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# School psychologists' attitudes toward grade retention

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School Psychologists' Attitudes Toward Grade Retention

Master's Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty

Of the School Psychology Program

College of Liberal Arts  
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By

Jill E. Ortlieb

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of  
Master of Science

Rochester, New York

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### Abstract

A national survey of the attitudes of school psychologists regarding grade retention were investigated in this study. An attitudinal survey was sent to 500 members of the National Association of School Psychologists; the response rate was 49%. The results of the study showed that school psychologists tend to believe that retention is a harmful practice.

### School Psychologists' Attitudes Toward Grade Retention

Grade retention is defined as “the nonpromotion of a student to the next grade level at the conclusion of the current school year” (Tanner & Combs, 1993, p. 76).

Currently in the United States, 2.3 million students are retained each year (Rafoth & Carey, 1995). These numbers have increased greatly since schools began to institute promotion policies based on achievement at the turn of the century (Pierson & Connell, 1992; Peterson, DeGracie, & Ayabe, 1987; Niklason, 1984; Shepard & Smith, as found in Meisels & Liaw, 1993). Although at the beginning of the nineteenth century retention was unnecessary because students moved through the school curriculum at their own pace, with the introduction from Europe of graded classes at the turn of the century, retention was used in order to ensure the homogeneity of classes (Biegler & Green, 1993; Byrnes & Yamamoto, 1986; Holmes & Matthews, 1984; Johnson, Merrell, & Stover, 1990; Medway, 1985; Nason, 1991; Niklason, 1984).

The current social-political climate emphasizes the need for schools to educate all students to high levels of academic achievement (Graham, 1995). As part of his “Goals 2000,” President Clinton (1993) notes that

...we must implement that portion of the national education goals that calls for establishing world-class standards in math, science, and other subjects. Today we have an education system that too often moves people up the ladder whether they study or not, graduates them whether they know anything or not, and dumps

them into the work force whether they have the skills to succeed or not. And that is wrong. (p. 5)

With these goals and increasing standards for academic excellence, the end result will likely be an increase in the rate of retention. Children who do not meet the standards for one grade will no longer be socially promoted to the next grade.

However, retention is not the only way schools can assist students who are not performing at grade level academic and social expectations. Smaller class sizes that allow for more individualized instruction are a viable alternative (Byrnes & Yamamoto, 1986; Songaylo & Shreeve, 1993). Nongraded classrooms, mixed-age grades, and transitional classes have also been suggested as possible solutions (Byrnes & Yamamoto, 1986; Hagborg, Masella, Palladino, & Shepardson, 1991; Songaylo & Shreeve, 1993). Remedial instruction, peer tutoring, cooperative learning groups, summer school, individualized instruction, and mastery learning are other possibilities (Hagborg et al., 1991; Medway, 1985; Rafoth, Dawson, & Carey, 1988; Smith & Shepard, 1988; Songaylo & Shreeve, 1993). Overall, regardless of grade, a program tailored to meet a student's needs will be most appropriate, and would make retention an obsolete practice (Nason, 1991; Songaylo & Shreeve, 1993).

Although the above alternatives do require funding, retention is also costly. Retaining a child for one year increases the total cost of that child's education by 8% (Nason, 1991; Smith & Shepard, 1988). At an average cost per pupil of \$5,653 each school year, with an average of 2.3 million students nationwide being retained each year,

the cost is approximately 13 billion dollars per year (NEA Today, as found in Rafoth & Carey, 1995). Given the questionable efficacy of retention (Holmes, 1989; Holmes & Matthews, 1984; Johnson et al., 1990; Shepard & Smith, 1989) and the estimated average cost of 13 billion dollars per year to our nation's schools, it certainly seems imperative to consider alternatives to this practice.

Taking into account the pressure placed on teachers to be accountable for student performance and the emphasis that parents place on achievement, there are many rationales accepted by schools as the basis for retaining students who meet certain criteria or who display specific traits (Nason, 1991). The purpose of retention is generally that of creating homogeneous classes at each grade level; in addition, when a student is retained, the responsibility for failure is placed on that child instead of on the teacher or school system (Byrnes & Yamamoto, 1986; Nason, 1991; Niklason, 1984). Likewise, in a 1993 survey, Tanner and Combs found that teachers feel that retaining children creates classes composed of children of a similar ability and achievement level.

Several studies have looked at the demographic characteristics of retainees versus promoted students (Byrnes & Yamamoto, 1986; Dauber, Alexander, & Entwisle, 1989; Meisels & Liaw, 1993; Nason, 1991; Niklason, 1984; Walters & Borgers, 1995). These studies have suggested that gender, reading and mathematics grades, and performance on quantitative tests are the best predictors of retention. Dauber, Alexander, and Entwisle (1989) found that, the greater the academic deficit, the more likely a child was to be held back in earlier grades. Niklason (1984) found that students who were recommended for retention scored lower on measures of math, reading, and social adjustment, and scored

one standard deviation lower on intelligence tests, on the average. If it is felt that a student is not ready to successfully meet academic expectations for students in the next grade level, she or he may be retained (Byrnes & Yamamoto, 1986). It has been found that, of the 15 to 19% of the total student body in the United States who are retained yearly, the majority are males, minority students, or students from families with a low socioeconomic status (Meisels & Liaw, 1993; Nason, 1991; Niklason, 1984; Walters & Borgers, 1995).

There are a variety of early predictors of retention. Generally, retention is most common in grades kindergarten through three (Meisels & Liaw, 1993). Parent and teacher ratings of ability given before the child enters first grade are good predictors of future retention (Dauber et al., 1993). Students are also sometimes retained due to “immature” behavior, small size when compared to same-age peers, motivational and self-esteem difficulties, or a young age (Byrnes & Yamamoto, 1986; Meisels & Liaw, 1993; Nason, 1991; Niklason, 1984). Additionally, students are retained after performing in the below average range on kindergarten readiness tests or other achievement measures, or because of delays in social skills (Rafoth & Carey, 1995).

Overall, few studies have reached the conclusion that retention is academically or socially beneficial. A 1992 study by Pierson and Connell found that children who were retained performed better on measures of academic achievement two or more years after their retention than a group of similar children who were promoted; retention had no effect on the self-concept of students. Peterson, DeGracie, and Ayabe (1987) found that retained students performed better on measures of achievement than their promoted peers



at the end of their second year of first, second, or third grade. However, these advantages were not found to extend beyond three years.

The majority of literature on retention has found that it has negative academic and social effects on children (Holmes, 1989; Johnson et al., 1990; Nason, 1991; Shepard & Smith, 1989; Thomas et al., 1992). Retainees have higher drop out rates (Hagborg et al., 1991; Neill & Medina, as found in Nason, 1991), score lower on measures of academic achievement and personal adjustment (Holmes, 1989; Holmes & Matthews, 1984; Niklason, 1984), and express more negative attitudes toward school (Holmes & Matthews, 1984). These negative outcomes are magnified when children are retained in higher grades (Meisels & Liaw, 1993), and/or are Caucasian (Thomas et al., 1992). So, while retention may be successful in raising student achievement on a short-term basis (approximately three years), it is ineffective over time, since some studies have shown that retained students actually perform less well than low-achieving promoted students overall (Holmes, 1989; Holmes & Matthews, 1984; Peterson, DeGracie, & Ayabe, 1987; Walters & Borgers, 1995). A study by Pierson and Connell (1992) found that retained students did not reach the level of performance of students who were never recommended for retention. They also reported that retained students tend to have fewer adaptive strategies than their peers.

A meta-analysis of 44 studies concerning grade retention was conducted by Holmes and Matthews (1984). They found that students similar to retainees who were promoted (e.g., low achieving or socially immature) scored an average of .37 standard deviation higher than students who were retained on a variety of outcome measures.

Specifically, promoted students scored .19 standard deviation higher on measures of self concept, .27 standard deviation higher on measures of personal adjustment, and .44 standard deviation higher on measures of achievement. An updated meta-analysis completed by Holmes in 1989 included 63 studies, and reached a similar conclusion. Promoted students scored .19 standard deviation higher than retained students on achievement measures; students retained in fourth grade scored .37 standard deviation lower than promoted students on measures of achievement. This is consistent with research that indicates retention in later grades is detrimental to achievement (Meisels & Liaw, 1993). When Holmes (1989) looked only at studies where retained and promoted students were matched on the basis of intelligence scores and achievement levels, promoted students scored on the average .30 standard deviation higher on a variety of outcome measures than retained students.

Shepard and Smith (1989) compared students retained in kindergarten with those who were promoted regarding their performance on standardized tests and teacher ratings. Teachers rated the two groups as equal in all areas (reading, math, social maturity, learner self-concept, and attention); the students also scored equivalently on a standardized measure of math (Shepard & Smith, 1989). Retained students did score higher than promoted students on a standardized measure of reading, but this difference amounted to a one-month gain, which is not large enough to justify the extra year of kindergarten (Shepard & Smith, 1989). A study by Thomas et al. (1992) compared the grade point averages in the second through fifth grades and teacher ratings of retainees with similar students who were promoted. White students who were retained in kindergarten or first

grade performed less well academically and were rated by their teachers as being less competent in social and cognitive functioning (Thomas et al., 1992).

Despite the extensive and comprehensive literature base that suggests that retention is ineffective, teachers tend to still view it as a viable strategy. Several surveys of teachers' attitudes toward grade retention have been conducted, and the results indicate that teachers believe that retention benefits children academically (Byrnes & Yamamoto, 1986; Smith, 1989; Tanner & Combs, 1993; Tomchin & Impara, 1992). A study by Tanner and Combs (1993) concluded that teachers do not feel retention harms a child's self concept, and that retention is beneficial particularly when it occurs early in a child's school career. Fewer teachers, however, support retention in grades four through seven (Tomchin & Impara, 1992). In a study by Smith (1989), almost all teachers who were interviewed reported that they would rather retain a child who did not need it than to promote a child who would have benefited from retention.

Overall, teachers' beliefs about retention do not appear to be influenced by their knowledge of research regarding the effects of grade retention (Edson, as found in Tanner & Combs, 1993). Tanner and Combs (1993) reported that teachers they surveyed saw retention as an effective means of increasing a student's level of achievement. Teachers felt that retention created a more homogeneous class, with students' levels of ability and achievement being less varied. Also, teachers saw retention as a way to provide children with extra time to grow and mature. However, teachers were divided regarding the effects of retention on a student's self-concept, with first-grade teachers seeing retention as having no ill effect on a child's self-concept, and fifth-grade teachers feeling

that retention was potentially harmful to self-concept. Both first and fifth grade teachers strongly disagreed that the threat of retention motivated a child to perform better in school.

A 1986 survey of principals, administrators, and parents conducted by Byrnes and Yamamoto found that 65% of teachers, 74% of principals, and 59% of parents felt that children should usually or always be retained when they do not meet grade-level requirements for promotion. Participants surveyed felt that children could be retained for reasons other than skill deficits, including immaturity and frequent absence from school. A follow-up interview of 25 teachers indicated that they viewed the decision to retain a student as a difficult one. However, teachers were reluctant to send an unprepared child to the next grade, thus endorsing retention as a necessary, although unpleasant, practice. Songaylo and Shreeve (1993) found different results than Byrnes and Yamamoto (1986). While the majority of principals they surveyed, 60%, felt that retention was never helpful, 25% still said that it was sometimes helpful.

Overall, teachers may endorse retention as a beneficial practice because they only see retained students during the year that they are retained, and are rarely informed regarding the long-term performance of these students (Tanner & Combs, 1993; Tomchin & Impara, 1992). Also, school districts rarely monitor the performance of retained students for the purposes of longitudinal study on the results of retention. Likewise, it is impossible to know how retained students would have functioned had they been promoted (Smith, 1989, as found in Tomchin & Impara, 1992).

In summary, the majority of studies have found retention to be a harmful practice. Retained students do not show long term academic benefits, and often have lower self-concepts than their peers. However, teachers and other school professionals do not appear to be aware of these findings. They seem to feel that retention academically benefits children, especially in grades kindergarten through three.

The implications of these findings are far-reaching. Educational professionals need to be made aware of these research findings, and an effort must be made to create viable alternatives (Johnson et al., 1990). As long as retention continues to be used as the solution for academic and social deficits, alternatives will be ignored (Rafoth et al., 1988). The school psychologist is an educational resource schools can use to reduce the number of students who are retained each year (Rafoth & Carey, 1995; Rafoth et al., 1988). Increasingly, school psychologists have been using a collaborative problem solving model as a prereferral strategy for students in general and special education (Costenbader, Swartz, & Petrix, 1992). This model allows school psychologists and teachers to work together to develop interventions that decrease or increase the occurrence of specific behavioral or academic issues, such as failing to turn in homework or calling out in class (Conoley & Conoley, 1992). The four step model of problem identification, problem analysis, intervention development and implementation, and evaluation/modification could be used in order to develop strategies for helping students at risk for retention early in the school year, when there is still time for progress to be made (Allen & Graden, 1995; Medway, 1985; Rafoth & Carey, 1995).

At the school district level, school psychologists can monitor the long-term effects of retention on students in their district, and present these findings to the administration (Rafoth et al., 1988). They can share their findings and the conclusions of other studies with teachers, parents, and members of community and state professional organizations (Rafoth & Carey, 1995; Rafoth et al., 1988).

Although school psychologists could potentially play an influential role both in deciding if retention is justified and in making research on retention known, research has not typically focused on their attitudes toward grade retention. The National Association of School Psychologists (1988) has a clear policy on grade retention; they recommend that other interventions be used in place of retention, and that students at risk for retention be identified early in the school year so that academic, behavioral, or emotional concerns can be addressed immediately. However, whether this policy is endorsed by practicing school psychologists is not known. No attitudinal surveys of school psychologists regarding this potentially harmful practice have been conducted. This study looked at school psychologists' attitudes toward retention, including whether they felt early (kindergarten through third grade) or later (fourth through seventh grade) retention is more beneficial, if they felt retention harms a student's self concept, and what type of policy regarding retention they felt is most effective.

## Methods

### Participants

Paper and pencil surveys were mailed to 500 randomly selected members of the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP). Two hundred forty-five school

psychologists participated in this study, for a response rate of 49%. Sixty-seven and four-tenth percent of respondents were females, while 32.6% of respondents were males. The majority of respondents held a Master's degree (34.6%), with 30.5% holding a Specialist's degree, and 26.3% holding a Doctoral degree. Participants came from 49 states, including New York (11.5%), California (6.1%), Pennsylvania (6.1%), Illinois (4.9%), New Jersey (4.9%), Massachusetts (4.5%), and Wisconsin (4.5%). The number of years that participants had been involved in the field of school psychology ranged from 0 to 39, with a mean of 15.57 years. Most respondents (34.7%) spent half or more of their time with elementary school-age children (grades three through six), while 12.5% worked primarily with high school-age students (grades nine through twelve), 10.3% spent most of their time with junior high school-age children (grades seven and eight), 4.6% worked with preschool-age children, and 2.6% worked with primary school-age children (grades kindergarten through two). Seventy-nine and three-tenth percent of survey respondents were familiar with the National Association of School Psychologists' position statement on grade retention.

### Instrument

A 34-item survey was used to determine school psychologists' attitudes toward grade retention (see Appendix A). The survey was initially developed by Tanner and Combs (1993) in order to evaluate teachers' attitudes toward retention, and was adopted with modification for this study. Modifications included adding questions (i.e.-Who is involved in making retention/promotion decisions in your school?), and adding survey items regarding opinions on retention for fourth through seventh grades, as well as

kindergarten through third grade. For purposes of the survey, retention was defined as: “the nonpromotion of a student to the next grade level at the conclusion of the school year” (Tanner & Combs, 1993).

The first seven items requested demographic information, such as gender, number of years experience in school psychology, level of training, knowledge of the National Association of School Psychologists’ policy regarding grade retention, age group of children served, and persons responsible for making retention decisions in their school district.

The next group of 23-items directly assessed attitudes toward grade retention. An eight-level Likert response format was used, with 1=strongly disagree and 8=strongly agree.

The final four questions examined school psychologists’ attitudes toward four policies on retention using an eight-level Likert response format, as described above.

### Psychometrics of the Instrument

Tanner and Combs (1993) compiled psychometric information on the survey that was modified for use in this study. Additional information was gathered on the present survey.

Reliability. For Tanner and Combs’ (1993) survey, test-retest reliability was assessed by administering the survey to 20 teachers two times in four weeks. Each item in their survey was individually examined using a t-test for correlated sample means; this resulted in one item being deleted.



Cronbach's alpha was used to calculate item-by-item reliability; the first seventeen items had alphas ranging from .8169 to .8799. The last six items were not analyzed, since they were not part of a cluster of common rationale given for retaining a student.

A correlation analysis on the present survey completed after data collection indicated that the alphas for each of the five clusters ranged between .6890 and .9014. Cluster 1, which included questions 1, 7, 12, 16, and 18, had a correlation coefficient of .7982. The second cluster, questions 2, 3, and 13, had a correlation coefficient of .8205. Cluster 3, questions 4, 8, and 15, had a correlation coefficient of .6890. The fourth cluster, questions 5, 9, and 14, had a correlation coefficient of .9014. Cluster 5, questions 6, 10, 11, 17, and 19, had a correlation coefficient of .8806. Questions 20 through 27 were not analyzed since they were not part of a cluster of common rationale given for retaining a student.

Validity. Content validity was investigated by review of a panel of professional educators familiar with retention. Several items were re-worded, and the survey was completed by 25 teachers, whose responses resulted in the refinement of several items.

In the present study, 12 school psychologists in the Rochester, NY area reviewed and further clarified the survey items.

### Procedure

The survey was mailed with a cover letter explaining the purpose of the study, and a pre-addressed, postage paid return envelope. A follow-up letter was mailed two weeks later reminding them of the date the survey was due (see Appendix B). Responses were confidential since no identifying information was collected.

## Analysis

Results were examined using descriptive procedures. Means and standard deviations were calculated for each item and cluster, and general trends were examined. The trends were further investigated using a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) in order to identify significant effects.

## Results

The five clusters previously listed were analyzed individually. Clusters were composed based on the most commonly given reasons for retaining a student (Tanner & Combs, 1993):

- (1) retention gave a student an extra year to master material that was unlearned the first time in that grade; (2) students who were retained did so well academically in the retained year that their self-esteem was enhanced; (3) retention helped to create homogeneous classes by keeping students with the same ability and achievement together in the same grade;
- (4) the threat of retention would motivate students to work more diligently at their school work; and (5) retention gave the immature student a year to grow and mature thus insuring success in learning. (p. 70)

## Cluster 1

Cluster 1, 5 items that concerned the respondents' opinion on whether a student's knowledge of subject matter was a reason for retaining that student, had a mean score of

15.36 (the maximum possible score was 40) and a standard deviation of 6.35 (see Table 1). This suggests that the school psychologists who responded do not support the notion that retention will help a student to achieve at grade-level expectations. Within this cluster, there was a general trend for respondents with more training (i.e.-doctoral degrees or post-doctoral training) to feel more strongly that retention would not increase a student's achievement as compared to those respondents with less training (i.e.-master's or specialist degrees). This trend did not reach significance. School psychologists familiar with the National Association of School Psychologists' position statement on retention also felt more strongly that retention would not have a positive effect on student achievement ( $F=8.53$ ,  $p < .004$ ).

### Cluster 2

The second cluster of 3 items, which looked at the respondents' opinion on the possible harm of retention on a child's self-concept, had a mean score of 8.52 (the maximum possible score was 24) and a standard deviation of 4.35 (see Table 1). This suggests that school psychologists tend to believe that retention is detrimental to a student's self-concept. In general, respondents felt that retention in grades 4 through 7 was more harmful (mean=2.08, standard deviation=1.39) than in grades K through 3 (mean=3.78, standard deviation=2.00). Also, respondents who spent more than half of their time working with children in lower grades (i.e.-preschool or primary) tended to believe more strongly that retention had a damaging effect on a student's self-concept than those who spent more of their time in upper grade levels.

### Cluster 3

Cluster 3, which was composed of 3 items, questioned the creation of homogenous classes through the use of retention. The mean responses on this cluster was 10.64 (the maximum possible score was 24), with a standard deviation of 4.32 (see Table 1). This suggests that respondents tended to believe that retaining students did not create classes composed of students of similar ability levels. School psychologists who were not familiar with the National Association of School Psychologists' position statement on retention supported this notion more than those who knew the NASP position statement, yet overall remained somewhat ambivalent ( $F=12.87$ ,  $p < .0004$ ).

### Cluster 4

The fourth cluster of 3 items, which looked at respondents' opinions on whether the threat of retention motivated students to do better, had a mean score of 7.11 (the maximum possible score was 24) and a standard deviation of 4.39 (see Table 1). This suggests that respondents believed strongly that the threat of retention did not provide a motivating factor for students to increase their level of achievement. No general response trends across demographics were noted in a survey of weighted means of respondents, thus suggesting that all respondents felt similarly on this issue.

### Cluster 5

Cluster 5 of 5 items, which looked at respondents' opinions on whether retention was a viable alternative for less mature students, had a mean response of 17.20 (the maximum possible score was 40) and a standard deviation of 7.83 (see Table 1). This suggests that respondents felt that immaturity was not a valid reason for retaining a

student. In general, school psychologists believed that retaining an immature student in grades K through 3 might be slightly more beneficial (mean=4.01, standard deviation=2.07) than retaining an immature student in grades 4 through 7 (mean=2.19, standard deviation=1.56). Also, respondents who worked primarily with children in lower grades (i.e. -preschool and primary) tended to believe more strongly that immaturity was not a valid reason for retention than respondents who spent more time working with students in elementary, junior, or high school. A significant trend was noted in that respondents who were familiar with the National Association of School Psychologists' position statement on retention tended to believe more strongly that retention was not beneficial for immature students ( $F=10.20, p < .0017$ ).

#### Retention in Grades K through 3 versus Retention in Grades 4 through 7

Questions 20 and 21, which asked respondents if retention was most beneficial in grades K through 3 or in grades 4 through 7, received mean responses of 5.50 (standard deviation = 2.10) and 1.79 (standard deviation = 1.08), respectively. This indicates that school psychologists believe that retention in grades K through 3 is more beneficial, and less likely to do harm, than retention in grades 4 through 7.

#### Retention Policies

Questions 24 through 27 asked respondents to rate four different retention/promotion policies. The grade standard policy, where students are required to learn specified information within a year in order to be promoted, received a mean score of 3.55, with a standard deviation of 2.02. The continuous promotion policy, where students are moved forward based on their chronological age, had a mean response of

3.83, with a standard deviation of 1.99. The guidance promotion policy, which espouses looking at each retention/promotion decision individually, received a mean score of 6.12, with a standard deviation of 1.98. The continuous progress policy, in which retention/promotion decisions are unnecessary because the curriculum is ungraded, received a mean response of 5.68, with a standard deviation of 2.21. Thus, school psychologists tended to prefer a policy of looking at retention/promotion decisions individually, and showed less support for policies that require students to move forward on the basis of chronological age or amount of information learned in a given year.

### Discussion

The results suggest that school psychologists tend to believe that retention is not a valuable way to remediate the academic deficits of children, or to increase their level of maturity. Retention is not seen as a motivational technique that inspires an underachieving student to perform at or above grade-level expectations. Additionally, school psychologists tend to believe that retention does not create classes of more homogeneous members; there will always be students at both the upper and the lower extreme, regardless of retention. In fact, overall, respondents believed strongly that this practice has potential negative effects on a student's self-esteem, especially when older students are retained.

One rather disturbing finding was that school psychologists felt that it was less harmful, and more beneficial, for students to be retained in grades K through 3 than in grades 4 through 7. Although seemingly grounded in common sense thinking, research

has not shown this to be true. Regardless of when a student is retained, sustained beneficial effects have not been found.

Another notable finding involved the trend for school psychologists working with students in higher grades to believe that retention had a less damaging effect on a student's self-esteem than those who worked with younger children. Since school psychologists working in junior and senior high schools see students retained in earlier grades, it would have seemed logical that they would see retention as damaging to a student's self-esteem. Further investigation in this area is warranted, and would provide further information to better explain this finding.

Based on previous studies that addressed teachers' and administrators' attitudes toward retention, school psychologists view this practice much more negatively. While teachers did not appear to be influenced by research regarding retention (Edson, as found in Tanner & Combs, 1993), school psychologists who responded to the current survey seemed to be more aware of the research and support the position statement issued by their supporting organization, the National Association of School Psychologists. Of course, it must be noted that school psychologists have a much different perspective on children in the school system. While a child's teacher will most likely lose touch with a child after the year of retention, the school psychologist may have varying levels of extended contact for the remainder of that child's school career. Since school psychologists are part of the team who evaluate children and decide how they can be most effectively educated within the school system, they may have contact with children who

have been retained, and who are now found to have a disability that obviously impacted their early school experience. The unique perspective of school psychologists provides them with valuable information to share with other school professionals.

The results of this survey and the current social-political stance of the nation regarding social promotion reinforce the urgent need for school psychologists to become actively involved with the issue of retention at a building, district, and state level. Research overwhelmingly concludes that retention is not a viable solution for remediating academic deficits; school psychologists are informed of the research and acknowledge the negative effects of retention. Politicians, however, are continuing attempts to stop the practice of social promotion, in accordance with President Clinton's "Goals 2000" agenda. Clinton is currently highlighting a strict policy against social promotion used in Chicago, where up to a third of all ninth-grade students are retained because they do not meet grade-level academic standards ("Feds Help," 1997). Now is the time for school psychologists to put their beliefs into action by working with teachers, administrators, and political leaders to determine effective retention and promotion policies, to develop interventions for addressing behavioral and academic issues that may have been previously dealt with through retention, and to create a data-based system for measuring the effectiveness of these new interventions and policies so that this information can be shared with other districts. Implementing and monitoring the results of such alternative strategies as remedial instruction, mastery learning, cooperative learning groups, nongraded classrooms, mixed-age grades, and individualized instruction, will provide valuable information regarding what strategies are successful in increasing the achievement of all



students. With rates of retention remaining high, the time is now for school psychologists to work with other educational professionals in order to effect change. NASP can assist in this process by educating law and policy makers at the federal level, including Clinton, in the negative effects of retention and offering data-based information on successful alternatives to the costly practice.

Strengths of the current study include the generalizability of its results; respondents from across the country participated. Also, the response rate was high, 49%, thus decreasing the effects of response bias. In addition, the clusters examined in the results section had good reliability, and the initial survey used had been subjected to numerous reliability and validity checks.

A major limitation of the study was its status as the initial survey examining school psychologists attitudes toward grade retention. Since there were no previous findings on which to base hypotheses, the data collected was not analyzed in hopes of proving or disproving various theories. Instead, trends were found, and then further investigated. In addition, an awkward demographic question concerning the percentage of time respondents' spent with specific grade levels of students proved to be difficult to analyze. In the end, it was condensed into what age group each subject spent greater than or equal to 50% of his or her time with, which eliminated some respondents. Further surveys should reword this question.

While the present study surveyed the reactions of school psychologists throughout the United States regarding grade retention, further research is needed in order to find out what interventions are being tried to reduce the number of students retained. It is

encouraging to find that school psychologists are knowledgeable about the negative consequences of retention, but now it is important to follow up that information with data-based research on what policies and practices are being used in the field and are successful. Further information sharing will expand the knowledge base and assist individual districts in creating their own best practice standards.

In conclusion, research has long documented the negative effects of grade retention. Research has shown that many teachers and school professionals are either unaware of or disregard this research. This study shows that school psychologists stand out among their peers in their knowledge of the harm of retention; it is imperative that they bring this message to their colleagues at the building, district, and state level in order to discontinue the practice and to further research into alternatives to grade retention.

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Appendix A

School Psychologist Survey Instrument

February 25, 1997

Dear School Psychologist:

Attached is a survey I am conducting as part of my Master's Thesis at Rochester Institute of Technology. My thesis, which I am working on under the supervision of Dr. Gerry Guild, is entitled "School Psychologists' Attitudes Toward Grade Retention," and its completion is a requirement for obtaining a Master of Science degree in School Psychology. Your participation in this study would be much appreciated.

The survey should take approximately 10 to 15 minutes to complete. When you are finished, please place it in the enclosed postage paid envelope and return it to me by April 15, 1997. Any questions can be directed to me at (716) 359-2887 or JEB1273@rit.edu. All responses are completely confidential. Thank-you for your assistance.

Sincerely,

Jill E. Bishop

## School Psychologist Survey Instrument

This instrument is designed to determine school psychologist attitudes toward retention of students. Retention, in this study, is defined as the nonpromotion of a student to the next grade level at the conclusion of the school year.

Do not place your name on this survey. Your opinion will be strictly confidential. Your professional cooperation in completing this instrument and returning it in the enclosed, stamped, addressed envelope will help all educators gain a better understanding of school psychologist attitudes toward retention.

Please respond to each item:

1. Your highest degree earned (check one):

- BA, BS
- Masters
- Specialist
- Doctorate
- Post Doctorate Training

2. Your years of experience as a school psychologist including this year: \_\_\_\_\_

3. Please indicate the percentage of time you work with each group:

- Preschool
- Primary School
- Elementary School
- Junior High School
- High School
- Other (Administration, Supervision, CSE meetings, etc.)

4. Your sex:    M        F

5. Do you know the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) position with regards to retention?    Yes        No

6. Who is involved in making retention/promotion decisions in your school (check all that apply)?

- Principal
- Teacher
- School Psychologist
- Parent
- Multidisciplinary Team
- Does Not Apply



7. If you checked multidisciplinary team as the response to the above question, please list the job titles of persons on that team: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Please complete this section of the instrument by circling the response on the following continuous scale that most nearly reflects your attitude toward retention. Number 1 indicates Strongly Disagree and Number 8 indicates Strongly Agree.

1. Retention prepares a student for successful achievement in the following grade.

Disagree 1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8 Agree

2. Retaining a student in **grades K-3** harms the student's self-concept.

Disagree 1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8 Agree

3. Retaining a student in **grades 4-7** harms the student's self-concept.

Disagree 1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8 Agree

4. Retention reduces the range of ability levels in the next grade, placing students closer to their learning peers.

Disagree 1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8 Agree

5. The threat of retention will enhance a student's desire to learn.

Disagree 1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8 Agree

6. Academic unreadiness is a valid reason for a student to be retained.

Disagree 1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8 Agree

7. At any grade level, low achieving students who are retained do better academically than low achieving students who are socially promoted.

Disagree 1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8 Agree

8. Students learn more easily in homogeneous classroom situations.

Disagree 1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8 Agree

9. The threat of retention provides a motivational incentive for students.

Disagree 1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8 Agree

10. Retention in **grades K-3** is an effective means of giving an immature student time to catch up.

Disagree 1   2   3   4   5   6   7   8 Agree

11. Retention in **grades 4-7** is an effective means of giving an immature student time to catch up.

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Agree

12. Repeating a grade will give an underachieving student a chance to catch up academically.

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Agree

13. Retention has a detrimental effect on a student's self-concept.

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Agree

14. The threat of retention provides incentive for students to try to improve at academic tasks.

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Agree

15. Retention reduces the range of achievement levels in the next grade, placing students closer to their learning peers.

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Agree

16. Retention has a detrimental effect on a student's academic achievement.

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Agree

17. Retention provides a student with time to grow and mature, thus increasing success in learning.

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Agree

18. Retaining students is an effective means of ensuring their mastery of grade-level requirements.

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Agree

19. Immature students benefit from retention.

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Agree

20. Retention is more effective in **grades K-3** than in any other grade level.

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Agree

21. Retention is more effective in **grades 4-7** than in any other grade level.

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Agree

22. Students become prepared for grade level changes according to a developmental unfolding of abilities which is mostly outside the influence of school personnel.

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Agree

23. What the school personnel do to accommodate a student can influence the student's readiness to learn even though the student may not have reached a certain level of cognitive operation.

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Agree

Please complete this section by circling the response on the continuous scale that most nearly reflects **your** attitude toward the four promotion/retention policies listed below:

24. Grade standards policy: Students are required to assimilate a predetermined body of knowledge in a given school year to be considered for promotion.

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Agree

25. Continuous promotion policy: Standards for achievement are not used to determine promotion/retention. Students are moved forward on the basis of age.

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Agree

26. Guidance promotion policy: All students are different, thus each case is individually reviewed to determine promotion/retention.

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Agree

27. Continuous progress policy: Based on an ungraded curriculum, promotion/retention decisions become unnecessary.

Disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 Agree

Adapted from a survey by Tanner and Combs (1993)

## Appendix B

Follow-Up Letter to School Psychologists***Reminder...***

Approximately two weeks ago you received a survey regarding your attitude toward grade retention. If you have already completed the survey and returned it, thank you. To those of you who have not yet completed the survey, please return it to me by **April 15, 1997** (no, I'm not affiliated with the IRS!). All responses are completely confidential, and your participation in this study is greatly appreciated. Any questions can be directed to me at (716) 359-2887 or JEB1273@rit.edu. Thank you for your assistance.

Sincerely,

Jill E. Bishop

Table 1

Mean Responses and Standard Deviations for Clusters

Cluster	Mean	SD
1	15.36	6.35
2	8.52	4.35
3	10.64	4.32
4	7.11	4.39
5	17.20	7.83