

Letter to Wrightslaw from Guy McBride,
North Carolina School Psychologist

Embargo Against Social Promotions: Retention Revisited

"About one-third of N.C. students are retained at least once before ninth grade."

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I am a school psychologist with 28 years of experience. I have spent twenty of those years working in a western North Carolina public school system.

As states move to implement a the President's proposed embargo against "social promotion," many are also implementing bars to promotion (retention) if children do not meet grade level standards.

On April 1, 1999, North Carolina became one of those states.

North Carolina needs about 7000 teachers next year. North Carolina will produce about 3500 job applicants. So in the face of the greatest teacher shortage in the past fifty years, what have we done? We've made our kids accountable for their own education. Coincidence, I'm sure, but still troubling.

Based on earlier test norms, children whose test results fall at Level II (below standard and therefore not eligible for promotion under the new policy) may be as high as the 40th percentile (in the average range).

You may wonder why the state wants to retain average kids. Since the state made teacher pay partially dependent on pupil performance, teachers have been learning how to teach (to) the test. For example, in my county the percentage of students who failed to meet the standard in 1998 ranged from 10% (an "exemplary" school) to 50% based on overall scores. While we know that the below average child will always be with us, the state's goal is to make all children above average—at least until the test is renormed.

About One-third of N.C. Children Retained

Phil Kirk, chairman of the state board of education, asked the North Carolina Research Council, located at UNC Chapel Hill, for a briefing paper on the effects of retention. According to this paper, **about a third of N.C. children are retained at least once before ninth grade.** These new standards (based on last year's scores) will almost certainly result in some schools retaining that many or more at a single grade level.

This wouldn't be so alarming if it benefited the children. Unfortunately, the same policy briefing confirmed what we already know.

Retention Is Not the Solution

Even under the best of circumstances, the benefits of retention erode after three years. In many cases, children are hurt. Children retained in kindergarten and first grade are more likely to be hurt. Children who are slow learners or disabled are more likely to be hurt.

Children who are hurt by the schools are more likely to drop out at age 16. This undermines our goal of a better educated population.

Retention is inherently discriminatory. More poor children, black children, and disabled children will be retained.

There are more effective methods to increase performance **without hurting our most fragile and vulnerable children.** Just one example is implementation of summer school, a state program that dramatically reduced retention in the early part of this decade

Despite this report, attempts to intimidate principals into retaining vast numbers of students seem to be escalating.

Originally, DPI seemed to be relying solely on a requirement for principals to report all children who were "socially promoted" as a deterrent. Apparently, this was too subtle for some because the State News Service on April 2 reported, "State School Board Chairman Phil Kirk says the board will target any district that tries to pass students who fail to meet the standards. But Kirk does say that there will be an appeals process for students who don't pass the tests but can earn passing grades."

An appeals committee will be formed under the policy, and the parents of disabled children will be non voting members. (How this differs substantively from regular parents' right to present information showing their child really is at grade level, I cannot say.)

The burden will be on the teachers and parents to show that a child is really at grade level despite low test scores —not on whether the retention is likely to be of benefit to the child or even whether it may be harmful.

Principal Retains Absolute Power to Grade and Place

The non voting parents of a disabled child will share their evidence with people who can only make a recommendation to the principal. **The principal retains his or her absolute power under the law to grade and place.** Absolute, at least, unless he or she is a wee bit fearful of being "targeted" by the state board of education for promoting children who do not meet the requirements.

Parents of disabled children may, under the policy, convene the IEP Team and ask that the promotion standard be waived. However, waiving the standard does not necessarily mean the child will be promoted.

As the policy is written, a principal may still retain a child for some other reason. The state has not clarified the implications of that exemption. The policy mandates that children exempted be provided with a "**functional curriculum.**"

However, to get a diploma, the child must complete the standard course of study. The policy limits educational interventions available to all students who fail the test to those disabled children enrolled in the standard course of study. It remains to be seen whether the federal government will sign off on those consequences. Right now, a decision to exempt still carries with it some potentially heavy penalties.

Retention is not the only part of this policy that threatens children.

State Policy That Pits Educators Against Parents

The threat of retention based on a single test score is aversive.

When a state policy pits educators against parents, the results are never beneficial. The warnings are already visible. Some **children with anxiety disorders are terrified to come to school** because their teachers told them that if they did not improve their scores on a pre-test given last fall, they might be retained.

These children are like bellwethers, signaling a new flock of children with test anxiety and school phobia.

When President Clinton spoke about ending social promotion last January, I do not believe he was suggesting a **"one coffin fits all" educational intervention based on a punitive philosophy**. Yet in the manner our state leaders have implemented this policy, end of grade test scores have become more important than the child.

Dr. Meany, consultant for the Exceptional Children's Division of DPI, said they were fearful if exceptional children were excluded from the retention standard, "no one" would be accountable. In the ABC Plan, the state already made teachers accountable for end of grade scores.

This policy actually marks the second phase, wherein students and their parents will be held answerable for the results of the child's performance on end of year tests.

It is hard to believe that the state would sacrifice our weakest, most fragile, and most vulnerable students so the majority of students will demonstrate higher test performance. Yet, without any evidence that retention helps our slow and disabled children, only one conclusion seems possible: **Our state leaders believe that by punishing slow kids, the other kids will work harder.**

Proposed Changes

First, **students who fail to meet the standard should be offered, and the state should fund, an instructionally sound intervention** as an alternative, not as an add-on, to retention (For a very small percentage of students, retention may be appropriate, e.g., for child who because of temporary health problems missed most of his school year.)

Second, if parents disagree with the option offered, the appeals committee should have the discretion to suggest an instructionally sound alternative, not just offer a "PASS/FAIL" recommendation that is not binding.

Third, the third tier of state testing, administered after a child has been given instructionally sound educational assistance, should be used to determine the child's needs for the coming year—not as a final hurdle for him to overcome.

Fourth, principals should be afforded the opportunity to report another category of child—children not meeting the standard who were placed in an upper grade with appropriate (sound) instructional interventions. Only if there is clear evidence that a child will be helped by an intervention, or if parents decline appropriate alternative instructional interventions (such as summer school), should retention be used.

In the case of a disabled child, I believe the IEP Team, not an Appeals Committee, should be making those decisions.

Because the state Department of Public Instruction has not proposed this kind of approach, one way for us to bring about change (short of going to due process or engaging in litigation) is to write our state legislators.

Check N.C. Policy

I ask North Carolina parents to read the [Policy](#) for themselves—this is too important just to take my word for what the state is proposing.

The state's [FAQ](#) on the policy offers a fascinating insight into the reasoning behind this policy.

Although many of our legislators have e-mail addresses, I recommend writing them via the U.S. mail, calling them, or meeting with them in person. Their names, addresses, and phone numbers are available from the public library or via the Internet.

Go to <http://www.ncga.state.nc.us/>.

Click on "Geography and Representation," when the next page loads, click on "Representation," and then scroll down to the bottom of the "Representation" page. All you need is your zip code plus 4.)

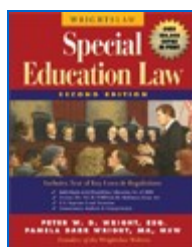
I recommend soliciting support from and offering your support to advocacy organizations like the [Learning Disabilities Association in North Carolina](#) and the [Exceptional Children's Assistance Center](#)

Together, we can make a difference.

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