Social Promotion

Prevalence of Social Promotion

Social promotion is the practice of promoting students to the next grade even though they have not acquired minimum competencies expected of that grade. The number of students socially promoted each year is unknown because few school districts report these data and other districts have only limited data (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). This practice appears to be fairly widespread, however, according to a 1997 survey conducted by the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). Results from the AFT (1997) survey showed that 85 large urban school districts do not have a policy endorsing social promotion. Even though social promotion is not officially endorsed in these districts, more than half the teachers surveyed indicated that they had promoted unprepared students the previous year. Reasons given for these social promotions were fear that high failure rates would reflect poorly on the school and school personnel, pressure exerted by principals and parents to promote unready students, knowledge that retention is ineffective, and the absence or insufficiency of effective educational alternatives to social promotion.

Negative Effects of Social Promotion

Educational leaders, governmental officials, and policymakers are clearly concerned about the prevalence of social promotion. In February 1998, President Clinton recommended that the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE) (1999) put an end to social promotion. In the past 15 years, 15 states have established specific standards for grade promotion, and others are planning such policies (Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory [NWREL], 1999).

Social promotion is problematic for students, teachers, and parents. Social promotion gives some students the false sense that they have mastered skills necessary for later success. It sends a message to other students that their effort and achievement do not count. Having socially promoted students in the classroom is challenging, because teachers must plan for and teach to a group of children with widely divergent skills and knowledge. Furthermore, it creates frustration among teachers who feel powerless to expect hard work from all students. Social promotion sends parents the false message that their children are adequately prepared to be successful in school and in the labor force (AFT, 1997; National Association of State Boards of Education [NASBE], 1999).

Colleges, universities, and businesses also encounter negative side effects from the practice of social promotion. Data from the NCES showed in 1995 that about one in three freshmen had to take a remedial class in math, science, or writing (NCES, 1996). In addition, college professors are finding that they must lower their standards to assist students who are not prepared for college work. The business community is now investing substantial funds to reeducate students who lack skills needed to be successful in the labor force (AFT, 1997; NASBE, 1999; Thompson, 1999).

Implications and Findings from Local Social Promotion Policies

An increasing number of state and local school districts have created promotion policies that guide decisions regarding students' advancement to the next grade level. The long-term results of these promotion policies are unknown. Recent events with the Los Angeles Unified School District provide an interesting case study of the possible fallout from implementing such standards.

The Los Angeles Unified School District reported on January 31, 2000, that if they retained all the students who had not met grade-level standards, two-thirds of all eighth graders and 40 to 60 percent of second through eighth graders would flunk. Therefore, the district redefined or loosened their standards and it now appears that 6,000 second graders and 4,000 eighth graders will not be promoted. Even though the number is substantially reduced, Los Angeles still faces several significant problems. School officials plan to tailor a curriculum for these students rather than have them repeat the same material. However, they have no place to house the retainees, so they are investigating leasing space from hospitals and setting up bungalows in school parking lots. In addition, they have not identified teachers to work with these students nor have they provided training to give them the
skills they need to be successful. Teachers, administrators, and parents are all questioning why the district did not adequately prepare for the possible consequences of the tougher promotion standards (Sahagun & Sauerwein, 2000).

A research study examining Chicago's promotion standards also provides information on the effect of promotion standards on student academic achievement. In 1997, Chicago established promotion standards for grades 3, 6, and 8. Students who do not meet the standards are required to attend a summer program and retake the promotion test. Those who fail in the summer are retained, promoted, or sent to an alternative school. The Consortium on Chicago Research completed a study examining the efficacy of the 1997 to 1998 promotion standards on student achievement (Roderick, Byrk, Jacob, Easton, & Allensworth, 1999). Results from this study showed that the summer program was successful in raising students' performance, but these students remained at risk because the gains were not sustained the following academic year. The students who were retained fared poorly. Only about one in three retained students were able to meet the test cutoff score after two years in the same grade. Furthermore, the retained students did no better than comparable children who had been socially promoted.

Conclusions about Social Promotion

Social promotion is a widespread practice that is being questioned by school personnel and the community at large. Districts are implementing policies to eliminate or severely curtail the practice because of the negative short- and long-term effects. Even though this practice is not in the best interest of students, schools, businesses, colleges, or the community, school officials are struggling with how best to eliminate social promotion and at the same time provide manageable, cost-effective programs that promote positive student achievement.


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