

The True Costs of Social Promotion and Retention

This article attempts to explain the societal costs of social promotion and retention, considering how these policies impact the future academic career of an impacted child (a child who is retained or promoted without having achieved the required graded level of knowledge and skill). Spiraling outward, the article will also consider costs to affected families, to communities in areas with particularly high retention or social promotion numbers; the impact on the national labor force and on higher education institutions, and the impact on the national economy. As far as possible, the aim here is to show the total cost of social promotion and retention policies, why social promotion and retention can be said to be ruining our public education system and, more than that, why these policies are having a damaging effect on our society as a whole.

Costs to Affected Students

Students directly impacted by social promotion or retention – those who are, at one time or another, either promoted per a social promotion policy or retained because of inability to pass standardized tests for their targeted age grade level – have been noted to pay a considerable price in a variety of ways.

Academic Costs

Most obvious costs perhaps, for a socially promoted or retained student, are academic in nature or specifically related to their educational experience. While data on the effects of these two policies upon students' long-term academic performance are not absolutely conclusive, generalizing results, it is fairly clear that the majority of students who are socially promoted find that their long-term academic potential is significantly undermined. For students who are retained, the same is true in terms of results but the explanation or causal factor is different. Retention policies require that students repeat a year, sometimes multiple times. The policy is put into effect based on a student's inability to achieve an acceptable score demonstrating knowledge and skill on graded standardized tests, suggesting, at least as a possibility, that the teaching approach used for the child either in the specific year or throughout their educational career to-date, as been ineffective or otherwise inappropriate for that individual. Whereas children with diagnosed special needs have an Individualized Education Program (IEP) developed to provide elements of specialized instruction to support the child's learning, students who fail standardized tests are not necessarily provided any kind of specialized instruction even in light of their failure.

Numerous studies have demonstrated the ineffectiveness of student retention on academic performance, ranging from generalizations of why retention and promotion policies do not work to specific studies and reviews of why these policies do not work for specific groups of students, often organized by grade. For instance, several studies have considered achievement results in kindergarten and how they are impacted by retention (Burkam, LoGerfo, Ready, & Lee, 2007; Dong, 2009; Penfield, 2010). Several of these studies tracked the test results of retained students beyond the year that they were retained (Hauser & Frederick, 2005; Pomplun, 1988). Others looked at literacy or reading results specifically, recognizing that literacy or rather reading levels are deemed fundamental to education (Burkam et al., 2007).

In terms of academic costs, substantial academic gains are seldom reported for retained students. The National Association of School Psychologists (2003) offered a position statement on retention that indicated the failure of retained students to do better than their promoted peers and even extended the conclusion to suggest that retained students have been shown to perform even less well than promoted students in some instances.

Summarizing studies into the academic development of retained versus promoted students, Holmes and Matthew (1984) considered a total of 63 studies and found that 54 of them reported negative effects for retention with specific reference to academic achievements. In other words, the

academic cost of retention versus social promotion is that students do not benefit academically from the policy of testing with the intention of retaining or promoting based on results. Neither social promotion nor retention specifically helps to enhance an individual's academic standing and potentially, individual students actually are less successful academically after either retention or social promotion. Hattie (2009), Jimerson (2001), and Dong (2009) suggested that there were predominantly negative results for retention. At best, any positive results (and there is a minimal amount reported) tend to be short lived and outweighed by the negative effects of retention versus social promotion.

Students who are retained are also documented to potentially experience a negative bias or the disadvantage of preconceived notions among other teachers they encounter. When a student is retained, "the retention may impact the beliefs of teachers the student will encounter in his future educational career," (Pomplun, 1988), making the cost fairly clear. Neither social promotion nor retention is effective in solving the problem of providing appropriate instruction for low performing students. The retention research "has been phrased for a yes or no answer relative to its implementation, but the main conclusion should be that both policies are failures" (NASP, 2003) for the impacted students, costing the academic potential of the students directly impacted. While students who are permitted to move on to the next grade level are actually noted to learn more than if retained in the same grade, grade retention and social promotion have a negative effect on all areas of student achievement including reading, math, language, and social and emotional adjustment (Jimerson, Pletcher, & Kerr, 2005).

While many students appear to accept that their grades are better after grade retention, there is still an issue that parents and students find with school support. In Fanguy and Mathis (2012), it was determined that parents identified a need for improved school performance and that they further identified such an improvement as having a potentially positive result on retention. All eight students featured in the study also indicated that they attempted grade level material for the second time and were either more familiar with the material or approached the material with a different attitude and more success. Although the actual effect may not have been as clear cut, it was perceived that school performance had improved based on performance with grade material. Jimerson, et al. (2005) also undertook a meta-analysis of 64 studies and suggested some students who were retained in school demonstrated short-term achievement gains following their retention. It is also demonstrated that retained adolescent students in nine of the 63 studies examined demonstrated increased academic achievement the year after they were retained but these gains as proved to be short-lived. As a cost, then, what this suggests is that retention can perpetuate false hopes for students after retention that leads to potentially more devastating failure. Having thought that their academic performance improved, after approaching graded material for a second time, students are then faced with new material at the next grade up and tend to experience struggles similar to those that lead to their initial retention. The long-term effects on academic performance have also been extensively studied but student perceptions of improved academic performance after retention must generally be discounted. Two of the eight adolescent students were retained a second time, and two were retained three times based on Fanguy and Mathis's (2012) findings. Their findings also concurred with studies by Jimerson et al. (2005) and Walters and Borgers (1995) indicating that retention appeared to benefit students the year after they were retained, but later perpetuated a decline and disappearance of positive effects in subsequent years, resulting in a second retention at times. The most striking academic cost is the potential erosion of any enthusiasm or love of learning among retained students based on these findings.

Non-Academic Costs to Directly Affected Students

For want of a better term, the notion of personal costs relates to the self of the student. Thompson and Cunningham (2000) pointed out that retention discourages students whose motivation and confidence are already shaky, adding that promoted students gain an opportunity to advance through next year's curriculum, while retained students go over the same ground and thus fall farther behind their advancing peers.

Several studies identify a high correlation between student retention and student drop-out rates. The National Longitudinal Study (NELS) was applied to examine student and school factors associated with students dropping out in different grades. The studies found that, consistent with previous research, the results indicated that being held back is the single strongest factor predictor of dropping out and that its effect is consistent for both early and late dropouts.

Socially and personally, retention and social promotion policies cost students as well. Retention clearly has a deleterious effect on the self-esteem and social and personal adjustment, including discipline, of affected students. Specifically, retained students are even noted to have increased risks in health related areas such as stress, low social confidence, substance abuse, and violent behaviors. Several studies have demonstrated that students also view retention as being more degrading and stressful than losing a parent or going blind, which is clearly indicative of a tremendous cost to self-esteem, social adjustment, and personal adjustment (Jimerson, 2001).

Depending on when a child is retained – and there is some need to draw a distinction between retention in Kindergarten or 1st Grade and later grades, when a student has an established educational career – it can be decidedly difficult to engage with non-retained peers on a par. The social development of children is complex as well and a crucial aspect of their overall development.

Fanguy and Mathis (2012) discussed the psychosocial fall out from grade retention and considered the implication on educators, as well, which surely is yet another cost angle for consideration. Their specific goal, in fact, was to identify counseling needs for grade-retained students through qualitative research focused on the psychosocial responses of retained students and their parents. The study found that universally, retained students did report highly negative development changes. Problems reported included lower than typical self-esteem, higher instances of social isolation from peers, shame about grade retention itself and being older than classmates, resentment of teachers and administrators, and an overall diminished quality of life

In addition to demonstrating the psychological and social costs, of course, this article emphasizes the importance of student integration on the psychosocial level. Without feeling confident about placement in typical education settings and without being able to maintain meaningful, positive relationships with peers, teachers, and even administrators, a student's academic potential can be seriously undermined.

While many studies concentrate on the more obvious features of grade retention, including demographics, Fanguy and Mathis (2012) consider these effects to be “the tip of the psychosocial iceberg” (p. 2). Although it is relevant to note that grade retention has significantly reduced student numbers in school (as noted by a variety of studies also cited by Fanguy and Mathis (2012) and others considering the effects of retention), consideration of the causes of this effect, the sub-causes, is perhaps more relevant and indicative of the true underlying cost. Not only are retained students dropping out of school or being excluded for one reason or another, including due to higher suspension rates, they are actually suffering more acutely in terms of their personal identity and psychology. Dropout and even suspension should perhaps be regarded as the effects of these costs – poor self-esteem, negatively impacted or delayed development in terms of developing a positive identity and sense of self-worth. While there are other paths, potentially, to educational development or job training, the psychosocial delays that actually lead to the dropping out of retained students are actually rather more likely to be permanent or at least long-term.

Erikson (1968) considered identity development and his research, which has ready application to retention and social promotion policies, sheds considerable light on these issues. Indeed, Erikson (1968) specifically noted that having a high level of self-esteem was critical to identity development in adolescents. Adolescents, when they feel good about themselves, develop a positive identity while those who do not feel good about themselves tend to struggle with their identity and can potentially develop maladaptive or dysfunctional behaviors (these could well be the actual causes of student suspension or dropout at critical points).

As Fanguy and Mathis (2012) point out, Erikson's theory about identity development focuses on individual psychological development as it pertains to adolescent life and also isolates social components of development that include family, school and peers. In their study, Fanguy and Mathis (2012) specifically apply this theory to demonstrate the most damaging psychosocial fall out of grade-retained students. Conducting 45-minute, semi-structured interviews with eight students selected for participation in their study and then further interviews with parents, Fanguy and Mathis (2012) noted that there was relative racial and economic diversity, with five of the selected students being white and three being black; with all but one of the students describing their families as middle-income.

In student and parent interviews, Fanguy and Mathis (2012) noted that the most common causes for retention were considered to be environmental stressors, apathy towards school, insufficient preparation for the following grade level, and poor behavior patterns. Fanguy and Mathis (2012) report the student feedback directly and clearly demonstrate the prominence of psychosocial issues that could well be traced to retention itself:

Acting apathetic toward school was a maladaptive behavior developed when Donovan repeated the third grade; Sam repeated the first grade; and Lisa repeated the seventh grade. Donovan, Lisa and Sam, along with Donovan's and Sam's parent, described how they developed poor attitudes toward school following their first retention and disengaged from the educational process. The trio's lack of academic success caused them to doubt their own ability to properly complete schoolwork successfully. As a result, this ultimately led these three students to be retained in eighth grade. On the other hand, Beth's apathy developed as a maladaptive behavior to cope with her watching her mother's health deteriorate to the point where she was unable to manage her personal life. For relief from her pain about her mother's illness, Beth became apathetic about all aspects of her life including her schoolwork. (p. 5-6)

Also cited were issues directly related to retention. Seven of the eight students reported reacting negatively to retention (being upset, crying, and being angry). Only one student reported having a minimal reaction to the news of retention. The majority reaction, though, being negative, suggests that retention had a strong and negative impact on self-esteem. Even in the case of the student who was retained but did not appear to react negatively to the news, parent report indicated that behavior caused retention in the sixth and seventh grades, with peer pressure influencing behaviors as well as disruptive behavior being a factor.

Fanguy and Mathis (2012) also assess the long-term impacts of retention to some degree, in their interviews with students and parents. Several of the students indicated that they had experienced what they considered to be life changing effects and that they had experienced a dramatic increase in stress and, in some instances, an even more pronounced dislike of school. One of the students was also diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder, which, correlating with the research conducted by Beebe-Frankenberger, Bocain, MacMillan, & Gresham (2004) pointing to the extent to which student retention is used as an intervention strategy prior to identification of a learning disability. Jimerson, et al (2005) identified that retention was ranked among the most stressful event in life for adolescents as well, which correlates with Fanguy and Mathis's (2012) research as well. Feelings of isolation from friends, abandonment by certain friends, and increased absence of parents were also identified in Fanguy and Mathis's (2012) study.

An assessment was made of low self-esteem signals for participating students, as well, with five of the eight students and five of the eight parents commenting on low self-esteem as an issue affecting the student with regard to retention. One student's father specifically indicated that they felt their child had low self-esteem and another parent indicated that their child clearly "felt bad about herself." Two parents also reported that their children were giving up too easily and not believing in themselves. Another of the parents described how their child had called herself "stupid" while one of the students indicated that they were aware that they did not set goals too high that they knew they could not achieve them. The implication of this was that the student did not have the self-esteem to set challenging goals.

Another of the students reported feeling “stupid” and “dumb” as a result of their lack of success in school. Another said she felt “she would never get it” when she kept experiencing failure on the Louisiana Educational Assessment Program (LEAP) test and reported how she felt she may never pass. Anger at being victimized by teachers as also referenced with regard to being forced to repeat a grade. The student described dropping out of school to escape the experience.

According to Fanguy and Mathis (2012), only two of their studied students demonstrated any signs of positive self-concepts, describing themselves positively and feeling optimistic about their abilities, a description supported by their parents.

Indicative of other studies that have assessed retention among students at various levels, the findings in Fanguy and Mathis (2012) clearly suggest that retention can actually be extremely destructive to a student’s development, allowing that academic development is not the only option. Yet, similar issues can also be seen with socially promoted students. The problems of poor self-esteem, poor sense of self-worth, issues with peers, anger and resentment towards teachers and school administrators, and general apathy towards school are also problems for students who are socially promoted. Indeed, peer isolation or bullying can sometimes be even more extreme.

Applying Erikson’s (1968) psychosocial theory of development, relating to long-term costs, it cannot be overemphasized that high self-esteem is important for adolescents and their long-term developmental success. Without reasonable self-esteem, individuals can prove unable to resolve the crisis of the identity versus role confusion stage of development.

In their study, Fanguy and Mathis (2012) identify six of the eight interviewed students as having reported a low level of self-esteem, described potentially as poor identity development. Only two students, of course, could then be described as having a normal positive identity development following their experiences of retention. Relevant research includes work by Steinberg and Morris (2001), which is supported by the conclusion that academic ability is one of the many factors used by adolescents to evaluate themselves. The finding of Fanguy and Mathis (2012) is clearly that self-esteem may be compromised during identity development if adolescents are not successful in school, if retention policies are implemented. In fact, their research conclusion echoed the belief that retention might be avoided if the students received more help from schools. Two of the students featured in the study also considered that if they had received more help from parents, though, they might have done better in school and potentially have avoided retention. Although such perceptions are inevitably subjective, the perceptions belong to students, whose own identity and conception of schoolwork undoubtedly played some role in the outcome of their academic efforts. There was, at least, a perceived need for further support for students. The students believed that their failing grades were at least in part due to somehow inadequate support in school or at home. Theoretically, the actual need versus perceived need at least is worth further investigation pertaining to students’ lack of accomplishment. Fanguy and Mathis (2012) also conclude that many of the students in the study lacked the skills to advocate for themselves, which potentially identifies another non-academic cost to retention – that affected students may already be reluctant (and potentially become more so) to ask for help from school representatives or family when they need it.

Cost to “Passing” Students

Students directly impacted by retention and social promotion are not the only ones impacted among the students of America’s public schools. Those students who actually pass from one grade to the next, year to year, according to the graded parameters also pay a price for the implementation of these policies. In an abstract way, we should not overlook the anxiety that must inevitably be associated with testing and grading for “passing” students. The potential for a student to be retained or to be socially promoted, not having achieved the required graded level is certainly a cause of anxiety; anxiety which does not always manifest as a motivating factor for students to prioritize their studies.

Beyond this cost, however, the cost on the mindset of the “passing” student, there are several clearly identified and fairly well documented costs for “passing” students that relate to, for instance, the quality of teaching provided when there is a need to also support retained or socially promoted students.

Fanguy and Mathis (2012) mention reports from retained students that their non-retained peers were increasingly distant. Inability to socialize with students in the grade in which retention is undertaken was also identified as a problem for retained students.

Although this is not entirely conclusive or indicative of the underlying causes for social withdrawal from retained students, these findings suggest that having a retained student in a classroom can be a confusing social experience for non-retained students and one that goes largely unaddressed by school support systems (counselors, teachers, and administrators).

Teasing from peers was also identified as a factor undermining the psychosocial development of retained students in Fanguy and Mathis (2012). Specifically, students reported that they had been made fun of and called names like “stupid” or “dumb”. This is particularly notable because adolescence is a phase, outlined by Erikson (1968, 1980), has being of particular importance for the formation of self-concepts and identities. It is during this period that individuals develop a sense of self and of their own identity. When there is disruption at this period, when the social and emotional development of students is hampered, there is potentially long-term, even permanent damage done. Peers play a particularly important role in adolescent development, as well, with experiences such as teasing having the potential to entirely disrupt proper development during this phase. Keltikangas-Jarvinen (2007), for instance, determined that adolescents tend to act with increased aggression during this phase. They tend to be more aggressive during this phase in response to bullying or teasing. A long-term cost of the disruption is inevitably that students who are retained or socially promoted can become generally maladjusted.

Cost to Teachers

McNeil (2000) offers particular insight into to the costs of retention and social promotion policies for teachers, the standardized testing of students as a means of “testing” teachers, pressurizing them to teach in a particular way, to teach to tests, and the like. She explains that when the state school system was 'nuked' or hit by the standardized testing and graded approach, the bombs did not fall on the targeted state education agency or middle-level managers in the state bureaucracy (McNeil, 2000). Standardized testing did not affect the central office administrators in the local school districts or others but rather, they affected the teachers. Education reform that brought about the pass or fail focus included systems of “testing teachers” and evaluating classroom performance but only by also prescribing the curriculum and emphasizing the testing of students. The cost of this is the quality of education overall and the scope that teachers have to manifest that quality. Teachers are essentially forced to undermine their own skills, trivializing and reducing the quality of the content of the curriculum they teach from and encouraging the distancing of children from “the substance of schooling” (McNeil, 2000).

Like their students, teachers must inevitably experience stress because of this emphasis on standardized testing as well, and also with respect to student retention or social promotion instances. Teachers play an important role in the decision process for retention or social promotion, as well, which perhaps is a further cause of increased anxiety or worse, an opportunity for anxiety about student test results to be mitigated by the effective removal of any students whose test results are not on par.

Cost to the Education System and Non-Teaching Agents

Social promotion and retention policies impact the entire education system in the United States. A 2009-2010 study by the United States Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights

(ORC), indicated that about 2.3 percent of all students in some 7,000 school districts (representing more than 85 percent of students in American public schools) were retained a grade at the close of the school year (West, 2012). Although much of this rate is said to have reflected retention in high school, where the credit system often determines that a significant number of students do not accumulate enough credits to advance their academic standing to the next grade, still approximately 1 percent of the students retained were in grades K to 8, with the largest numbers actually repeating Kindergarten or first grade.

Regardless of the point at which retention occurs, there are direct financial costs associated with the policy, as well. Retaining a student in the same grade is actually a costly intervention (West, 2012). The average cost per student, of a typically developing and progressing child, was approximately \$10,700 in 2009-2010. The direct cost to retain approximately 2.3 percent is therefore an excess of \$12 billion annually for the number of students retained (2.3 percent of the 50 million students enrolled in American schools in a given year). This estimate also excludes costs for any remedial services provided to the students repeating a grade, such as any learning support or specialized services. It also excludes the costs of any earnings foregone by retained students due to their delayed entry into the labor market (West, 2012).

Social promotion costs, of course, are less easily tracked on every count, including in terms of costs to the education system. However, having students of considerably different abilities within a single classroom certainly undermines the potential for teachers to successfully address the needs of all students equally and as needed, without other specific supports in the classroom.

Cost to Families and Communities

Families impacted by retention and social promotion policies are disproportionately among already disadvantaged groups. Cannon and Lipscomb identified that children from low-income families, English learners, and Latinos were significantly more likely to be retained (Jimerson, 2001). Based on socio-economic patterns alone, it is reasonably well documented that these groups – low-income, English learner, and Latino – families are at particularly high risk of being impacted by retention or social promotion policies. The United States Department of Education report from 2006 noted that, among the most common characteristics of retained students were the following factors: male, black or racial minority, low socio-economic status, parents with low educational level, and parents with little school involvement (NASP, 2003).

Translated into costs, the tendency for certain families – low income, English learner, low educational level, and limited school involvement – determines that potentially there is a tendency for even greater anxiety about education when there is retention or promotion. Because retention or social promotion is apparently undertaken in a rather informal and somewhat haphazard fashion, it is worth nothing that parents and families as a whole may feel further disconnected from the education of their child when they are affected.

The ORC survey of 2009-2010, finding that 2.3 percent of students were retained, also indicated that retention rates are highest among traditionally disadvantaged minorities (West, 2012). Also noted as those most likely to suffer from low academic performance, the respective rates of retention for black and Hispanic students were 4.2 percent and 2.8 percent, as compared with just 1.5 percent for whites (West, 2012). One of the obvious community costs of retention, then, and arguably also of promotion, is the perpetuation of race based inequalities or biases in the education system as a whole.

Cost to Society At Large

Public education, by its very nature and purpose, impacts people, the public, in a variety of ways. By design, it impacts the knowledge and skillset of the population it serves – the students and those students as adults or future workers. When the system fails, however, in providing an education

to prepare future workers for success in their careers and in life, that failure costs both the national labor force and, thinking even more broadly, the national economy and system for social services.

National Labor Force

It seems rather ironic that an educational policy so closely connected to the notion of industrialization, puritan or at least protestant work ethic, and even modern production efforts, should allow itself to be so self-defeating. Yet, the failure of the public education system to support students who do not achieve the graded standards by year determines that a substantial population of public school students and future workers are essentially unprepared or underprepared for successful participation in the labor force. Students who drop out of school – and retained or socially promoted students are at significantly higher risk for this – have fewer qualifications as they enter the work force and ultimately less knowledge and skill compared to their peers who have graduated high school and beyond. While there are costs to the individual that translate to economic and social outcomes, for the labor force, the cost of an unprepared or underprepared worker is considerable as well.

Markey (1988) noted that of the 4 million high school dropouts in 1986, 1 in 6 was unemployed and many were not in the labor force at all because of the overwhelming competition from high school graduates and college graduates. The overwhelming correlation between retention and social promotion and high school drop-out rates must also be considered to understand exactly how this particular factor plays out.

In essence, the failure to inspire individual students to success in school tends to determine that they are less productive overall as participants in the workforce. Being less likely to pursue higher education opportunities, they are also therefore more likely to be unemployed and are certainly scaled to earn considerably less over the course of their lifetime. Our education system is failing itself in that it is producing workers who are unable to contribute to the workforce to what is quite likely their potential.

Costs to the Economy and Social Services

Generally speaking, grade repeaters are more likely to be on public assistance programs, unemployed or imprisoned (NASP, 2003). Assessing family income for recent high school drop outs versus high school graduates and recent high school graduates, assessing households where students were still living at home, it was found that the median income for families of dropouts was \$12,100 and the median for families of recent high school graduates was \$22,700. For college-enrolled high school graduates, the median family income was \$34,200 (NASP, 2003). Although these elements are not to be regarded as causal – low income families causing drop outs or the need for retention or social promotion – these factors and statistics that suggest that large numbers of dropouts come from single parent households and households run by women, these risk factors show social fall outs of in the education policy. That is, at risk students, students from families where there are challenges in addition to education are not being effectively supported by the current education system.

With students who are retained or socially promoted tending to end up reliant upon social services, earning less over the course of their lifetime than those who are not retained or socially promoted, potentially dropping out of school all together, it is clear that there are considerable long-term costs for the pass and fail policy, with society having to go on supporting affected students, more often than not, rather than education actually serving its purpose and enabling individuals to be self-sufficient. Indeed, one study in particular, by Klima (2007), examined the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and discusses a national dropout crisis in the United States. The study determined that, every September, approximately 3.5 million young people in America are seen to enter the eighth grade, with roughly 505,000 of this number dropping out over the next four years—an average of nearly more than 2,805 per day of the school year.

Within the context of this problem of NCLB, the use of high-stakes testing places increased pressure on students and forces teachers and administrators. Stating that the goal of testing is to distinguish between good and bad students, reward successful schools and bad schools, transfer students from failing students to successful ones, and provide students for those with adequate test scores, one of the most notable fallouts of the NCLB has been the prominence with which states have undertaken to use scores for retention and promotion decisions. This application of the NCLB, though, has apparently lead to the increase in dropout rates and traces to higher instances of single parents, declines into poverty, reliance upon welfare, and possibly decline to poverty.

Individuals who drop out of school earn approximately \$270,000 less than a high school graduate over their working life. It is also noted that having a high school diploma rather than having a skills assessment based on a minimum competency test, help to determine whether a person can obtain employment and how much money they will earn.

In 1997, it was indicated that the employment rate of men in the 25-to 34-year-old range who did not graduate high school was more than twice that of men who did graduate. Among women, within that same age-range, the unemployment rate of women without diplomas was three times higher than those with diplomas (Klima, 2007).

Although the link may be somewhat indirect, retention and social promotion policies are contributing to the increased dropout rates among American students. The increase in dropouts or at least the prevalence of dropouts among individuals who are retained or socially promoted is also linked, inevitably, to social problems such as unemployment, reliance upon welfare, poverty, and increased crime rates.

Because both retention and social promotion policies, linking also to high instances of dropout, tend to impact minority students disproportionately (minority students are disproportionately more likely to be retained or socially promoted and to drop out of school), it is apparently that policies of retention and social promotion also potentially contribute to racial disparities. The same can be said with regard to low-income families. Although the correlation between retention and social promotion and low-income families is not perhaps as definitive as the link between minorities and these policies, there is still an apparent correlation and a basis for suggesting that there is also a link to poverty and retention and social promotion policies.

The 21st century, however, is not the age of overt prejudices or even necessarily direct and transparent racial, social, or economic discrimination. The disparities that exist, some of which may be growing more extreme, remain rather well concealed. They are ignored, even, on the surface of things. It is in structured systems, like education, in fact, that they tend to emerge, going unaddressed until the situation, for one individual, is so far gone that affirmative action must be taken. The obvious example with education is that the discrimination against a minority, impoverished, or even learning disabled student goes on from the first day that they enter the education system and carries on, remains in effect, largely unnoticed, largely undetected, until the affected individual is so severely impacted that, for instance, they are unable to demonstrate appropriate understanding of materials that have been the emphasis of their curriculum for a year. This type of cost is potentially even harder to assess or otherwise overcome. It is unseen, largely intangible. There are also secondary costs, related to the lack of academic achievement, which include the individual's lost interest in school and their lost potential to excel in a variety of areas that do require demonstration of academic achievement. Yet, how can such problems, such costs, be undone? The education system itself cannot find its way out of providing some kind of quantitative assessment of performance – the performance of students and the performance of educators, administrators, and schools. Solutions are not easy to come by. The alternative strategies are complex, difficult to balance out. They require subtlety, inevitably, to overcome the subtlety of the prejudices that are in play. The potential of growing costs, though, and the expansion of those costs justify most efforts.

Conclusions

Although there are numerous challenges and limitations impacting the overall process of assessing the costs of retention and social promotion, the general cost of these policies is apparent from the evidence that is available and from a certain logical analysis of the scenario. The various stakeholders in education, including students, teachers, education policy makers, parents, and employers are all undermined by the pass or fail mentality of the current system. As failure continues to mean that a student is either retained or promoted without the necessary mastery of skills and knowledge deemed age appropriate, all of these stakeholders pay a price or absorb a cost that can hardly be made up. Individual students are literally disconnected as a result of this policy – disconnected from themselves, from education, from fellow students, from teachers and other educators, from their families, even, sometimes and from the community at large. Affected students are also disabled by the policy when it comes to their education and their potential in the workplace. While this is to state the causal and effect rather more directly than can be absolutely demonstrated with empirical evidence, in the context of education policy historically and at large, it is a statement that very much needs to be made and truly considered moving forward.

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