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EFFECT OF GRADE RETENTION ON STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT: A CASE
STUDY OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF GRADE RETENTION IN IMPROVING
THE ACHIEVEMENT OF ELEMENTARY STUDENTS

The University of North Carolina at Greensboro

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EFFECT OF GRADE RETENTION ON STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT:
A CASE STUDY OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF GRADE
RETENTION IN IMPROVING THE ACHIEVEMENT
OF ELEMENTARY STUDENTS

by

Nancy Reynolds Routh

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the Faculty of the Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
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Doctor of Education

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Approved by


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APPROVAL PAGE

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ROUTH, NANCY REYNOLDS, Ed.D. Effect of Grade Retention on Student Achievement: A Case Study of the Effectiveness of Grade Retention in Improving the Achievement of Elementary Students. (1986)
Directed by Dr. Dale L. Brubaker. 97 pp.

The focus of this study was on the effectiveness of grade retention as a means of improving student achievement. Literature relating to grade retention was reviewed and a case study presented. The case study presents descriptive data covering a six-year period in one school system in which a strict promotion/retention policy for elementary schools was adopted. Achievement data for the retained students were assessed. Demographic data was included.

The legal aspects of grade retention in relation to due process and equal protection rights was presented. The courts are generally reluctant to intervene in academic matters and defer to the school officials in decisions regarding standards for promotion or graduation requirements.

Based on the findings of this study, the practice of grade retention was an ineffective means for improving student achievement. Alternatives to retention are suggested and recommendations for further study are made.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This study began in 1979, but it did not begin as the basis for a dissertation. The early data was gathered in an attempt to better understand the behavior and attitude problems that were becoming more and more evident with many of my elementary students. A check of their records quickly revealed that the majority of the students exhibiting adjustment and learning problems were the students who were overaged for their grade placement and who had failed to meet promotion standards.

My early training and teaching experience with exceptional students has instilled in me the need to look at students as individuals and to consider each one according to his needs. The idea of trying to fit all students at any level into one mold has no appeal to me. The ideal of allowing each student the time needed to learn, the instruction necessary and the appropriate materials required to help him develop to the highest level he is capable of developing, may be unrealistic. Somewhere between these two concepts is a middle ground that allows a student to be an individual, requires the mastery of skills according to his ability, expects the student to learn and understands that learning is a continuous process not confined to predetermined curricula and texts. The love of learning is not taught through failure.

The information included in this study is presented in the hope that it may influence educators and school officials to focus on the

individual—not at the expense of quality but with the realization that free and independent thought fosters new and creative ideas needed to solve the problems of a complex society.

I wish to express my thanks and appreciation to those who have guided, supported and contributed to this study.

I appreciate the guidance and support from Dr. Dale Brubaker who chaired the committee and guided the dissertation. I also thank Drs. Joseph Bryson, David Olson and Harold Snyder who have served on the committee.

I appreciate the support and encouragement from my family as I have worked on this project.

I appreciate the contribution made to this study by my colleagues in the Greensboro Public Schools and the Research Committee who gave approval for the use of data.

I am especially grateful to the typist Jan Poole for her help and patience, and to the reader Karen Gerringer for her encouragement and suggestions.

I sincerely hope that the outcome of this study will be the beginning of additional work leading to a solution to a problem occurring in the schools but rooted in society.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Poor academic achievement is a continuing concern of educators and of public administrators responsible for the allocation of fiscal and human resources used in the educational process. Grade retention has been used as a means of allowing students more time, or another chance, to learn the skills and subject content required at a particular grade level.

The effectiveness of grade retention as a means of improving academic achievement has been a subject of controversy since the early part of this century. Numerous studies have been conducted to try to determine the results of grade retention, but since these studies were conducted under differing circumstances and without consideration of common variables, the conclusions have often been conflicting.

This study includes a review and summary of the literature dealing with grade retention, but focuses on a case study of the effects of grade retention on student achievement. Descriptive data include background information about the schools and school system used in the study, characteristics of students including socioeconomic status, and the circumstances leading to the implementation of minimum promotion standards.

Consideration is given to current trends in state and local educational agencies relative to policies establishing competency-based programs and standards for promotion.

Method of Study

It is difficult to study the effects of grade retention through an experimental research design. The problems associated with establishing matched groups, assigning treatment and continuing the study over a sufficient period of time are prohibitive. A statistical analysis of factors relating to grade retention may be misleading. While many common factors are found among individuals or groups who have been retained, establishing a correlation between any one of these variables and a student's lack of achievement may imply a casual relationship which does not exist. Therefore, the case study approach is being used to describe the characteristics of individuals and the common characteristics of the total group included in the study. Studying the descriptive data of the characteristics of students who have been retained and the results of this retention, allows an analysis of variables which can be very helpful in evaluating the effectiveness of this practice and in considering alternatives to grade retention as a means of improving achievement.

Seymour Sarason in his book The Creation of Settings in Future Societies, considers the case study to be more than a collection of facts. It is a description of the total setting in which the situation or the condition being studied exists.¹

In the area of educational research methodology, L. R. Gay defines the case study as an in-depth method for studying an individual,

¹Seymour Sarason, The Creation of Settings in Future Societies (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1976).

a group, or an institution, by looking at all of the factors affecting the present condition and by analyzing the relationship of those factors.² The case study method is also recommended when there is conflicting information or when there is disagreement concerning the topic. The case study method is appropriate for studying student achievement in relation to grade retention.

Scope of the Study

This study focuses on the characteristics and achievement levels of three groups of students. Descriptive data were collected for one hundred and twenty-two retained students enrolled in an elementary school during the 1979-80 school year. These students were assigned to classes from kindergarten through grade six. The achievement data collected for fifth grade students show achievement for the years retained compared to the years promoted. This group represented a larger sample and also had more complete information available for each individual student.

The second set of data was collected in 1983 from all of the elementary schools within the Greensboro School system. These data were gathered to determine characteristics and number of students retained more than one time between kindergarten and eighth grade. Achievement test data were collected and studied for the third grade and sixth grade students. Achievement test data were more readily available for these two grades as a result of the state testing program.

²L. R. Gay, Educational Research: Competencies for Analysis and Application (Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill, 1976), p. 137.

The third set of data was collected in the spring of 1985 for sixth grade students enrolled in one elementary school. These data were collected to determine if there were significant differences in the characteristics and achievement of the retained students in 1985 as compared to the first group studied in 1980.

Literature Review

In addition to the group case studies a review of previous studies is included in Chapter II. William Lucas, in his report compiled for the Rand Corporation (1978),³ suggests that studying previously completed research is an effective method for bridging the present situation to the past.

Problems may be encountered in using earlier studies to support present decisions; however, if the basic questions to be answered are determined in advance and used consistently then the survey of previous studies can be helpful.

Three basic questions are considered in the literature review.

1. How has the practice of grade retention developed historically and what is the philosophical basis for the practice?
2. Is there evidence to support this practice as an effective means of improving student achievement?

³William Lucas, The Case Survey Method: Aggregating Case Experience (Rand Corporation, 1974), p. 37.

3. Are there characteristics of retained students found in previous studies to suggest alternatives to retention for solving the problem of poor academic achievement?

A summary of studies conducted between 1929 and 1975 is included in the literature review for background and historical information. More emphasis is given to studies completed during the late seventies and early eighties which looked at current practices of grade retention.

The growing emphasis on basic education programs and the demand for excellence in education seems to have influenced the decisions of educators to set criteria for promotion based on mastery of competencies. Changes that have resulted from the criticisms aimed at education have tended to be in terms of organization, structure, and program rather than in terms of educational philosophy or the psychology of learning.

Seymour Sarason addressed some of the criticisms aimed at education in his book Schooling in America, Scapegoat or Salvation and points out some contradictions.⁴ He attacks the assumption that schools are the best place for learning to occur and challenges educators to look for alternatives.⁵

Additional literature is used to show the need for identifying and analyzing the characteristics of groups or of individual students in determining appropriate educational practices.

⁴Seymour Sarason, Schooling in America, Scapegoat or Salvation (New York: Free Press, 1983), pp. 13-17.

⁵Ibid., pp. 59-83.

Legal Implications

Chapter IV addresses the legal implications surrounding the practice of grade retention based on the required mastery of specific standards or competencies. While the courts generally have been reluctant to interfere in the educational process they have addressed the issues of due process rights, equal educational opportunity and discrimination.

Grade retention based on the student's failure to master certain competencies requires some form of competency testing. Joseph Bryson and Charles Bentley in their book Ability Grouping of Public School Students point out that competency testing is legal and occurs daily in the classroom; however, it is important that the practices resulting from the testing do not discriminate against any minority group, deny equal educational opportunity or bring injury because of permanent placement or tracking.⁶

Court cases relating to competency testing and the placement of students are reviewed to determine their application to grade retention practices. The legal aspects are considered in relation to the following questions:

1. Are retained students being denied equal educational opportunity by being required to repeat elementary grades without access to vocational education or alternative courses?

⁶Joseph E. Bryson and Charles P. Bentley, Ability Grouping of Public School Students (Charlottesville, Va.: Michi Company, 1980), pp. 182-183.

2. Is there evidence that grade retention discriminates against socioeconomically deprived and/or minority groups?
3. Who has the responsibility for monitoring the impact of grade retention policies?

Summary and Conclusions

Chapter V summarizes the findings of the case studies in terms of their significance to educators and educational decision-makers. Findings from the case studies are compared to the earlier studies discussed in the literature review.

The questions identified in Chapter II and Chapter IV are answered and conclusions drawn from the information gathered from the study.

While this study does not provide absolute answers to the questions posed, it does provide extensive data describing the students who are most affected by policies regarding competencies and promotion. It also points out the many variables which impact on a student's ability to meet competencies and encourages student placement decisions based on all of the information available.

Definition of Terms

For the purposes of this study the following definitions are used:

Grade retention - The practice of having a student remain in the same grade for more than one school year in order to learn the skills and information designated for that particular grade.

Promotion - moving a student to the next higher grade.

Promotion standards - the criteria set for determining a student's eligibility for moving to a higher grade.

Retainee - a student who has repeated or is repeating a particular grade.

Multiply-retained - a student who has been required to repeat a grade more than one time during his school career.

Promotion/retention policy - a policy adopted by a local board of education or by a state education agency stating the requirements to be met in order to be promoted to the next higher grade.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Available literature relating to grade retention, promotion/retention policies, minimum competencies and competency testing has been reviewed. A listing of related literature was obtained through a computer search from Educational Information Center (ERIC). Dissertation Abstracts International was searched for studies completed on grade retention and student achievement or other related topics. Additional research and journal articles were found in Readers Guide to Periodic Literature, bibliographies accompanying some studies and from unpublished works made available by the researcher.

Three basic questions were considered in the literature review:

1. How has the practice of grade retention developed historically and what is the philosophical basis for the practice?
2. Is there evidence to support this practice as an effective means of improving student achievement?
3. Are there characteristics of retained students found in previous studies to suggest alternatives to retention for solving the problem of poor academic achievement?

Historical Background

Prior to the middle of the nineteenth century a student's academic progress was a highly individual matter. Students worked

through a series of texts at their own rate and their educational status was determined by the particular text they had completed.¹

When schools in America moved from the home and the one-room school into larger public schools, the organization became more structured. Students moved to a higher level, or grade, as material was mastered. It was assumed that teachers knew how to teach and the students were responsible for learning. If they failed to learn they were retained. Student placement was based on achievement and students in a particular grade were expected to pursue the same subject at the same times.²

The industrialization occurring during the latter part of the nineteenth century influenced the graded school organization and the standardization of education.³ Little attention was given to individual differences in ability or learning rate. According to Frederic Medway and Janet Rose in their study of grade retention, approximately every other student was retained at least once before reaching the eighth grade during the period from 1840-1930.⁴

During the depression years the practice of retaining students declined. This effort by educators to make school more desirable was

¹Fran Lehr, "Grade Retention vs. Social Promotion," The Reading Teacher 36 (1982):234.

²Sidney Thompson, "Grade Retention and Social Promotion," ASCD School Management Digest, Series I (1980):1-36.

³Ibid.

⁴Frederic Medway and Janet Rose, "Grade Retention" (Address, University of South Carolina, 1984), p. 6.

done to prevent students from dropping out to look for employment. Retentions continued to decline through the 1950s and 1960s. School systems adopted policies designed to reduce the number of overaged students in classrooms and to reduce academic failure.⁵

A student's deficiencies were accommodated through grouping and individualized instruction. Greater emphasis was placed on the student's self-concept and feelings of worth. If a student was retained, the decision was based on age, social and emotional maturity, home background, and the student's own interest rather than on academic achievement or test scores alone. This practice known as "social promotion" became the norm.⁶

The social promotion trend continued into the 1970s when achievement test scores began to decline and critics of public education cited the practice of social promotion as a major cause.⁷ Public demand for accountability in education led to the establishment of minimum competency tests and policies requiring a certain level of achievement before receiving a high school diploma or before moving to a higher grade.⁸ According to John Guthrie the pressure put on the schools for stricter standards and greater accountability was based on the problems of youth unemployment and functional illiteracy. In early 1970 the unemployment

⁵Ibid., p. 7.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Lehr, p. 235.

⁸John Guthrie, "Minimum Competency Testing: A Brief History," The Reading Teacher 34 (1981):875.

rate for youth ranged from 15 to 35 percent. The public believed that the failure of the school to develop communication and job-related skills was the cause of this unemployment and also believed that illiteracy was widespread.⁹

Minimum competency testing programs were developed to serve two purposes--accountability and remediation.¹⁰ The use of competency testing originated in Oregon in 1972 with a State Board of Education proposal recommending a testing program. The idea quickly spread to other states and was generally linked to graduation and/or promotion.¹¹

While competency testing was not tied originally to grade promotion, several states passed legislation which said these tests could be used for promotion prior to high school. Grade retention became an easy instructional option to more expensive remedial programs.¹² An exact census of grade retentions is not readily available, however, in a report prepared for the Office of Civil Rights for the 1971-1972 school year, 1,007,539 elementary and secondary school students were retained.¹³ Even though retention is considered a less expensive form of remediation since it does not require new personnel or materials, the

⁹Ibid., p. 876.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Medway and Rose, p. 9.

¹²Ibid., p. 11.

¹³Gregg B. Jackson, "The Research Evidence on the Effects of Grade Retention," Review of Educational Research 45 (1975):613.

estimated 1971-1972 cost to the nation was between 739 million and 903 million dollars.¹⁴

Official reports of national retention rates are not available; however, Medway and Rose report data gathered by the United States Bureau of the Census which shows "the number of children who are at or below the modal grade for their age (i.e., the grade in which most children of a given age are enrolled)."¹⁵ According to the census data there was a decline in the number of children enrolled below the mode between 1950 and 1970. This corresponds to the period in which social promotion was the dominant practice. After 1970 the number enrolled below the mode increased. In 1978, 600,000 eight year olds were reported to be enrolled one or more years below the mode, an increase of 400,000 children in a two-year period.¹⁶ This increase occurred during the period in which minimum competency testing programs were being put into practice by many states.

Retention Studies

Grade retention has been a subject of controversy and a subject of research for many years. A study completed by Gregg Jackson for the Office of Civil Rights and published in 1975 reviews over forty studies conducted between 1929 and 1974 on the effects of retention.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Medway and Rose, p. 20.

¹⁶Ibid.

The purpose of Jackson's study was to determine if students, in general, are likely to benefit more from retention than from being promoted to the next grade (other alternatives were not considered). A common rationale given for retention was: (1) to remedy inadequate academic progress and (2) to aid in the development of students judged to be emotionally immature.¹⁷ A third reason often given was the need for students to master material at one level before being able to benefit from higher level material.¹⁸

The variety of research designs used made it difficult to compare results. Most studies were of pupils who had been retained for either academic or adjustment difficulties, but none of the studies matched retained and promoted students on both classroom achievement and adjustment. Even when retained and promoted students were matched on age, IQ and socioeconomic status there was no assurance that pupils were initially similar in respect to actual conditions.

Jackson concluded that most of the research was quite inadequate for making valid inferences about the effects of grade retention; however, none of the studies suggested that grade retention was more beneficial to pupils having difficulty in school than promotion to the next higher grade level. He said:

There is no reliable body of evidence to indicate that grade retention is more beneficial than grade promotion for pupils with serious academic or adjustment difficulties.¹⁹

¹⁷Jackson, p. 614.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Jackson, p. 627.

Additional studies completed since 1975 and reported by Medway and Rose look at the circumstances and situations in which retention has seemed to help students in an effort to determine the characteristics of students who benefit from retention.²⁰

The "successful retaineer" was described as a child whose intelligence was not more than one standard deviation below the mean (i.e., IQ 84 or above). One who had made some progress in the first year or grade, was emotionally well adjusted and was developing appropriate social skills. Children described as having low intelligence, low achievement or delayed development would be better served by special education programs.²¹

Medway and Rose also examined the progress of more than 6,000 students during the year of retention as compared to the original year in the grade. They found that only 20-35 percent learned more in the second year while almost 40 percent learned less during the second year. Based on their research they concluded that if retention helped a student it was during the early school years and that retention had little educational benefit in the upper elementary grades or beyond the sixth grade.²² They also point out that these conclusions related to repeating the grade only and did not include students who received some type of special help or remedial instruction.²³

²⁰Medway and Rose, pp. 33-37.

²¹Ibid.

²²Ibid., pp. 29-30.

²³Ibid.

John Maddocks studied the effects of grade retention on the reading achievement of first grade students retained in North Carolina.²⁴ His study looked at the number of students retained in first grade during the years 1978 through 1982 and the achievement of these students at the end of the first grade year and for the two years following their retention. Maddocks' study supported the findings reported by the State Department of Public Instruction:

1. When considering matched pairs, promoted students achieve higher in reading than nonpromoted students for each year of school. In absolute terms, promoting students has a more favorable effect on reading achievement than retaining them at at the first grade.
2. When considering their ranking at the end of each grade level, the nonpromoted students had a higher ranking than their counterparts who were promoted, but the difference diminished at each grade level. At the end of the third grade the difference lacked educational importance.²⁵

A major study completed in 1984 by Thomas Holmes and Kenneth Matthews from the University of Georgia, looked at the effects of non-promotion on both elementary and junior high students. A meta-analysis was done of forty-four studies conducted between 1929 and 1982 to determine any measurable effect nonpromotion had on academic achievement, personal adjustment, self-concept and attitude toward school.²⁶

²⁴John C. Maddocks, "The Relationship Between Average Student Achievement and Nonpromotion Rate: A Path Analysis Model for North Carolina Elementary Schools" (Ed.D. dissertation, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 1983).

²⁵State Department of Public Instruction, "Study of the Effect of First Grade Nonpromotion on Subsequent Achievement in Reading" (Raleigh, N.C.: Author, 1983), p. 11.

²⁶C. Thomas Holmes and Kenneth M. Matthews, "The Effects of Non-promotion on Elementary and Junior High School Pupils: A Meta-Analysis," Review of Educational Research 54 (1984):225-231.

Their analysis indicated that: the promoted group on the average achieved significantly higher than a like group of previously retained students; following retention the retained students scored below promoted students on measures of personal adjustment and self-concept; and retained students held school in "less favor" than promoted students.²⁷

They further concluded:

Those who continue to retain pupils at grade level do so despite cumulative research evidence showing that the potential for negative effects consistently outweighs positive outcomes. Because this cumulative research evidence consistently points to negative effects of nonpromotion, the burden of proof legitimately falls on proponents of retention plans to show there is compelling logic indicating success of their plans when so many other plans have failed.²⁸

Lucille Nicklason reported in her study of nonpromotion that thirty-eight states had competency testing programs by 1979 and that half of these required passing a test for graduation.²⁹ A 1982 NEA survey included in the report stated that one third of the teachers surveyed indicated that students are now being retained until they reach a satisfactory level of achievement. This was in contrast to a 1960 survey which reported less than 1 percent of students were retained on the basis of academic achievement alone.³⁰ Nicklason's study supported the majority of studies over the past eighty years

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Ibid., p. 232.

²⁹Lucille B. Nicklason, "Nonpromotion: A Pseudoscientific Solution," Psychology in the Schools 21 (1984):485.

³⁰Ibid.

which concluded that retaining students did not serve to increase a student's academic achievement nor his personal and social adjustment. In addition, she reported that the majority of the students recommended for retention were already achieving academically at their expected levels thus making retention seem "harsh and insensitive."³¹

A few recent studies and reports support the use of competency tests, stricter standards and retention as means of improving achievement. Even though the "promotion by achievement" program begun in the Greensville County Virginia Schools during the 1973-1974 school year is no longer in use, Judith Cates and Philip Ash reported on the positive results from the program.³²

Charges of racial discrimination brought an end to the program in the early 1980s, but achievement test scores reported indicated that the gains made by black students were more than twice the gains made by white students. Cates and Ash felt that the black students were closing the achievement gap and that both groups benefited from the program in spite of the negative reactions from parents of retained students.³³

Another report supporting a stricter promotion and retention policy came from Pinellas County, Florida. The new stricter policy was implemented in the 1977-1978 school year and its purpose was to provide uniform criteria for promotion and retention within the school system

³¹Ibid., p. 495.

³²Judith Cates and Phillip Ash, "The End to a Common Sense Approach to Basics," Phi Delta Kappan 65 (1983):137-138.

³³Ibid.

and to better prepare students for the competency test already required for all eleventh grade students.³⁴

The first year of implementation the retention rate rose from 4 percent to 12 percent, dropped to 8 percent in 1980, and seemed to stabilize between 6 and 7 percent in subsequent years. The school board asked to be kept informed of the numbers affected. Achievement test records indicated that students did make significant gains during the year of retention. Those retained in lower elementary grades gained more than those retained at higher grades.³⁵

The evaluation of the retained students' progress the year following the retention year found both academic progress and grade level standing to be substantially improved.³⁶ Two to three times as many students have been retained under the new policy than were previously retained, but the result has been viewed as having a positive impact. Retention has been presented as an opportunity rather than as a penalty. Parents are counseled early in the year about possible retention and have tended to support the practice. Decisions to retain have been based on more than achievement test scores alone.³⁷

The most recent report used in this study comes from the Austin, Texas Independent School District. A three year evaluation of Austin's

³⁴Jane K. Elligett and Thomas S. Tocco, "The Promotion Retention Policy in Panellas County, Florida," Phi Delta Kappan 64 (1983):733.

³⁵Ibid., p. 734.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Ibid., p. 735.

stricter retention policy, which was implemented in the 1981-1982 school year, found that "on the average, retainees at all elementary grades almost always gained significantly less in mathematics and usually gained less in reading than did students who were promoted."³⁸

Austin's program was evaluated in two different ways. The attitudes of teachers and parents regarding the effects of retaining a student were used along with growth in achievement as measured by the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS).³⁹

Of the students retained during the two-year period from 1982-1984, 79 percent were considered successful as judged by their teachers and 71 percent were considered successful when judged by their parents. Only 54 percent were also successful according to their ITBS reading scores.

The success study revealed that, at the end of the repeated grade, teachers and parents are more likely to see retention as successful than achievement test score gains are likely to show such success. This suggests that teachers and parents perceive most students' classroom performance and attitude toward school as improving.⁴⁰

After three years of study, Austin concluded that "long-term achievement results suggest that retention does not help most students. Some students do benefit in the following areas:

1. In reading, gains increase during the retention year but slow after promotion.

³⁸Nancy Baenen Schuyler, "A Matter of Time Retention and Promotion," ERS Spectrum 3 (1985):40.

³⁹Ibid., p. 41.

⁴⁰Ibid.

2. In mathematics, gains decrease during the year retained and increase only after promotion.⁴¹

It was also noted in the Austin study that some students who were retained because of poor reading ability might not be behind in mathematics. The fact that their growth in mathematics slowed down the year retained and did not increase until promoted, indicated the students were not challenged and that retaining a student with reading problems can have an adverse effect on mathematics.⁴²

If students did show benefits from retention it was generally for a short term and they eventually fell behind again. Retention did not improve their learning rate. It was also found that by age fourteen students who were older than the average for the grade were more likely to drop out.⁴³

Andrea Carstens has studied the effects of retention and social promotion on exceptional children. She describes remedial programs designed to help the slow learner improve his achievement in reading, language and mathematics. She points out that even under optimum conditions the gap between the child's grade level and achievement level is not adequately reduced and children are often retained to further reduce the gap. Based on the child's slower rate of learning she states:

If retention were used to correct this gap each time a child fell one year below grade placement, a child would have to be retained seven times to achieve a twelfth-grade education.

⁴¹Ibid., p. 45.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Ibid.

This child would be twenty-four years old at graduation. What happens in reality, is that these children are retained several times and a large proportion drop out of school before graduation.⁴⁴

The learning disabled student may also have problems making sufficient progress since the amount of appropriate instructional time is usually limited. Carstens also feels that retention is inappropriate for these children since it fails to provide instructional techniques and time with material which they require.⁴⁵

Neither retention nor social promotion is considered the appropriate solution since both methods are based on the assumption that traditional methods of instruction are adequate for exceptional children. Both of these approaches fail to provide for the slower rate of progress and for the different types of instruction needed by many exceptional children.⁴⁶ Carstens recommends a program that "continuously assesses a child's progress" and provides individualized instruction.⁴⁷

In 1977, shortly after the move toward competency testing and the increased use of retention as a solution to the problem of low achievement, William Bocks reported that the "majority of students who repeat a grade will achieve no better the second time in the grade than

⁴⁴Andrea Carstens, "Retention and Social Promotion for the Exceptional Child." Unpublished manuscript, 1982. (Available Bowman Gray School of Medicine, Winston-Salem, N.C.), pp. 30-31.

⁴⁵Ibid., pp. 32-33.

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 40.

⁴⁷Ibid.

they did the first time and a substantial number will do poorer."⁴⁸ He also reported research conducted by the North Carolina Advancement School in their work with low achieving students from throughout North Carolina. They concluded that retaining students did not help them to "catch-up" academically and that the retained students had lower scores on self-concept scales. Nonpromotion did not insure greater mastery of subject matter, the threat of nonpromotion did not serve as a motivating force and the removal of the threat of nonpromotion did not lower achievement.⁴⁹

Clair Koons also challenged the increased use of nonpromotion as a means for helping low achieving children. She pointed out that students could be promoted with their peers and still be given instruction at the appropriate level and provided with materials below grade level.⁵⁰

"Regularly promoted low-achieving children score higher on achievement tests than similar retained students after they spend an additional year in a grade."⁵¹

More recent literature continues to report the negative aspects of retention. Thomas Toch pointed out that today's reformers are

⁴⁸William K. Bocks, "Nonpromotion: 'A Year to Grow?'" Educational Leadership 34 (1977):380.

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 383.

⁵⁰Clair Koons, "Nonpromotion: A Dead-End Road." Phi Delta Kappan 58 (1977):701.

⁵¹Ibid., p. 702.

urging that all students be held to higher standards and that the focus be on "excellence." The changes sought have been those most easily implemented--competency requirements, higher cut-off scores, more credits for graduation, longer school day and longer year.⁵² Very little has been done for those who failed to meet the competency requirements.

The District of Columbia Schools implemented stricter standards, had large numbers of students who failed and now provide a summer school program, after-school tutoring, computer assisted instruction and special classroom aides to work with retainees.⁵³ New York city implemented stricter promotion requirements for grades four and seven in 1981. More than 20,000 students required remedial help. Teachers were given additional training and smaller classes to deal with the problem. The most difficult problem was the 30 percent of the students who failed for the second time. In an effort to avoid psychological damage to the student, remedial academic work was combined with vocational training to allow older seventh graders to spend some time with their high school peers. The tremendous cost of the programs and difficulty keeping track of student progress were also problems.⁵⁴

The Philadelphia School System approached the higher promotion requirement differently. A stricter promotion policy was adopted in

⁵²Thomas Toch, "The Dark Side of the Excellence Movement." Phi Delta Kappan 66 (1984):174.

⁵³Ibid., p. 175.

⁵⁴Ibid.

1983, but a study of the system indicated that two out of five students would fail to meet the grade level reading and math standards if the new policy were put into effect as planned. The implementation of the policy was delayed until plans could be made for helping the students who would fail the new standards.⁵⁵

David Labarée has also studied the effects of the stricter requirements in New York City and other large urban areas. He did not find the threat of retention to be a strong motivating device for students to improve.⁵⁶ He stated, "To the extent that poor test scores are the result of such factors as class background, racial discrimination, family conditions and test validity, the student's motivation is irrelevant and retention will not spur to higher achievement."⁵⁷

Labarée feels that if rigid promotion standards have an effect on achievement it will depend on the remediation efforts of the schools. Smaller classes, additional training for teachers and new curricula are suggested. He recommends a "rigorous evaluation" of program effectiveness and instructional programs that provide more than just basics. Expansive and challenging programs should be oriented toward higher achievement for all students, including the average and the above average. Placing the emphasis on improving the instructional program

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ David F. Labarée, "Setting the Standard: Alternative Policies for Student Promotion." Harvard Educational Review 54 (February 1984): 83.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

and instruction rather than on retention is considered a better alternative for improving achievement.⁵⁸

Retaining students is expensive and can create even more costly problems in the future. Phi Delta Kappan research reported that the retention of over 900 students in one Virginia school district had cost that district \$4.5 million in one year.⁵⁹ This same report stated: "Many studies have shown that students who are retained, especially in the early grades, later drop out. These same studies and others including the follow-ups of high school and beyond, have shown that the cost of dropping out is high to both the dropout and the society."⁶⁰

There has been very little found in the studies reviewed to clearly support the practice of grade retention as an effective means for improving student achievement. The same statement is also true for the practice of social promotion. The controversy that has existed for more than a century is likely to continue.

Educators have debated two philosophical issues: (a) the impact of the failure experience and (b) the degree to which students or schools are responsible for student achievement.⁶¹

In this debate most people agree that failure is not a welcomed experience while others view it as not pleasant, but necessary. The

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 85

⁵⁹Gerald W. Bracey, "A Promotion for Social Promotion." Phi Delta Kappan 66 (January 1985):376.

⁶⁰Ibid.

⁶¹Janet Rose, Frederick Medway, et al., "A Fresh Look at the Retention-Promotion Controversy." Journal of School Psychology 21 (1983):207.

question in retention is whether personal failure has beneficial or harmful consequences on the person's development.⁶²

Rose, Medway and others feel that grade placement decisions must be made on an individual basis "by educators who are familiar with research, theory and practice as it relates to student retention."⁶³

The majority of the studies reviewed in this chapter deal with the results of several different situations in which students repeated grades and were later assessed to determine their progress, or to compare their progress to promoted students with similar characteristics and abilities. A few studies report the results of promotion standards and/or competency testing in a particular situation.

The following chapter reports descriptively the effects of a strict promotion/retention policy and minimum standards, over a period of seven years in one specific school system. This group case study focuses on the students most affected by grade retention--the ones who have failed.

⁶²Ibid.

⁶³Ibid., p. 210.

CHAPTER III

PRESENTATION OF STUDY

The purpose of this study has been to examine the practice of grade retention as a means of improving academic achievement and to determine its effectiveness. In the introductory chapter the rationale for using a case study approach to the problem has been given. The data presented in the following pages includes descriptions of the settings and groups examined; charts and tables showing statistical information; and a narrative of the progression of events from the beginning of the study to the present.

The literature review has presented background information on the practice of retaining students in a grade and the outcome of this practice as reported in studies ranging from the early part of the century to the present. Retaining students in a grade and requiring the student to repeat the material for that grade has been a common practice in American schools since their early beginnings. Educators, psychologists and administrators generally agree that individual students learn at different rates and through different methods and modes. The agreement ends when they attempt to plan instructional programs and to place students in classes based on these differences.

Competency testing at the secondary school level to determine eligibility for graduation was implemented in North Carolina in 1977. Programs designed to reduce the failure rate and to assure the acquisition of basic reading and math skills were added to the high school

course of study. Social promotion, the practice of placing a student at the next higher grade based on attendance or age, was abandoned by many schools and replaced with promotion criteria based on grade level expectations, grades and test scores.

During the 1977-1978 school year, the Greensboro Public Schools adopted a policy requiring promotion standards for all elementary grades including kindergarten. These standards defined specific mathematics, reading and language arts skills to be mastered and recommended requirements for all other subject areas. The skills required were based primarily on the current textbook adoptions and were revised as textbooks were changed. The Board of Education policy authorized promotion standards which were raised annually until all elementary grades, kindergarten through grade six, had grade level standards for reading and mathematics.

In order to avoid annual revisions, the administrative regulation was changed in 1983 to include the requirement of a passing grade or a "D" average minimum on all subjects for which a grade is given.

The information in this chapter is from data collected in 1980 of one hundred and twenty-two (122) students in one elementary school, and from a more extensive study completed in 1983 of seven hundred and seventeen (717) students within the school system. Descriptive data of a third group of elementary students studied in 1985 and currently enrolled in one elementary school is included.

The 1980 Study: One School

At the end of the 1978-1979 school year a reorganization of the elementary schools within the Greensboro Public School System occurred. In an effort to manage declining enrollment, school district lines were redrawn; a few elementary schools were closed and students were reassigned.

As a result of the reorganization, Public School A became the largest elementary school in the system with an enrollment of six hundred and twenty-five students in kindergarten through the sixth grade. All of the students through the fourth grade were newly assigned to the school and only fifty-seven of the fifth and sixth graders had previously attended that school.

The student population represented a cross section of the city's population. Socioeconomic levels ranged from high income, professionally trained family members to very low income levels with family members having only elementary school education.

Students had been reassigned from at least eight different elementary schools within the system and their success, or lack of success, could not be attributed to any one particular school's program or staff.

The school system's promotion retention policy and minimum standards for promotion had been implemented for two years. Very little was known about the effect of this policy except the number of students retained annually at each grade level.

As the cumulative records of students newly assigned to Public School A were studied, it was apparent that a large number of

students had already repeated a grade. Achievement test scores indicated that they were also functioning below their current grade placement level.

Table 1 shows the distribution by grade of the one hundred and twenty-two students studied, the grade at which they had been retained and the number classified as exceptional children and receiving services through exceptional children's programs.

Table 1
Distribution by Grade of the 122 Retainees in
the 1980 Single School Study

Present Grade	Number of Retained Students	Grade Level at Which Student was Retained								Exceptional Students Retained		
		K	1	2	3	4	5	6		Spe/Lang	EMH	LD
K	3	3										1
1	16	5	11						5	1		
2	22	7	9	8					3	1		2
3	20	1	9	11	1				2	1		5
4	11	0	2	1	5	3				1		2
5	33	0	4	2	3	14	10			3		7
6	17	0	0	3	0	0	13	1		1		2
Total	122	16	35	25	9	17	23	1	10	8		19

One hundred and twenty-two of the six hundred and twenty-five students enrolled, or 19.2 percent, had been retained.

The rationale for retaining a student in the same grade for more than one year is usually to allow the student to "catch-up" or to master the subjects or skills in which he is deficient. Achievement

test data from the California Test of Basic Skills (CTBS) or from the California Achievement Test (CAT) were available for students retained in kindergarten, third, fourth, fifth and sixth grades. Criteria referenced test data (Primary Reading Inventory and Developmental Mathematics Inventory) available for first and second grades could not be accurately compared to achievement scores to determine growth during the period from first and second grades to third grade and were not used.

An effort was made to determine the actual level of functioning and instructional level in reading for each student during the first nine weeks of the school year. Reading placement tests, informal reading inventories, and unit mastery tests from the basal reading series were used to determine the level of functioning.

Table 2 indicates the number of retainees at each grade level who were able to function on grade level and those functioning below their assigned grade level.

As shown in Tables 1 and 2 the largest number of retainees in any one grade was thirty-three students in the fifth grade. Fourteen of these students had repeated the fourth grade and ten were repeating the fifth grade. While a few students had been retained in the primary grades (K-3), there was a significant increase in the number of retentions the year (1978-79) in which the promotion/retention policy and standards for promotion were adopted and implemented.

Academic records were incomplete for many of the students. In some cases there were indications that students had attended two or three different schools and test data were missing from their records for some of their school years.

Table 2
Achievement Level in Reading - Fall 1980

Present Grade	Number Retained	Number on Grade Level	Number Below Grade Level	No. 2 yrs./ More Below Grade Level
K	3	1	2	
1	16	9	7	
2	22	4	14	4
3	20	7	10	3
4	11	1	6	4
5	33	3	14	16
6	17	4	6	7
Total	122	29	59	34

Thirty students had been tested with the Short Form Test of Academic Ability (SFTAA) a test used by the state of North Carolina to determine academic ability for third graders and sixth graders throughout the state. The scores available for the fifth grade retainees were results obtained during their third grade year. Nineteen of the fifth grade retainees had also been evaluated individually by a school psychologist using the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC).

The mean intelligence quotient (IQ) for the SFTAA was 85 with a range of scores from 60 to 116. Scores from the Wechsler ranged from 71 to 121 with a mean IQ of 83.8.

Achievement test data indicated that only three of the thirty-three retained students were functioning at the fifth grade level. Fourteen were functioning from one half to one year below grade level,

and sixteen remained two years or more below grade level after having been retained for at least one year. Complete achievement test data from the California Achievement Tests given during the third grade year, fourth grade year and fourth grade year retained were available for ten of the thirty-three fifth graders.

Table 3 shows the three year achievement data for these ten students given in grade equivalent scores and indicates the number of months growth gained from year to year.

Table 3
Three Year CAT Achievement Data for
Ten Fifth Grade Students

Student	1978	1979	Growth	1980 (Year Retained)	Growth
1	1.3	2.0	7 mos	2.9 ^a	9 mos
2	1.9	3.4	1 yr 5 mo	4.4	1 yr
3	2.3	3.6	1 yr 3 mos	5.1 ^a	1 yr 5 mos
4	2.0	3.2	1 yr 2 mos	3.7	5 mos
5	1.6	3.2	1 yr 6 mos	3.9	7 mos
6	2.5	3.6	1 yr 1 mo	4.5	9 mos
7	0.8	2.2	1 yr 4 mos	1.7	-5 mos
8	1.8	3.2	1 yr 4 mos	3.6	4 mos
9	2.5	3.4	9 mos	4.5 ^a	1 yr 1 mo
10	2.4	3.4	1 yr	3.5	1 mo

a = greater gains during year retained

All of the students were scoring below grade level on the CAT at the end of fourth grade, but the amount of growth or actual months gained was greater than the growth attained during the year of

retention. Only three of the ten show greater gains during the year retained than during the year prior to retention.

An assessment of the achievement data and the actual level of functioning demonstrated by these fifth grade students did not support the premise that holding students in a grade and allowing them to repeat material increases their levels of achievement. Repeating the grade did not bring them up to a grade level standard.

No attempt was made to document social adjustment, self-concept or the socioeconomic status of this group. While teachers, counselors and administrators recognized the fact that many variables other than ability, previous learning opportunities and present work/study habits, related to the student's progress, the concern centered on the academic achievement and the progress made during their years in school.

While the number of students included in this one school study was small, the information gained indicated a need to study the effect of grade retention more extensively and to look for factors influencing a student's academic achievement.

1983 Study: Multiple Retention

As the number of students being retained in the elementary grades increased in the Greensboro School System, the administration realized the need for a more extensive study of the situation. Records indicated that many students were failing to meet promotion standards more than once and had been retained two or more times in the elementary grades. Junior high schools were aware of the impact of over-aged students entering the seventh grade.

A task force was set up in the spring of 1983 to study the effects of the retention policy on elementary and junior high school students throughout the system. The survey developed by the task force subcommittee to collect the data was distributed to thirty-five elementary and junior high schools in the spring of 1983. The survey requested demographic data, including achievement, for any student within the school population known to have repeated grades two or more times.

The data compiled and analyzed during the summer and fall of 1983 indicated that seven-hundred and forty-seven students had been retained two or more times. Thirty of the reported cases were omitted from the study because of incomplete information.

The seven hundred and seventeen students included in the study ranged in age from seven to sixteen with the majority falling within the ten to thirteen year range. The age distribution is shown in Table 4.

Grade placements ranged from kindergarten through grade eight with the highest number of retained students reported in grades four, five and six as shown in Table 5.

Socioeconomic and ethnic data collected in the survey indicated that 50 percent of the multiply retained students were black males. Slightly over 25 percent were black females with the remaining 25 percent distributed among white males, white females, other males and other females (see Table 6).

Background data shown in Table 7 indicates that 37 percent of the students were reported as living with both parents, however, more

Table 4
The 717 Students Reported Range in Age From 7 to
16 with the Majority Falling Between
the Ages of 10 and 14

Age	Frequency	Percent
(not given)	3	-
7	8	1.12
8	49	6.86
9	80	11.20
10	77	10.78
11	109	15.26
12	170	23.81
13	134	18.76
14	46	6.44
15	34	4.76
16	7	.98

n = 717

Table 5
Grade Placement at End of 1983

Grade	Frequency	Percent
K	4	.56
1	28	3.91
2	77	10.75
3	88	12.29
4	103	14.38
5	161	22.49
6	134	18.72
7	76	10.62
8	33	4.61
9	12	1.68
not given	1	-

Table 6
Sex/Race Distribution of Multiply Retained Students

Sex/Race Code	Frequency	Percent
1 (WM)	106	14.80
2 (WF)	51	7.12
3 (BM)	358	50.00
4 (BF)	180	25.14
5 (OM)	15	2.10
6 (OF)	1	.84

than half of the students, 53.5 percent, lived with mother only and 2 percent with father only. The remainder were reported as living with another relative such as an aunt or a grandparent or in a foster home.

The mother's educational level was used as an indicator of the education level represented in the family. Five percent reported the mother's education as having extended beyond high school. The majority indicated that the mother had attended high school, but an additional 21 percent indicated that the mother had not attended school beyond the elementary grades.

Seventy-seven percent were eligible to receive free or reduced lunch. Chronic health problems were reported for 10 percent of the students. More than two thirds of the students, 69 percent, were reported as having moved from one school or school district to another as many as six times since entering school.

Table 7
Demographic Data for Multiply Retained Students

	Frequency	Percent
a. Student lives with:		
-both parents	259	36.90
-mother	376	53.56
-father	15	2.14
-other relative	52	7.41
-not given	15	-
b. Mother's education:		
-elementary	143	21.38
-high school	428	63.98
-beyond high school	34	5.08
-unknown	64	9.57
-not given	48	-
c. Free/reduced lunch:		
-no	163	22.3
-yes	554	77.7
d. Health problems:		
-none reported	645	89.96
-chronic problems (hearing, vision, asthma, etc.)	72	10.04
e. Number of school changes reported:		
0	223	31.10
1	167	23.29
2	133	18.55
3	101	14.09
4	57	7.95
5	28	3.91
6	8	1.09

Tables 8 and 9 show the number of times the students had been retained and the distribution of these retentions in kindergarten through seventh grade.

Table 8
Total Number of Retentions

Retentions	Frequency	Percent
unable to determine	8	-
2	624	88.01
3	66	9.31
4	17	2.40
5	2	.28

Table 9
Number of Retentions by Grade

Grade	Times Retained	Frequency
K	1	122
	2	19
1	1	299
	2	29
	3	1
	4	1
2	1	212
	2	23
3	1	177
	2	8
4	1	204
	2	16
5	1	151
	2	25
6	1	96
	2	13
	3	1
7	1	11
	2	2

A large number of the multiply retained students were classified as exceptional and were receiving services in programs for exceptional children. Table 10 shows the type of exceptionality reported and the frequency of cases. Slightly over 1 percent were reported as having previously received services but no longer classified as exceptional children.

Table 10
Exceptional Children

Exceptionality	Frequency	% of Total (717)
LD	185	
EMH	30	
Sp./Lang.	35	
SEH	4	
MH	1	
Total	255	35.70

Ability test data available from the Short Form Test of Academic Ability (SFTAA), given in the third grade and sixth grade years, indicated ability levels averaging one standard deviation below the mean or within the slow learner range. Individual test scores obtained from the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC), and available for approximately 62 percent of the students studies, fell within the same range.

Table 11 shows the SFTAA data and Table 12 gives the individual IQ data.

Table 11
Short Form Test of Academic Aptitude -
Mean IQ Scores

Grade	<u>n</u>	Lang.	Nonlang.	Total
3 (first year in grade)	499	80.67	86.02	81.98
3 (retained)	108	80.58	87.37	82.61
6 (first year in grade)	146	84.65	88.82	86.02
6 (retained)	38	82.52	88.36	85.04

Table 12
WISC Individual IQ Test
Mean IQ

<u>n</u>	Verbal	Performance	Total
445	83.35	85.81	83.14

Achievement test data for the multiply retained students were reported in percentile scores because of the differences between the tests given at the primary and upper elementary grades.

Table 13 shows the number of students for whom test scores were available at each grade level. It also shows the number of scores available when the grade was repeated. The median percentile is given for each grade and the percent of students scoring below average (p50) the first year in a grade and also after the grade was repeated.

The percent of students still scoring below the fiftieth percentile in reading after repeating a grade declined in the first grade and second grade, but increased from third grade to sixth grade. The percent of students below the fiftieth percentile in mathematics after repeating a grade declined each year until the sixth grade.

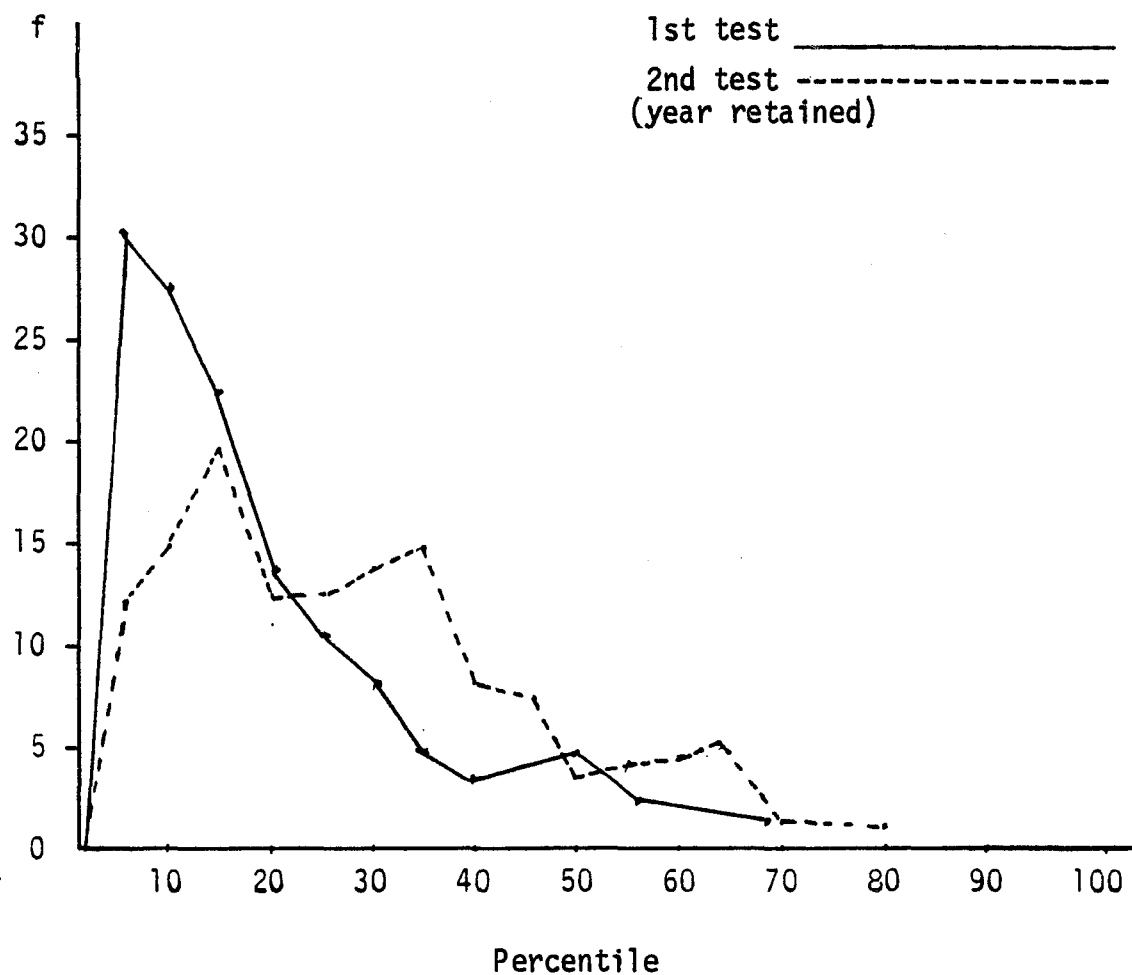
Matched data were available for one hundred and twenty-seven students retained in the third grade. Reading and mathematics achievement scores are shown in Figures 1 and 2. The distribution of reading scores along the percentile scale is shown for the first year in the third grade and for the year the third grade was repeated. Ninety-six and one-tenth percent of those retained scored below the fiftieth percentile the first year and 90.6 percent remained below the fiftieth percentile the second year in third grade.

In Figure 2 mathematics scores are shown. Ninety-four and one-half percent of the students scored below the fiftieth percentile the first year and 68.5 percent remained below the fiftieth percentile after repeating the third grade.

Table 13
Achievement Test Data for Each Grade
(First Year in Grade and Year Repeated)

Grade	<u>n</u>	Reading Median Percentile	Percent Below p50
1	401	21	86.0
1 (retained)	227	38	63.0
2	528	24	85.4
2 (retained)	160	29	75.0
3	507.	17	90.7
3 (retained)	136	21.5	91.2
4	350	21	90.6
4 (retained)	134	29	85.1
5	228	25	84.6
5 (retained)	85	25	87.1
6	167	33	79.6
6 (retained)	50	31	82.0

Grade	<u>n</u>	Math Median Percentile	Percent Below p50
1	400	36	65.2
1 (retained)	226	67	36.3
2	531	40	58.0
2 (retained)	159	63	42.8
3	503	22	85.9
3 (retained)	136	34	67.2
4	346	23	89.0
4 (retained)	132	33	78.8
5	230	29	79.6
5 (retained)	85	36	67.1
6	167	37	71.9
6 (retained)	49	37	73.5



1st test:

\underline{n} - 127

Med. \underline{p} = 13

Percent below p50 = 96.1

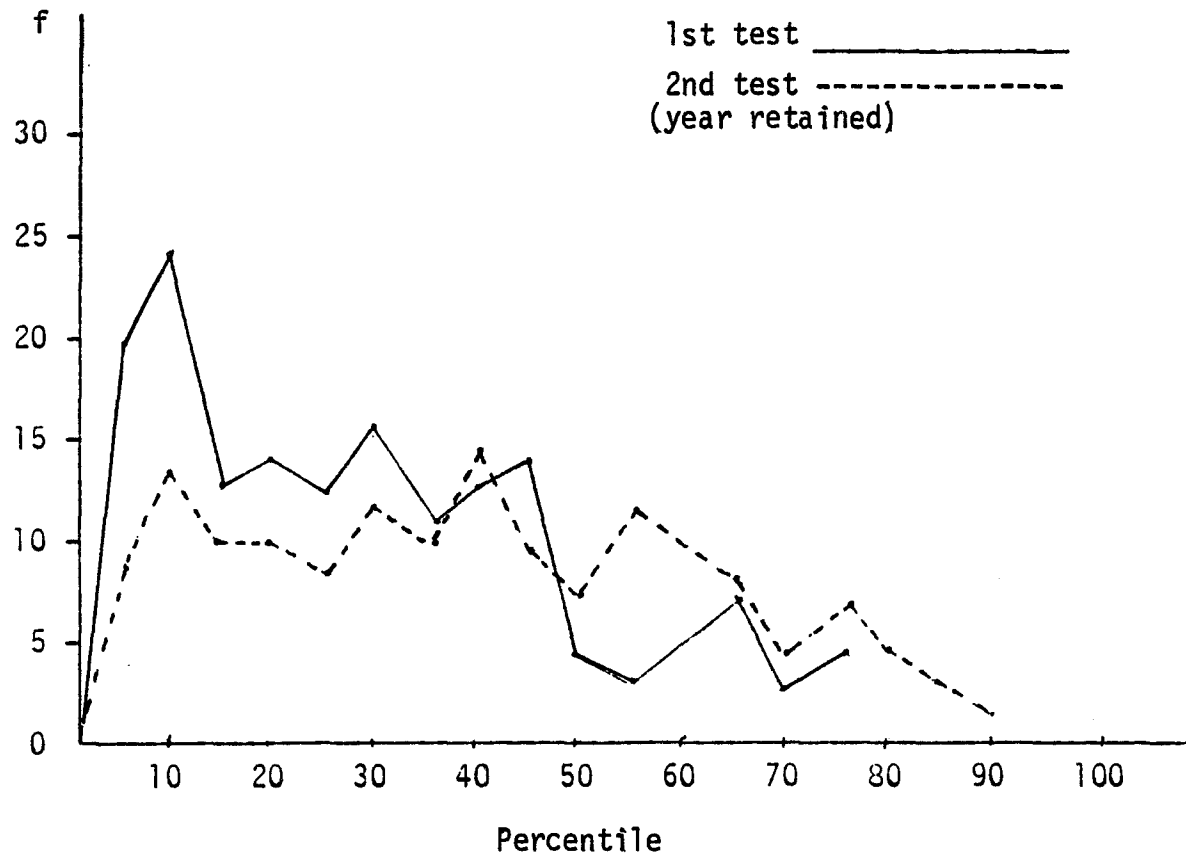
2nd test (year retained):

\underline{n} = 127

Med. \underline{p} = 21

Percent below p50 = 90.6

Figure 1: Reading achievement scores - 3rd grade
Matched data for 127 students who were retained at 3rd grade



1st test:

$\underline{n} = 127$

Med. $\underline{p} = 18$

Percent below p50 = 94.5

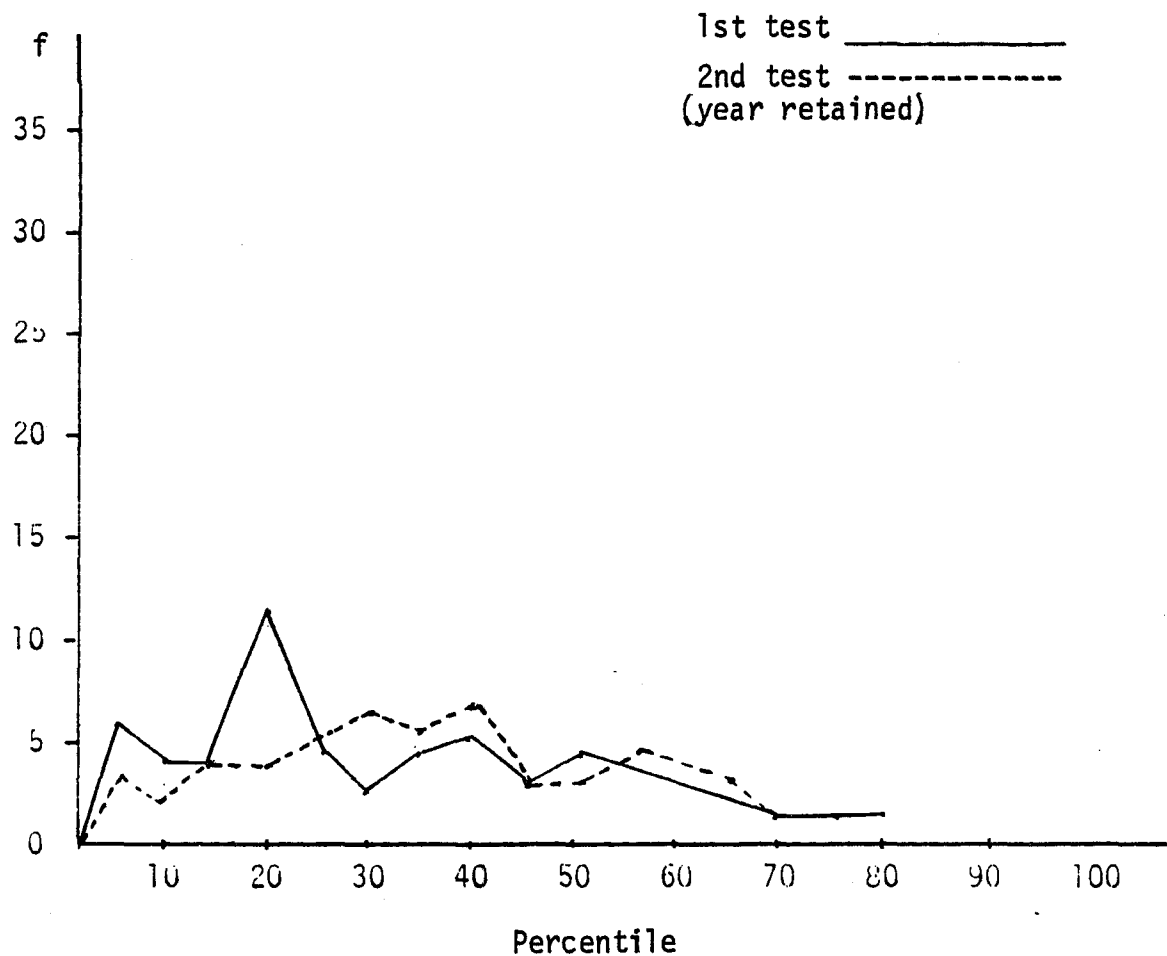
2nd test (year retained):

$\underline{n} = 127$

Med. $\underline{p} = 35$

Percent below p50 = 68.5

Figure 2: Math achievement scores - 3rd grade
Matched data for 127 students who were retained at 3rd grade



1st test:

$\underline{n} = 46$

Med. $\underline{p} = 20$

Percent below p50 = 95.7

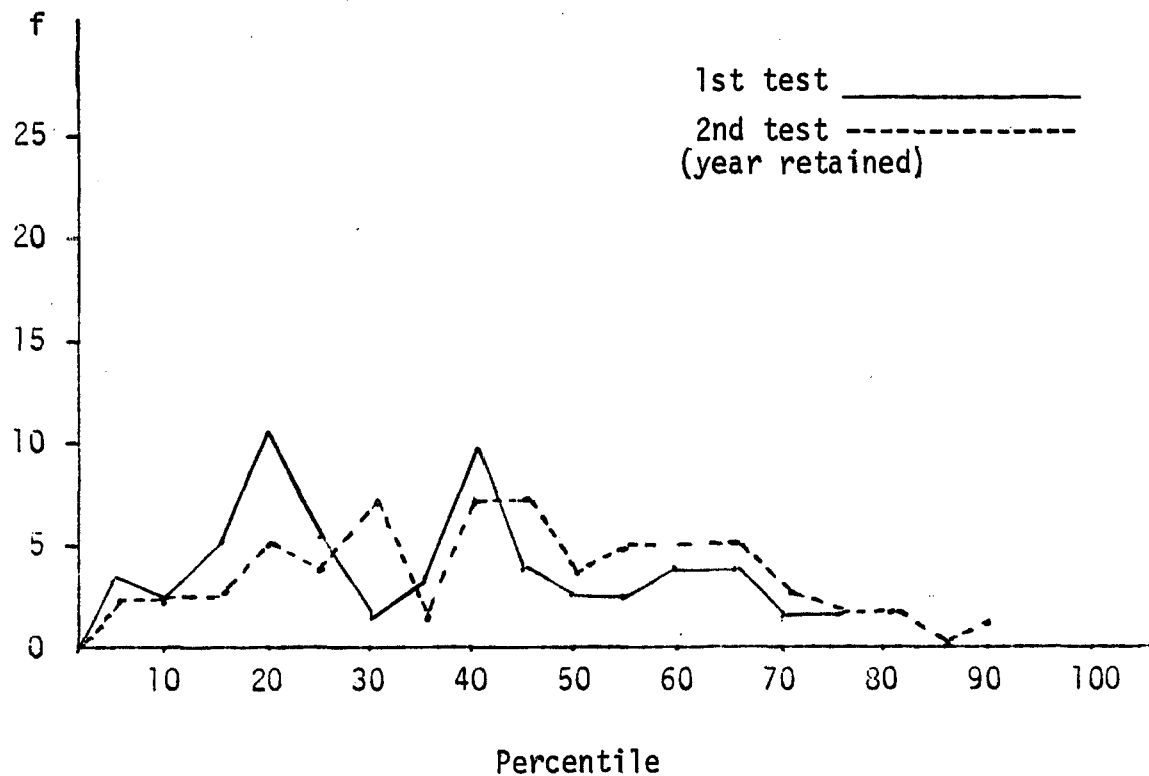
2nd test (year retained):

$\underline{n} = 46$

Med. $\underline{p} = 31$

Percent below p50 = 80.4

Figure 3: Reading achievement - 6th grade
Matched data for 46 students who were retained at 6th grade



1st test:

$\underline{n} = 46$

Med. $\underline{p} = 24$

Percent below p50 = 84.8

2nd test (year retained):

$\underline{n} = 46$

Med. $\underline{p} = 38$

Percent below p50 = 71.7

Figure 4: Math achievement scores - 6th grade
Matched data for 46 students who were retained at 6th grade

Matched data were available for only forty-six sixth graders who had repeated the sixth grade. Their distribution of scores is shown in Figures 3 and 4. While the number of cases is smaller the distribution is similar to the third grade scores. It should also be noted that for most of the forty-six retainees at the sixth grade level it was a second retention. They had already repeated at least one grade previously.

The matched achievement test data for third grade and sixth grade students in reading and math indicate that the majority of students retained were still scoring well below grade level after the year of retention.

The information gathered from the multiple retention survey was compiled and a report presented to the administration in December 1983. The report was accepted for study and there were no recommendations for policy changes. The need to reduce the number of students being retained two or more times was acknowledged. Summer school programs already provided for elementary students who had failed to meet promotion standards were continued and students were encouraged to participate. School based assessment committees were asked to review the progress of exceptional students in relation to their individual educational plan (IEP) before recommending retention.

A committee was formed in the summer of 1984 to study the multiple retention report and to make recommendations for programs, or alterations in programs, to reduce the number of students failing to meet promotion standards after being retained one time.

1985 Study: One Sixth Grade

During the spring and summer of 1984 additional elementary schools were closed and attendance lines again redrawn. Total reorganization occurred in many of the remaining twenty-four elementary schools.

The third group of students used in this study were sixth graders at Public School B during the 1984-1985 school year. Records and achievement tests data were available for sixty-eight students completing the sixth grade in the spring of 1985.

The total enrollment, kindergarten through the sixth grade, was five hundred and four students. The majority of these students had been assigned to Public School B from seven different elementary schools with many coming from recently closed schools. All of the students lived in the adjacent geographic areas and ranged from middle to lower socioeconomic levels. Seventy-six percent of the school population was eligible for free or reduced price lunch.

A breakdown of the age distributions within each grade indicated that a large number of students were overaged for their grade placements (Table 14). Grade retention accounted for most of the age difference beyond kindergarten.

The sixth grade was selected for study since there was a higher percentage of students who had been retained one or more times in that grade. Also, the majority of these students had attended schools in the Greensboro system for all or most of their elementary years and had been subject to the same promotion/retention policy and minimum promotion standards during those years.

Table 14
Age Distribution June 1985

Age	Grade					
	K	1	2	3	4	5
5	53					
6	26	35				
7	2	35	35	1		
8		2	35	16		
9			5	28	35	
10				14	25	27
11					11	27
12						22
13						2
14						
15						

Twenty-eight of the sixty-eight sixth graders, or 41.1 percent, had been retained one or more times by the sixth grade. Their ages ranged from eleven to fifteen (Table 14). Cumulative records indicated that sixteen had been retained two times, two had been retained three times and ten had been retained once.

Background information revealed that this group of retainees was similar to the large group studied in 1983. Nineteen of the twenty-eight lived with mother only and only two of the twenty-eight lived with mothers who had training beyond high school. Eight of twenty-eight or slightly more than 28 percent were classified as exceptional and received additional services through programs for exceptional children.

Table 15
 Distribution of Achievement Test Scores Spring
 1985 California Achievement (CAT) and
 Test of Cognitive Skills (TCS)

Grade Equiv.	Percentile	Scores		# of Retentions
		CSI (IQ)	Except.	
7.4	62	108		1
7.4	62	107		1
7.1	57	93		1
6.9	54	88		1
6.9	54	103		1
6.8	52	87		2
6.8	51	103		1
6.7	50	92		2
6.2	42	85		2
6.2	42	87		2
6.2	41	78		2
5.6	32	87		1
5.6	32	84		1
5.6	33	94		2
5.5	30	85	LD	2
5.5	30	67		2
5.4	28	90		1
5.4	29	90		2
5.1	24	77		2
5.1	24	83	LD	2
4.8	20	82		2
4.8	20	79		2
4.6	18	86	LD	2
4.1	11	62	LD	1
3.7	7	58	LD	3
3.6	6	78	LD	3
3.2	3	80	LD	2
3.0	2	58	EMH	2

n = 28 sixth graders

Number below p50 = 20 (71.4%)

Eight of the retainees were scoring at or above the fiftieth percentile at the end of the sixth grade. Two of the eight had been retained twice and all eight had group ability test scores within the average range.

Test data was available for fifteen of the students from third grade to sixth grade, but matched data (scores for both the first and second years in a grade) were available for only four students. Each of the four had repeated different grades and no comparisons were included in this study.

The distribution of retainees by sex and race was similar to the distribution found in the 1983 study and is shown in Table 16.

Table 16
Sex/Race Distribution of Retainees

Sex/Race Code	Number
1 (white male)	2
2 (white female)	4
3 (black male)	15
4 (black female)	7

The achievement scores, the characteristics of the students, and the number of students being affected by retention had not changed significantly between the 1983 and the 1985 study. Students who had been retained continued to score below average in both achievement and ability. The majority lived with only one parent, usually the mother,

and the income and educational level in the home was generally at the lower middle to low level. The group most affected by grade retention was black males. Many of the retainees (28-35 percent) were also classified as exceptional children and qualified for exceptional children's services.

No attempt has been made in this study to document the student's attitude toward school, work/study habits, behavioral problems and self-concept. However, the social problems, negative attitudes and discipline problems within the classroom at the fourth, fifth and sixth grades were observable.

Conclusions and recommendations are addressed in chapter five.

CHAPTER IV

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

Past and present practices in public education and the changes which seem to occur in educational philosophy are rarely the result of internal changes within the education system alone. While program evaluation and research are continuing processes in the educational system, significant changes in policies and practices tend to occur as a result of public and political influence or pressure.

At any given period in the history of public education, the policies controlling educational programs and practices reflect the trends which are current in society and which influence the governing bodies responsible for educational decisions. To quote Seymour Sarason, "Introducing, sustaining, and assessing an educational change are all political processes because they inevitably alter or threaten to alter existing power relationships especially if that process implies, as it almost always does, a reallocation of resources."¹

The policies developed by state and local educational agencies regarding promotion and retention of students do not reflect the philosophy of educators as much as they reflect the demand of the general public that schools produce a quality product, i.e., a student

¹Seymour Sarason, The Culture of the School and the Problem of Change (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1981), p. 70.

equipped with the basic skills necessary for employment or for continuing education.

The formulation of these policies is based on the governing body's perception of the existing problem, and the solutions possible with the resources available. Those responsible for the implementation of the policies must consider their accountability and also their responsibility for the individual or groups affected by the policies.

Most education policy statements are written to affirm the state or local board of education's position or rule in a specific area. The regulations outlined for implementing a policy and the manner in which it is applied determine the impact of the policy. Considering the large number of policies written to regulate schools, there are relatively few policies that are challenged on legal grounds.

Policies relating to students are challenged when they are perceived as being unfair or when they deny the constitutional rights of individuals or of groups. Cases involving promotion and retention policies have challenged the right of schools to impose competency test requirements and to withhold diplomas or promotion based on failure to meet these requirements.

Most of the literature relating to the legal aspects of retention policies focuses on competency testing programs and ability grouping. This chapter will include a review of some of the available literature and court litigations in an attempt to answer the following

questions:

1. Are retained students denied equal educational opportunity by being required to repeat elementary grades without access to alternative programs or to vocational education?
2. Is there evidence that grade retention discriminates against socioeconomically deprived and/or minority students?
3. Who has the responsibility for monitoring the impact of grade retention policies?

Policy Right

Policy right, the school's right to establish policy, has been demonstrated in the area of competency testing. An analysis of state statutes and court cases completed in 1981 by Susan Rogers listed thirty-seven states with minimum competency testing programs.² Eighteen of these programs resulted from legislative mandates (North Carolina included) and nineteen from state board of education mandates. The majority required all local education agencies to participate. Seventeen programs were fully implemented at the time of the study and others were in the process of field-testing or phasing-in graduation requirements.³

²Susan Katherine Rogers, "Analysis of Issues Surrounding Competency Testing Through Examination of State Statutes, Court Cases and Educational Literature" (Doctoral dissertation, Kansas State University, 1981), p. 46.

³Ibid., p. 47.

Rogers reported that minimum competency programs have been established as a response to political pressure rather than as a response to litigation against educational agencies. However, litigation against some aspects of the programs was reported in ten states up to 1981. Most of the litigation centered around the test requirement as a prerequisite for a diploma or for promotion from one grade to another.⁴

The position of the courts has generally been not to interfere in educational issues. Medway and Rose make this point, but also report that the court has been forced to change its position as a result of the strict academic standards and testing programs established by educators in response to public attacks on education.⁵

There are few court cases that address the issue of grade retention. One case which specifically challenged grade retention was Sandlin v. Johnson in which a Virginia teacher was challenged for retaining twenty-three students who failed to complete the second-grade reading requirement. The parents claimed:

. . . violation of equal protection guarantees under the Fourteenth Amendment, alleging that their children were being denied third-grade educational opportunities, as well as employment opportunities caused by delayed completion of their education.⁶

The federal court supported the school officials and their method of evaluation. The court reasoned that the evaluation of the

⁴Ibid., p. 59.

⁵Medway and Rose, p. 39.

⁶Ibid., p. 40.

students' reading ability was used to identify students in need of remedial instruction and that repeating the grade was an appropriate method of remediation.⁷

The school district's right to establish standards to improve academic performance, and to require students to meet these standards before being promoted or receiving a diploma, is not challenged by the court.

Decisions by educational authorities which turn on evaluation of academic performance of a student as it relates to promotion are peculiarly within the expertise of educators and are particularly inappropriate for review in a judicial context.⁸

Educational malpractice cases usually challenge a school district's promotion or graduation decisions. Peter Doe v. San Francisco Unified School District⁹ charged the school district with negligence because it had permitted the plaintiff to graduate without being able to read at the eighth grade level as required by California law. The claim was not upheld since the "responsibility for academic injury" was difficult to determine.¹⁰ The court was also concerned that similar suits could become a burden on the schools.¹¹ This decision supported the schools;

⁷Ibid.

⁸Sandlin v. Johnson, 643 F. 2d 1027 (4th Cir. 1981).

⁹Peter Doe v. San Francisco Unified School District, 60 Cal. App. 3d 870, 131 Cal. Rptr. 854 (Ct. App. 1976).

¹⁰Stinson W. Stroup and Perry A. Zirkel, "A Legal Look at Retention-Promotion Controversy," Journal of School Psychology 21 (1983):214.

¹¹Ibid., p. 215.

however, the court further stated that it was the state's responsibility to change the situation in the schools. California responded by passing the Hart Bill (1977) which mandated a competency based approach to instruction.¹²

Procedural and Due Process Rights

While the right of school districts to establish standards to improve academic performance has been upheld by the courts, the procedure used in implementing these standards and the right to due process have been examined.

All applications of due process share three common elements. The first is that the state is taking an action against an individual or class of individuals; the second is that the action of the state threatens to deny an individual's interest in "life, liberty or property"; and the third is that the individual is disputing with the state over the validity of that threatened denial.¹³

Procedural due process limits the way in which the state is permitted to take action against an individual's interests and gives the individual the right to argue against the action. "The basic principle of due process safeguards is written in the constitution. But the specific rights protected by due process have been defined over time by court rulings and legislation."¹⁴

¹²Donald McKinley, "Educational Malpractice . . . The Case of Peter Doe et al." Eric Report ED 151952 (1978).

¹³Milton Budoff and Alan Orienstein, Due Process in Special Education: On Going to a Hearing (Cambridge, Mass.: Ware Press, Inc., 1982), p. 18.

¹⁴Ibid.

Constitutional protection was extended to school students in the 1940's as a result of a Supreme Court ruling. In 1943 the student's right to freedom of speech (First Amendment) was upheld in the West Virginia Board of Education v. Barnett¹⁵ decision which denied the school's right to require a student to salute the flag.

The Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment was applied to students in 1954 with the Brown v. Board of Education¹⁶ decision declaring racially segregated public schools to be unconstitutional. Segregation served to deny equal protection and should not be permitted in the public schools.

Due process protection was first extended to children in the area of criminal law. The same procedural protection guaranteed adults charged with crimes was extended to juveniles by the court in the In re Gault case.¹⁷ Due process procedures were later applied to school disciplinary actions which denied the students the right to attend school. Goss v. Lopez¹⁸ established the students right to due process prior to being suspended. Notice of the action must be given, the charges stated and the student given the right to respond to the charges when school attendance is being denied.¹⁹

¹⁵West Virginia Board of Education v. Barnett, 319 U.S. 624 (1943).

¹⁶Brown v. Board of Education, 347 U.S. 483 (1954).

¹⁷Budoff and Orienstein, p. 19 and In re Gault, 387 U.S. 1 (1967).

¹⁸Goss v. Lopez, 419 U.S. 565 (1975).

¹⁹Budoff and Orienstein, p. 19.

Court decisions in these and other landmark cases have been the basis for decisions in cases brought against school systems which challenged promotion-retention policies or charged educational malpractice. Discrimination aspects of these cases are also reviewed on the basis of Civil Rights legislation applicable to educational practices.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits discrimination in: the quality, quantity or manner in which a benefit is provided; segregation or separate treatment of a program; restriction in enjoyment or any advantages or privileges offered; and setting standards or requirements.²⁰

Rights Applied to Competency Requirements and Grouping

The court's general preference for leaving educational decisions to the discretion of educators has not prevented the court from intervening where there is evidence that individual or group rights are being denied. The Debra P. v. Turlington²¹ case which challenged Florida's functional literacy test (FLT) as a requirement for graduation has resulted in the court establishing procedural and due process guidelines applicable to other competency testing programs requiring mastery of specific material, or skills, before graduation or promotion.

²⁰Edward C. Bolmeir, School and the Legal Structure (Cincinnati: W. H. Anderson Co., 1973), p. 25.

²¹Debra P. v. Turlington, 564 F. Supp. 177 (1983).

Racial discrimination charges in the Debra P. case were based on the fact that students had entered school in a segregated system and that minority students suffered from the negative effects of such a system. The literacy test itself was charged to be biased against minority students who had not had the opportunity to learn some of the skills being tested.²²

It was also charged that students were treated unfairly and were denied equal protection because students who failed the test were labeled as "functional illiterates," a term which served to stigmatize them. The denial of due process charge was based on three things: the lack of advanced notice and time to prepare for the test; the lack of evidence that the test measured what the students had been taught; and the lack of established reliability and validity of the test.²³

In this case, the court ordered a four year moratorium on the use of the test as a requirement for receiving a diploma. This allowed all students the opportunity of spending a full twelve years in desegregated schools. The state was also required to show "curricular match" and "test fairness." The skills and objectives to be tested must be taught and the students clearly informed of the test requirements.²⁴ Standards for a "constitutionally fair teaching program" were given by

²²George F. Madaus, The Courts, Validity and Minimum Competency Testing (Boston: Kluwer-Nighoff Publishing, 1983), pp. 6-16.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Ibid.

the court and are summarized here:

1. Students must be told the objectives to be tested at the time of instruction.
2. The curriculum offered (and taught) must include objectives to be tested.
3. Students must be taught in a "rational and orderly sequence."
4. Sufficient time should be spent teaching a skill.
5. Students must receive instruction or "review of prior instruction" before the test is administered.
6. A process for assessing the individual student's learning should be used.
7. Remedial instruction should be offered if students have not mastered objectives.²⁵

The court did not question the legality of competency testing nor the intent of the state to improve academic performance. The issue addressed was the fairness of the program as applied to specific individuals and groups.

Another case which has provided some guidance in issues relating to grouping and tracking of students in the public schools is Hobson v. Hansen.²⁶ The District of Columbia School System used a system of assigning students to classes based on ability and achievement test scores. The Hobson case charged that the ability grouping used by the school system and the Superintendent, Carl Hansen, discriminated

²⁵Ibid., p. 17.

²⁶Hobson v. Hansen, 269 F. Supp. 401 (D.D.C. 1967).

against non-white and poor children.²⁷ The plaintiffs contended that the tracking system placed a disproportionate number of non-white and poor children in the lower groups and denied them equal educational opportunity.²⁸

Evidence presented supported the claim and the court ruled against the school system and the tracking plan as it existed. The decision was based on these conclusions:

1. Track assignments in the schools were significantly related to class and race.
2. Track assignments had not been shown to be directly related to ability to learn.
3. Track assignments significantly limited vocational choices.
4. Track assignments did not allow students to move from lower to higher tracks.
5. The lower track assignments did not include remedial reading programs for students assigned to these tracks.
6. Tests used to classify students were inappropriate for a large proportion of the black and poor white students in that they were standardized primarily on white, middle-class students.²⁹

When the principles of due process and equal protection were applied, poor minorities were denied equal educational opportunity.

Since there is evidence to suggest that ability grouping practices tend to stigmatize students who are assigned to low groups, it is conceivable that future court decisions

²⁷Joseph Bryson and Charles Bentley, Ability Grouping of Public School Students (Charlottesville, Va.: Michie Company, 1980), p. 103.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Ibid., p. 105.

might require some form of minimal due process hearing procedures before students are assigned to lower groups.³⁰

Grade retention becomes a form of ability grouping when a student is placed at a lower grade. Applying due process procedures when placing students in a lower grade could require schools to inform parents of the placement (as is normally done) and also allow them the opportunity to accept or reject the lower grade placement. If the parent opposed the lower class placement, or retention, the school would then be responsible for justifying the retention as the appropriate means for meeting the student's educational need.

The purpose of this chapter is not to review court cases and case reports extensively, but to establish the legal aspects to be considered when promotion-retention policies are formulated and implemented.

The following list of cases is included to show the progression that has occurred over the past four decades. Constitutional protection of student's rights has been established and in turn, used to challenge practices which were considered discriminatory or which denied equal protection and equal opportunity.

West Virginia Board of Education v. Barnette, 319 U.S. 624 (1943 (1943)).

Established students' right to freedom of speech (First Amendment).

³⁰Ibid., p. 60.

Brown v. Board of Education, 347 U.S. 483 (1954).

Segregated schools declared unconstitutional. Segregation served to deny equal protection.

In re Gault, 387 U.S. 1 (1967).

Due process right extended to juveniles (in area of criminal law). Given right to be notified of charges and to defend himself.

Hobson v. Hansen, 269 F. Supp. 401 (DDC. 1967).

Ability grouping and tracking found to be discriminatory and to deny equal educational opportunity.

Singleton v. Jackson Municipal School District, 419 F. 2d 1211 (5th Cir. 1970).

School assignments based on achievement test scores denied equal protection and equal educational opportunity.

Moses v. Washington Parish School Board, 330 F. Supp. 1340 (1971).

Ability grouping resulted in resegregation. Denied equal educational opportunity and equal protection.

Serna v. Portales Municipal School District, 351 F. Supp. 1279 (1972).

Educational programs must meet needs of students. In this case remedial education was needed in language to accommodate Spanish speaking students.

Lau v. Nichols, 414 U.S. 563 (1974).

Language program required, in this case, for Chinese student.

Goss v. Lopez, 419 U.S. 565 (1975).

Due process applied to school suspension and disciplinary action.

Peter Doe v. San Francisco Unified School District, 60 Cal. App. 3d. 870, 131 Cal. Rptr. 854 (Ct. App. 1976).

Malpractice suit charged school district with negligence in graduating student unable to read at required level.

Influenced the development of competency based instruction.

Sandlin v. Johnson, 643 F. 2d 1027 (4th Cir. 1981).

Court supported school's right to evaluate student achievement and to retain students.

Brookhart v. Illinois State Board of Education, 534 F. Supp. 725 (1982).

Court upheld the use of competency tests, but established right of handicapped students to be tested by a different means or to have test modified.

Board of Education v. Rowley, 451 U.S. 1 (1982).

Individualized educational program (IEP) for exceptional student required to provide educational benefits. Students receiving services in regular classroom should have program designed to enable advancement from grade to grade.

Debra P. v. Turlington, 564 F. Supp. 177 (1983).

Court upheld Florida's functional literacy test but established guidelines to protect student's right to due process and equal educational opportunity.

Educational policies relating to competency testing programs linked to diplomas or to promotion are challenged most often when (a) there is inadequate phase-in time; (b) the objectives and skills being tested are not being taught as part of the regular curriculum; (c) the tests used lack validity; (d) the tests label minority groups as incompetent; and (e) when the results of testing programs serve to resegregate students. Ability grouping becomes an issue when tests are used to group and the results of this grouping denies equal educational opportunity.

Medway and Rose recommend that when school districts are setting standards and criteria for measuring the standard, it is better from the legal standpoint to use more than one criterion.³¹ In addition to test scores, other indicators of achievement should be used. Promotion standards and graduation requirements should be publicized well in advance and an adequate phase-in time allowed. The importance of indicating the requirements for handicapped students on the Individual Educational Plan (IEP) is also noted as well as the need for administrators to monitor the instructional objectives teachers incorporate into the instructional program. The impact of promotion standards on minority groups should also be monitored periodically.³²

Rogers' study of competency testing issues found that the legal implications are most important when the testing is linked to the

³¹Medway and Rose, p. 48.

³²Ibid., pp. 49-50.

awarding of diplomas.³³ The student has a "property interest" in the diplomas and failure to receive it has an effect on the educational and vocational choices available.³⁴

Courts are less likely to become involved if standards are objectively set and sufficient study has been done. The South Carolina competency program enacted in 1978 will gather baseline data on the impact of the program until 1989 before making a decision regarding its use for graduation.³⁵

Local districts may set standards which go beyond the state requirements if they do not violate due process or equal protection rights. Special needs of students must also be considered and programs provided to meet these needs.³⁶

Court cases alone can not determine the total number of challenges to policies relating to promotion, retention and placement of students. Complaints, grievances, hearings and suits which never reach the level of the court are compromised or settled regularly between parents (on behalf of students) and school authorities.

The number of these challenges, whether in the form of litigation or grievance, has not served to reverse the move toward an increasing number of competency requirements. North Carolina is

³³Rogers, p. 88.

³⁴Ibid.

³³Ibid., pp. 67-68.

³⁴Ibid., p. 94.

implementing promotion requirements for third grade and sixth grade beginning in the 1985-1986 school year. Minimum achievement levels for reading, language and mathematics have been established and tests for social studies and science are being developed. Challenges which may arise as a result of these requirements can not be predicted; however, the state's right to establish such requirements is not in question.

Chapter V will present further conclusions and recommendations relative to policy development and the implementation of promotion-retention policies.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The problem identified for study in this paper has been the practice of grade retention and its effect on student academic achievement. The purpose of the study was to present educators and public school officials with important information to be considered when programs are planned and policies are formulated. A general review of the literature was presented in order to present previous studies and findings relating to grade retention and achievement. The case study was presented to show an actual situation in which a promotion-retention policy was adopted and the impact of that policy over a period of several years. Selected court cases were reviewed to establish the school's responsibility for protecting the rights of students and for providing equal education opportunities. The review of the legal aspects also established the school's right to set standards and to require the mastery of competencies before awarding a diploma or promoting to a higher level.

Summary

In Chapter I six questions were identified as important considerations for this study. The first question asked how the practice of grade retention has developed historically and what the philosophical basis for the practice seemed to be. Historically the practice has

gone in and out of favor according to the political and economic pressures of the particular time. Grade retention became the common practice in the late nineteenth century when schools became organized into a graded structure. It remained the common practice until the 1930s when economic consideration influenced the schools to make the requirements less rigid in an effort to hold students in school rather than have them leave to seek employment.

While the underlying reasons for changes in the practice has been external to the school itself, the basic educational philosophy used to support the practice has been the belief that rigid academic standards would produce high academic achievement. The years in which the educational philosophy centered on the individual and the need to recognize individual differences (1950s to early 1970s), paralleled the years in which the political emphasis was on the rights of the individual. During this period social promotion rather than grade retention became the norm. Beginning in the mid to late 1970s the emphasis returned to more rigid standards and the practice of grade retention increased as a result of national and state studies of the effectiveness of schools.

The second question related to the effectiveness of grade retention as a means of improving student achievement. Studies conducted in the early 1900s and those continuing to the present fail to support this practice as a means of improving academic achievement. Findings from the literature indicate that there is often less growth in achievement during the years of retention. The data presented in the case study also indicated that students show very little improvement in

academic achievement as a result of retention and in some cases they regress.

The third question focused on the students who are retained and the characteristics which these students might have in common. The literature and the case study indicated that the majority of the students retained are below average in ability and are socioeconomically deprived. There was very little in the literature suggesting alternatives to grade retention. Comparisons of the effectiveness of grade retention with the effectiveness of social promotion did not support one as being better than the other.

Three of the questions presented in the introductory chapter relate to the legal aspects of grade retention practices. The first of these three related to the students' access to equal educational opportunities when required to remain in a lower grade. Cases dealing with ability grouping did find that equal educational opportunity was denied when the grouping resulted in racially segregated classes or tracking plans which prevented students from moving to higher levels. Remedial programs were required to assist students who were handicapped either physically or by previous experiences which prevented their being able to profit from some programs.

The second question about the legal aspects of grade retention regards discrimination. Neither the cases reviewed nor the literature relating to the legal issues found promotion retention policies to be discriminatory. It was established that schools have the right to retain students as a means of remediation. However, the studies presented in the literature review, the case study in Chapter III and the

court cases relating to competency testing and ability grouping clearly show that the groups most affected by grade retention are minorities and the poor. The case study clearly shows that the group most affected by retention is black males, and that the majority of the students studied in each of the three case study subgroups were from low socioeconomic backgrounds. A large number of the retained students were also classified as exceptional children and qualified for exceptional children's programs. Charges of discrimination were upheld in some of the cases relating to grouping and tracking and also in the area of test validity and fairness.

The third question in this group asks who should be responsible for monitoring the impact of grade retention policies. This responsibility is not clearly defined in the literature, but the courts have provided guidelines for establishing standards and programs which can be judged as constitutionally fair to students. Educators who work in direct contact with students are responsible for the instructional program. Administrators and public school officials responsible for the development of programs and policies are responsible for studying the needs of students and the results of current practices as policies are formulated or changed.

Conclusions

The focus of this study has been on the effectiveness of grade retention as a means of improving student achievement. Neither the literature reviewed nor the data reported in the case study indicated

that having a student repeat a grade improved his academic performance. Gains in achievement that might be noted for some students after retention were no longer present two to three years later.

Achievement test scores reported in the case study indicated that the retained students continued to score below average after being retained. Achievement data reported for the students retained two or more times indicated that the subsequent retentions were less effective than the one time retention in improving academic achievement.

Based on the findings from the literature and from the case study, the students' ability, socioeconomic status, family background, prior experiences, and transiency were all important variables which seemed to affect achievement. Conclusions based on these and other findings from the literature and from the case study are presented below.

1. Rigid promotion standards and competency requirements have had the greatest impact on minority students and socio-economically deprived students.
2. Students who were retained in the lower grades and who reached the required level of achievement the year retained did not maintain this improvement. The majority fell below the grade level standard again within two to three years.
3. Grade retention is an expensive and ineffective means for improving academic achievement. Requiring large numbers of students to remain in a grade--even when no other remediation is offered--increases the cost per student.

4. Students who are two to three years overaged for their grade placement by the end of the sixth grade are more likely to drop out of school before reaching high school.
5. Schools have the right to require a specific level of competence before awarding a diploma or before promoting a student. This right has been upheld by the courts.
6. Schools have a responsibility for providing appropriate instructional programs to enable students to meet the required competencies.
7. Schools have a responsibility for assuring equal educational opportunities for all students and for following due process procedures when higher standards are required.
8. School systems are likely to continue to set competency requirements and to use grade retention as a method of remediation. The courts are not likely to intervene except in situations which discriminate or deny the student's constitutional rights.
9. Based on the number of students who fail to meet promotion requirements, the threat of retention is not a motivator for students to improve.
10. The case study revealed that one third of the students who had been retained more than one time were classified as exceptional children. In this situation a disproportionate number of exceptional children were affected by the grade retention policy.

11. In their attempt to respond to the public demand for excellence, many schools have set stricter standards and competency requirements which disregard the individual differences in ability, experiences and environment affecting the individuals acquisition of academic skills.

Recommendations

Promotion-retention policies and competency requirements have been developed for the purpose of improving student performance and academic achievement. While some improvement may have been recorded for the average and above average student, it has been the below average student who has failed most often. The objectives set by public school officials for improvement have been appropriate, but the outcome has, in many cases, created new problems. Based on this fact and the conclusions of this study, the following recommendations are made.

1. Public school officials should revise promotion policies to provide flexibility in their implementation. Standards should be based on expected levels of achievement and individual growth rather than a rigid standard based on the grade level.
2. Recommendations to retain a student should be based on the individual student's achievement, ability, physical, emotional and social maturity and overall adjustment to school. School psychologists and guidance counselors should be involved in making the decision to retain.

3. Alternative programs should be developed as preventive measures. Summer school programs, extended day programs, individual tutoring programs, smaller classes, computer assisted instruction, and developmental and language centered preschool programs should be implemented to reduce the risk of failure.
4. The effectiveness of the instructional program should be evaluated. David Labarée's recommendation that emphasis be placed on instruction rather than retention is sound. Changes in curriculum to include more than the basics are needed. An introduction to vocational education is needed at the elementary level and should not be viewed as being less demanding or as a track leading away from academics.
5. The effectiveness of programs for exceptional children should be evaluated. The case study indicated that a large number of exceptional children have been retained. Administrators and educators responsible for exceptional children's programs need to assess the effectiveness of current programs in terms of objectives and expectations for learning disabled, mentally handicapped and other exceptional children being served in the regular school setting.
6. Administrators and public school officials need to be more aware of their responsibility for monitoring the impact of promotion-retention policies. Having the legal right to formulate and implement policies does not relieve school officials of their responsibility for protecting the student's interest.

7. Long-range studies should be conducted to determine if the competencies and skills required by the schools are the competencies and skills needed for employment or for continuing education.
8. Additional study should be conducted to determine the effect of grade retention and the more rigorous requirements on the number of students dropping out of school.
9. The effects of minimum standards and competencies on the average and above average student should be studied. Minimum standards require the below average student to work harder in order to pass and to eventually graduate. Students who have no difficulty passing or who have above average ability may not be challenged by the competency requirements.
10. Additional study is needed on student transience. The mobility of families as the result of job changes, family break-up, housing needs and emergency situations often prevent the student from having stability in the school and continuity in instruction.

The mission of the school is to provide opportunities for students to learn the skills needed to care for themselves and to function successfully in society. This opportunity should be available to all. The requirements or standards that are set by the schools, or for the schools, serve to identify the goals and objectives for instruction. Standards serve a useful purpose when this is their function. Raising

the standard may serve two purposes. It may be raised to meet the needs of students, or it may be raised for political reasons. The public may demand that standards be more rigid and, those in appointed and elected positions may receive more support if they endorse higher standards.

Setting a higher standard may also serve to exclude. Students with below average ability may be excluded from certain programs and eventually from school itself when minimum standards become too high. The public schools do not have the right to set standards and competency requirements which serve ultimately to exclude certain students from equal educational opportunities.

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APPENDIX A
SURVEY SHEET DISTRIBUTED IN JUNE 1983 TO
COLLECT MULTIPLE RETENTION DATA

GREENSBORO PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Student Data Sheet

School _____

For Elementary and Junior High Students who have been retained more than one time (including students who will be retained this year).

1. Student's name _____; DOB ____/____/____
month day year
Identification # _____; Age _____
2. Child lives with: Both parents _____; Mother _____; Father _____;
Other relative _____; Foster Home _____; Other _____ (indicate)
3. Sex/race code _____ Current grade placement _____
4. Educational level of mother (if known): Elementary _____; High School _____;
College _____; Graduate School _____; Trade School _____.
5. Receives free or reduced lunch: Yes _____ No _____
6. a. Presently receives services for exceptional children in (check all applicable):
LD _____, EMH _____, Speech/Lang _____, SEH _____, other _____ (indicate)
b. At one time was identified as exceptional but no longer receives services-
Indicate area of service _____, and last year services were
received _____.
c. Indicate any significant health problem and/or physical disability:

d. Remedial services, Title I/Chapter I: Reading _____; Math _____
7. How many times has student changed schools since entering school (do not count
pairs or clusters)? _____
8. Fill in this area with available information and indicate if student's records
are incomplete:

Grade	K	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Grade/s in which re- tained (write number of times retained)								
Math & Reading R Achievement Scores give percentiles PRI, DMI, CAT M								
PRI, DMI or CAT R Scores for year retained M								
SFTAA Scores Lang, non-La. & IQ								
SFTAA Scores for year retained								

9. Has child had an individual evaluation by a school psychologist? If so,
when _____? WISC-R, Verb.IQ _____, Perf.IQ _____, Total IQ _____
10. Comments: Any important information relative to attendance, suspension,
grades, etc.

APPENDIX B
STUDENT PROMOTION AND NONPROMOTION (RETENTION)
POLICY IN EFFECT IN GREENSBORO SCHOOLS
AT TIME OF 1983 STUDY

GREENSBORO PUBLIC SCHOOLS
Drawer V
Greensboro, N.C. 27402

Board of Education Policy - IHE

April 19, 1983
Adoption Date

STUDENT PROMOTION AND NONPROMOTION (RETENTION) - GRADES K-9

A. RESPONSIBILITY

1. It is the duty of the principal to assist teachers in making decisions regarding promotion and nonpromotion with the principal having the final authority for grade level assignment of students.
2. This school system opposes the social promotion of students at any grade level. Exceptions are covered in Section E.
3. Appropriate programs of remediation for students who are retained will be provided pursuant to regulations developed by the Superintendent. The Superintendent is encouraged to use free summer programs, after-school and weekend tutorial programs and smaller classes to meet remediation needs of retained students if local, State, Federal or private funding can be found to finance these programs.

B. PROMOTION REQUIREMENTS FOR GRADES K-6

1. Grades K-3 (K to 1, 1 to 2, 2 to 3, 3 to 4)

Promotion will be based on students meeting the systemwide minimum promotion standards contained in the Systemwide Administrative Regulation - IHE-R. These promotion criteria (minimum levels of performance) will be shared with students and parents no later than the end of the first nine weeks grading period. These promotion criteria will emphasize language arts (emphasis on reading) and mathematics.

2. Grades 4-6 (4 to 5, 5 to 6, 6 to 7)

Promotions will be based on students meeting the systemwide minimum promotion standards contained in the Systemwide Administrative Regulation - IHE-R. These promotion criteria (minimum levels of performance) will be shared with students and parents no later than the end of the first nine weeks

grading period. These promotion criteria will emphasize language arts (emphasis on reading), mathematics, science and social studies.

C. NONPROMOTION (RETENTION) GRADES K-6

1. If retention is a possibility or is being considered, two actions must be taken: (a) advanced warning in writing must be given to the parent(s) or guardian by the end of the first semester; (b) a conference must be held with the parent(s) or guardian and a written report given to the parent(s) or guardian by the end of the third grading period.
2. A final decision on promotion or retention must be made no later than June 1 and parent(s) or guardian notified in writing.
3. Students must meet promotion criteria outlined in the System-wide Administrative Regulation - IHE-R. There is no limit on the number of years of nonpromotion (retentions) in K-6. Exceptions are covered in Section E.
4. Retention in K-3 is better than in 4-6. Students should not be made to feel they are failures. They should receive counseling and guidance from classroom teachers and guidance counselors which assists them in realizing that all students learn at different rates and that it may take them a little longer to master the skills and subject matter. Remediation programs will be used to meet the needs of students who are retained.
5. Under North Carolina School Law, the Principal has the final determination regarding nonpromotion of students. However, parents may appeal decisions of principals to the Assistant Superintendent and/or the Superintendent.

D. PROMOTION REQUIREMENTS FROM GRADES TO 8, 8 TO 9, AND 9 TO 10

1. In order to be promoted from grade 7 to 8 and grade 8 to 9, each student must earn no less than a "D" average in each of the following courses: (1) English, (2) Mathematics, (3) Science, (4) Social Studies, (5) Physical Education/Health. (Teachers will compute the yearly average for each subject.)
 - a. Failure of one (1) or two (2) required course(s) will require either passing failed required courses in summer school or repeating the failed required courses the following school year.

- b. Student failing to fulfill requirements for promotion may elect to repeat the failed courses in a tuition-based summer school. A maximum of two (2) courses may be taken in summer school.
 - c. For students attending an alternative school, the same academic standards will apply, with the method of grading and promotion being designed by the teacher(s) and principal.
 - d. A student in grades 7 or 8 failing one (1) required subject will be classified at the next grade level, but will be required to repeat the failed course in summer school or during the following year in lieu of an elective.
 - e. A student repeating two required courses will be classified at the lower grade level, but may take courses at the next grade level while repeating the two failed courses. The repeat courses will be taken in lieu of electives.
 - f. Students entering ninth grade at the Open High School must pass all eighth grade requirements.
2. In order to be promoted from grade 9 to 10, each student must have earned by the end of summer school no less than a "D" average in three of the following required courses: (1) English, (2) Mathematics, (3) Social Studies, (4) Physical Education/Health.
- a. If a student passes only three of the four required courses listed above, the failed courses will constitute a graduation deficiency that must be made up.
 - b. Students entering grade 10 with one deficiency must make up this deficiency in one of the following ways:
 - 1. *Pass the course in a tuition-based summer school.
 - 2. *Pass the course at the Optional School Evening Program or at the home school.

*Options (1) and (2) above are contingent on the course being offered at these schools.
 - c. A ninth grader failing two of the four required courses must repeat at least one of the required courses in summer school or remain at the junior high until promotion requirements are fulfilled.

- d. Ninth grade deficiencies may not be made up in lieu of electives in grades 10-12, but are to be taken in addition to 10-12 graduation requirements.

E. EXCEPTIONS

1. Students who meet the criteria for exceptionality will be considered on an individual basis in consultation with appropriate pupil personnel staff members. These individual decisions may involve the use of retention acceleration.
2. Students retained two or three times in any grade in grades K-6 may receive special evaluation and placement in the next grade upon approval of the Superintendent.

This policy rescinds Board of Education Policy IHE adopted January 19, 1982.

Note: Revised in 1985-86 school year.

APPENDIX C
ADMINISTRATIVE REGULATION: PROMOTION STANDARDS K-6
AS REVISED IN 1984 FOLLOWING
MULTIPLE-RETENTION STUDY

GREENSBORO PUBLIC SCHOOLS
Drawer V
Greensboro, N.C. 27402

October 15, 1984
Submitted

Revised Systemwide Administrative Regulation - IHE-R

PROMOTION STANDARDS
K-6

Standards for Promotion should be viewed as an integral part of the total instructional program. While these standards ensure a uniform minimum level of performance, each student should be challenged to perform to his/her potential. Each teacher has a responsibility to diagnose and respond to the needs of students. In turn, the principal as the instructional leader, is ultimately responsible for monitoring the school-wide instructional program as it is carried out in each teacher's classroom.

In early Spring 1982, the Superintendent appointed a Promotion Standards Review Committee. This committee was composed of five (5) teachers and four (4) curriculum directors and was chaired by the Director of Psychological Services. The committee's task was to evaluate the existing Promotion-Retention Standards for grades K-6 and to propose needed revisions to the Superintendent and the System-wide Leadership Team. The following became major considerations during the review process.

- the need to establish connections between the promotion standards, the adopted curriculum, and the adopted textbooks;
- the need to establish connections between the promotion standards and grading;
- the need to emphasize skills development in the instructional process;
- the need to establish a uniform meaning regarding the standards and their applications;
- the need to carry out the Greensboro Board of Education mandate to continue to raise the Standards for Promotion in grades K-6.

This regulation rescinds Revised Systemwide Administrative Regulation IHE-R adopted October 18, 1982.

PROMOTION STANDARDS

In order to be promoted, the student must

BOTH:

- master a developmental sequence of skills in the areas of reading/language arts and mathematics (see attached)

AND

- attain a passing grade average (D or above) for the year in each core area (reading, language arts, spelling [for grades 2-6 only], mathematics, science/health, and social studies).

While high standards in music, art, and physical education are also important, failure in any or all of these areas will not result in retention.

In keeping with the system's plan to continue to raise Promotion Standards, the standards in math will now be on grade level in grades K-6. In reading/language arts, the standards will now be on grade level through grade 2. Beginning with the 1982-83 school year, students must now pass science/health and social studies in all grades, K-6, in order to be promoted.

In 1983-84, the Promotion Standards in reading/language arts for grade 3 will be brought to grade level. In 1984-85, the Promotion Standards in reading/language arts for grade 4 will be brought to grade level. In 1985-86, the Promotion Standards in reading/language arts for grade 5 will be brought to grade level. In 1986-87, the Promotion Standards in reading/language arts for grade 6 will be brought to grade level.

In reading and spelling only, mastering the developmental sequence of skills is contingent upon completion of specific textbook material as described in the Reading/Language Arts Promotion Standards of each grade level. In language, math, science/health, and social studies, attaining a passing grade average for the year is contingent upon students successfully completing the teacher's prescribed instructional program. The teacher's program is, in turn, to be based on the appropriate local curriculum guides, not necessarily upon completion of adopted textbooks.

Based on the judgment of the principal, parents of students not making sufficient progress toward meeting the standards will be notified by the end of the first semester as designated in Board of Education Policy IHE.

For students retained two times or more, a Student Learning Plan (SLP) will be written by the teacher and approved by the principal. The Student Learning Plan (SLP) will identify academic goals in each curriculum area which the student must fulfill in order to be promoted. These academic goals must reflect the students unique learning needs. If a student is recommended for promotion based on mastery of the Student Learning Plan (SLP) goals, the Superintendent will review the progress and make a decision regarding promotion.