



Position Statement on Grade Retention and Social Promotion

The Florida Association of School Psychologists (FASP) is committed to advocating for educational practices that are research-based and demonstrate positive outcomes for students. To this end, FASP urges educators, legislators, and policy makers throughout Florida to abandon the practice of grade retention in favor of evidenced-based supports and interventions for children and youth that demonstrably improve educational outcomes long-term. Conversely, the practice of promotion in the absence of such targeted supports and interventions is not an acceptable, research-supported alternative to grade retention.

While the number of retentions has decreased significantly over the past decade (from 201,684 students during the 2003-04 school year to 101,357 students in 2013-14), the negative impact of these retentions on both the longitudinal outcomes of students and the fiscal health of school districts cannot be minimized. In a 2012 meta-analysis by educational researcher John Hattie, it was determined that retention ranks 148th out of 150 educational practices for the effect size it has on student achievement, followed only by television and mobility. Despite its ineffectiveness, which is echoed in numerous reputable studies, grade retention continues as a practice in schools throughout Florida and is not solely problematic in Florida's legislated third grade retention mandate for those students who score poorly on the state assessment. During the 2012-13 school year, the highest rates of non-promotions occurred in grades 9 through 12, followed by K-2, excluding the mandated third grade retentions. Sadly, educating the 101,357 students in the same grade for an additional year at the current base student allocation costs Florida and its school districts in excess of \$408,000,000, dollars that would have been better spent on sound educational practices and meaningful interventions.

Admirably, an integral purpose of the Florida Standards is to create college and career ready students, which necessitates improved graduation rates. It is noteworthy that one of the strongest predictors of high school dropout rate is course failure in 9th grade (Consortium on Chicago School Research, 2007), which can be impacted by poor attendance and school disciplinary practices such as out of school suspensions. Retentions/non-promotions throughout high schools in Florida are the byproducts of course failure(s) regardless of cause, which is highly correlated with future negative effects, such as dropping out of school and poor post-secondary outcomes. Furthermore, while conventional wisdom has held that if a student is to be retained, it is best to do so in the primary grades, the deleterious longitudinal effects of retentions have their roots as early as kindergarten. A recent study (Raffaele Mendez, Kim, Ferron, & Woods, 2014) that used statistical matching to control for pre-retention differences, found that students in one Florida school district who were retained in kindergarten and followed through 12th grade had significantly poorer outcomes than their non-retained peers on a variety of long-term outcomes, including standardized test score achievement, special education placement, and school completion. The study suggests that struggling students need more intensive interventions [e.g., current Florida efforts to implement a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) with fidelity in all Florida schools] as opposed to an additional year in kindergarten. Retention, "the gift of time," is certainly a Trojan horse.

Of further concern, Florida data mirror national trends, in that minorities, particularly African Americans/Blacks, are more likely to be retained than Whites, and male students are more likely to be retained than females. In addition, the National Association of School Psychologists' White Paper on this subject indicates there are numerous negative effects of grade retention for students both academically and socially-emotionally (National Association of School Psychologists, 2011).

FASP applauds the efforts being made by the Florida Department of Education and the Florida legislature to utilize Early Warning Systems in School Improvement Plans and District Improvement Action Plans, as these systems, when used appropriately, lead to early interventions and supports for students. FASP recognizes retention as an early warning indicator and urges educators to take preventative measures to eliminate retention and, instead, to implement evidenced-based interventions for struggling students.

FASP urges educators at the state, district and school levels, as well as legislators and other policy-makers, to implement the following evidence-based alternatives to grade retention:

- In lieu of grade retention and social promotion, develop and implement a multi-tiered system of supports across the district and school levels so that students have coordinated opportunities to access support along the continuum of need.
- Use state and local assessments and benchmarks, as well as formative assessment measures, to identify students who are struggling academically and behaviorally beginning in kindergarten, as soon as delays are evident.
- Provide educationally at-risk students opportunities to learn through quality pre-kindergarten programs and extended time outside of the school day/year.
- Identify and implement interventions with fidelity that are targeted to the areas of academic, behavioral, and social-emotional concern.
- Provide educators with training, consultation, and coaching supports that are aimed to enhance the effectiveness of targeted interventions.
- Support those students retained throughout their school careers, including those who were retained in kindergarten, with evidenced-based academic and social-emotional supports.
- In light of the research on the correlation of non-promotions in high school (particularly in 9th grade) with dropping out of school, high school students need structured opportunities for credit retrieval and targeted intervention, including the use of evidence-based practices for improving school attendance and positive behavioral supports.
- Expand engaging and relevant initiatives such as vocational education programs and career academies.
- For students identified as Students with Disabilities, address needs for possible increased Exceptional Student Education support through the Individual Education Plan (IEP) as opposed to grade retention.
- Legislative policies should focus on adequate funding for schools to implement a multi-tiered system of supports and abolish policies that require mandated retention based on state assessments (i.e., F.S. 1008.25).

REFERENCES

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