1-1-1993

Retention Study: Development of a Policy for South Central Community Unit School District #401

Steven W. Laur

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Retention Study: Development of a Policy for South Central Community Unit School District #401

BY

Steven W. Laur

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF Specialist in Educational Administration IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

1993 YEAR

I HEREBY RECOMMEND THIS THESIS BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING THIS PART OF THE GRADUATE DEGREE CITED ABOVE

12/9/93 DATE

12/9/93 DATE
Retention Study: Development of a Policy for South Central Community Unit School District #401

Steven W. Laur

Eastern Illinois University
Retention

Abstract

This field experience investigated the opinions of administrators and current educational practices in regard to student retention in K-8 school buildings located within the Illinois Educational Service Center #17. The investigation was accomplished by conducting a survey of building administrators in the region. The results of the survey indicated that a majority of the administrators responding to the survey do not agree with the practice of retaining students. The results also show that more boys than girls are retained and that only about half of the schools have written policies in regard to retention. Another fact that emerged was that less than half of the schools surveyed conducted any type of follow-up study on the students who were retained. In addition, a review of literature and research associated with student retention was conducted. The majority of research indicated that retention does not achieve that goal of helping a student who did not meet standards for promotion. The results of the study were used to develop a retention policy for the South Central Community Unit School District #401. The policy is included as part of the study.
Acknowledgements

I would like to dedicate this project to my wife, Jeanne, and my children Jill, Derek, and Matthew. They had to endure much while I was completing this field experience.
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Chapter I
Overview, Statement of the Problem, Assumptions, Delimitations, Definitions

Overview

The practice of retaining children who do not achieve at desired academic levels for their grade has been a concern of educators since the inception of the graded system. Teachers, administrators, students, and parents wrestle with the question of how beneficial it would be for a student to repeat the grade just completed (Holmes & Matthews, 1984). A student who repeats a grade faces a social and academic environment that now includes younger children and sometimes lower academic expectations on behalf of the teacher (Carstens, 1985).

In May, 1989, the Illinois school districts of Kinmundy-Alma and Farina-LaGrove consolidated to become a more productive, and hopefully, more financially stable school district. That consolidation effort resulted in the formation of the South Central Community Unit School District #401 (South Central CUSD #401) on July 1, 1989. Although the blending of the two districts has gone smoothly, there are still some areas of policy from the previous districts which need to be consolidated into a cohesive policy for the district. A policy that addresses the issue of retention is one of those areas.
The philosophical views of the districts before consolidation were opposite in the attitude toward student retention. The Farina-LaGrove district had fewer retentions and allowed students to be retained one time during their K-8 years. The Kinmundy-Alma district had a more stringent retention policy, retained more students, and allowed for a student to be retained more than once in the K-8 grades (J. Ross, personal interview, November 20, 1991).

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this study was to investigate the retention policies currently being implemented in schools in the Educational Service Center Region #17 (ESC Region #17). The administrators of the ESC Region #17 schools surveyed for the study were asked for their ideas and perceptions on the practice of student retention. The information collected was used to develop a proposed retention policy that will be presented to the South Central Community Unit District #401 Board of Education for its consideration.

The main goal of this study to develop a workable retention policy that will benefit students and gain the support of the teachers, administrators, and parents. The study also provides useful information upon which decisions about retention can be based.
Assumptions

It was assumed that the responses given in the surveys by administrators were sincere and based upon their true perceptions of the educational practice of retention in their district. It was also assumed that the random sampling of the school administrators was representative of the general population of schools in Illinois with enrollments of less than 2400 students in small towns or rural environments.

Delimitations

This study was designed to focus on the educational practice of retaining students at grade level for another school term.

1. The field experience surveyed only administrators in ESC Region #17 of the southeastern section of central Illinois.

2. The study only requested information from administrators of buildings that included any combination of grades K-8.

Operational Definitions

Educational Service Center #17 (ESC #17). A regional educational service center that provides such services as planning, implementing, and evaluating education for gifted children, computer technology education, mathematics, science, and reading resources for teachers, as well as
training, technical assistance, coordination, and planning in other program areas such as career guidance, alternative education, early childhood education, and alcohol/drug education. ESC #17 is a 12 county region in southeastern Illinois. The center's office is located in Olney, Illinois (Illinois School Code, 1993).

K-8 School (K-8). Any school that included classes in kindergarten through eighth grade in the building.

Low achiever. A student who does not achieve at the level at which standardized testing indicates that the student is capable of achieving.

Retention. The practice of having a student repeat a grade.

Slow learner. A student who does not have the ability to learn at the desired rate of most students in the class.

South Central Community Unit School District #401 (South Central CUSD #401). South Central is a consolidated district that has territory in the three counties of Marion, Fayette, and Clay. The district covers 217.5 square miles and has an enrollment of over 900 students in four attendance centers. The district employs approximately 100 employees including 4 administrators and 65 teachers.
Chapter II
Review of Literature and Research

A look at British schools as far back as the 16th century shows that retention was a widely used and accepted educational practice (Rose, Medway, Cantrell & Marus, 1983). As public schools developed in the United States, they sometimes followed educational practices used in the British schools. Retention was one of those practices that was accepted for use in the United States. In the early 19th century, graded classes became more common in American schools and the practice of having a student repeat a grade became the method used to improve academic deficiencies of students (Sandoval & Fitzgerald, 1985).

A change in the retention practice of schools began to develop during the 1930's as educators were more concerned with possible alternative effects retention could have on a child's social and emotional development. It was during this time that the term and practice of "social promotion" was instituted in many schools. Students who were average or low achievers were promoted to the next grade even if they did not meet academic standards. It was during this period that educators began to examine what was best for the student when considering retention (Sevener, 1990).

Educators began to notice a decline in student achievement on standardized tests in the early 1960's. This
decline prompted some educators to blame relaxed promotion standards and resulted in a call for stricter standards which would hopefully ensure higher academic achievement (Rose et al., 1983). Another push during the early 1960's saw citizen demands for schools to go "back to the basics" and the development of skills assessment programs in many states. These programs tend to discourage schools from socially promoting students who do not meet the standards that have been set for academic success (Carstens, 1983).

During the 1980's school performance again began to decline. The thinking was that the decline was caused by low standards of achievement and lower expectations of students by teachers. As a result, higher standards for students and accountability systems were established to help ensure that the trend did not continue (Schultz, 1989).

Characteristics of Retained Students

There are studies that have attempted to account for the reasons why students were retained. An early study by Smeltz (1945) indicated that students were retained for one or more of the following reasons: (a) absenteeism; (b) poor health; (c) lack of interest in school; (d) bad home conditions; (e) putting forth little effort; and (f) low academic ability.

In addition to Smeltz's list, more recent studies clearly indicate that there are more boys retained than girls and that minority students are more likely to be
retained than students who are not a part of a minority group (Smith & Shepard, 1987). Smith and Shepard (1987) also reported that students who are considered physically small for their class or those from working class families are more likely to be retained than classmates from middle class families even if academic achievement is similar. Aggressive and disruptive behavior on the part of boys has always been a condition of retention. Girls who are aggressive and disruptive also are retained more than their female peers who do not exhibit such behavior traits.

Retention: Research

There have been as many as 50 studies done on the topic of retention since the early 1900's. The research either compares the progress a student makes in the retained class as compared to the previous year or compares retained student progress with academic progress made by students who were not retained (Rose et al., 1983).

Kamii and Weikhart (1963) compared a group of students who had been retained with a randomly selected group of students who had not been retained. Their findings indicate that the retained group's grades were lower, achievement scores were lower, and IQ scores were below the scores of the promoted students. The authors concluded that the extra year spent in elementary school by the retained group had failed to bring the achievement of the retained students up to the level of the promoted students.
A group of 85 sixth graders who had been retained once in first or second grade was compared with a random sample of 43 sixth grade students who had never been retained. The study indicated that the retained group scored lower on achievement tests than the promoted group and that the promoted group scored at or above grade level by the time they were tested in the sixth grade (Abidin, Golladay & Howerton, 1971). Retention had again failed to achieve the results educators thought it would achieve.

Holmes and Matthews (1984) reviewed 50 years of study on the subject of retention. Their findings indicated that students who are retained make less progress than even comparably low achieving students who were promoted. This finding was evident in every variable that was examined. Holmes and Matthews concluded that schools which continue to retain students are doing so despite much evidence that shows that the negative effects of retention far outweigh any positive effects that may develop from the retention.

Shepard and Smith (1990) in their synthesis on grade retention, summarized the following:

1. Grade failures are as high today as they were earlier in the century.

2. Students who have been retained usually perform more poorly when they go on to the next grade than if they had been promoted.
3. Dropouts are more likely to have repeated a grade than are students who graduate from high school.

4. Children rated the possibility of repeating a grade as more stressful than wetting in class or being caught stealing.

5. Students rated going blind or losing a parent as the two events more stressful than being retained.

6. It is estimated that retaining students is costly to school districts.

7. Almost 100 per cent of the students who were retained twice drop out of school.

8. There are alternatives available that are more effective than retention.

Although research indicates that retention is not a sound educational practice, many teachers, administrators, parents, and school board members believe that students should be retained (Natale, 1991). With this in mind, the author completed a survey of administrators in the ESC Region #17 to gather information about the current retention practices of the schools and to gain insight into the beliefs of the school administrators in regard to the educational practice of retaining students at grade level. The aforementioned survey was completed in order to aid in the development of a retention policy for South Central CUSD #401.
Chapter III

Research Questions

The questions addressed were:

1. Do principals believe that the practice of retaining students at grade level to be a sound educational practice?

2. How many students were retained in schools answering the survey and what was the sex and grade level of each student retained?

3. Does the school district have a formal written policy to be followed when a student is retained?

4. When a school district does have a formal retention policy, what trends were evident in the policy?

5. What trends developed in school districts that did not have a written retention policy?

6. Are special services provided to students who have been retained?

7. What special services are available to students who have been retained?

8. Do school districts conduct follow up studies to check on the progress of retained students?

Sample and Population

Educational Service Center #17 (ESC #17) provided a list of all schools located within its 12 counties. The list contained the names and addresses of buildings that contained any combination of grades K-8 and the
administrator of each building. If a principal was responsible for more than one building, one survey was mailed to that administrator. The parochial schools located in the region were excluded from the population surveyed.

A total of 63 surveys were mailed to administrators for completion with 31 surveys completed and returned. This represents a completion rate of 49 per cent.

Instrumentation

The survey instrument (Appendix A) utilized specific questions that were designed to provide information from each surveyed school district pertaining to the educational practice of retaining students. Studies conducted by Abidin, Gollaway, and Howerton (1971), Smith and Shepard (1987), and Doyle (1989) were used as bases for the development of survey questions (Appendix A). The information obtained by the surveys was used in the development of the written policy which will be presented to the South Central Board of Education for adoption. A stamped, self-addressed envelope was included with the survey to assist in the return of completed surveys. It should be noted that the survey questions and the research questions are identical.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics in the form of frequency and percentages were tabulated for each question. Qualitative statements from respondents were also used to collect data.
Chapter IV

Results and Conclusions

Chapter IV analyzes each question asked on the survey. Descriptive statistics are presented and illustrated in the figures used in the chapter. Conclusions are given in response to each question on the survey. The research and survey questions are identical.

Results and Conclusions

Question 1 asked the administrators to give their professional opinions of the educational practice of retaining students at grade level. As illustrated in Figure 1, 64% of the principals who responded stated that they did not believe retention was effective. Two of the respondents stated that in a few situations, retention may be beneficial. As shown in Figure 1, 36% of the administrators did agree with the practice of retaining students at grade level. The conclusion drawn by examining the response is that a majority of the principals surveyed do agree with the majority of the research that has been conducted on the subject of retention.

Question 2 asked for information about number, grade level, and sex of students retained during the past school year. The administrators were instructed to list the necessary information of any student retained in their school. Figure 2 illustrates that information.
Figure 1
Principal's Opinion on Retention

![Pie chart showing percentage of school officials who support retention and those who do not support it.]

Figure 2
Students Retained

![Bar chart showing the number of boys and girls retained in each grade level.]
Figure 2 indicates that more boys than girls were retained at every grade level except eighth grade. The conclusion that more boys than girls are retained parallels the research on retention. The graph also indicated that more students are retained in grades K-1 than in grades 2-5.

Question 3 asked principals if their school districts had a formal written policy for retention. The information in Figure 3 illustrates that 46% of the principals indicated that their district had a formal written retention policy.

A total of ten administrators included a copy of their retention policy when they returned their completed survey. When the policies were examined, it was found that the schools had several similar procedures for retention. The schools considered the following items when retention was a
possibility: student grades, achievement test scores, absenteeism, age, previous retentions, and the maturity level of the student in question. All of the school districts required that several meetings take place before a retention became final. The meetings usually involved parents, teachers, administrators, and counselors. It was evident that retention was not taken lightly in the schools that had a formal written policy on retention. It appeared that each retention was analyzed thoroughly before a student was retained.

The conclusion that can be drawn from the information indicates that in schools with written policies, a student is not retained without much forethought and discussion and that each retention case is thoroughly reviewed before the retention becomes final.

Question 5 analyzed the data presented by school districts that did not have a written policy about retention. As illustrated in Figure 3, 54% of the school districts surveyed did not have a written policy when considering retention. Eleven of the school districts without formal policies listed the methods they normally followed when considering a retention. The districts without a written retention policy followed many of the same procedures as schools that had written retention policies. The re-occurring event, in almost every school, was the meetings that took place before the retention became final.
First, the teacher and administrator would meet and analyze the available data. The teacher would then meet with the parents and discuss the possibility of retention. The school districts that did not have a formal policy also analyzed much of the same data as districts with policies. It was evident that the classroom teacher played a larger role in the retention case in the schools without written policies.

The conclusion drawn from the issue of a formal written policy versus no formal written policy is that most school districts today analyze every retention case thoroughly before proceeding with the retention. A written policy does ensure that specific steps are followed before a student is retained and that all retention cases are handled in the same manner.

Question 6 asked the respondents to indicate if their district offered special services to students who have been retained. As shown in Figure 4, 51% of the respondents indicated that they offered special services to students who had been retained.
Question 7 asked the districts that offered special services to indicate what special services were available to retained students. The schools that indicated they offered special services listed the following services to be available: (a) Chapter 1 classes; (b) all day, every day kindergarten; (c) referral to special education classes; and (c) different forms of tutoring services.

The conclusions drawn from Questions 6 and 7 are that about half of the principals responded that their schools were not offering beneficial special services for students who had been retained. A retained student was facing another year in the same program that had failed to help him/her. The list of available programs indicated only
programs that should have been instituted earlier in the school year to help prevent a retention.

Question 8 asked the respondents to indicate if their schools conducted any follow-up studies on retained students. As illustrated in Figure 5, 38% of the schools responding to the survey check on the progress of retained students. The most common method used to check on the retained students was to compare the current grades with the grades the student received the previous year. Eight respondents indicated that they did compare achievement test scores to see if the student had made any academic gains.

Figure 5
Follow-Up Studies

The conclusion reached from this question is that a majority of the schools surveyed are doing very little to
check on the progress of a student faced with repeating a grade for the second time.
Chapter V
Summary, Findings and Recommendations

Summary
The emphasis of this field experience was the educational practice of retaining students. The main goal of the study was the development of a retention policy for the South Central schools that would be accepted by administrators, teachers, parents and the district's board of education. The policy was developed after conducting a survey of K-8 schools located within ESC #17. The survey questions were developed to solicit input from school administrators on the subject of retention. The survey asked for the opinion of administrators on the matter of retention as well as the retention policies currently being used in their respective schools. A policy was then developed suitable for application in schools that are concerned with the issue of retention.

Findings
In reviewing the results of the retention survey, several facts emerged.

1. The majority of building administrators surveyed do not believe retention to be a beneficial educational practice.

2. The reported numbers of students who were retained parallel research on retention.
3. Less than half of the schools surveyed have a written retention policy for use by building administrators.

4. There are several common procedures that are followed in both schools with and without a written retention policy.

5. Less than half of the schools answering the survey conduct follow-up studies designed to check the progress of students who have been retained.

In addition to determining the current retention practices, a review of the literature and research associated with student retention was conducted. A majority of the research condemned the practice of retaining a student and indicated that students who have been retained seldom make the academic gains expected from the retention. Another important act to be considered is that students who have been retained have a higher chance of dropping out of school than students who have not been retained.

In reviewing the findings of this study, a determination was made that, although retaining students for another school year is not a productive educational practice, many school districts continue to retain students for a variety of reasons. As a result, this study provides a retention policy for the South Central schools which could be considered by other school districts concerned about retention.
Recommendations

Since it is unlikely that schools will stop retaining students, all school districts should develop retention policies to help ensure that all retention cases are handled in the same manner. The policy should include the step-by-step procedure to be followed by the school staff when considering retention. This policy should also provide for preventative and assistance programs that will be implemented before the retention is final. The attempts to help the struggling student should begin as early in the school term as possible. Retention should be implemented only when all other efforts have not achieved the desired results.

Proposed Retention Policy

The following proposal will be presented to the South Central Board of Education at its December, 1993, meeting for its consideration as a retention policy for implementation in the district:

The South Central Board of Education believes that the administration, faculty, support staff, and parent should all be involved in carefully reviewing a decision to promote or retain a student. The welfare of the student should be the primary concern in making the decision. The following statements reflect the position of the Board regarding retention of students:
1. Students in grades K-8 will be retained only after careful evaluation of the student's age, academic record, absenteeism, results of standardized tests, social and emotional maturity, the possible effects of the retention, and the effort of the student.

2. The process of retention shall start as early in the school year as possible. If necessary, the process will begin when the mid-term reports are completed during the first grading period. The homeroom teachers in grades K-6 will make the building principal aware of any student who may be a possible retention case. The teacher will make a written request of the parents asking them to come to the school for a conference. During the conference, the teacher will discuss with the parent his/her concerns about the student and present any possible programs that may help the students. The teacher will also begin a Student Retention Worksheet (Appendix B) that will be kept in the student's temporary file for future reference. In grades 7 and 8, the building principal will initiate the proceedings in conjunction with the student's teachers.

3. Once a student has been identified as a possible retention candidate, the teacher will initiate various programs aimed at assisting the students. The assistance may come in the form of available tutoring including peer tutoring, Chapter 1 classes, special education referral, counseling, or other programs the teacher may develop. A
record of assistance given the student will be noted on the Student Retention Worksheet.

4. The parents will be kept updated on the progress of the student during the school year. This will take the form of the mid-term reports, report cards, and scheduled parent-teacher conferences.

5. The teacher, principal, parents, and any other staff members who have been involved with the student will meet during the first week of May to make the final decision in regard to whether the student will be retained or promoted. Parents will not hold veto power in regard to the final decision.

6. Pupils should seldom be retained more than once in grades K-8. Repeated retention of pupils of low intelligence will not be tolerated.

Student retention is a very difficult decision for any teacher or parent and requiring a student to complete another year in the same grade should only be implemented when it is believed that the student will benefit from the decision.
References


Appendix A
Retention Survey

Attendance Center __________________________________________
Grades _____________________________________________________
School Enrollment ___________________________________________

1. Do you personally believe that retention is a beneficial educational practice?
   ____ Yes  ____ No

2. Please list the number of students by grade and sex who were retained in your school during the 1990-1991 school year.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Boys</th>
<th>Girls</th>
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</table>

3. Do you have a formal written policy or procedure that you follow when a student is retained?
   ____ Yes  ____ No
4. If yes, briefly outline the procedure or enclose a copy of your written policy when returning the survey.

5. If no, please explain how the decision to retain a student is reached when retention becomes a possibility for a student.

6. Does your school offer any special services for students who have been retained in their previous grade?

   ____ Yes    ____ No

   If yes, please explain those services.
7. Does your school conduct a follow-up study to check the academic progress of retained students?
   ____ Yes   ____ No

8. If you would like a copy of the completed retention policy, please check here: ____

9. Additional comments about retention:
Appendix B

Student Retention Worksheet

Student's Name: ____________________________ Grade: ____

Date: _______

Student's Age: ____ Birthdate: _____________ Sex: ____

Parent's Name:

________________________________________

Vision Problem: ____ Yes ____ No

Hearing Problem: ____ Yes ____ No

Speech/Language Problem: ____ Yes ____ No

Iowa Achievement Test Scores (List or attach copy of profile)

________________________________________

________________________________________

________________________________________

Date of Parent Notification: ________________

Date of Parent/Teacher Conference: __________

List of Programs Implemented to Help Student:

________________________________________

________________________________________

________________________________________
Diagnosed Learning Disability: ___ Yes  ___ No
Previous Retention:  ___ Yes  ___ No  ___ Grade
Teacher Recommendations:

__________________________________________

__________________________________________

__________________________________________
Dear Principal,

The purpose of this letter and survey is to gain your assistance in the completion of my education specialist degree at Eastern Illinois University. This project will complete my work on that degree.

I am surveying the K-8 public schools in Education Service Center #17 to determine the methods used in retaining students in schools of that region. The goal of my project is to develop a policy for retention that will be fair as well as beneficial to the students who must face being retained in the South Central district as well as other districts who may want to use this policy.

I know your time is limited and valuable and I fully appreciate the effort that you are putting forth in helping me with my project. I ask that you complete the survey and return it to me in the enclosed envelope.

I thank you very much for your help in helping me to reach my goal.

Yours in education,

Steven W. Laur