

## Grade Retention:

### A Historical Perspective and its relevance to the State Constitution

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The practice of grade retention has been heavily debated in the history of the United States education system. Since the inception of formalized education, the notion of having a child repeat a grade when it is felt they have not mastered the concepts taught has been a primary method of remediation in our schools. Although this practice has been rampant in our nation's education system (and concurrently practiced here in Belleville with consistency), its results on the retained children as well as on our society have been less than favorable. In 1875, the New Jersey Constitution guaranteed a Thorough and Efficient educational system. The theory behind this article lies behind the untried notion that the practice of grade retention in the state of New Jersey is unconstitutional on the basis that having a child repeat an academic grade as a method of remediation is neither efficient to the child nor society. This paper is not a direct attack on the Belleville Public School's practice of retention (or almost every other district in the state of New Jersey for that matter) but rather an examination of the practice and its relevance to our state's constitution.

Dennis Parker (2001), stated it best when he said, "Unlike any other profession, education tides an ideological pendulum with uncanny regularity. From bridge builders to doctors, better practices and products regularly replace old ones. Yet education policymakers sometimes revert to the past for their future. They think nothing of readopting materials, practices, or policies from the past and calling them innovations." The retention pendulum has swayed back and forth in the history of our formalized education. The practice of retaining students between the 1980's and 90's appeared to be less utilized

however information from NASP (National Association of School Psychologists) has yielded that retention is on the rise in some states nationwide. In recent years, education policy makers in several states (Texas, California, Delaware, South Carolina, North Carolina, Wisconsin) and major cities (Chicago, New York, Boston, and Los Angeles) have adopted retention as the primary remediation method when students do not achieve proficiency on standardized test results. In New Jersey, AchieveNJ has tied graduation requirements on proficiency levels for the PARCC. As will be discussed later, these methods can be costly to the students being retained as well as to society. Although policy makers in the state of New Jersey have not adopted a uniform retention regulation in any major bureau of our state (with the exception of the graduation requirement in AchieveNJ), the practice is overly prevalent in almost all districts in the garden state.

The practice of retention and its constitutionality has never been decided by our state supreme court. Individual parents (e.g. J.C and C.C, Vs. Board of Education of the Borough of Woodbine, Cape May County; etc) have taken their school boards to local courts to contest schools' decisions regarding their child being retained and the results have been mixed; however, parents have never contested that retaining their child was unconstitutional based on it being an inefficient practice.

Challenging the efficiency of retention is not a difficult task. Research dedicated to this topic has been tenacious and almost all objective studies yield the practice is harmful to the retained student, both academically and emotionally. Systemic reviews and meta-analyses examining research over the past century conclude that the cumulative evidence does not support the use of grade retention as an intervention for academic achievement or socio-emotional adjustment problems (Holmes, 1989; Jimerson, 2001, as seen in Anderson, et. al; 2016 on NASP informational review). Research examining the overall effects of 19 empirical studies conducted during the 1990's compared outcomes for students

who were retained and matched comparison students who were promoted. On the elementary level, results indicate that grade retention had a negative impact on all areas of achievement (reading, math, and language) and socio-emotional adjustment (peer relationships, self-esteem, problem behaviors, and attendance (Jimerson, 2001).

It was mentioned earlier, that Chicago was one of the major cities in the United States that adopted retention as the primary method of remediation for students whom were not proficient based on standardized test results. A comparison study was conducted and results found that there was little to no evidence that students who were retained did better than their low-achieving (but non-retained) counterparts. Overall, there is no evidence that retention led to greater achievement growth for two years after the promotional grade, and, in the sixth grade, the study found significant evidence that retaining students significantly increased the likelihood of placement in special education (Nagaoko, Roderick, 2004).

In addition to academic disadvantages stemming from retention, a child's cognitive growth appears to be stunted when they are retained in kindergarten as well. Hong and Raudenbush (2005) found that there was no evidence that a policy of grade retention in kindergarten improves average achievement in mathematics or reading. Evidence does suggest however that children who are retained learn less than they would have in later academic years had they instead been promoted. After being retained for one year, the average loss in academic growth experienced by retained students was about two-thirds of a standard deviation of the outcome in each subject area, equivalent to almost half a year's expected growth.

On the high school level, grade retention is one of the most powerful predictors of high school dropout. When a child is retained, his or her likelihood of dropping out increases between 2 and 11 times when compared to promoted students (Jimerson, Anderson, and Whipple, 2002).

In addition to dropping out of high school, retention students have increased risks of health compromising behaviors such as emotional distress, cigarette use, alcohol use, drug abuse, driving while drinking, suicidal intentions, and violent behaviors. The impact of retention does not only affect the individual student being retained. Eric Eide and Mark Showalter (1999) examine the economic effect retention has on dropping out of school and thus future labor market earnings several years after the student drops out. The findings reveal that retention significantly increases one's likelihood of dropping out of school and thus, dramatically decreasing their future earnings. Students who ultimately drop out of school without a diploma face considerable difficulty finding and maintaining employment for self-sufficiency and experience higher rates of mental health problems, chemical abuse, and criminal activities than do high school graduates.

Effective alternatives to retaining a student exist; however, they are rarely utilized. Reasons for their lack of utilization revolve largely around continuing to employ more customary remedial measures as well as financial limitations. If we further look into the financial implications of retention, we will see that the practice of retaining students is a costly one. It is estimated that as many as 10% of American students are retained each year. While the numbers in Belleville are not that high, if we take the average cost to educate a pupil per year and put that extra savings into more remedial measures, like summer school programs and after school educational activities, it may be a more effective method, emotionally and educationally.

Overall, the evidence is insurmountable that the practice of retention is an inefficient process. Not only does it not produce positive academic results, evidence suggests that it actually decreases academic and cognitive potential. In addition to causing negative implications cognitively, academically and emotionally, it produces effects that have a strong likelihood of leading to dropping out of school, depression, and lowered self-esteem. Yet despite all of this evidence, to date, no retained student in the state of New Jersey has challenged the court system on the basis that the practice of retention is unconstitutional due to it being an inefficient method of practice. Hopefully in the upcoming years more efficient outcomes can be garnered.

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