out interventions and summer school. At the district level, all six sites provide summer school for students failing to meet promotion criteria; promotion policies in Houston,

[13] Most states and districts offer a wide variety of programs aimed at helping struggling students. However, our focus here is on formal identification and intervention of students at risk of retention as specified in the promotion policies of each site.

Milwaukee and Philadelphia also require schools to provide school-year interventions through after-school programs, pull-out, or other means of instruction.

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 lays down a number of specific requirements.

The districts in our sample vary by the level of discretion over summer school curriculum. Four districts – Long Beach, Atlanta, Philadelphia and Milwaukee – require a standardized curriculum for their summer school program. Houston and Atlanta, on the other hand, emphasize individualized and differentiated instruction targeted towards students' individual 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 does provide recommended lesson plans for its after-school program.

Some sites specify the number of hours of remediation required or the length of summer school programs. Atlanta, Chicago and Long Beach require summer school programs to last 5-6 weeks, while Philadelphia and Louisiana require 40 contact hours for after-school programs and, respectively, 80 and 50 contact hours in summer school. In contrast, the state administrator in Georgia noted wide variation in the length and hours of summer school programs in his state, in part as a result of the issues related to the timing of identification that we discussed above, and in part as a result of the state's long-standing tradition of local control over education.

Though less common across our sites, student-teacher ratios and teacher qualifications are also specified in some policies. Louisiana requires after-school tutoring programs to have no more than seven students per teacher, while Texas policy specifies a ratio of ten students per teacher for its summer school programs. Chicago specifies substantially larger classes, with 18 students per teacher for its summer school. State-level policy in Texas and Louisiana also require that teachers in summer school programs be fully certified.

Support in the Next School Year. Recognizing that students who have been retained or who have been promoted via appeal or review without meeting the formal promotion criteria are in need of on-going support, all 12 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 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 on-

going assessments and other means of monitoring progress. Some sites further specify particular types of follow-on support that is to be provided to all students, either in addition to or in place of individual plans. For example, Florida requires 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 on 4th grade material. Chicago uses separate "Achievement Academies" for retained 8th graders who are 15 years or older, in order to keep these students closer to their chronological peers.

Accounting for Variation in Policies

In some cases, the policy variation shown in the tables 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.[14]

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. We noted above that differences in the prescriptiveness of criteria for promotion appeals and reviews, for example, reflect differing solutions to the tension between ensuring that the promotion policy is consistent and has "teeth" and allowing for some 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

[14] 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.

the student's own teachers and principal. Yet officials from both states provide compelling rationales for their opposing policy designs: in North Carolina, the emphasis is on the objectivity of the process, while the state official we spoke to in Texas underscored the importance of placing the decision-making process in the hands of those "who really know the kid."

- **Summer School Curriculum.** Representatives from both Long Beach and Atlanta offered strong justification for the curriculum of their summer school programs. Long Beach uses a highly prescriptive curriculum because it provides teachers with strategies and a strong pacing guide to help them teach to standards; the official we spoke with 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 versus discretion, objectivity versus in-depth knowledge of the student, and standardization versus differentiation 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.

In the remainder of the paper, we preserve the anonymity of our states and districts in addition to the respondents, with two exceptions. First, where something was reported to work well, we felt it important to identify the state or district in case readers wished to consider something similar or to initiate follow up discussions. Second, where challenges were identified, we identified the state or district if the same material was included in published reports.

5. CHALLENGES AND SUCCESSES

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

- Building stakeholder support
- Setting criteria for promotion
- Identifying at-risk students
- Providing high-quality student interventions and support
- Building capacity
- 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 the successes they experienced. 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 both to NYC and to other state and local school systems considering or currently implementing similar promotion policies.

Building Stakeholder Support

Investing in Strategies to Build Stakeholder Support. More than half of the respondents identified the importance of building 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. For example:

- 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.
- In Houston, administrators send an explanation of the policy along with the first report card to ensure that parents and students understand expectations.
- 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.
- 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 among local staff, colleagues, and stakeholders.

To some respondents, the content of this communication and implicit messages were critical for gaining parent buy-in. 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. Brochures and literature on state and district websites 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, 2005).

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 one year in advance. 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. The Louisiana official noted that at times when communication did not precede changes in the policy, "it really hurt us." 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. 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, the district official convened a Teacher Council of representatives from schools that he supervised, which met regularly to discuss concerns and recommendations about the policy as it was rolled out. According to respondents in both locales, when stakeholders feel that policymakers have listened to their views, they are more likely to endorse the new policies. 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.

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 this gradual phasing-in provided much-needed time to ensure proper understanding and awareness of the policy and that having "all the pieces in place" built credibility and support for the policy. For example, the Louisiana official reported that "the policies have been phased in … and better accepted when we developed the policy or the policy change well in advance and gave lots of notice to the parents, schools, and teachers—even a year or more in advance." Others noted that 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 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 only covered 3rd grade students and performance in the area of reading. 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 for them to "go slow to go fast" and to be in control so they could "pull back or push forward."

The Texas state official similarly identified the importance of phasing in the policy gradually over time. 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. As discussed further below, 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 the 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, however, inattention to these issues reportedly proved to be considerable barriers to implementation. For example, one district official lamented their 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. Other officials simply noted the difficulty of communicating to parents the intricate details of the policy and the intent that the policy be supportive rather than punitive. 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.

In Delaware, the state official described one innovative strategy to confront and potentially ease parent resistance. For the past four years, state administrators have 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 receives about 500-600 requests a year—primarily from parents of low-performing students—and asks parents to sign a non-disclosure 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 do not meet the test criteria for proficiency. 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 on 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.

The competing perception that altering retention policies, even slightly, amounted to lowering standards made it equally difficult for administrators in some locales to consider changes to the policy. As one district official explained, "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."

Setting Criteria for Promotion

Balancing State versus Local Measures as Criteria for Promotion. Although using external measures—such as scores on a state exam—assured consistency, many respondents 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, they often encountered problems maintaining consistency in the quality of these measures and the definition of proficiency. For some locales, the inconsistency pertained to local assessments. 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. … [T]hey're not really knowing if what they're assessing is what they taught." The official noted that the district is working hard this year to provide better models and support to teachers to improve consistency. 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, 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 A's and B's 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 kids].

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. Similarly, another district official reported that the district 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."

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, Long Beach officials compared student results on the state test with their local test results and found that their "internal benchmark was not high enough." In response, they adjusted the test to make it more rigorous.

Providing Local Discretion and Alternatives without Undermining the Policy. In about half of our 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. This challenge appeared to be quite significant in several sites.

Two examples from published data help illustrate the tension between providing local discretion and alternatives and ensuring strict standards. 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, Rickman, Fortner and Henrich, 2005). According to the state official, the numbers for these types of promotions in 2005-06 may be even higher. A Georgia Department of Education (2006) publication indicates that three-quarters of those 3rd graders who were promoted despite failing the retest in 2004 were still not meeting grade-level standards the following year.

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 notes that 79 percent of student who failed to meet the gateway criteria were promoted in 2004-05, and of those, half were due to the principal's decision (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction Accountability Services Division, 2005). The state report acknowledges that the state law gives principals "considerable latitude to use his/her personal judgment" and the administrator conceded that the statistics show that principals' use of this judgment "defeats the intent [of the law] of eliminating the need for social promotion."

Some respondents attributed this to the lack of consequences resulting from the use of this promotion-via-appeals option and a lack of specific criteria for these decisions:

> 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.

Another district administrator confirmed the pervasiveness of this practice, noting that "the appeals process is pushing a lot of kids up" in his district.

Several respondents cited a disposition against retention, 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 your school system.

Not surprisingly, the incentives to promote based on 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 non-academic 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 child to another campus. In contrast, these incentives are not as great in the lower elementary grades, where educators often feel that students are more likely to benefit from being held back to address their academic deficiencies early or where 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. 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 eight grader and have them come back – the little ones they are more okay with."

In several interviews, the conversation about this challenge centered on the notion of consequences. Some respondents noted that, due to a lack of monitoring and substantive repercussions for promoting a student when they were not academically ready to move on, there were few incentives for administrators not to pursue potential loopholes and alternatives to retention. 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 children when they are not ready. He warned that repeatedly promoting such children would increase the "gulf" between what they know and should know to be on grade level, and that an under-performing student promoted to the next grade could jeopardize that grade's and school's ability to meet the accountability requirements for 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 where this tension really resonated, 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 more below, 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.

Innovative 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 recently 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 non-academic reasons. Central office leaders had heard about strong coercion occurring in appeals meetings for students who had already been retained once. Within 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. The "black ball" vote of the receiving school was intended to counter-act 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 at the 4th grade, including an appeals process and the use of alternative measures. 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 that 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 who 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 that are promoted via appeals, but estimated that the figure is somewhere

between three and seven percent. He attributed these lower rates to the specificity of the requirements.

Similarly, 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 is 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 the state was listening to their input and therefore had no reason to seek avenues to evade the law. 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.

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. 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 Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) determinations under the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act.[15] Similarly, several officials 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 ITBS and adopt the state standards-based exam as one of its measures for promotion decisions enhanced overall district efforts. 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 contrast, at least one state official lamented the fact that due to timing and administrative issues, the results of retesting of students on the state exam did not count toward schools' AYP status. The official believed that if the retest results

[15] Similar incentives may be missing in certain states and districts, such as New York City, because not all grade levels' test results currently factor into AYP determinations.

were to count toward these school ratings, administrators and teachers might put forth more effort to support students in summer school.

In a few cases, officials identified the threat of retention as an effective *incentive for students*. One district administrator, for example, noted that a lot of 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. The Oklahoma state administrator identified another potential 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 this 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) 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

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 they 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, 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.

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 take 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 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 order to maximize the time they have 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 to attend summer school—created a "problematic" situation for administrators, who would have preferred to administer the test a week earlier.

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.[16] 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. For 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

[16] 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: "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).

teach early reading.[17] The state respondent believed 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.

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 the year prior to the gateway grade, but the early elementary grades in order to provide needed interventions.

Focusing on Individual Students. Although perhaps more of an outcome than an aspect of policy implementation, many officials responded to the question of "what is working well?" by explaining that as a result of their policy, educators were having detailed conversations about individual students and focusing learning plans and interventions on those students' specific needs. In Georgia, both state and district officials cited this as a benefit of the new policy. According to the state official, the policy has made school systems think about how to help specific kids on the "front and back ends" and started a dialogue among educators about how to support students early in the years prior to the gateway grades. Similarly, the Atlanta official reported that the state promotion policy "is forcing us to take a look at these kids":

> It's forcing us to change school goals for performance simply because now we can't ignore these kids. In the past, if you had 95 percent of your kids that were doing okay, you were pretty happy with it. But now, that five [percent] is starting to stick out like a sore thumb. And now there are people beside us locally who are looking at that five

[17] In later years the state established summer training in math for upper elementary grade teachers and in 2004-05, the state changed these summer math and reading "academies" to an electronic format.

> percent of the kids … and that's good because even though 95 percent of the children can read, the 5 percent who can't, for them, it's 100 percent. They can't perform. So it is forcing us to deal with that subset of kids and it's forcing us to look at them in a very meaningful way. For instance, if the child has not passed two administrations of the test, [we ask], "Is there something going on here that we need to look at? Do we need to have him referred for Special Ed. testing, for instance?" In the past, with social promotion, they might have just moved on and never gotten the assistance they need. But now somebody is taking a long hard look at them and that's good.

In Milwaukee, the administrator also noted that the policy "forced a lot of teachers and principals to talk about kids in ways that they never talked about them before." He explained,

> [P]rincipals started asking teachers, "well, what kinds of interventions do you have put in place for this child?" and teachers would say "Interventions, what are those?" So it opened up a whole new can of worms, but something that was necessary. So now teachers are starting to learn about interventions and teaching differently, and to differentiate their instruction based on conversations that they've had out of these recommendations of teacher meetings.

Using Interim Assessment Data. 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. 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 it provides the information with enough time for them 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, the Chicago administrator noted that educators greatly appreciated the district's new 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 (TPRI)—a formative assessment to measures 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.

Although several respondents cited data-driven practices as enablers of promotion policies, at least one raised a cautionary note. 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.

Providing Student Interventions and Support

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. As one 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." In fact, the Louisiana official reported that their research on summer school programs demonstrates that "the more they come, the more they benefit." An on-line attendance reporting system in 2005 allowed the state to examine the correlation between student attendance at the state's summer remediation program and retest results (Louisiana Department of Education, 2006). Students in the "high attendance" group—attending more than 65 percent of the remediation hours offered—demonstrated larger improvement 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. In addition, the percentage of grade 4 and grade 8 students meeting the promotion standard increased when students attended more remediation hours.

Second, several respondents expressed concerns about ensuring consistency of quality in these support programs. 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 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?

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 a lot 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.[18] The district's 2003-04 evaluation of its after-school program found minor differences between the academic achievement of students in the program and comparison groups. The evaluators conclude 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. The state official speculates that the reason for the limited success is that one hour a week does not provide enough continuity.

Fourth, 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.

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[18] 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.

Fifth, more than half of all respondents 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,"[19] but admitted to not knowing exactly what supports were necessary. Although most officials urged their districts and schools to implement different strategies the year a student is retained, some reported finding schools that were not "doing everything they should be doing" or that teachers or schools simply did not know which new interventions to try. In one district that was seemingly aware of this problem, 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 system-wide methods to support retained students—some with more reported success than others. For example, one district tried a non-graded 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 schools with high retention rates in 3rd grade with more professional development and centralized resources to support reading and math instruction.[20]

Finally, a few officials cited the difficulty of sustaining the progress of the students promoted who had received significant interventions and support to achieve grade-level proficiency. One

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[19] 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 students 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).

[20] Past evaluations in Chicago have noted a lack of structure in the support provided to students in the retained year and much local discretion over the nature of this support. Evaluators have found that most retained students received few extra supports. They conclude: "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.

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?"

According to this administrator, although principals and teachers frequently urge the state for more support in these grades, the state is unable to provide additional resources.

Student Mobility. In a few sites, high mobility among at-risk students made it difficult to provide them with adequate interventions and monitor their progress. 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 children to attend their summer programs and be retested. Another state official reported that in 2005-06, 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 reported that the students identified in the fall for interventions are not always the same students that remain in the district in the spring, and that the state lacks the capacity to track students as they move to other districts.

Ensuring Continuity and Concentrated Support through Summer School Programs. A few respondents reported successfully implementing high-quality, continuous interventions for students. For example, the Louisiana state administrator reported that their 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. He reported that their research indicates that students who regularly attended summer school demonstrated greater gains on tests than those attending only tutoring. The official speculated that unlike tutoring for one hour a 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, Rickman, Fortner, and Henrich, 2005). Controlling for other individual and program characteristics, summer programs offering more hours of instruction were correlated with greater improvements in student test scores.[21]

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 summer vacation, most parents are now "on board" and satisfied with the program. 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.

Lack of Funding. Several officials noted that limited funding constrained efforts to implement high-quality summer school opportunities. 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 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.

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 below, other officials attributed their inability to adequately monitor promotion policies

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[21] Researchers found that children who received an additional hour of instruction gained on average a relative increase of 0.11 points in 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. Researchers 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" (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.

and programs to a lack of funding. One state official also questioned whether districts had adequate funding to scale up promotion policies to all three 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 two 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 for every grade level as one of the measures used to make promotion decisions, the district had enough funding to develop them for only one grade level. 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 on whether the student had met the requirements and demonstrated reason to be promoted.

Capacity Building

Providing Teacher Professional Development. Although a few sites—such as Texas (see previous section on "early identification and intervention" under "Identifying At-Risk Students")—allocated significant resources to the provision of professional development for teachers in conjunction with their promotion and retention policies, several other sites cited a need for better training and support to ensure that teachers knew how to support students at risk of retention. 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 noted above, 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 support 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. Finally, one state administrator reported that professional development needs were greatest at the secondary level, where teachers generally were not trained in how to teach reading (the main subject area covered by this state's promotion policy).

Innovative Ideas. Several officials cited examples of professional development opportunities that they believed assisted teachers 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.

Monitoring of Implementation and Outcomes

Inability to Adequately Monitor Implementation and Effects. 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 children 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 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 supports.

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.

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. Similarly, another administrator in a large state noted, "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 one district, administrators have reportedly struggled to monitor a relatively new aspect of their policy, which 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 40 hours of the district program.

Many respondents specifically noted the lack of ability 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 for their teachers the following year. 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.

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 that "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 third 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 third graders 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 regrets that "we have no good way to identify if we're having an impact."

Eight respondents 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.

For some, limited technology also constrained their 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 which 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.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this paper was to examine how states and districts have designed and implemented policies similar to those in New York City to end social promotion, and to identify lessons learned that might inform the work of policymakers and administrators in NYC and elsewhere.

Summary of Findings

Among our sample of 12 states and 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 influenced design choices.

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

- **Stakeholder Support.** Some officials cited the difficulty of building parent understanding and confronting pre-existing 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.

- **Criteria for Promotion.** Several respondents mentioned challenges pertaining to the use of state versus local indicators, and even more cited tensions over providing local discretion and alternatives without undermining policy intent. Others provided examples of successful strategies to manage the tension over potential loopholes and to provide incentives to students and schools.
- **Identifying At-Risk Students.** 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 to identify and monitor at-risk students.
- **High-Quality Intervention and Support.** Many respondents reported specific challenges with the provision of support to at-risk students—including maintaining student attendance, ensuring consistency of quality, implementing after-school programs, identifying best practices, 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.
- **Capacity Building**. Several officials noted great difficulty providing adequate professional development to teachers, while a few provided innovative examples of how to build teacher capacity.
- **Monitoring**. All but three respondents reported an inability to adequately monitor the implementation and effects of their social promotion policies and programs.

Finally, a reported lack of funding cut across many of these categories. Six respondents noted 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).

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 within this paper. Readers should keep in mind that the following implications/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 section.

Invest in building support and ongoing communication with parents and educators. The majority of respondents identified the importance of communicating with and gaining buy-in of all stakeholders. 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, 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 policy over time, officials should consider some of the innovative ideas reported herein (e.g., dedicating a phone line and support staff to answer questions, allowing parents to view their child's exam, teacher council).

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 (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.

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 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—in particular, students who receive significant intervention in order to be promoted

(who may continue to struggle in future years without continued support) and students who have been retained (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 will/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)
- 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)
- 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 that change schools or move out of the district mid-year or during the summer).

Think holistically about supports for at-risk students. Several policies reviewed appeared to be 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 instruction 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 where many respondents saw a great need was the support provided to teachers. Officials should consider providing professional development opportunities focused not only on instruction for at-risk students (e.g., how to "differentiate," "remediate," and "accelerate," how to support students that 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 best practices. There is a strong reported need for more information and research about what interventions work best with 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 to best 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.

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).

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 invest resources into support services for students, monitoring, professional development for teachers, and parent outreach.

Next Steps

As we mentioned at the beginning of the paper, we plan to update the paper in the last year of the study (2008-2009), when states and districts will be further along in their implementation. Future work will link lessons learned from the experiences of these locales to the key components of NYCDOE's policy and its experiences and outcomes. In addition, future work will seek to understand the broader questions of resource allocation, effectiveness, and best

practices, particularly in the areas of student interventions and support and teacher professional development.

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