

Summary: Illinois Social Promotion Conferences

Sponsored by the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory and the Center on Education Policy

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In February 1998, the state of Illinois in Public Act 90-548 (H.B. 452) prohibited the practice of social promotion within the state: "Decisions to promote or retain students in any classes shall be based on successful completion of the curriculum, attendance, performance based on Illinois Goals and Assessment Program tests and the Iowa Test of Basic of Skills, or other testing or any other criteria established by the school board." (Illinois P.A. 90-548, § 5-915, § 10-20.9a). In other words, the ending of social promotion is a statewide policy that vests full authority in local school boards for its implementation.

On May 3 and 4, 1999, the Center on Education Policy and the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, with funding from the Joyce Foundation, sponsored two local meetings on social promotion and retention in the southern and western suburbs of Chicago. More than 100 participants (district superintendents, school principals, teachers, board members, and PTA representatives) attended the two meetings. Both meetings were convened (1) to assist school superintendents, teachers, administrators, and parents in dealing with the pressures of ending social promotion in Illinois and (2) to give participants an opportunity to voice their opinions and provide suggestions to local and federal legislators on the current debate surrounding social promotion.

Recommendations

Conference participants from both the southern and western suburbs suggested similar recommendations on social promotion and the development of new education policy. These recommendations included:

1. *Any decision on retaining a student should not be based solely on the results of one test, rather multiple indicators must be used.*
2. *To avoid retaining students, early and frequent interventions must be provided to help failing students, and teachers must be assisted to improve their teaching. Furthermore, these services must be adequately supported with stable and sustained funding and with more flexible uses of earmarked funds.*
3. *Parental support and involvement in the education of children is essential. Efforts must be made to increase parents' involvement and to talk with them about how that would take place.*
4. *Legislators need to solicit input from educators before adopting state policies on education.*

Both social promotion conferences were intended to provide varying perspectives on the intent, implications, and intervention strategies used to implement House Bill 452. At each meeting, presenters on two panels focused their remarks on the political and practical implications of this legislation. Following the panel presentations, small groups discussed the social promotion debate and the strategies they are employing in response to the new state promotion policy. This report will combine the presentations and discussions at both conferences since the proceedings of the two days were so similar.

Panel I: Intent and Implications of House Bill 452

Dr. Mary Lee Smith, professor, Arizona State University, and one of the leading authors in the field of social promotion research, gave a summary at both meetings of what current research says on the effects of retention on student achievement. She believes social promotion is based on three prevailing opinions held by policymakers and the general public:

1. Repetition of content will promote student achievement.
2. The threat of failure/retention will motivate students to work harder.
3. Something, anything must be done to improve schools.

This second opinion, according to Smith, is not based on fact. She reported that the overwhelming majority of educational research says retention has not worked as a strategy to increase student achievement. Seventy percent of retention studies report negative results in the use of these practices. Additionally, retained/over-age students are most associated with increased rates of behavior problems and are more likely to drop out of school. Smith also noted that the use of high-stakes testing as the sole measure for retention or promotion is invalid, and the use of student test scores is not a reliable indication that student achievement and learning are increasing. “If students only focus on the test and how to obtain a high score, the test loses its meaning and learning suffers.”

Smith concluded her presentation by offering the following observations:

1. The hidden cost of retaining one student an additional year in the same grade is equal to fifty hours of one-on-one professional tutoring.
2. There are more cost-effective alternatives to retention (e.g., summer school, extended-day programs, extended-year schools, accelerated learning, high-quality instruction, after-school programs, and so on).
3. Research has shown that remediation increases student achievement without the negative affects associated with retention.

Dr. Alfred Hess, director, Center for Urban School Policy, Northwestern University, spoke at the southern suburban meeting. He provided a local perspective on the national debate surrounding social promotion with an overview of the retention policy in the Chicago Public Schools (CPS). According to Hess, the implementation of reforms in the CPS system has resulted in people working harder, with heightened accountability for teachers, administrators, and students. Moreover, the framing of the retention/promotion debate as an “A or B” choice does a disservice to the Chicago effort. Hess further noted that the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) is an inappropriate measure for retention and promotion, and CPS is developing new, more appropriate tests. Despite this shortcoming, Chicago’s level of retained students entering the ninth grade in the lowest-achievement quadrant has dropped 21 percent since 1993. Retention’s effects in CPS cannot be determined yet, but what is clear is that many CPS students had negative attitudes toward school before the promotion policy was established. Since the advent of retention, students no longer think it is “uncool” to do well in school. Hess did, however, concede that the developments/achievements in Chicago are not necessarily duplicable in school districts across the country, and flexibility needs to be employed in developing national legislation on the issue.

Walter Carlson, partner, Sidley and Austin Law Firm and Local School Board president, District #65, Skokie, Illinois, spoke at the western suburban meeting. He shared the business community’s perspective on social promotion and the Evanston/Skokie school district’s responses to the legislation. Carlson—also a principal in the Chicago business alliance, Chicago United—began by explaining that the business community believes the education system is not doing its job. The continued practice of socially promoting students regardless of their achievement is an indication the system has failed some students.

However, in his role as president of the Skokie School Board, Carlson stated that he knew and understood the problems and pressures of addressing the needs and learning styles of all students. In response to this, the Skokie district is drafting a new promotion policy that includes flexibility for the assessment of student achievement (i.e., tests, teacher/principal recommendation, and so on). Additionally, Skokie developed new K-12 student standards, offers after-school programs, and instituted summer school for low-achieving students.

Panel II: Intervention Strategies and the Practical Application of House Bill 452

At both meetings, Panel II focused on producing concrete examples of intervention strategies and local promotion policies in the wake of H.B. 452.

Dr. Jay Cunneen, superintendent, Thornton School District, and Dr. Dorothea Fitzgerald, superintendent, Dolton School District, shared at the southern suburban session their districts' responses to Illinois's new promotion legislation. Both Cunneen and Fitzgerald noted that while the research may show retention does not deliver positive effects on student achievement, district superintendents are bound by the current legislation and must promote or retain students according to the new policy. The superintendents suggested that school districts collaborate with each other and focus their efforts on preventing the need for retention at all. Strategies for doing this include:

1. Using of alternative funding sources for intervention programs (e.g., Goals 2000).
2. Increasing opportunities for teacher professional development on quality instruction practices.
3. Providing accelerated learning programs for students in the classes they find challenging.
4. Providing transition centers for low-achieving eighth graders ineligible for promotion to high school.
5. Developing a promotion policy that includes multiple indicators for student assessment.

Patrick Murphy, superintendent, Berwyn School District #98, at the western suburban meeting reiterated a number of the points made by Cunneen and Fitzgerald and supported the research outlined by Smith regarding the negative effects of in-grade retention. Murphy's own response to low-student achievement in the district includes interventions that address the special needs of limited English-proficient students (e.g., enhanced teacher training to assist language minority children, expansion of ESL class sections with a Spanish emphasis, employment of social workers who are able to communicate in Spanish, encouragement of on-campus adult-education ESL programs for school parents, and so on).

Dr. Brenda Rodriguez, director, Center for School and Community Development, NCREL, added to the discussion at both meetings by focusing the debate around schools and school district's making sure they do not "ignore the issues of cultural and language diversity and the multidimensional fluid dimensions of intelligence and human development." Rodriguez further stated that students must be assessed continually, and schools must develop partnerships with community service centers and review and analyze their programs to determine if their policies have a negative impact on students based on native language, race/ethnicity, immigration status, mobility rates, gender, poverty, and other social factors.

Summary of Small-Group Discussions

Following the panel presentations, conference participants met in small groups and discussed three questions regarding the social promotion/retention debate:

1. How will you implement the new state policy on social promotion in your district?
2. What strategies, practices, and programs have you observed to be particularly effective in addressing social promotion at the local level?
3. How do programs addressing social promotion affect other educational reform initiatives in your district (e.g., extended-day learning, comprehensive school reform)?

Recorders from each group shared the key ideas and concerns of the small groups. The common themes that emerged from these discussions at both meetings can be characterized as (a) interventions for assisting schools in increasing student achievement and (b) recommendations for policymakers regarding the development of education policy. Jack Jennings, director of the Center on Education Policy and the moderator for both conferences, noted that participants from both the southern and western suburbs made many of the same suggestions for student, teacher, and school interventions:

- **Accountability/Assessment**

Participants suggested that student assessments include multiple indicators, such as student portfolios, attendance, and teacher/principal recommendations.

• **Funding/Flexibility**

Increased and sustained funding support for student intervention strategies and teacher professional development was continually suggested as a necessity for true reform to work. A number of participants also requested funding flexibility and more opportunities to shift monies from one area to another, just as the Chicago Public School system was able to do. Many participants believe the new push for retention will have an adverse affect on current educational reforms in their districts (e.g., extended-day learning, comprehensive school reform, Title I, class-size reduction). This negative effect is expected to be in the form of competition for available funding and in the hidden costs of additional students having to repeat a year.

• **Parental Involvement**

The difficulty of increasing parental involvement was continually pointed to as a hindrance in providing support and academic intervention to low-achieving students. Local incentives were suggested as options to increase parental involvement in schools. Participants identified additional dialogue between educators and parents on what constitutes useful and effective parental involvement as an important need.

• **Intervention/Remediation**

Participants overwhelmingly suggested that students who appear to have difficulty in school should be offered remediation early and often. And in light of the negative research on retention, participants also recommended that a monitoring system be developed to determine who the new retention policy affects the most and how successful it is.

• **Educator-Politician Disconnect**

The one constant and strongly voiced suggestion from both conferences focused on the perception that local educators are not included in the development of education policy. With all the negative research on retention, participants loudly voiced their disbelief that legislators would pass policy that is seen in the education field as not only ineffective but harmful to children. One participant’s statement echoed the feelings of nearly everyone on this matter.

Education cannot be driven by polls and it is not always popular, but it must be correct and research driven. Legislators need to engage in a dialogue with teachers and those who are in schools...People believe they know schools because they were there and made it, but that does not mean they know education or know what will work.

Note of Appreciation

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