

## A Synthesis of Grade Retention Research: Looking Backward and Moving Forward

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Amidst an era emphasizing educational standards and accountability, and politicians calling for an end to social promotion, the practice of grade retention has become increasingly popular. Consistent with the political zeitgeist across the country, the California Legislature has recently approved bills directing educational professionals to establish promotion performance standards. These actions have revived many debates regarding the relative merits and limitations of grade retention and social promotion. Given the abundance of research examining the efficacy of grade retention as well as alternative prevention and intervention strategies, education professionals are encouraged to make informed decisions. School psychologists are in a unique position to play an important role in encouraging educational professionals to use interventions with demonstrated effectiveness. This synthesis of grade retention research provides a review of: (a) research examining the effects of grade retention on academic achievement, (b) research examining the effects of grade retention on socioemotional adjustment, (c) research exploring long-term outcomes associated with grade retention, (d) a conceptual framework to facilitate interpretation of the research, and (e) ideas to move forward in identifying and implementing effective alternatives to grade retention. School psychologists and other educational professionals are encouraged to incorporate the research literature when advocating for appropriate prevention and intervention services on behalf of students.

Amidst an era emphasizing educational standards and accountability, research examining the efficacy of grade retention warrants further review and consideration. "Grade retention," also known as "non-promotion," "flunking," "being retained," and "being held back," refers to the practice of requiring a student who has been in a given grade level for a full school year to remain at that same grade level for a subsequent school year (Jackson, 1975; Shepard & Smith, 1989). Research indicates that across the nation, 30% to 50% of students will be retained at least once by the 9<sup>th</sup> grade (Alexander, Entwisle, & Kabbani, 1999; Hauser, Pager, & Simmons, 2000; McCoy &

Reynolds, 1999; Shepard & Smith, 1989). Nationally, it is estimated that 5-10% of students are retained annually, which translates to over 2.4 million children every year that must complete an extra year of schooling (Dawson, 1998a; Shepard & Smith, 1990). Current trends appear to be moving toward increased retention rates as "standards" and "accountability" have received increasing emphasis in the field education (McCoy & Reynolds, 1999; U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Census, 1966, 1990).

During the late 1990s, in each State of the Union Address, President Clinton (1997, 1998, 1999) repeatedly called for an end to social

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promotion. By 1998, at least 10 states had developed explicit policies for ending social promotion (American Federation of Teachers, 1998). Governors of some states (e.g., Texas, California, Wisconsin, Michigan, and Delaware) have pledged to eliminate social promotion (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). Moreover, across the country educational policies and related legislation aimed at increasing standards and emphasizing accountability, may result in more children being retained at grade level (U.S. Department of Education, 1999).

In California during September 1998, Assembly Bills 1626 and 1639 were signed into law<sup>1</sup>. Broadly, these bills outline new promotion and retention requirements for the students in California, directing school districts to retain students who do not meet certain performance criteria (to be determined by the local education agency), and to provide summer remediation programs for these students (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). The legislation proposed that the 1998-1999 academic year be a planning year during which each school board was required to develop policies and procedures related to implementation of the legislation, including: (a) identifying a process for early identification of students at risk of retention; (b) developing a process for parent notification; (c) outlining the teachers' discretion in the promotion or retention decision; and (d) establishing promotion standards (based on standardized testing, students' grades, or other indicators or academic achievement) for students in grades, 2, 3, and 4 (in addition to promotion to both middle and high school). For grades 2 and 3, districts were required to establish promotion standards in reading only. At the other grade levels, districts were required to set standards in language arts, reading, and math. Considering the interplay of standards, accountability, and grade retention as described above, research examining

the efficacy of grade retention to facilitate student progress must be considered.

Too often, it seems as though "anecdotes, clinical experience, and folklore" overshadow empirical research when discussing the merits and limitations of grade retention (Webster, 2000, p. 17). The lack of emphasis on results of research is disconcerting considering the abundance of studies and scholarly analysis examining the efficacy of grade retention during the past century. As purveyors of knowledge related to facilitating the socioemotional adjustment and academic success of students, school psychologists may provide leadership in disseminating the results of research related to grade retention. Towards this end, this succinct synthesis of grade retention research addresses five important aspects: (a) a summary of research examining the effects of grade retention on academic achievement, (b) a synopsis of research examining the effects of grade retention on socioemotional adjustment, (c) a discussion of long-term outcomes associated with grade retention, (e) an overview of a conceptual framework to facilitate interpretation of the research, and (e) provides ideas to move forward in identifying alternatives to grade retention. The discussion below includes many references of important resources that may be gathered to provide materials for review when discussing the topic with teachers, principals and other educational professionals.

### **STATISTICAL META-ANALYSES PROVIDE INFORMATION ON OUTCOMES**

This synthesis includes the results from published meta-analyses of research examining outcomes associated with grade retention (Holmes, 1989; Holmes & Matthews, 1984; Jimerson, 2001). These three meta-analyses provide information from studies of grade retention published between 1925-1999 (see Table 1 for a summary of these findings). In brief, meta-analysis is based on the concept of effect size (ES) (Glass, 1978). Calculation of effect sizes allows researchers to

<sup>1</sup> Information on these statutes may be obtained from the California Department of Education, see AB1626 (Chapter 742), AB1639 (Chapter 743), and also SB1370 (Chapter 942) from the Statutes of 1998.

**Table 1**  
**Summary of Mean Effect Sizes (ES) from Three Meta-Analyses Examining the Outcomes of Studies Exploring the Efficacy of Grade Retention.**

	Holmes & Matthews (1984)	Holmes (1989)	Jimerson (2001)
Overall Effect Size	-.37 [575]	-.15 [861]	-.31 [246]
Academic Achievement	-.44 [367]	-.19 [536]	-.39 [169]
Language	-.40 [85]	-.16 [106]	-.36 [11]
Reading	-.48 [75]	-.08 [144]	-.54 [52]
Mathematics	-.33 [77]	-.11 [137]	-.49 [48]
Total/Composites	na	na	-.20 [13]
GPA	-.58 [4]	-.58 [4]	-.18 [45]
Socioemotional Adjustment	-.27 [142]	-.09 [234]	-.22 [77]
Social	-.27 [60]	-.09 [101]	-.08 [12]
Emotional	-.37 [9]	.03 [33]	-.28 [13]
Behavioral	-.31 [13]	-.13 [24]	-.11 [30]
Self-Concept	-.19 [34]	-.13 [45]	-.04 [16]
Adjustment Composite	na	na	-.15 [4]
Attitude Toward School	-.16 [26]	-.05 [39]	na
Attendance	-.12 [6]	-.18 [7]	-.65 [2]

na = not available.

[Numbers in brackets indicate the number of effect sizes used in calculating the mean effect size].

*Note.* Negative numbers represent that results of analyses favored the matched comparison group of students relative to the retained students.

systematically pool results across studies. Thus, results from multiple studies may be included in order to examine the relative benefit of an educational intervention. Meta-analysis statistical procedures provide a measure of the difference between two groups that is expressed in quantitative units that are comparable across studies. Because each effect size is standardized relative to the comparison group standard deviation, it is possible to combine the results from different measures at different grade levels. Analyses resulting in a negative effect size suggest that an intervention (retention in this case) had a negative or deleterious effect relative to the comparison groups of promoted students (review Cohen, 1988; Cooper & Hedges, 1994; Glass, 1978; Glass, McGaw, & Smith, 1981; Hedges & Olkin, 1985; Holmes,

1984; Hunter & Schmidt, 1990; Light & Pillemer, 1984 for additional information on meta-analyses).

Holmes and Matthews (1984) performed the first comprehensive statistical meta-analysis exploring the effects of retention on elementary and junior high school students using both achievement and socioemotional outcomes. This meta-analysis included 44 studies published between 1929 and 1981, totaling 4,208 retained students and 6,924 regularly promoted students. Five years later, Holmes (1989) included an additional 19 studies published between 1981-1989 to generate a total of 63 studies published between 1925-1989 where retained students were followed and compared to promoted students. Of the 63 studies in this review, 25 of these studies included matched participants (e.g., IQ, achievement, SES, gender,

grades, and other variables). Jimerson (2001) provides the most recent systematic review and meta-analysis of studies examining the efficacy of grade retention. Through a systematic literature search, Jimerson (2001) included 20 articles published between 1990-1999, totaling over 1,100 retained students and over 1,500 regularly promoted students. One of the key criteria for selection in the Jimerson (2001) meta-analysis was that the study must have included an identifiable comparison group of promoted students. Thus, the results discussed below include effect sizes from the 83 studies published between 1925-1999 included in the three previous meta-analyses (Holmes, 1989; Holmes & Matthews, 1984; Jimerson, 2001).

**Methodological variation.** With nearly 100 years of research on grade retention, the quality of studies has certainly varied. Historically, the most commonly noted methodological concerns include: (a) too often outcome analyses compare pre- and post-test scores of retained students rather than using a comparison group; (b) when comparison groups are used, characteristics are often not delineated; (c) most studies analyze only academic achievement and rarely include socioemotional outcomes; (d) few studies document remedial services during the repeated year; (e) few studies examine the long-term outcomes associated with early grade retention; and (f) data collected 30-40 years ago may be outdated (Alexander, Entwisle, & Dauber, 1994; Holmes, 1989; Jackson, 1975; Jimerson, Carlson, Rotert, Egeland, & Sroufe, 1997; Niklason, 1984, 1987; Rose, Medway, Cantrell, & Marus, 1983). Current scholars have advanced the study of grade retention attending to common critiques and methodological concerns.

It should be noted that of studies during the most recent decade (1990-1999) the 20 published studies examining grade retention addressed many of the methodological limitations described above (Jimerson, 2001). For instance, each of the 20 studies included a comparison group, 16 of the 20 included socioemotional outcomes in addition to academic achievement, and each study delineated

the characteristics of the matched comparison groups. Several studies included information on remedial services and a few studies extended from kindergarten through high school. While methodological limitations prohibit unequivocal conclusions when considering any single study in isolation, the confluence of results warrants further consideration (Jimerson, 2001).

### **THE EFFECTS OF GRADE RETENTION ON ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT**

In general, the confluence of research results fails to demonstrate academic achievement advantages for retained students relative to comparison groups of low-achieving promoted peers. Holmes (1989) reports that 54 studies showed negative achievement effects when retained children went on to the next grade level. Of nine studies that reported positive short-term achievement effects, the benefits were shown to diminish over time and disappear in later grades (Holmes, 1989). The overall effect sizes for academic achievement outcomes in the Holmes and Matthews (1984) and Holmes (1989) meta-analyses were  $-.44$  and  $-.19$  respectively (Table 1). Jimerson (2001) reports, of the 175 analyses of academic achievement outcomes, 9 resulted in significant statistical differences favoring the retained students and 82 resulted in significant statistical differences favoring the comparison group of low achieving peers. Of the 9 analyses favoring the retained students, 6 reflect differences during the repeated year (e.g., second year in kindergarten). While a few analyses demonstrated achievement gains in the years immediately following the retention, these gains were not shown to be maintained. The overall average effect size across academic achievement outcomes was  $-.39$ , with a high of  $-.54$  for reading and a low of  $-.18$  for grade point average (Table 1). Thus, results indicated that overall the retained group scored  $.39$  of a standard deviation unit *lower* than the comparison promoted group. The results of the meta-analyses of nearly 700 analyses emerging from research during the past 75 years dem-

onstrate consistent negative effects of grade retention on subsequent academic achievement. Regarding achievement during adolescence, the author knows of no published studies demonstrating significant advantages in achievement for retained students over matched comparison peers during middle school and high school.

### **THE EFFECTS OF GRADE RETENTION ON SOCIOEMOTIONAL ADJUSTMENT**

Relatively fewer studies have addressed the social and psychological adjustment outcomes of retained students with about 320 analyses being included in the meta-analyses. Considering over 40 studies including 234 analyses of socioemotional outcomes, Holmes (1989) concluded, on average the retained students display poorer social adjustment (-.09), attitudes toward school (-.05), attendance (-.18), and more problem behaviors (-.13) in comparison to matched controls (Table 1). Jimerson (2001) reports that 16 studies yielded 148 analyses of socioemotional adjustment outcomes of retained students relative to a comparison group of students, of these 8 resulted in statistical significance favoring the retained students and 13 were statistically significant favoring the comparison group. The overall average effect size across studies published between 1990-1999 was -.22. It is noted that those studies focusing on older children often report poorer adjustment for retained students (Bachman, Green, & Wirtanen, 1971; Finlayson, 1977; Godfrey, 1972; Hubbell, 1981; Jimerson, 1999; Jimerson et al., 1997; Plummer & Graziano, 1987; Safer, 1986; White & Howard, 1973). In addition, related research indicates that many retained students have difficulties with their peers (Byrnes, 1989; Shepard & Smith, 1990). The author knows of no published research evidence of beneficial effects of grade retention on social and personal adjustment in junior high or high school. School psychologists should be prepared to present a summary of results from systematic, comprehensive reviews and meta-analyses of research examining

the efficacy of grade retention, as this literature provides remarkably consistent results across the past 25 years (Holmes, 1989; Holmes & Matthews, 1984; Jackson, 1975; Jimerson, 2001; see Jimerson 2001 for a brief summary of each of these studies, conclusions from each are provided in Table 2).

### **GRADE RETENTION AND LONG-TERM OUTCOMES**

Relatively few studies have examined long-term outcomes associated with grade retention. One such study is a 21-year longitudinal study examining outcomes through age 20 (Jimerson, 1999). The results of this 21-year prospective longitudinal study comparing retained students, low-achieving but promoted students, and a control group, provide evidence that retained students have a greater probability of poorer educational and employment outcomes during late adolescence. In particular, retained students had lower levels of academic adjustment at the end of 11th grade, were more likely to drop out of high school by age 19, were less likely to receive a diploma by age 20, were less likely to be enrolled in a post-secondary education program, received lower education/employment status ratings, were paid less per hour, and received poorer employment competence ratings at age 20 in comparison to a group of low-achieving students (Jimerson, 1999). In addition, the low-achieving but promoted group was comparable to the control group on all employment outcomes at age 20. Results from other longitudinal samples yield similar findings, suggesting poorer long-term outcomes for retained students relative to a comparison group (Alexander, Entwisle, & Dauber, 2000; Sandoval & Fitzgerald, 1985; Temple, Reynolds, & Ou, 2000). The association of grade retention and subsequent dropout has received much attention in the past decade.

In their book reviewing research on grade retention, Shepard and Smith (1990) concluded, "Although grade retention is widely practiced, it does not help children to 'catch up.' Retained children may appear to do better in the short term, but

**Table 2****Conclusions from Systematic, Comprehensive Reviews and Meta-Analyses of Research Examining the Efficacy of Grade Retention**


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“One general conclusion about the effects of grade retention relative to grade promotion is clearly warranted by all the results taken as a whole: There is no reliable body of evidence to indicate that grade retention is more beneficial than grade promotion for students with serious academic or adjustment difficulties. ... Thus, those educators who retain pupils in a grade do so without valid research evidence to indicate that such treatment will provide greater benefits to students with academic or adjustment difficulties than will promotion to the next grade.” (Jackson, 1975; p. 627)

“Those who continue to retain pupils at grade level do so despite cumulative evidence showing that the potential for negative effects consistently outweighs positive outcomes. Because this cumulative research evidence consistently points to negative effects of non-promotion, 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.” (Holmes & Matthews, 1984; p. 232)

“When only well-matched studies were examined, a greater negative effect was found for retention than in the research literature as a whole. In studies where retained children and promoted controls matched on IQ and prior achievement, repeating a grade had an average negative effect of  $-.30$  standard deviations. The weight of empirical evidence argues against grade retention.” (Holmes, 1989; p. 28)

“Studies examining the efficacy of early grade retention on academic achievement and socioemotional adjustment that have been published during the past decade report results that are consistent with the converging evidence and conclusions of research from earlier in the century that fail to demonstrate that grade retention provides greater benefits to students with academic or adjustment difficulties than does promotion to the next grade.” (Jimerson, 2001; p. 327)

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they are at much greater risk for future failure than their equally achieving, non-retained peers” (p. 84). Studies examining the association of grade retention and dropping out of high school consistently have demonstrated that students who are retained are more likely to drop out of school prior to graduation than students who are not retained (Jimerson, Anderson, & Whipple, 2001). The striking association of grade retention and dropping out of high school recently led to the statement “we’ve won the battle but lost the war,” in reference to the long-term outcomes of grade retention (Dawson, 1998b, p. 21). Moreover, dropping out is associated with numerous deleterious outcomes including fewer employment opportunities, substance abuse, and arrests (Cairns & Cairns, 1994; Catterall, 1987; Center for the Study of Social

Policy, 1994; McDill, Natriello, & Pallas, 1986; Steinberg, Blinde, & Chan, 1984). School psychologists and others reviewing the efficacy of grade retention on academic success would benefit from awareness of the literature addressing the association between grade retention and dropping out.

Jimerson et al. (2001) provide a comprehensive review of dropout research that examines grade retention as a predictor variable. A systematic review of 17 studies examining dropping out of high school prior to graduation suggests that grade retention is one of the most powerful predictors of dropout status. Of the 17 studies including grade retention, *all* 17 found grade retention to be associated with subsequent dropout. Educational professionals, researchers, parents, and

policymakers considering the efficacy of grade retention are encouraged to consider the implications of these findings. The research demonstrates that children retained during elementary school are at an increased risk of dropping out of high school (Jimerson et al., 2001). Tuck (1989) reported that up to 78% of dropouts were retained at least once, while other studies suggest that grade retention increases the risk of dropping out between 20% and 50% (Bachman, Green, & Wirtanen, 1971; Jimerson, 1999). Research suggests that retained students are 2 to 11 times more likely to drop out (Alexander, Entwisle, & Kabbani, 1999; Bachman et al., 1971; Cairns, Cairns, & Neckerman, 1989; Ensminger & Slusarick, 1992; Fine, 1989, 1991; Grissom & Shepard, 1989; Lloyd, 1978; McDill et al., 1986; Nason, 1991; Pallas, 1986; Roderick, 1994, 1995; Rumberger, 1987, 1995; Shepard & Smith, 1989, 1990; Stroup & Robins, 1972; Tuck, 1989). Grade retention has been identified as the single most powerful predictor of dropping out (Rumberger, 1995). Jimerson et al. (2001) provide a summary of each of the above studies. In sum, past research provides evidence that repeating a grade provides few remedial benefits and in the long run, places students at a higher risk of dropping out of school (Roderick, 1995; Jimerson, 1999, 2001; Jimerson et al., 2001; Jimerson et al., 1997).

## A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The transactional model of development (Sameroff & Chandler, 1975) may facilitate the interpretation of the research examining outcomes associated with grade retention (Jimerson, 1999). The transactional model posits that developmental processes reflect the transactions between individuals and environments in which each is altered by the other, and that these transactions impact subsequent interactions in an ongoing continuous manner (Sameroff & Chandler, 1975). Each experience in one's developmental history has an impact on how she or he responds to subsequent experiences, which will similarly impact experiences subsequent to these events and so on (Sameroff, 1992; Sameroff & Chandler, 1975).

From this perspective, current outcomes are always a product of current circumstances and one's developmental history (Sameroff, 1992; Sameroff & Fiese, 1990; Sroufe et al., 1999). Thus, the transactional model of development gives special consideration to the confluence of earlier factors, which ultimately propel individuals towards alternative pathways. For instance, the experience of being retained may influence numerous factors determined to be associated with dropping out of high school (e.g., student's self-esteem, socioemotional adjustment, peer relations, and school engagement).

There are a variety of socioemotional and achievement outcomes associated with grade retention during elementary school. To understand the effects of education on children, we must acknowledge the transactional nature of students' developmental history, their experiences at school, as well as other contemporaneous experiences (see Cairns & Cairns, 1994; Dryfoos, 1990; Evans & DiBenedetto, 1990; Jimerson, 2001; Jimerson, et al., 2001; Kirsch, Jungeblut, Jenkins, & Kolstad, 1993; Kronick & Hargis, 1990; Sroufe, Egeland, & Carlson, 1999; Wehlage, Smith & Lipman, 1992; for further discussion).

From a transactional developmental perspective, the outcomes associated with grade retention are likely a result of the confluence of factors throughout development, all of which work in an increasingly deleterious probabilistic manner over time. Rather than suggesting that grade retention singularly and inevitably leads to associated outcomes in a direct and causal manner, the transactional perspective reminds us to consider the complex interplay of individual and experiential influences across time. There are school, family, and individual characteristics associated with the likelihood of grade retention (Jimerson, 1999) and these characteristics have been documented influences on subsequent development and achievement trajectories. Consideration of these characteristics has important implications when selecting appropriate remedial intervention strategies. Considering the developmental history and assorted circumstances (e.g., low SES, single-par-

ent households, lower cognitive scores) of many retained students, it is not surprising that research has failed to demonstrate that retaining a child at grade level provides long-term effectiveness on socioemotional or achievement outcomes. Simply having a student repeat a grade is unlikely to address the multiple factors influencing poor achievement or adjustment that led to the student being retained to begin with. The basic idea is that children who are at risk as a result of poor achievement or adjustment require additional resources or services to facilitate achievement trajectories. Thus, the transactional model of development provides a conceptual framework to facilitate the interpretation of achievement, socioemotional, and behavioral outcomes associated with early grade retention and emphasizes the importance of considering alternative early intervention strategies.

### MOVING FORWARD

The emphasis on educational standards and accountability has resulted in a recent publication from the U.S. Department of Education (1999) entitled "Taking Responsibility for Ending Social Promotion." Within this guide for educators and policymakers, Sandra Feldman of the American Federation of Teachers notes, "Neither social promotion nor holding kids back without help is a successful strategy for improving learning" (U.S. Department of Education, 1999; p. 4). Richard Riley, former United States Secretary of Education, indicates that, "Taking responsibility for ending social promotion means ensuring that students have the opportunity and assistance they need to meet challenging standards." (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). This recent rhetoric underscores the importance of appropriate remedial strategies and emphasizes the responsibility of educational professionals and families in facilitating achievement trajectories of these students.

In reviewing recent literature addressing social promotion, it is important to note that often "grade retention" could be substituted for "social promotion" and conclusions would remain the same. For instance, consider the quote above from the Secretary of Education, taking responsibility

for ending *grade retention* also means ensuring that students have the opportunity and assistance they need to meet challenging standards. In addition the content of President Clinton's Memorandum (February 23, 1998, included in U.S. Department of Education, 1999) for the Secretary of Education addressing the subject of "Helping Schools End Social Promotions" is consistent with the basis for helping schools end *grade retention*. For example,

In our efforts to promote higher standards and to lead to increased student achievement, the standards must count. Students must be required to meet them and schools must adequately prepare each student to do so. ... Neither promoting students when they are unprepared nor simply retaining them in the same grade is the right response to low student achievement. ... Ending social promotions by simply holding more students back is the wrong choice. Students who are required to repeat a year are more likely than other students to eventually drop out, and few catch up academically with their peers. The right approach is to ensure that more students are prepared to meet challenging academic standards in the first place. ... Schools must implement those proven strategies that will prepare students to meet rigorous standards the first time. (U.S. Department of Education, 1999; pp. 1-2)

Too often, educational professionals debate the merits and limitations of "social promotion" versus "grade retention." A more constructive discussion would focus on specific educational strategies to facilitate the education of children at-risk of academic failure. As such, the recent emphasis on empirically supported interventions will hopefully provide valuable insight regarding appropriate academic interventions (Stoiber & Kratochwill, 2000; Kratochwill, Stoiber, & Gutkin, 2000; Kratochwill & Stoiber, 2000).

While it is beyond the scope of this article to review all possible alternative remedial strategies to facilitate the educational success of children, in



general, empirically supported programs would be optimal. For instance, strategies such as parent involvement, early reading intervention, direct instruction, cognitive behavioral modification, and systematic formative evaluation, have each emerged as promising strategies in the research literature. Recognizing the multiple influences on student's adjustment and achievement at school, it is important to consider comprehensive school-wide prevention and intervention programs that promote both socioemotional and cognitive competence.

Parental involvement has consistently been found to lead to greater success among students (Christenson, 1995; Harrison, 1999; Swap, 1993). For example, weekly routine, structure and use of time out of school, homework practices, and family attitude toward the child's education are all factors that can affect a child's school performance (Sheridan & Kratochwill, 1992). Parent education can facilitate that involvement and while it may be difficult for one teacher to educate all parents, school-wide programs led by the principal and/or school psychologist may be beneficial. Results of a recent meta-analysis also demonstrate the benefits of parental involvement (Fan & Chen, 2000).

Early reading programs are beneficial because reading is an important skill for all subsequent knowledge acquisition. Early reading programs are found to contribute to higher student success (Slavin, Karweit, & Wasik, 1994; Slavin & Madden, 2001). Research demonstrates that assisting students in the process of decoding and providing opportunities to practice reading are valuable strategies (Talbot, Lloyd, & Tankersley, 1994). One program that has been implemented to promote early reading is "Success for All" (Ross, Smith, Slavin, & Madden, 1997). This program involves changing the classroom set-up for reading, such that small groups of students at the same reading level are placed together for 90 minutes of direct language arts instruction. An additional component of "Success for All" is reading tutors who work closely with first grade students to facilitate successful reading before the need for remediation (Slavin, Madden, Karweit, Livermon, & Dolan, 1989).

Effective behavior modification strategies may target the whole classroom to reduce behavior problems. Promoting self-evaluation and self-management of behaviors may provide the student a sense of greater control over his or her behavior and consequences and enhance appropriate classroom behavior. Another useful strategy can be consistently posting good group and individual behavior in the classroom (Shapiro, 1996). While behavior modification focuses mostly on the overt behaviors, cognitive behavioral modification also addresses the underlying cognitions influencing the behaviors. Cognitive behavioral modification involves combining behavior approaches such as modeling, feedback, and reinforcement with cognitive approaches such as "cognitive think alouds" to teach strategies such as anger control and self-coping. A meta-analysis found that cognitive behavioral modification provided lasting effects in reducing hyperactivity-impulsivity and aggression (Robinson, Smith, Miller, & Brownell, 1999).

Formative evaluation involves the systematic ongoing evaluation and modification of teaching programs. While much of the research on this has been conducted with special education students, formative evaluation can also be used with regular education students as well. Formative evaluation allows for both teacher and student feedback so that the program can be modified if unsuccessful, or continued if successful. The results of a meta-analysis suggested that formative evaluation procedures reliably increase academic achievement (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1986).

Examples of empirically studied comprehensive school-wide programs to promote socioemotional and cognitive competence include, Project ACHIEVE and Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS). Project ACHIEVE includes several components designed to address the psychosocial and academic needs of many children in elementary and middle schools (Knoff & Batsche, 1995). There are seven interdependent components of Project ACHIEVE: (a) strategic planning and organizational analysis and development; (b) referral question consultation process; (c) effective classroom teaching/staff develop-

ment; (d) instructional consultation and curriculum based assessment; (e) behavioral consultation and behavioral interventions including school-wide and parent/community use of social skills (or problem solving) and aggression control training; (f) parent training, tutoring, and support; and (g) research and accountability (Knoff, 1999).

PATHS targets the development of social and emotional competence in order to build protective factors and decrease risk for behavior problems and enhance achievement (it also aims to improve the quality of the classroom ecology) (Greenberg, Kusche, Cook, & Quamma, 1995). PATHS focuses on the developmental integration of affect, behavior, and cognitive understanding, recognizing that a child's behavior and self-regulation are functions of emotional awareness, affective-cognitive control, and social-cognitive understanding. PATHS aims to provide children with the knowledge and skills necessary for: (a) self-control; (b) understanding, expressing, and regulating their emotions; (c) increasing self-esteem; and (d) effective social problem-solving. Both PATHS and Project ACHIEVE are examples of programs that incorporate many of the above empirically supported intervention strategies and each

has been successfully implemented school-wide.

It is necessary to design, implement, and evaluate remedial strategies that facilitate academic success. Educational professionals and researchers are encouraged to pilot alternative interventions, empirically examine the efficacy of such efforts, document merits and limitations of various strategies, and disseminate the results of current and past research to others. During the past decade, an assortment of literature has included reviews of current intervention strategies and specific suggestions to optimize student achievement trajectories (Forness, Kavale, Blum, & Lloyd, 1997; Knoff & Batsche, 1995; National Association of School Psychologists, 1998; Slavin, Karweit, & Madden, 1989). This research and related literature will provide direction as school psychologists move forward and advocate empirically supported intervention strategies (review of the above literature addressing alternative intervention strategies is encouraged, highlights are provided in Table 3). Also, the National Association of School Psychologists publishes a handout for parents (Canter & Carey, 1998) and a handout for teachers (Canter, Carey, & Dawson, 1998) regarding retention and promotion which identifies

**Table 3**

**Research and Related Literature Provides Direction Regarding Empirically Supported Prevention and Intervention Strategies to Facilitate Academic Achievement and Socioemotional Adjustment.**

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Parent Involvement (Fan & Chen, 2000; Harrison, 1999)  
 Early Reading Programs (Talbot, Lloyd, & Tankersley, 1994)  
 Instructional Modifications (Slavin, Karweit, & Madden, 1989)  
 School Based Mental Health Programs (Dwyer & Bernstein, 1998; Tharinger & Stafford, 1995)  
 Direct Instruction Strategies (White, 1988)  
 Behavior Modification Strategies (Skiba & Casey, 1985)  
 Cognitive Behavior Modification Strategies (Robinson, Smith, Miller, & Brownell, 1999)  
 Summer School Programs (Cooper, Charlton, Valentine, & Muhlenbruck, 2000)  
 Extended Day Learning Opportunities (U.S. Department of Education, 1998)  
 Effective Preschool and Kindergarten Programs (Casto & Mastropieri, 1986)  
 Formative Evaluation (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1986)

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*Note.* The citations above are examples of empirically supported alternatives to grade retention and social promotion and related research, additional research is available in each area and a thorough literature search would yield additional alternative strategies.

what parents and teachers may do to help children.

It has been suggested that "...the real need is not so much to find a formula for effective remediation, as it is to find a formula for effective education..." (Alexander, Entwisle, & Kabbani, 1999; p. 15). Given the cumulative nature of development (as characterized by the transactional model described above) and considering the results of research in the fields of education, child development, and psychology, specific academic and socioemotional early education programs warrant further emphasis. Research demonstrates a range of indicators of success for children who attend model early childhood programs (Behrman, 1995).

#### In Sum

In looking backwards at the retention research and previous reviews and meta-analyses, a consistent theme emerges—grade retention is not an empirically supported intervention. As reflected in the results of the three meta-analyses described above, the confluence of results from research during the past century fails to demonstrate achievement, socioemotional, or behavioral advantages of retaining students. Moreover, the research consistently demonstrates that students who are retained are more likely to drop out of high school.

Other educational research presents evidence that alternative strategies, such as parental involvement, modification of instructional strategies, early reading instruction, cognitive-behavioral modification, systematic formative evaluation, and assorted early intervention efforts, provide positive effects on subsequent school achievement and adjustment. The synthesis of research, many citations, and tables presented above provide school psychologists with an overview of seminal research and an update in this area to share with other educational professionals. It is time to move beyond the rhetoric regarding the relative merits and limitations of grade retention and social promotion. Instead, a focus on implementing prevention and intervention strategies with demonstrated effectiveness is recommended.

We are informed by nearly a century of research and we should embrace this knowledge as we educate children in the new millennium. School psychologists are in key positions to disseminate research examining the effects of grade retention and advocate that effective strategies are implemented.

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