

The Pandemic of Social Passing and Retention: When there is no system-wide policy, what happens to socially promoted or retained students?

Ms. Dominique Moore, M. ED

Rationale

The District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) socially promotes students who cannot read and retains students without changing the curriculum or academic support for their success. Based on metrics that the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) has in place such as the Reading Inventory assessment, educators continuously promote students who cannot read. The Reading Inventory measures reading levels. Students are showing up to school with inadequate skills to be successful at the next grade level. Teachers are being disadvantaged in the expectations of instructional growth and its evaluation systems. The effects of social passing and retention have lasting effects on the children's academic and social-emotional productivity. The education system cannot expect teachers to properly educate students severely below grade level without structural reform. The purpose of this research is to highlight the impact of not having a system-wide policy around social promotion and retention. Therefore, the research question is, when there is no system-wide policy, what happens to students who are socially promoted or retained?

Literature Review

Social promotion is “the practice of passing students along from grade to grade with their peers even if the students have not satisfied academic requirements or met performance standards at key grades. It is called “social” promotion because it is often carried out in the perceived interest of a student’s social and psychological well-being (Doherty, 2004)”. Grade retention and social promotion are inadequate responses because students are not given educational plans or instructional programming to support the deficit in instruction. Both of these practices occur because policy makers wanted to support scholar’s social emotional development. Research shows that retained students and socially promoted students do not increase achievement but become at higher risk of drop out and falling into the school to prison pipeline.

Social passing is known to be a part of the history of education as early as the late 1800’s. Affluent and or influential parents would harass school officials and teachers into promoting their children despite not making the needed gains. Including that into the growing business of education, the cost of retaining students has now resulted in the social promotion and retention crisis two centuries later. Social promotion is more of a response to the business operations of education than it is about correctly helping the whole child. The issue with retention is that it does not support tier two instructional approaches nor does social promotion which would be the bare minimum accommodation for a socially promoted or retained student. According to author Kathryn Doherty, “research suggests that neither social promotion nor retention is effective for improving student achievement. The U.S. Department of Education concludes that the results of both are unacceptably high dropout rates, especially for poor and minority students, and inadequate knowledge and skills for students (Doherty, 2004).”

President Bill Clinton and his administration highlighted the social promotion crisis as part of his Presidential agenda in his State of the Union speech in February of 1999. President Clinton drafted legislation the Education Accountability Act (Picklo&Christenson, 2005). The bill did not pass, but was broken down into other legislation which included the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

Social promotion and retention are known to affect students disproportionately based on demographics and location. The instructional programming and vast array of promotion and retention guidelines are intricate in the failures of school systems. There needs to be universal oversight and streamlined standards in social promotion and retention just like the common core curriculum. “Politicians, teachers, and parents should agree that neither social promotion or retention is necessarily

good for children: interventions that promote learning success without the damage of retention must be creatively developed (Stevens et al, 2000)".

Methodology

Trends on social promotion and retention were explored in the K-12 setting. The data collected in this study collected survey answers from over 40 professional educators. The survey was sent out via email and social media to educators. The survey consisted of 17 questions: 13 multiple choice and 4 opened ended response questions. The data from the survey was collected using a Microsoft form link. The participant names are being kept confidential. The qualitative data was used to identify and establish patterns and themes in social promotion and retention.

Data & Analysis

Looking at the research was overwhelming. There were forty-one responses. Fifteen educators or 37% instructed elementary school, eleven or 27% instructed middle school and 15 or 37% instructed high school. 29% of the responses indicated that they were knowledgeable of the federal policy around social promotion and retention, except there is not a policy. The majority of respondents, 98% of the teachers reported having students after the beginning of the year testing scoring two grade levels or more below grade level expectations. 78% of teachers reported that social promotion is a trend in their school, and the remaining 28% responded maybe. 73% of teachers indicated retention plans did not support student success at any level: federal, state or local. 93% of teachers indicated that social promotion negatively affects educational outcomes. However, only 61% of teachers reported retention having negative effects on scholars. 37% think social passing has positive effects, the remaining 63% said no. Adversely, 51% of teachers indicated that retention may have positive effects on a student, 27% said yes and the remaining 22% said no. Questions 14 and 15 ask questions in relation to instructional programming and recommendations. Participants were asked if multi-aged classrooms were a possible solution to social promotion and retention in effort to raise student achievement. 59% said maybe, 27% said yes and 15% of respondents said no. To the contrary 93% of respondents do however believe that students should be instructed based on current levels in a more permanent setting than a small group.

Recommendations

There is a clear consensus among teachers in different grade levels that social promotion is an empirical trend in the education system. Retention is not providing a different educational experience the second time around and social promotion does not address the gap in skills. While retention is the clearest alternative to social promotion, this option has not been proven particularly effective either. Based on this research, there needs to be a federal policy on social promotion and retention and curriculum and instructional reform. The guidelines and expectations for a competent student should be universal. Alternate learning settings should be offered such as multi-aged classrooms and classrooms grouped by similar instructional skills. While the social emotional of a child is important, their future abilities depend on foundational skills learned in the classroom. This instructional style should mimic several different intervention programs available where students are placed by instructional levels and abilities. Summer instruction and enrichment programs should also be expanded as a consistent part of the educational system.

References

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