



Does 3rd Grade Retention Make Sense for New Mexico?

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One New Mexico

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HB 41 offered by Rep. Monica Youngblood provides, among other strategies to address reading deficiencies in grades K-3, the mandatory retention of a 3rd grade student who is “not proficient in reading after completion of the prescribed intervention and remediation program and shall be retained in the same grade with a reading improvement plan”

This working paper is in opposition to this bill—a bill that is not from New Mexico, a bill that doesn't work, that is both ineffective and expensive, and that ultimately does more harm than good.

We conclude that, based on the evidence and experiences in other states, third grade retention is not good for our students and not good for our state.

Where Did This Idea Come From?

Third grade retention is being pushed by out-of-state interests trying to drive New Mexico's educational agenda toward the privatization of public education: public schools, private gain.

The actual proposal came from the Heritage Foundation, a right-wing “think tank” and was a part of Jeb Bush's “educational reform” package during his 1998 campaign for Governor of Florida. The idea is now contained in model legislation proposed by ALEC, a right wing “bill mill” that writes legislation for states that are pursuing a “privatization” strategy under the guise of education reform.

In fact, many of the people who worked on Bush's plan in Florida have made millions from the test industry the law spawned and from the for-profit charter schools promoted as a panacea for public education. Florida remains one of the most under-performing states in the nation. This is not right for New Mexico.

Who Gets Retained?

A close look at the research related to retention reveals an overwhelmingly disproportionate impact on children from poor families, especially those who are members of racial and/or ethnic minorities.

Third grade retention unfairly targets the most vulnerable students and punishes them for being born into poor families. It does nothing to address the root cause of these students' educational issues.

Rather than seeing these students as requiring a full range of services and strategies to put them on a path toward educational success, this policy takes a “one-size-fits-all” simplistic approach,.

Does It Work?

At best, this policy results in minimal, short-term gains in reading proficiency that fade over a two-year time frame; at worst, it is a policy that undermines the educational future of the most vulnerable students in public schools.

The growing conclusion from research across the country is that retention is, in fact, counter-productive. The children who are held back suffer serious loss of self-esteem. Retention is the single biggest predictor of a child’s leaving school before graduation from high school.

In two separate studies students say that being held back is more stressful than the loss of a parent or losing their sight. The children report feeling singled out, shamed and publically humiliated.

Is It Cost-Effective?

As a policy, third grade retention is very costly and very ineffective.

Estimates from the U.S. Department of Education place the cost of retention at \$10,297 per child. In a school district of 1,000 students, if even 10% of the children were retained (the average rate in states that employ retention), the cost would be \$1.3 million.

This makes a harmful policy also an expensive policy. It exacts a high price—on taxpayers and on the children it purports to help.

New Mexico could spend that money much more wisely if it made an estimate of the number of children in New Mexico who would be retained and then invest that money into early childhood education, smaller class sizes, better teacher training, nutrition and health programs and outreach to struggling households and other wrap-around services. That would be a cost-effective investment.

Are Tests Good Decision-Making Vehicles?

Testing has become a major industry in this country. Millions of dollars that could be spent on more effective and individualized measures of academic success are being spent on tests in the name of “accountability.” But what does a test actually test?

Most experts agree that a test is a measure of a student’s ability to take a test. It is a blunt instrument applied to a very subtle subject—the life of a child.

What happened to evaluating a child based on a body of work: on classroom observation, on conversations between parents and teachers? To retain a child based on a test score is to hold our children’s lives, futures and sense of themselves hostage to a “one-size-fits-all,” blunt instrument.

What Can We Learn From Oklahoma’s case?

Oklahoma enacted a mandatory third grade retention statute in 2011. In 2014 the state legislature, controlled by Republicans, voted to overturn that law.

Lawmakers there were concerned about the mandate. They felt strongly that decisions about

retention should not be based on testing alone but should be informed by parents and teachers. Today in Oklahoma the 8,000 children who would have been retained automatically will instead be able to move on to the next grade if a team of parents, teachers, administrators, and a reading specialist decide it is in the overall best interests of the child to promote her or him.

In other words, the Oklahoma legislature reversed its earlier decision, saw the retention law it had passed as ineffective, expensive and undifferentiated in its treatment of students, and adopted a much more sensible position.

Does New Mexico Need Mandatory Retention?

No. In 2003, the New Mexico legislature enacted HB 212, also known as the New Mexico School Reform Act. The law provides guidance to schools and teachers on when and how to develop an Academic Improvement Plan (AIP) for children who fail to attain proficiency on a specific school district determined assessment.

Under this current law, students may not be retained without parental consent and, whether retained or not, must have an individualized AIP. Mandatory retention is only an option if a child is promoted because of a parent's refusal to retain and, even with an AIP fails to make adequate progress during the next school year. This puts decision making into the hands of local educators and parents where it belongs.

Is There a Better Approach to Improving Educational Performance?

The following list of strategies comes from "It's Being Done: Academic Success in Unexpected Schools," written by Karin Chenoweth.

Her two-year study was funded by a consortium that included The Education Trust, the Business Roundtable, Citizens' Commission on Civil Rights, National Center for Educational Accountability, and National Council of La Raza, to find schools that were working: schools that took students from poor communities, students of color, and provided them a quality educational experience.

Notably absent from the list: third grade retention.

Here's what Chenoweth found that schools with academic success have in common:

1. They teach their students. "Not for the test, but to be productive members of society."
2. They don't teach to the state tests. They teach a rich, coherent curriculum tied to state standards. They don't teach to the test.
3. They have high expectations for their students. They assume that their students are able to meet high standards and they believe their job is to help their students get there.
4. They know what the stakes are. They know that if their students don't get a good education, they face the probability of a lifetime of poverty and dependence.
5. They embrace and use all the data they can get their hands on. They want to know how their students are doing and they know that classroom observation by teachers, though important, is fragmentary and doesn't allow overall patterns to be observed.

6. They use data to focus on individual students, not just groups of students. Each of these schools has found ways to pay attention to every student. Nobody falls through the cracks.
7. They constantly reexamine what they do. Tradition is never invoked as the only reason why something is done, the way it is in crummy schools. This approach causes teachers great discomfort—but the kids have to be the first priority. It's not about the teacher—it's about the learning of the kids.
8. They embrace accountability. They know they have an obligation not only to their students but also to their communities to demonstrate that they are doing the job that has been entrusted to them—to educate future citizens.
9. They make decisions on what is good for kids, not what is good for adults.
10. They use school time wisely. School time is for instruction, and instruction is treated as something almost sacred.
11. They leverage as many resources from the community as possible. They organize outside mentors and volunteers, ask local organizations and companies for specific help, link with outside social service agencies and welcome outside scrutiny as a way of helping them see themselves more clearly.
12. They expand the time students—especially struggling students—have in school. Before- and afterschool classes, summer school, year round calendars, grants and federal funds, foundations or community organizations—or enrichment opportunities.
13. They do not spend a lot of time disciplining students in the sense of punishing them. They do spend time disciplining children in the original sense of the word: leading them (think of the word “disciple”). Their main method of discipline is to aim for high-quality instruction every moment, on the theory that busy and actively engaged students do not have time to misbehave.
14. They establish an atmosphere of respect. Students, teachers and parents are all treated with respect. This starts with the principal and/or the superintendent.
15. They like kids. At too many schools the dominant emotion is contempt for the students. At these schools, teachers tell affectionate stories about their students and boast about their work. Principals know the students by name.
16. They make sure the kids who struggle the most have the best instruction. They don't ignore their advanced students; but they give the student who is struggling the most concentrated teaching expertise.
17. Principals are a constant presence. The principals are in the building, walking the halls, conferring with teachers, interacting with students, parents and teachers. It's the principals' version of doctors' “doing rounds”—gauging the pulse of their building.
18. Although the principals are important leaders, they are not the only leaders. Teachers, other administrators, sometimes parents and community members sit on committees that make important decisions for the school.
19. They pay careful attention to the quality of the teaching staff.
20. They provide teachers with the time to meet to plan and work collaboratively.
21. They provide teachers time to observe each other. Teachers seek out and observe colleagues who have perfected a particular lesson or are trying something new and want feedback.

22. They think seriously about professional development. If students are weak in a particular area, the teachers need to learn more about it.
23. They assume that they will have to train new teachers more or less from scratch and carefully acculturate all newly hired teachers. New teachers often don't know the first thing about classroom management, standards, curriculum, assessment, reading instruction or even how to physically set up a classroom. University education programs don't prepare teachers for teaching.
24. They have high-quality, dedicated, and competent office and building staff who feel themselves part of the educational mission of the school.
25. They are nice places to work. Because their work is organized in a way that allows teachers to be successful and take leadership roles, and because the atmosphere in these schools is one of respect, they are nice places to work. But they're not easy places to work. It's hard work with high and rising expectations. There is the kind of camaraderie that comes from teams of people facing a difficult challenge together.
26. The adults in these schools expect their students to learn, and they work hard to master the skills and knowledge necessary to teach those students.
27. "We know what works in education," says one English teacher. "The research is prolific. Amazingly, then, the question today is not about what works, but about why we do not implement what we know works in all schools for all kids."

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