

# TO RETAIN OR NOT TO RETAIN? THAT IS THE QUESTION

*(But It Shouldn't Be)*

**A** common recommendation for children who do not do well in school is to “flunk” them or to “hold them back.” In education jargon, making a student repeat a grade is called *retention*. The most common reason given is student failure. But the possibility that the failing student might have some type of learning disability is often a factor.<sup>1</sup> Evidence is accumulating that retention is a common alternative to special education for students who “don’t fit” the eligibility criteria for special-ed programs or for whom such programs are not readily available.<sup>2</sup>

Though not all states keep records on the subject, it has been estimated that American schools retain six percent of their students, with the rates in early grades being much higher in some areas. Retention is more common in some states than others, with early grade retention rates ranging from 0 to 40 percent or more.<sup>3</sup>

Does retention do the student any good? Or does the practice increase learning problems? Are there social and emotional, as well as academic, effects? If so, what are they? If teachers and parents believe that retaining a child is beneficial, what criteria should be used in making the decision?

Fortunately, a substantial amount of research can guide us.

One practical guide is Light’s Retention Scale (LRS). In this evaluation instrument, Light<sup>4</sup> suggests 19 categories that are important in making retention decisions.

Four broad areas should be considered when making retention decisions: (1) student issues, (2) parental issues, (3) historical questions, and (4) school issues. The information presented in each of these four areas should help us to make more-informed decisions about retention. Because of retention’s financial and emotional costs to parents, students, and teachers, we must consider these issues.<sup>5</sup>

## **Student Issues**

### *Physical Characteristics—Size, Age, and Gender*

- Children who are large for their age likely will suffer if retained. Conversely, children who are small for their age are less likely to be penalized.
- Students who are significantly older than their classmates when retained are much more likely to drop out of school.<sup>6</sup> A child who is more than one year older than his or her classmates is usually a poor candidate for retention. In general, the earlier the age of retention, the less likely that harm will result.
- Because girls mature faster than boys, they are less promising candidates for retention than boys the same age. One study indicated that 13-year-old Caucasian males have

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a retention rate almost double that of girls the same age.<sup>7</sup> Quite possibly, the different maturational rates of boys and girls also account at least in part for the greater prevalence of boys in special-education programs.

***Knowledge-related Characteristics—  
Language Proficiency, Academic  
Achievement, and Intellectual Ability***

- A child who does not speak English and is not motivated to learn is, of course, a poor candidate for retention. If a child is acquiring English as a second language, and is in the earlier grades, he or she may benefit from retention. If a child is not bilingual and has poor language skills, the potential risk in retaining the child is high.

- The student's level of achievement must be considered carefully. Some children recommended for grade retention are at, or even above, grade level academically but are described by teachers as "lazy," "a behavioral problem," or "socially immature." Such children should never, or rarely, be retained.<sup>8</sup> A possible exception would be a bright but socially immature kindergartner.

The best candidates for retention are children who are "average" or "normal" in intelligence and who are about one year behind in achievement in all academic areas. The farther behind, the less likely the chances for success. But if the achievement is below grade level in one subject but average or above in others, the child is not a good candidate. If a child functions in the low ability range, he or she will rarely, if ever, benefit from being retained. In general, very bright students are also poor candidates for retention unless they can be helped to catch up in a low-functioning area and can skip a grade later on.

A subtle alternative to retention, when there are emotional or political reasons to avoid the practice, is the assumption and subsequent determination that a student has a learning disability requiring a special program of instruction. Such instruction is usually at or below the academic level at which the student has been retained. Although the cause is considered to be quite different, the resulting program is virtually

the same—a lower level of academic requirement.

***Emotional or Affective Characteristics***

Students demonstrating emotional behaviors that are not conducive to learning or are unacceptable in the school environment stand a very high chance of being diagnosed as needing special-education programs. And if eligibility is not an option, as it is not in many SDA schools, then retention (if not expulsion) is often seen as the solution.

A child who displays symptoms of emotional difficulty, who cannot concentrate on academic work, and who is dis-

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tractible and overreactive almost never benefits from retention. An emotional problem seldom is alleviated by retaining a child in the same grade; indeed, it is likely that the problem will be exacerbated.

Children with both low achievement and aggressive tendencies are most likely to be retained—yet they are precisely the ones who should not be because retention increases hostility. There is a strong relationship between poor verbal ability, delinquency, and retention. Delinquents also tend to be more adventuresome, aggressive, hostile, belligerent, and resentful than other adolescents. Powell<sup>9</sup> reports that a fail-

ure in school was likely to contribute to a rejection of general social forms. Consequently, retaining an antisocial student is rarely successful.

The child should be included in deciding whether to retain. If approached sensitively, most children can be induced to cooperate, particularly if they see this as a way to break the cycle of failure and frustration. If a child feels threatened by the idea of retention and refuses to discuss the possibility, little benefit can be expected.

Light<sup>10</sup> reports only one known study<sup>11</sup> of the effect of the *threat* of grade retention on students. (Since many teachers

ior as a reason for retention, it bears discussing. If a child is disinterested, he or she is more likely to become more hostile if retained and may even become truant. The best candidate for retention is a child who shows some interest in and makes some effort to complete the work assigned.

Light<sup>12</sup> states that the most common reason teachers give for recommending retention is immaturity, usually defined as behavior appropriate for a young child. A child who regularly seeks out playmates who are younger and smaller is usually socially immature. Some evidence indicates that children so charac-

research<sup>15</sup> indicates that parents of primary-level youngsters are more likely to support retention than are parents of older students.

Children who have restricted experiential background and resulting lack of verbal skills may benefit from retention because another year in the same grade may broaden their experience. However, Casavantes<sup>16</sup> and others<sup>17</sup> see such retention as discriminatory, since most children who lack a broad experiential background come from the lower socioeconomic classes. A student who has had many stimulating experiences through social and family activities is less likely to benefit from retention.

In general, a child who has attended the same school for several years is more likely to benefit from retention than one who has moved frequently. Greater permanency offers the child a better chance of forming meaningful friendships. Social acceptance or lack of it can be a major influence on the child's development.

A high rate of absenteeism is one of the most frequent reasons for retention because repeating the grade allegedly gives the child a chance to "catch up" if attendance patterns change. But truancy may indicate other problems compounding the retention decision. If the child, particularly an older one, is truant because of a dislike for school, retention is unlikely to be successful. However, even a child with good attendance habits is unlikely to benefit from retention if the same materials and methods are used when the grade is repeated.

### Historical Issues

Retention begets retention. A child who has been retained once is likely to be retained again. Because of the relation between a child's self-concept and success in school, repeated retention can be devastating. In fact, Wattenberg and Clifford<sup>18</sup> believe that for young primary children, self-concept and ego strength are more predictive of later learning ability than are measures of intelligence. If retention is unsuccessful the first time, it is much less likely to be effective the second time.

It is important to look for a history of

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believe that the threat of retention has positive effects on student performance, it is surprising that only one study seems to have been reported.) Even though the study is dated, the results are still relevant. The researcher found no significant differences in achievement between a group of students who were threatened with retention if they didn't improve their performance (experimental) and another group who were not threatened in this way (control). The threat of failure had no effect on student achievement.

It seems obvious that a student who refuses to do his or her academic work will not benefit from retention, but because some teachers use such behav-

terized achieved more during retention than did those who acted in age-appropriate ways.<sup>13</sup> Chase<sup>14</sup> suggests that there are fewer negative emotional and social effects when the reasons for failure are primarily social or physical immaturity. When the problem is explained in a caring manner, children more readily accept the idea that they need "more time to grow" as a reason for retention.

### Parental Issues

Parental attitudes play a significant role in successful retention or promotional decisions. If parents are directly or indirectly antagonistic to the teacher or to the idea of retention, the practice is unlikely to benefit the child. Some

delinquency and for learning, emotional, or behavioral problems when considering retention. If the child has a history of any of those conditions, then retention is usually not indicated.

### School Issues

In a school with a strict grade-level structure, retention is most likely to be successful early in the primary grades. The most favorable time for retention is kindergarten to grade three. Its effectiveness decreases as grade and age increase. According to Light,<sup>19</sup> one will rarely find a child in the fourth grade or higher who would benefit from retention.

In a multigrade or multi-age school, retention questions become moot, particularly with a nongraded curriculum. Since teachers can place each child wherever his or her development warrants, each student can be taught at his or her instructional level. With most SDA schools being organized into multigraded groups out of necessity, retention should rarely if ever become a topic of discussion—but it often does!

The teacher's training and the resources of the school and conference are important variables. Teachers who are well trained, who have a significant repertoire of teaching techniques and some background in teaching students with a range of abilities are more likely to succeed with youngsters who are retained. If it makes sense to retain a child one year to make up for lost instructional time, then it should make just as much sense to allow the student to skip a grade when he or she does well. A non-graded school structure permits—indeed, encourages—this kind of flexibility.

### Conclusion

Educators' positions on retention vary from cautious support under certain conditions to absolute opposition. Upon reviewing the evidence, presented primarily by Shepard and Smith,<sup>20</sup> the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) passed a resolution against all retention.<sup>21</sup> After reviewing the data presented for and against retention, we believe that the

following attitudes are warranted:

1. The issues involved in grade retention are complex and include student, parental, historical, and school-related questions.

2. Grade retention is an artificial barrier imposed upon our students primarily through the graded structures of our schools and the graded curriculum materials that we continue to produce and promote.

3. Non-graded, multi-age classroom organizations virtually eliminate the need for grade retention.

4. Grade retention generally is not helpful, especially if the student displays learning differences (e.g., special learning needs, different learning styles).

5. If retention is being considered, then the process should include the use of a child-study team (a multi-disciplinary group of professionals—See William Green's 1992 article in the JOURNAL<sup>22</sup> for further information), Light's Retention Scale,<sup>23</sup> and careful consideration of student, parental, historical, and school issues.

Grade-retention questions rarely arise when schools are not organized around artificial barriers of gradedness. When retention is considered, however, it should be done more carefully, thoughtfully, and formally than it has been in the past. ☞

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