

## BEYOND GRADE RETENTION AND SOCIAL PROMOTION: PROMOTING THE SOCIAL AND ACADEMIC COMPETENCE OF STUDENTS

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During the past decade, amidst the current context emphasizing educational standards and accountability, the practice of grade retention has increased. The call for an end to social promotion has generated a variety of recommendations and legislation regarding promotion policies. This context has served as a catalyst for numerous debates regarding the use of grade retention and social promotion. In an era emphasizing evidence-based interventions, research indicates that neither grade retention nor social promotion is a successful strategy for improving educational success. Moreover, research also reveals prevention and intervention strategies that are likely to promote the social or academic competence of students at risk of poor school performance. It is essential that educational professionals are familiar with the research when implementing interventions to promote student success. School psychologists may use this article as a primer for teachers, administrators, and parents, as it provides a synthesis of research addressing the following important questions: (a) What are the demographic characteristics of retained students? (b) What are the effects of retention on academic and socioemotional outcomes? (c) What long-term outcomes are associated with grade retention? (d) What are students' perspectives regarding grade retention? (e) How does a developmental perspective enhance our understanding? (f) What are some empirically supported effective intervention strategies? Educational professionals are encouraged to incorporate evidence-based programs and policies to facilitate the success of all students. © 2006 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

As someone on the front lines in the battle of closing the achievement gap, I struggle with decisions that are made to retain a child who has failed to master grade level content. Retention decisions are not made hastily, cases are thoroughly reviewed. Often the contributing factors to the student's readiness to acquire and retain grade-level content include those related to family circumstances. Suspicions of learning disabilities are quelled, if only temporarily, by data garnered from psychoeducational testing. Too often I have learned that one of my primary grade students who had been retained surfaced with academic difficulties at the intermediate level and upon being retested, qualified as a student with a learning disability. Are these students truly learning disabled or has the system failed them? Retention is clearly not the answer in an overwhelming majority of my students' cases, instead, I search for strategies to help these children succeed in school.

Mariellen Kerr, School Psychologist and Elementary Counselor (personal communication, September 13, 2004)

The previous correspondence characterizes numerous communications with colleagues advocating on behalf of students, and highlights several important considerations regarding the decision to retain a student. "To retain or to promote?" is a question vexing educational professionals, parents, and policy makers throughout the United States. During the past decade, it has been suggested that "Perhaps no topic in public education suffers from a greater divide between the views of researchers and the views of practitioners and the public. The existing research overwhelmingly points to negative effects of retention" (Educational Research Service, 1998, p. 1). Well-prepared and knowledgeable school psychologists are essential advocates for children,

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serving as a conduit between educational science and practice. The following provides a brief review of the current context and synthesis of research that informs practice.

One influence on the increasing popularity of grade retention is the current sociopolitical context emphasizing high standards and accountability. With national initiatives such as the 2001 No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act (20 U.S.C. § 6301), there has been an increased emphasis on “closing the achievement gap” between minority and nonminority students and improving the performance of all children. In an effort to ensure that all students meet basic competencies, an array of reading, writing, and other academic standards have emerged as indicators of whether students are proficient and should be promoted to the next grade level. Facilitating the educational success of *all* students is indeed a daunting task, and it is within this context that research regarding grade retention and social promotion is particularly informative.

#### GRADE RETENTION RATES IN THE UNITED STATES

It is paradoxical that more children have been “left behind” since NCLB was passed than before. The number of students retained annually in the United States has increased during the past decade (Hauser, Pager, & Simmons, 2000; Jimerson, 2003; McCoy & Reynolds, 1999), with recent estimates between 7 and 15% (over 3 million children) each year (Hauser, 1999; Merrick, McCreery, & Brown, 1998). Retention rates vary by individual factors (e.g., social and economic indicators and ethnicity), school type (e.g., suburban, metropolitan), and geographic region. Retention rates escalate rapidly as sociodemographic risk factors are combined. It is reported that by high school, the cumulative risk of grade retention in metropolitan school systems often exceeds 50% (Hauser, 1999).

Retention is not an inexpensive intervention. For instance, at the end of at the end of the 2002–2003 academic year, 192,713 students were retained in kindergarten through third grade in Florida, which cost the state over 1 billion dollars (Florida Association of School Psychologists, 2004). This estimate is based on the annual cost of education per student and does not factor in other collateral costs related to increased dropout rates and other deleterious long-term outcomes associated with grade retention (Eide & Showalter, 2001).

#### RESEARCH EXAMINING GRADE RETENTION

NCLB emphasizes scientifically based interventions; however, the extant empirical evidence appears to contraindicate grade retention. Educational professionals are expected to consider contemporary research that supports effective interventions to promote the success of students. Over 100 studies have been conducted during the past century examining both the short- and long-term outcomes associated with repeating a grade; however, there is no single definitive study examining the effectiveness of grade retention that includes all necessary control variables and outcomes. Thus, it is essential to consider the convergence of empirical evidence.

Research examining the efficacy of grade retention suggests that it is not likely to be effective in remediating academic failure and/or behavioral difficulties; rather, it is essential to focus on instructional strategies and specific interventions to facilitate the education of children at risk of academic failure (Jimerson, 2001b). Unfortunately, there is often a disparity between research, policy, and practice, such that educational policy and instructional strategies do not necessarily follow from what has been empirically shown to be effective (Jimerson, 2001a, 2001b). It is possible to strengthen the connection between research and practice by recognizing that educational professionals who are knowledgeable of educational research are those best prepared to implement effective strategies to maintain high standards and facilitate student success.

## WHAT ARE THE DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF RETAINED STUDENTS?

Retained students often have lower achievement (particularly in reading and language arts) relative to most students in a classroom; however, there are often peers who are equally low-achieving but promoted (Jimerson, Carlson, Rotert, Egeland, & Sroufe, 1997; Sandoval, 1984). Compared to equally low-achieving and promoted peers, retained students typically do not have lower levels of intelligence (Jimerson et al., 1997); however, children who are retained are more likely to have mothers with lower IQ scores, poorer attitudes toward their child's education, and lower parental involvement in school. Many students who are retained exhibit behavior and socioemotional problems (Jimerson et al., 1997; Sandoval, 1984). A prospective longitudinal study of children indicated that prior to retention, those students who were retained displayed more negative classroom behaviors and also were seen as being significantly less confident and less socially competent than their peers (Jimerson et al., 1997).

Research also has revealed gender and ethnic characteristics of retained students (Abidin, Golladay, & Howerton, 1971; Niklason, 1984). For instance, statistics for the 2002–2003 academic year in Florida indicated that the relative ratio of retained students by race included a disproportionate percentage of Black (24%) and Hispanic (19%) students relative to White (8%) and Asian/Pacific (6%) students (Florida Association of School Psychologists, 2004). Numerous studies have suggested that boys are about twice as likely to repeat a grade as girls, and consistent findings indicate that retention rates are higher for minority students (particularly Black and Hispanic students). Retained students also are likely to have missed a greater percentage of school days than nonretained students (Jimerson et al., 1997). Thus, research indicates that retained students are a heterogeneous group of children with an assortment of challenges influencing low achievement.

## WHAT ARE THE EFFECTS OF RETENTION ON ACADEMIC AND SOCIOEMOTIONAL OUTCOMES?

School psychologists and other educational professionals should be familiar with the three meta-analyses that provide information from studies of grade retention published between 1925–1999 (Holmes, 1989; Holmes & Matthews, 1984; Jimerson, 2001a). Meta-analysis is a statistical procedure based on the concept of effect size (ES; Glass, 1978), which allows researchers to systematically pool results across studies. Analyses resulting in a negative ES suggest that an intervention had a negative or harmful effect relative to the comparison group. Holmes and Matthews (1984) completed a meta-analysis examining the efficacy of retention, including the effects on both academic achievement and socioemotional outcomes that included 44 studies published between 1929 and 1981. Five years later, Holmes (1989) included 19 additional studies published between 1981–1989, for a total of 63 studies published between 1925–1989 where retained students were followed and compared to promoted students. Jimerson (2001a) provided the most recent systematic review and meta-analysis of studies examining the efficacy of grade retention. Following a systematic literature search, Jimerson (2001a) included 20 studies published between 1990–1999, including over 1,100 retained students and over 1,500 regularly promoted students. Thus, the results discussed in this section are ESs from the 83 studies published between 1925–1999 that were included in the three previous meta-analyses (Holmes, 1989; Holmes & Matthews, 1984; Jimerson, 2001a) (see Table 1 for specific analyses).

Overall, the convergence of research does not demonstrate academic advantages for retained students relative to comparison groups of low-achieving promoted peers. Holmes (1989) reported that 54 studies showed negative achievement effects when retained children went on to the next grade level, and in the nine studies that reported positive short-term achievement effects, the benefits were shown to diminish over time and disappear in later grades. In the most recent

Table 1  
*Mean Effect Sizes from Three Meta-Analyses Examining the Outcomes of Studies Exploring the Efficacy of Grade Retention*

	Jimerson (2001a)	Holmes (1989)	Holmes & Matthews (1984)
Overall Effect Size	-.31 [246] <sup>a</sup>	-.15 [861]	-.37 [575]
Academic Achievement	-.39 [169]	-.19 [536]	-.44 [367]
Language Arts	-.36 [11]	-.16 [106]	-.40 [85]
Reading	-.54 [52]	-.08 [144]	-.48 [75]
Mathematics	-.49 [48]	-.11 [137]	-.33 [77]
Total/Composites	-.20 [13]	NA	NA
GPA	-.18 [45]	-.58 [4]	-.58 [4]
Socioemotional Adjustment	-.22 [77]	-.09 [234]	-.27 [142]
Social	-.08 [12]	-.09 [101]	-.27 [60]
Emotional	-.28 [13]	.03 [33]	-.37 [9]
Behavioral	-.11 [30]	-.13 [24]	-.31 [13]
Self-Concept	-.04 [16]	-.13 [45]	-.19 [34]
Adjustment Composite	-.15 [4]	NA	NA
Attitude Toward School	NA	-.05 [39]	-.16 [26]
Attendance	-.65 [2]	-.18 [7]	-.12 [6]

*Note.* Negative numbers represent that results of analyses favored the matched comparison group of students relative to the retained students. NA = not available.

<sup>a</sup>numbers in brackets indicate the number of effect sizes used in calculating the mean effect size.

meta-analysis, Jimerson (2001a) indicated that only 5% of 169 analyses of academic achievement outcomes resulted in significant statistical differences favoring the retained students; however, 47% resulted in significant statistical differences favoring the comparison group of low-achieving peers. Furthermore, among the analyses favoring the retained students, two thirds reflected differences during the repeated year (e.g., second year in kindergarten), but initial gains were not maintained over time. These results of the meta-analyses comprising nearly 700 analyses of achievement, from over 80 studies during the past 75 years, do not support the use of grade retention as an early intervention to enhance academic achievement.

There are relatively fewer studies that have addressed the social and behavioral adjustment outcomes of retained students. The findings from these studies have suggested that grade retention can have harmful effects on socioemotional and behavioral adjustment as well as academic adjustment. Holmes (1989) concluded that on average, the retained students displayed poorer social adjustment, more negative attitudes toward school, less frequent attendance, and more problem behaviors in comparison to groups of matched controls. Jimerson (2001a) reported that among 16 studies, which yielded 148 analyses of socioemotional adjustment outcomes of retained students relative to a matched comparison group of students, 8 analyses resulted in statistical significance favoring the retained students whereas 13 analyses were statistically significant favoring the comparison group. Thus, the majority (86%) of analyses examining socioemotional outcomes indicated no significant differences between those students who were retained and low-achieving-but-promoted students. Furthermore, related research indicated that many retained students have difficulties with their peers (Byrnes, 1989; Shepard & Smith, 1990). Thus, the results of the meta-analyses synthesizing over 300 analyses of socioemotional and behavioral adjustment, from

over 50 studies during the past 75 years, fail to support the use of grade retention as an early intervention to enhance socioemotional and behavioral adjustment.

It is often thought that retention in early grades may not lead to the same negative outcomes as retention in later grades; however, the majority of the studies in the meta-analyses included children retained from kindergarten through third grade. Across studies, retention at any grade level has been associated with later high-school dropout as well as other deleterious long-term outcomes.

#### WHAT LONG-TERM OUTCOMES ARE ASSOCIATED WITH GRADE RETENTION?

While there are few studies examining the efficacy of early grade retention that extend through high school, longitudinal studies that do exist have consistently demonstrated that retained students are more likely to drop out than matched comparison groups of equally low achieving, but socially promoted, peers (Jimerson, 1999; Jimerson, Ferguson, Whipple, Anderson, & Dalton, 2002). Rumberger (1995) identified grade retention as the single most powerful predictor of dropping out. A review provided by Jimerson, Anderson, and Whipple (2002) documented the consistent finding that students retained during elementary school are between 2 and 11 times more likely to drop out of high school than nonretained students and that overall, grade retention increases the risk of dropping out by 20 to 50%.

Grade retention also is associated with other long-term negative outcomes. One study followed children for 21 years and compared retained students, low-achieving-but-promoted students, and a control group (Jimerson, 1999). This study found that retained students had lower levels of academic adjustment (i.e., a combination of achievement, behavior, and attendance) at the end of Grade 11, were more likely to drop out of high school by age 19, were less likely to receive a diploma by age 20, were less likely to be enrolled in a postsecondary education program, received lower education/employment-status ratings, were paid less per hour, and received poorer employment-competence ratings at age 20 in comparison to a group of low-achieving students (Jimerson, 1999). In addition, noted that unlike the retained students, the low-achieving-but-promoted group was comparable to the control group on all employment outcomes at age 20. Results from other longitudinal samples have yielded similar findings, suggesting poorer long-term outcomes for retained students relative to a comparison group of low-achieving-but-promoted students (Alexander, Entwisle, & Dauber, 2003; Eide & Showalter, 2001; Temple, Reynolds, & Ou, 2000).

#### WHAT ARE STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES REGARDING GRADE RETENTION?

It also is important to explore students' perspectives regarding retention. Yamamoto and Byrnes (1987) asked children to rate 20 stressful life events, which included such occurrences as: losing a parent, going to the dentist, and getting a bad report card. The results among sixth-grade students indicated that only the loss of a parent and going blind were reported as more stressful than grade retention. Anderson, Jimerson, and Whipple (2005) replicated and expanded upon this study and found that sixth-grade students rated grade retention as the most stressful life event, similar to the loss of a parent and going blind. Both studies demonstrated a developmental trend, consistent with emerging social and cognitive skills, with the reported stress of grade retention increasing from first, to third, to sixth grade. These findings have clear implications in considering the potential socioemotional and psychological impact on children when exploring possible interventions to address academic or behavioral problems.

#### HOW DOES A DEVELOPMENTAL PERSPECTIVE ENHANCE OUR UNDERSTANDING?

A transactional-ecological model that emphasizes early influences, multiple contexts, and developmental processes is valuable in considering both the short- and long-term developmental

trajectories of retained students (Jimerson, Egeland, Sroufe, & Carlson, 2000; Jimerson, Ferguson, et al., 2002). From this perspective, current adaptation is influenced by the individual's past and current circumstances, ecological contexts, and previous developmental history. Therefore, considering the transactional–ecological model of development, grade retention should not be construed as a single event causing all subsequent negative events but rather as an outcome associated with a disadvantaged developmental history exacerbated by an ineffective intervention. Without appropriate support and assistance, children experiencing grade retention are likely to continue upon developmental pathways characterized by low-achievement, poor adjustment, and further academic failure. This helps to understand why grade retention is typically an ineffective and potentially harmful intervention, as it does not in and of itself address the needs of these low-achieving and/or misbehaving students. Given the heterogeneous characteristics among retained students and the assortment of needs, educational professionals have a responsibility to delineate specific evidence-based intervention strategies that will enhance the achievement and adjustment of individual students. Thus, there should be an emphasis on early interventions designed to promote the social and academic competence of students.

#### ALTERNATIVES TO RETENTION: EMPIRICALLY SUPPORTED EFFECTIVE INTERVENTION STRATEGIES

It is essential to examine other prevention and intervention strategies that *are supported by the empirical evidence*. The following strategies are aimed at promoting the social and academic competence of students. It is important to respect developmental, cultural, linguistic, and gender differences among students when selecting and implementing interventions. As such, there is no single “silver bullet” intervention that can meet the needs of all students. Rather, it is vital to consider the context and specific needs of the individual children receiving the prevention or intervention services. Once the needs of an individual student and/or the entire student population are understood, it is important for educators to be familiar with specific intervention strategies that are evidence based (Kratochwill & Stoiber, 2000). While a complete review of all preventative and remedial approaches is beyond the scope of this article (for a discussion of research-based strategies for effective instruction, see Algozzine, Ysseldyke, & Elliott, 2002; for a more extensive discussion of interventions for academic and behavior problems, see Shinn, Walker, & Stoner, 2002), the following provides a brief review of evidence-based intervention strategies that may be implemented by educational professionals as alternatives to retention.

Children are most often retained due to low academic achievement, behavioral difficulties, or a combination of the two. Alternatives designed to prevent academic failure, remediate academic deficits, address behavioral problems, and reduce retention rates include an array of possible school-wide interventions and instructional strategies (Rafoth & Carey, 1995). School-wide interventions refer to administratively commissioned programs that are pervasive throughout the school whereas instructional strategies are direct, teacher-led interventions implemented within the existing classroom structure. Depending on the timing, such interventions may serve a preventative function for at-risk students who have not yet been retained or as interventions for students who have been recommended for retention.

Interventions briefly reviewed next include (a) preschool programs, (b) comprehensive school-wide programs, (c) summer school and after school programs, (d) looping and multi-age classrooms, (e) school-based mental health programs, (f) parent involvement, (g) early reading programs, (h) effective instructional strategies and assessment, and (i) behavior/cognitive behavior modification. Some of the alternatives described may involve substantial changes to existing school structure. School psychologists are encouraged to advocate for these types of changes as appropriate; however, it may not always be possible to immediately implement systemic reform.

Therefore, several intervention strategies that can be used at the individual and classroom levels also are described (A table delineating key scholarship related to each of these strategies is available at the *Beyond Grade Retention and Social Promotion* Web site: <http://www.education.ucsb.edu/jimerson/retention>).

### *Preschool Intervention Programs*

A primary purpose of preschool intervention programs is generally to assist at-risk students before they experience academic challenges, through enhancing foundation skills necessary for subsequent academic success (Casto & Mastropieri, 1986; Zigler & Styfco, 2000). Basic literacy skills, prosocial behaviors, and socioemotional development are often emphasized in preschool programs. Preschool programs offer a range of individualized services in the areas of health, nutrition, and parent involvement designed to foster healthy development of children. For instance, Head Start and the Chicago Child-Parent Centers (CPC) are two examples of early childhood intervention programs that provide comprehensive educational and family support services to children from economically disadvantaged families to increase school readiness. Schwartz, Garfinkle, and Davis (2002) provided valuable information and guidance on setting up preschool classrooms including membership, relationships, and knowledge/skills to promote positive outcomes for children. By enhancing skills for academic success through preschool programs, retention may be prevented.

### *Comprehensive Programs to Promote Social and Academic Development*

Proponents of comprehensive programs emphasize that schools are likely to be most successful when they integrate strategies to promote children's academic, social, and emotional learning (Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg, 2004). Comprehensive intervention programs generally emphasize a systems approach for redesigning schools to prevent academic and behavior problems through proactive instruction and school-wide behavior support (Sugai, Horner, & Gresham, 2002). Programs also have been developed to strengthen children's social and academic skills and promote problem solving and conflict resolution skills, such as *Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies* (e.g., Greenberg, Kusche, Cook, & Quamma, 1995). Implementation of comprehensive programs requires a significant commitment by the school administration and faculty, including considerable training, personnel, and resources. However, if these programs are successful, they may lead to reductions in retention.

### *Summer School and After School Programs*

Recognizing that many children may benefit from additional instructional opportunities (beyond the 5–6 hr a day and approximately 175 days a year), well-designed summer school and after school programs may provide students with additional time and exposure to master academic material. Summer school programs focus on providing instruction during the summer months of a traditional academic year whereas after-school programs provide instruction and/or supplementary support outside of the normal school day (or schools may offer morning programs or Saturday school). There have been numerous studies examining the effects of summer school and after school programs (for a review, see Cooper, Charlton, Valentine, & Muhlenbruck, 2000). When implementing summer school or after school programs as an intervention to improve student achievement, it is important that the programs contain key elements commonly found in effective programs (as delineated in Cooper et al., 2000). Giving students additional instructional after school or in summer school, as opposed to retaining them for a year, also may reduce the risk of students dropping out due to being overage for grade.

### *Looping and Multi-Age Classrooms*

Considering individual differences in learning and development, looping and multi-age classrooms are two alternative classroom structures that allow more flexibility to address the needs of students. Looping classrooms have students spend 2 or more years with the same teacher, allowing the teacher to provide instruction to meet the needs and embrace the strengths of each student. Multi-age classrooms include students of different ages and abilities, thus allowing each student to move ahead at his or her own pace and to learn from one another (May, Kundert, & Brent, 1995). Both looping and multi-age classrooms provide teachers an opportunity to better understand and adapt to individual learning styles of students (e.g., Nicholas & Nicholas, 2002; Yang, 1997). Other countries that have significantly lower retention rates in comparison to the United States (e.g., Japan, Germany) often use looping (Reynolds, Barnhart, & Martin, 1999).

### *School-Based Mental Health Programs*

Students with mental health problems (e.g., attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, depression, posttraumatic stress disorder) often fall behind their classmates academically. As noted earlier, behavioral difficulties and socioemotional problems are often associated with recommendations for retention. Some schools have adopted school-based mental health programs in an effort to address the broad mental health needs of students in the most efficient manner possible. Preliminary evaluation results have suggested that school-based mental health programs are promising interventions for promoting social and emotional competence (Armbruster & Lichtman, 1999).

### *Parent Involvement*

Parent involvement (i.e., a combination of a parent's attitude toward education and school as well as a parent's willingness to assist in creating a home atmosphere that is conducive to doing homework) is associated with greater success among students (Christenson, 1995; Fan & Chen, 2001; Sheridan & Kratochwill, 1992; Swap, 1993). Parent involvement is often an essential component of broad-based interventions aimed at improving academic achievement (e.g., Slavin & Madden, 2001), and the addition of a parent component may improve the outcomes of many interventions. It is important to consider cultural variations among parents/families and the ways in which cultural factors may interact with the school's outreach. Policy changes that encourage parent involvement, increasing understanding among administrators, teachers, and staff, and inviting parents' involvement in all aspects of their children's education are proactive strategies that may make parent involvement more feasible.

### *Early Reading Programs*

Reading is an essential skill for subsequent knowledge acquisition; thus, early reading interventions attempt to facilitate children's reading skills before they fall behind and are subsequently recommended for retention. Structured early reading programs have been demonstrated to promote student success (e.g., Slavin & Madden, 2001). Teaching phonemic awareness and decoding skills and providing opportunities to practice reading are valuable instructional strategies (Talbot, Lloyd, & Tankersley, 1994). There is an assortment of early reading programs, including *Writing to Read* (Martin & Freidberg, 1986), *Reading Recovery* (Clay, 1987; Gredler, 1997), *Success for All* (Slavin & Madden, 2001), and *Exitto Para Todos* (Spanish version of *Success for All*; Slavin & Madden, 1999). It is important to consider the needs of diverse student populations and to establish multiple forms of instructional support when implementing early reading programs.

*Effective Instructional Strategies and Assessment*

There are numerous teaching techniques which can be easily implemented within existing classroom structures to increase student performance; for instance, direct instruction, Curriculum-Based Measurement, cooperative learning, and use of mnemonic strategies have been shown to improve academic performance (for more information, see Barnett, Clarizio, & Payette, 1996; Dretzke & Levin, 1996; Forness, Kavale, Blum, & Lloyd, 1997; Fuchs & Fuchs, 1986; Mastropieri & Scruggs, 1998; Shapiro, 1996; White, 1988). Implementing effective, research-based teaching strategies in the classroom is an important facet of facilitating student success. When consulting with classroom teachers, school psychologists are encouraged to highlight research findings regarding effective strategies to promote learning that may in turn reduce the perceived need for retention.

*Behavior and Cognitive Behavior Modification Strategies*

Behavior and cognitive behavior modification strategies are valuable to reduce disruptive behavior and to increase positive classroom behaviors. While behavior and cognitive behavior strategies are grouped together in this section, there are important distinctions between them. Often, behavior modification strategies use token reinforcement systems and peer or adult monitors, or may involve the use of publicly posted positive group and individual behaviors (Shapiro, 1996). Cognitive behavior modification aims to address both the behaviors and the underlying cognitions influencing external behaviors. A combination of behavioral approaches such as modeling, feedback, and reinforcement with cognitive approaches such as "cognitive think alouds," may be effective to teach strategies such as anger control and self-coping. Both behavior and cognitive behavior strategies have consistently been found to reduce disruptive behaviors and increase on-task classroom behavior, thus providing an opportunity to increase academic skills and achievement (Robinson, Smith, Miller, & Brownell, 1999).

## SUMMARY

While it is not possible to review all possible interventions that have been demonstrated to enhance the social and academic competence of students, the aforementioned interventions illustrate numerous effective strategies. When students' needs are addressed, school success will increase. Educational practices, including prevention and intervention strategies, should be informed by theory and empirical research. In addition, students' responses to the intervention should be carefully monitored so that failed educational activities and interventions can be modified or discarded. School psychologists are encouraged to consider the general effectiveness of an intervention strategy; intervention integrity; acceptability by teachers, parents, children and other stakeholders; and the degree to which the interventions empower stakeholders to implement programs with existing skills and resources (Elliott, Witt, Kratochwill, & Stoiber, 2002).

As described earlier, the trajectory resulting in a recommendation for retention is a dynamic process influenced by multiple variables. Given the individual variation in the development of children, adopting a single empirically supported intervention will not, in itself, address all students' needs. Thus, a comprehensive approach aimed at promoting the social and academic competence of students (and preventing school failure), implemented across multiple levels, will likely result in the most successful school outcomes. It is important to have numerous proven and effective intervention strategies available to tailor a program for both the larger student body as well as the needs of individual students. Intervention strategies must consider cultural, linguistic, and gender differences among students and should also utilize frameworks relevant to serving under-represented populations.

It is essential to accept the responsibility of facilitating the progress of students who do not meet school/district/state standards. Children do not arbitrarily fail to meet academic standards; rather, their lack of academic success typically reflects the failure of adults to provide appropriate support and to use scaffolding to facilitate their early developmental and academic trajectories. Considering the extant empirical evidence, it is essential to move beyond the question “To retain or promote?” and prudent to focus on “how to promote the social and academic competence of students.” As highlighted in the correspondence from Ms. Mariellen Kerr, it is vital that we continue the quest for effective strategies to help children succeed in school. Educational professionals, policy makers, and families must collaborate together to promote the social and academic competence of *all* children.

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APPENDIX A. BEYOND GRADE RETENTION:  
A HANDOUT FOR EDUCATIONAL PROFESSIONALS.

A common misperception is that giving a student the “gift” of another year in the same grade will allow the child time to mature (academically and socially); however, grade retention has been associated with numerous deleterious outcomes. Without specific targeted interventions, most retained students do not “catch up.”

**Research Regarding Retention:**

**Temporary gains.** Research indicates that academic improvements may be observed during the year the student is retained, however, achievement gains typically decline within 2–3 years of retention.

**Negative impact on achievement and adjustment.** Research has shown that grade retention is associated with negative outcomes in all areas of student achievement (e.g., reading, math, oral and written language) and social and emotional adjustment (e.g., peer relationships, self-esteem, problem behaviors, and attendance).

**Negative long-term effects.** By adolescence, experiencing grade retention is associated with emotional distress, low self-esteem, poor peer relations, cigarette use, alcohol and drug abuse, early onset of sexual activity, suicidal intentions, and violent behaviors.

**Retention and dropout.** Students who have been retained are much more likely to drop out of school.

**Consequences during adulthood.** As adults, individuals who repeated a grade are more likely than adults who did not repeat a grade to be unemployed, living on public assistance, or in prison.

**What can educational professionals do to help?**

It is imperative that we implement effective strategies that enable at-risk students to succeed. Addressing problems early improves chances for success. Consider the following:

- Identify the unique strengths and needs of the student.
- Implement effective research-based teaching strategies (e.g., Preschool Programs, Access to School-Wide Evidence-Based Programs, Summer School and After School Programs, Looping and Multi-Aged Classrooms, School-Based Mental Health Programs, Parental Involvement, Early Reading Programs, Direct Instruction, Mnemonic Strategies, Curriculum-Based Measurement, Cooperative Learning, Behavior and Cognitive Behavior Modification Strategies)
- Identify learning and behavior problems early to help avoid the cumulative effects of ongoing difficulties.
- Discuss concerns and ideas with parents and other educational professionals at the school.
- Provide structured activities and guidance for parents or other adults to work with the child to help develop necessary skills.
- Collaborate with other professionals in a multidisciplinary student-support team.

This handout for educational professionals was adapted from a handout developed for teachers.

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