Research Brief

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Ending Social Promotion in New York City Public Schools Without Leaving Children Behind

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Abstract

RAND researchers examined New York City's test-based grade promotion and retention policy, focusing on 5th-grade students. The findings show that the support services provided under the policy helped students meet promotion criteria and that, overall, few students were retained. Furthermore, those who were retained did not report negative socioemotional effects. Some of the positive effects from the support services continued into later grades, leading the researchers to recommend a continued emphasis on early identification and support of at-risk students, as well as continued monitoring of the longer-term effects of retention.

Educators struggle with how best to handle students whose academic performance does not reflect readiness for the next grade by the end of the school year. While retaining these students in grade gives them an additional year to master the knowledge and skills for that grade, critics point out that the practice disproportionately affects low-income and minority children and is associated with low self-esteem, problem behaviors, and an increased risk of dropping out of school. However, promoting students who do not meet academic standards—also known as "social promotion"—puts students at a disadvantage by advancing them to a grade for which they are not prepared.

As part of an ambitious reform initiative, the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE), the largest school district in the country, implemented a new promotion and retention policy for students in grade 3 during the 2003–2004 school year. The policy was extended to grade 5 in 2004–2005, grade 7 in 2005–2006, and grade 8 in 2008–2009. Under the policy, general education students in these grades are required to score at or above Level 2 on a four-level performance scale on the state English language arts and mathematics assessments in order to be promoted to the next grade. Performance at or above Level 3 is considered "proficient" under the No Child Left Behind Act and is a higher standard than the promotion benchmark.

NYCDOE's policy is noteworthy in that it emphasizes identifying struggling students early; providing them with support services, such as additional instructional time; and continuously monitoring their progress. Under the policy, at-risk students are identified—based on their performance on the previous year's assessments, teacher recommendations, or being previously retained in grade—and scheduled to receive support services in and outside of school. Students who do not pass the spring assessments are enrolled in summer school. The policy also offers students multiple opportunities to meet promotion criteria.

From March 2006 through August 2009, RAND researchers analyzed the impact of NYCDOE's policy on student outcomes, focusing on three cohorts of 5th-grade students held to the policy and one pre-policy comparison cohort. Using interviews, case studies, student surveys, and demographic and test score data, the researchers examined the implementation of NYCDOE's grade promotion and retention policy and its impact on student academic and socioemotional outcomes over time.

Few Students Were Retained Under the Policy

Overall, approximately 75 percent, or 60,000, 5th-grade students were held to the promotion policy in each of the three cohorts. About 20 percent of those students were categorized as need-

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ing services upon entering the 5th grade. At the beginning of the year, more students needed services in English language arts than in mathematics, but by the end of the year, students were more likely to be retained for failing to meet promotion criteria in mathematics. Few students were retained under the policy, and the percentage of retained students dropped over time, from 2–3 percent in the first two cohorts to 1 percent in the third cohort (about 600 students out of approximately 58,000 students).

Supports Provided Under the Policy Helped Students Meet Promotion Standards

The study found that the policy had positive effects on the achievement of in-need students during the 5th-grade year. The effects were stronger in English language arts than in mathematics. However, for the small group of students entering 5th grade with the lowest scores on the state assessments, additional promotion policy services during the school year had little effect on performance. More frequent attendance at Saturday classes and summer school was associated with greater improvements in mathematics performance.

The Positive Effects of the Policy Continued into Later Grades

The study's findings showed that components of the promotion policy had positive effects for students that lasted into the 6th and 7th grades, including small, positive effects from early identification and intervention; small, positive effects from summer school; and moderate, positive effects from an additional year of instruction due to retention.

Retained Students Did Not Report Negative Socioemotional Effects

The responses to student surveys indicated that retention did not have negative effects on students' sense of school belonging or confidence in mathematics and reading, even three years after being retained in grade. While this is counterintuitive, it is consistent with some prior studies.

School Staff Tended to Be Positive About the Policy

In surveys and interviews, principals and teachers were positive about many aspects of the promotion policy; the majority agreed that the policy helped focus their schools' instructional efforts and made parents more aware of their children's progress. However, the majority of respondents thought that the promotion policy relied too heavily on state assessment scores and, interestingly, that the policy made it more difficult to retain students who would benefit from being retained but had passed the test.

Several Policy Recommendations Emerge from the Findings

The study's findings led to the following recommendations for policymakers and administrators. While targeted to New York City, these recommendations may also apply to other districts and states considering or implementing test-based promotion policies.

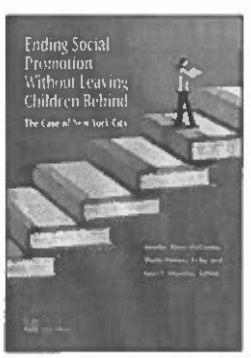
Continue early identification of students and provision of academic intervention services. The findings suggest that early identification and support services helped students meet promotion standards and improved student achievement in future grades. One-on-one tutoring was particularly helpful and should be continued and expanded when possible.

Consider the expected duration and participation when designing Saturday programs. The researchers found that attending at least seven sessions was associated with improved performance in mathematics. Thus, principals need to consider expected student attendance and program length before investing in such programs.

Continue to encourage struggling students to attend summer school. Summer school attendance appeared to have a positive relationship with student achievement, particularly in mathematics, and summer school may also have a positive impact on future achievement in grades 6 and 7.

Analyze student-level data to evaluate the effectiveness of specific interventions provided to struggling students. The study highlighted several instructional strategies that can help low-performing students. It is important to systematically collect and analyze data to determine each strategy's effectiveness.

Continue to monitor the longer-term effects of retention on students. Two of the most important questions are whether the short-term positive effects of the policy persist over the longer term and whether the policy is cost-effective, compared with alternatives. This study could not answer those questions, but they remain important topics for New York City to address in the future. ■



This research brief describes work conducted within RAND Education and documented in *Ending Social Promotion Without Leaving Children Behind: The Case of New York City*, Jennifer Sloan McCombs, Sheila Nataraj Kirby, and Louis T. Mariano, eds., MG-894-NYCDOE (available at http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG894), 2009, 308 pp., $37, ISBN: 978-0-8330-4778-6. This research brief was written by Jennifer Li. The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research organization providing objective analysis and effective solutions that address the challenges facing the public and private sectors around the world. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. RAND® is a registered trademark.

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