

First, Do No Harm:
A Response to the Proposed New York City
Third Grade Retention Policy

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March 2004

In his 2004 State of the City, Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg announced a major new initiative to end social promotion in the New York City Public Schools. A week later, city schools Chancellor Joel Klein outlined that new initiative, indicating that in third grade, “students must perform at least level 2 on our standardized literacy and math tests before being promoted to fourth grade.”

Other elements of the plan include “following every child” using interim assessments put into effect this year, employing “differentiated instruction for students with different needs,” and organizing Student Success Teams in each school. Third graders at risk of failing will receive “additional learning time outside of the regular school day” that will include small group instruction two or three times a week, before or after school as well as on vacation days and weekends. A Summer Success Academy for third graders who fail the test will provide a “new, intensive summer program” with classes limited to 15 students.¹ Smaller classes for students who fail third grade twice is also part of the proposed new policy.² Students will be retested at the end of summer school. Those who pass will be promoted to fourth grade. Those who don’t will remain in third grade.

The New York Times reported that DOE officials estimate that up to 15,000 third graders may fail the April exams.³ An appeals process for students slated to repeat the third grade requires parents to convince their child’s teacher that other work or academic strengths qualify her for promotion. If in agreement, the teacher must then persuade the principal to submit the appeal to the local instructional supervisor. The Department of Education budgeted \$25 million for the initiative⁴ and an additional \$8 million to help students prepare for the April test.⁵

We oppose the New York City Public Schools current retention policy, in place for the past four years, and the new, even less flexible version the Mayor and the Chancellor have proposed. Retaining students to improve their academic achievement is a strategy that has been scrutinized by decades of research and evaluation and found severely wanting. Both old and new versions of the City’s retention policy ignore the debacle of the city’s previous experiment with retention, the Promotional Gates program imposed from 1980-1991.

We believe that although proclaiming the ending of social promotion may play well as ideology and as sound-bite, it is a punitive and costly failure as instructional policy. Both retention and social promotion are inappropriate responses to the systemic failure of the school system to adequately educate our children.

¹ Klein, “Remarks of Schools Chancellor, Joel I. Klein.” Jan. 15, 2004.

² Gootman, “Council Members Question Plan to Hold Back 3rd Graders.” March 4, 2004.

³ Herszenhorn, “Stricter Standards in New York May Hold 15,000 in 3rd Grade.” Jan. 9, 2004.

⁴ Domanico, “Ending Social Promotion Once Again.” Feb. 2, 2004.

⁵ Gootman, “Appeals Process for 3rd Graders Explained.” Feb. 27, 2004.

Neither [social promotion nor grade retention] closes the learning gap for low-achieving students, and neither is an appropriate response to the academic needs of students experiencing difficulty mastering required coursework.⁶

A more productive approach to meeting students' academic needs would organize instruction and provide the supporting resources to reduce failure, if not eliminate it altogether, before children enter third grade. Such a response would be less punitive, more cost effective, and much more likely to eliminate the need for a retention policy, which, research indicates, only compounds students' learning problems.

What research indicates

The research about grade retention as an academic improvement strategy is extensive and consistent. A recent analysis of more than a century of "evidence and research" concludes that the most recent studies validate earlier investigations "that fail to demonstrate that grade retention provides greater benefits to students with academic or adjustment difficulties than does promotion to the next grade."⁷

Ernest R. House, who consulted as an external auditor for the Board of Education's evaluation of the Promotional Gates Programs, observes that:

There is a large body of research about student retention gathered over 40 years. Although retention sounds like common sense, this research indicates that few practices have such negative effects. This research consistently indicates that students who are retained do not achieve better on standardized tests after a few years and are much more likely to drop out later on. They also experience personal shame and depression.⁸

Lorrie Shepard, co-editor of *Flunking Grades: Research and Policies on Retention*, writes: "Contrary to popular beliefs, repeating a grade does not help students gain ground academically and has a negative impact on social adjustment and self-esteem."⁹ Drawing on various studies, including the evaluation of the recent Chicago Public School program that established testing gates at third, sixth and eighth grades, Robert Hauser at the Center for Demography and Ecology at the University of Wisconsin and colleagues conclude that:

There is no evidence for claims that new retention policies will be coupled with effective remediation of learning deficits that would be worth their cost or would offset the well-established long-term negative effects of retention...

⁶ U.S. Dept. of Education, *Taking Responsibility for Ending Social Promotion*. 1999.

⁷ Jimerson, Anderson, & Whipple. *Winning the Battle and Losing the War*. 2002.

⁸ House, *The Predictable Failure of Chicago's Student Retention Program*, 1998.

⁹ In Darling-Hammond, *Alternatives to Grade Retention*, 1998.

There is no positive example of such a system in the United States, past or present, whose success is documented by credible research.¹⁰

Research has, in fact, identified two strands of apparently positive results for grade retention. A meta-analysis of 63 retention studies identifies nine efforts that yielded relatively strong, positive effects. However, all nine dealt with middle class, suburban students, many of whom had been retained despite already demonstrating achievement results considerably higher than urban school systems usually manage.¹¹ The second positive strand identifies greater score gains for children at the end of their repeated year, in comparison to the gains of former classmates or cohort members who were not retained. These and other gains generally disappear the following year.¹² Moreover, these temporary gains do not immunize students from increased risk of dropping out later in their academic careers.¹³

More than 30 years ago, researchers identified holding children back as “the most powerful predictor of future drop out.” A study of third grade students who eventually dropped out of school found that they were more likely to drop out if they had been retained in the early grades. A second study concluded that dropouts were much more likely to have been retained in grades one through three than were high school graduates.¹⁴

Recent evidence from Chicago

The Chicago school system has had recent, system-wide experience with retention policies mandated to end social promotion. Chicago’s program, imposed in 1996, holds back third, sixth and eighth graders who cannot meet citywide benchmarks on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) in reading and math. (ITBS test developers went on record that the use of the test was inappropriate for decisions related to promotion.) The policy also includes an extended-day program during the school year in which students are tested, a summer program, re-testing, and intensive academic support for those students identified as at risk of repeating their grade.

During the Chicago program’s first two years, twenty percent of the system’s third graders were retained, and two-thirds of those initially retained students were unable to pass the test at the end of their second year in third grade.¹⁵ Investigators at the Consortium on Chicago School Research reviewed the results of the first two years of the program and found that, “while Summer Bridge [the summer school program] raised students’ performance briefly, there is no evidence that it altered the

¹⁰ Hauser, *Should We End Social Promotion? Truth and Consequences*, Oct. 1999.

¹¹ Holmes, 1988, *Grade Level Retention Effects: A Meta-Analysis of Research Studies*, chapter in Shepard & Smith, 1989.

¹² Hauser, 1999, op. cit.; Holmes, 1988, Op.cit; and Karweit, 1991; NASP, 1998; Roderick, 1995; Thompson & Cunningham, 2000 in NCREL, *Critical Issue: Beyond Social Promotion and Retention*, 2001.

¹³ NYC DOE, *Flash Report # 5*, 2001; Alexander et al., *Grade Retention, Social Promotion and Third Way Alternatives*, 1999.

¹⁴ Stroup & Robins, *Elementary Predictors of High School Dropout among Black Males*, 1972, and Lloyd, 1978, in Jimerson et al. Op.cit.

¹⁵ Roderick et al., *Ending Social Promotion*, 1999.

overall pattern of school-year achievement for these students,” thus leaving them at risk of retention from future test score cutoffs.¹⁶

Reviews of program results updated through 1999 data show that eighth grade dropout rates for Chicago students retained two years earlier are exceptionally high. Further, when the academic achievement of students retained in 1997 is compared with those promoted in 1995 under previous promotion policies, students in the earlier cohort demonstrate comparatively higher achievement levels. However, “both socially promoted and retained students continued to *achieve very poorly*” (authors’ emphasis).¹⁷

Past retention policies in New York City

New York City’s experience confirms these findings. The Board of Education’s Promotional Gates Program, instituted in the 1980s, retained students in fourth and seventh grades if they did not achieve “appropriate grade-level performance on citywide reading and mathematics achievement tests.” Students who missed this benchmark in those grades were held back, assigned to summer school and, if they still could not pass the tests, forced to repeat the grade in much smaller Gates classes with intensive instruction in reading and math.¹⁸

According to House, who helped oversee the evaluation, Gates classes for grade repeaters served 18 or fewer students when the average class in the city packed in 43. “The extra help provided to retained students required hiring 1,100 new teachers at a cost of between \$40 million and \$70 million per year.”¹⁹ Retrospective work by the Board of Education’s Division of Assessment and Accountability suggested that the Gates promotional policy did produce initial increases in student achievement.²⁰ (In House’s view, initial summer school test score gains resulted from “mistakes in the school district’s analysis of its data.”²¹)

But a Board of Education study comparing Gates students with students who had not been held back found that Gates students failed to continue to make adequate progress. The evaluation concluded that the school system had not provided the educational and social services necessary to ensure that Gates students completed their education in a timely manner. The evaluation also tracked those Gates students who had been retained in seventh grade during 1982-83 up through 1986-87, when they should have been in the eleventh grade. By then, approximately 40 percent had dropped out of school, as opposed to only 25 percent of comparison group students.²²

¹⁶ Roderick, Engel & Nagaoka, *Ending Social Promotion: Results from Summer Bridge, Report Highlights 2003*.

¹⁷ Moore & Hauser, *Comment on Update: Ending Social Promotion*.

¹⁸ NYC DOE, Op.cit.

¹⁹ House, *The Predictable Failure of Chicago’s Student Retention Program*, 1998.

²⁰ NYC DOE, Op.cit.

²¹ House, Op.cit.

²² NYC DOE, op cit.

In 1991, the Board of Education discontinued the Promotional Gates program and conceded that it had a negative impact on students, causing increased drop out and social problems:

It has been determined that Promotional Gates had little positive impact on students. Each year more than one-third of the students who were held over and attended Gates classes still failed to meet promotional standards. Fourth grade holdovers were no more likely, three years later, to meet the seventh grade promotional standard than students who were promoted. A longitudinal study indicated that a disproportionate percentage of students held over in Gates classes became dropouts. National research has also confirmed the negative impact of retention policies by indicating that retention doubles the chances that a student will ultimately drop out. There is no evidence, therefore, that holdovers make academic progress, although there is evidence that holdovers demonstrate greater social and emotional difficulties.²³

Eight years later, in 1999, the school system reversed course. Reacting to mayoral pressure triggered by a drop in citywide test scores subsequently identified as caused by test publisher error, Chancellor Crew instituted the system's current retention policy of mandatory summer school and grade repetition for those students unable to pass the citywide reading and math tests in all grades from third through eighth. Although the current policy includes three promotional criteria – test scores, school work and attendance – those who fail to satisfy at least two are required to attend summer school and forced to repeat the grade unless they can reach the cut-off score at the end of the summer. Thus the students arguably most in need of multiple assessments are funneled into a one-shot, make or break situation. “The inappropriate reliance on a single test performance came back to haunt the Crew administration when it turned out that the test was improperly normed, and thousands of students had been failed when they should have passed.”²⁴

Thousands of New York City public school students reach high school without the academic skills they need to succeed and graduate. Indeed, unacceptably large percentages of students never advance beyond ninth grade, and as the New York City Department of Education cohort studies indicate, at least 30 percent eventually drop out.²⁵

But to blame social promotion for the systemic failures of teaching and learning that have left those students without the skills they need, and to promote retention as the antidote to social promotion, misrepresents both policy options and ignores the reality in our schools. Students advance to high school without the necessary skills because of systemic failures to provide the high quality teaching and other educational resources they require in elementary and middle school. If, instead of attending

²³ Cited in Advocates for Children, *Analysis of the Board of Education's Change of Policy Regarding Retention of Students*, 2000.

²⁴ Hauser et al., *Race-Ethnicity, Social Background, And Grade Retention*.

²⁵ New York City Department of Education, *The Class of 1999 Final Longitudinal Report: A Three-Year Follow-Up Study*, 2003.

to those failures of instruction, we hold students back, we as educational practitioners, policymakers, and citizens punish young people for what we have not learned, or been willing, to do. If the Chancellor's proposed program to improve the skills of retained third graders actually proves successful, why should we wait until students have failed third grade to introduce them to it?

A matter of equity

Policymakers enamored of retention policies have repeatedly ignored the evidence that students' failure to make adequate academic progress is the result of ongoing, stubbornly held, but mistaken policy.

Although most of the [eighties accountability] reforms were popular, the policymakers and educators simply ignored a large body of research showing that they would not produce academic gains and would increase dropout rates. In other words, this was a policy with no probable educational benefits and large costs. The benefits were political and the costs were borne by at-risk students.²⁶

We forget that the mantra of "all children can learn" requires a necessary foundation of equity. That hopeful assertion rings hollow when the distribution of essential educational resources such as high quality teaching and challenging curricula has historically been skewed to the disadvantage of children of color and low income students in the city's public schools.²⁷ Retention and social promotion policies further the same objective: to avoid confronting and correcting the inadequate and inequitable provision of the educational resources our public school students need to succeed in school.

Last summer's historic Campaign for Fiscal Equity vs. the State of New York decision ordered a radical overhaul of the State's support for New York City's public schools. The Court of Appeals order requires the State to ensure that all New York City children have access to a "sound basic education."²⁸ The Court explicitly rejected a lower court ruling that argued that providing an eighth or ninth grade education fulfills the State's constitutional responsibility to its children. There is, however, ample evidence to suggest that the Mayor and Chancellor's proposed third grade retention policy would considerably increase the already large number of students tracked for academic failure and eventual drop out.

Chief Judge Kaye's CFE opinion asserted that:

²⁶ Orfield & Ashkinaze, *The Closing Door: Conservative Policy and Black Opportunity*; 1991.

²⁷ NY ACORN, *Secret Apartheid II*, 1997. Bronx ACORN, *No Silver Bullet*, 1999. Eskenazi et al. October 2003.

²⁸ Kaye, CFE v. State of New York, 2003.

tens of thousands of students are placed in overcrowded classrooms, taught by unqualified teachers, and provided with inadequate facilities and equipment. The number of children in these straits is large enough to represent a systemic failure.²⁹

The proposed third grade retention policy compounds that failure by holding eight year olds responsible for the school system's inability to educate them. The allocation of resources and the reorganization of instruction necessary to begin dramatically reducing systemic failure are the responsibility of the Chancellor and the Mayor.

Cost Considerations

As the preceding discussion indicates, the New York City school system has had a retention policy in place since Spring 1999. The Mayor and Chancellor are actually proposing a toughening of the current policy under which students in third through eighth grade who perform far below the standard (Level 1) in English Language Arts (ELA) or mathematics may be held back if they do not "pass" (score in Level 2) after summer school. Schoolwork and attendance are other factors considered in the current retention decision for which there is no parental appeal process. The proposed policy transfers those factors to a hastily designed appeals process that actually places the decision one and often two bureaucratic levels beyond parent access.

Examination of reports on summer school programs in 2000 through 2003 reveals that, in each of these four years:³⁰

- Approximately 13,000 third graders were ordered to report to summer school because they were at risk of being held back; and
- Approximately 65 percent of these students remain at Level 1 after summer school, and 43 percent are actually held back in third grade. Ten percent of those who were previously held back were at risk of being held back a second time in third grade; thus they could spend three years in third grade.

This year, the New York City Department of Education (DOE) estimates that at least 15,000 of its 85,000 third grade students are likely to perform at Level 1 in ELA and/or math this spring. Using past test performance and promotion policy as a guide, we estimate that under the current policy, approximately 9,750 students will remain at Level 1 after this year's summer school. Of these, again using past performance as a guide, 6,450 students will be held back in third grade, 645 of them for a

²⁹ Kaye, J, *Ibid.*

³⁰ Metis Associates, Inc. *Evaluation Report: New York City Board of Education Summer School 2000, 2001*; Metis Associates, Inc., *Evaluation Report: New York City Department of Education Summer School 2002*, December 2002; and Division of Assessment and Accountability, New York City Department of Education, *Evaluation of the New York City Department of Education Summer School 2003 Program*, October 2003.

second time. But under the proposed retention policy, all 9,750 Level 1 students could be held back in third grade, about 3,300 more students than under the current policy.

Retaining students is very expensive. Based on DOE school expenditure data for the 2001-02 school year,³¹ the cost of an extra year of school for an elementary school student was \$10,738. The cost, under the current and proposed policies, of the current third grade retention policy (in 2002 dollars) is \$76 million, while the cost of the proposed retention policy, with 3,300 more students held back, would be \$115 million. Additionally, the Chancellor has committed \$33 million for programmatic costs of retention-related services.

Table 1: Estimated cost of current and proposed retention policies

	<i>Current policy</i>	<i>Proposed policy</i>
<i>Number of retained students</i>	6,450	9,750
<i>Number of twice-retained students</i>	645	975
<i>Cost per student</i>	\$10,738	\$10,738
<i>Total annual cost</i>	\$76,186,110	\$115,165,050
<i>New money committed for proposed policy</i>	\$33,000,000	\$33,000,000
<i>Total cost with new money</i>	\$109,186,110	\$148,165,050

However, the greatest cost of the school system’s failure to educate its students falls on both the students themselves and the quality of our civil society. The proposed retention policy would increase the number of students who ultimately drop out of school and consequently exacerbate both human and societal costs. Although it is not possible to accurately estimate the increased drop out rate without a detailed longitudinal study, New York City’s experience with the Promotional Gates program indicates a 60 percent increase in the drop out rate (from 25 percent to 40 percent) for students who were retained, compared to similar students who were not held back.

³¹ Board of Education of the City of New York, *School Based Expenditure Reports, Fiscal Year 2001-2002, Systemwide Summary*, 2003.

Table 2: Estimated change in drop out rate under proposed retention policy

		<i>Current policy</i>	<i>Proposed policy</i>
<i>Number of students affected by policy</i>		6,450	9,750
<i>Estimated number of drop-outs due without retention policy</i>		1,613	2,438
<i>Estimated number of additional drop-outs with retention policy</i>		968	1,463
<i>Class of 1999 drop out rate</i>	31.4%		
<i>Estimated drop out rate with retention policy</i>		32.9%	33.7%

This analysis suggests that the number of high school students who drop out would increase by more than two percentage points if the new policy were fully implemented. Of the 62,482 students who were supposed to graduate in 1999 after four years in high school, the final DOE report indicates that 19,640 students (31.4 percent) had dropped out by 2002.³² When those students affected by the current policy reach high school age, the drop out rate would increase to 32.9 percent. When those students affected by the proposed policy reach high school age, the drop out rate would increase to 33.7 percent, a statistically significant change.

Alternatives to Retention

Past efforts to improve students' literacy skills offer useful guidance. In 1996, Chancellor Crew began to focus the city school system's efforts to ensure that all students learn to read by third grade. Those efforts included an early grades diagnostic reading assessment (ECLAS), increased provision of test score data for teacher use, system-wide whole-school team assessments of instructional effectiveness (PASS), the extensive use of early grades literacy interventions such as Reading Recovery and other programs, the forced-march improvement of failing schools through the Chancellor's District, and some initial reduction in class size. Chancellor Levy continued these programs, and his efforts were immeasurably aided by the implementation of state-funded class size reductions. Levy also implemented the Grow Report that advised teachers and parents about students' specific literacy and math proficiency, and provided recommendations about how to help students improve their skills.

We propose that the \$109-148 million of projected costs related to retention policy spending on either the current or the proposed third grade promotion policies could be better used in improving instruction sufficiently to prevent failure in the first place. Here are some examples:

³² New York City Department of Education, *The Class of 1999 Final Longitudinal Report: A Three-Year Follow-Up Study*, 2003.

- The cost of reducing class size to 20 students in grades 2 and 3 would be approximately \$72 million.
- The cost of Reading Recovery or a similarly effective intervention program targeted to the 20 percent of first graders with the poorest reading skills would be approximately \$56 million.
- The cost of a half-time lead teacher to provide coaching, professional development, and support to other teachers in grades 1-3 of the lowest performing third of New York City’s schools would be approximately \$26 million.
- The cost of instituting the successful Chancellor’s District approach -- including an extended school day, tutoring after school, reduced class size, and extensive professional development -- in grades 2 and 3 in the same lowest performing third of the city’s schools, would be approximately \$85 million.

Table 3: Estimated cost of alternative approaches to retention

<i>Reduce class size from 25 to 20 in grades 2 and 3 in all schools³³</i>	\$72,000,000
<i>Chancellor’s District approach: Extra teacher cost for extended day (longer school day and tutoring after school), reduced class size to 20 students & extensive PD for grades 2 and 3 in bottom third of schools³⁴</i>	\$85,000,000
<i>Reading Recovery: bottom 20 percent of first graders system wide³⁵</i>	\$56,000,000
<i>Lead teacher: Extra half-teacher per grade, grades 1-3, for bottom third of schools³⁶</i>	\$26,000,000

We are not proposing any of these interventions as specific remedies for the systemic failures to educate New York City’s elementary school students. We are suggesting that, for the same or less money than the current and proposed retention policies require, the Department of Education could mount instructional interventions whose effectiveness has, in contrast to any lasting impact of various retention experiments, been reliably demonstrated by research. Such interventions would identify and support the students in need of targeted assistance long before they ever take the third grade ELA and math tests.

³³ Assumes 170,000 students in grades 2 and 3, and average teacher salary in 2001-02.

³⁴ Assumes \$1,500 per student, based on findings from forthcoming paper on Chancellor’s District study.

³⁵ Assumes \$3,500 per student for half-time teacher costing \$80,000 per year, working with 12 students per year.

³⁶ Assumes cost of teacher with fringes is \$75,000 per year.

Conclusion

Neither retention nor social promotion is an instructional policy that improves students' academic achievement. The Mayor's efforts to restructure the public schools will not be well served by reverting to the proven failures of the past. We urge Chancellor Klein to withdraw his proposed retention policy and to dismantle the current retention program as well. He could then devote their resources to building on the successful instructional interventions developed during previous administrations.

Proven strategies are available to ensure that every student throughout the New York City Public Schools, and especially in the early grades, has an equitable opportunity to become an effective learner. Foremost among these strategies is access to high quality classroom instruction. Providing that equitable opportunity will require articulating and implementing the policies necessary to engage the most qualified teachers with the neediest students. Enacting that single change would so significantly improve achievement, particularly in the city's most poorly performing schools, that policy would no longer feel constrained to hide behind the smokescreen of retention programs and ending social promotion.

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Khaled Amin, Colin Chellman, Dana Lockwood, Deinya Phenix, Dorothy Siegel and Meryle Weinstein made significant contributions to the Institute's participation in this project. Gillian Eddins, Michael Eskenazi, Fatos Kaba, and Latisha Thomas made significant contributions to the Center's participation in this project. The views expressed in this position paper in no way represent the institutional views of Fordham University.

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