



# SO IF RETENTION IS SO HARMFUL, WHAT SHOULD WE DO? TEACH!

*Heading Toward a Long-term, Systemic Solution*

**By Alice Thomas, M.Ed.**

For over 40 years, study after study on grade retention has reached the same conclusion: Failing a student, particularly in the critical ninth grade year, is the single largest predictor of whether he or she drops out (Edley, 2002). Widespread retention further exacerbates the achievement gap. In Massachusetts, for example, across all grades, African-American and Hispanics are retained at over three times the rate of whites (Edley, 2002).

According to research (Anderson, Jimerson and Whipple, 2002; NASP, 2003; Jimerson, Anderson and Whipple, 2002; Setencich, 1994), some of the devastating effects of retention are:

- Most children do not "catch up" when held back.
- Although some retained students do better at first, these children often fall behind again in later grades.
- Retention is one of the most powerful predictors of high school dropout; holding a child back twice makes dropping out of school 90% certain.
- In 2001, 6th grade students ranked grade retention as the most stressful life event, followed by losing a parent and going blind.
- Students who are held back tend to get into trouble, dislike school, and feel badly about themselves more often than children who go on to the next grade.
- The weakened self-esteem that usually accompanies retention plays a role in how well the child may cope in the future.

Far too many students simply give up on school, largely because they feel like their school has already given up on them. Even our special education services are failure-based. "The current system uses an antiquated model that waits for a child to fail, instead of a model based on prevention and intervention. Too little emphasis is put on prevention, early and accurate identification of learning and behavior problems and aggressive intervention using research-based approaches" (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, 2002).

**IT DOESN'T HAVE TO BE THIS WAY.**

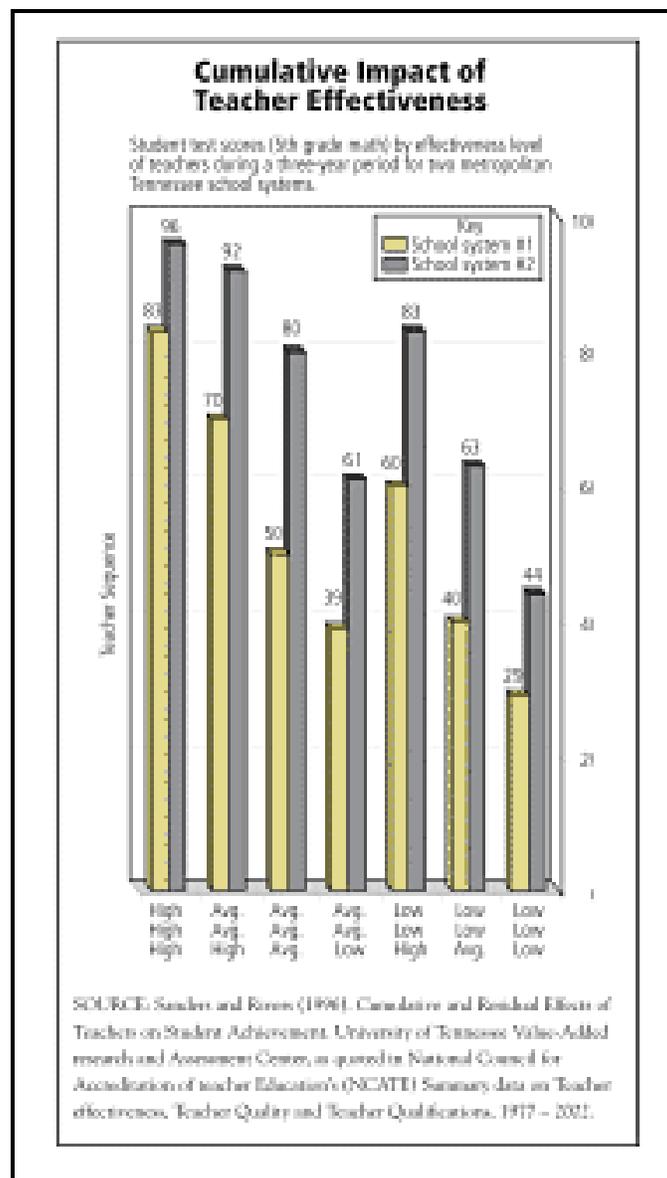
## **So What Can We Do?**

Many advocate for early identification of student needs in order to apply appropriate instructional strategies (Anderson, Whipple and Jimerson, 2002; U. S. Department of Education, 2002; Lyon and Fletcher, 2001; Lyon, 2002). That is clearly a step in the right direction.

But not all teachers are effective at identifying student needs and applying instructional strategies that are the most appropriate for student needs. A study conducted by Sanders and Rivers (1996) examined the

cumulative and residual effects of teachers on student achievement and found a wide chasm between the impact on student achievement by effective teachers and ineffective teachers. Equally performing second graders were separated by as many as 50 percentile points on standardized tests by the time they reached fifth grade solely as a result of being taught by teachers whose effectiveness varied greatly.

This study was based on Tennessee's "value-added" testing system that maintained year-to-year test records on every student in the public school system and matched students to their teachers. Teachers were divided into three groups – low, average, and high – based on their students' performance. The results showed the dramatic effect of good teaching on student achievement in two urban districts. There was a sharp difference in performance between students who had three teachers rated "low" and three teachers who were rated "high" during a three-year period. Although students in one of the urban systems performed at a higher level than the other, the pattern of "teacher-added value" was evident in both systems. The study also found that African American students were about twice as likely to be assigned ineffective teachers.



## **What We Now Know**

The Sanders and Rivers study leads one to formulate a question: What action can we take to ensure that **all** teachers are functioning at a level that optimizes the highest levels of student learning?

What is decidedly different in this age of information is new knowledge founded on solid, evidence-based research. Scientific research from multiple fields is allowing us to understand how learning takes place, what it looks like when it isn't, and which interventions or instructional strategies will result in the greatest impact on student learning. Scientific, evidence-based research, for example, has found new ways to help young children become proficient readers. Over the last ten years, National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) has conducted extensive scientific reading research studies. To date, 42,062 children have been included in these studies at 44 sites across the United States. The reading research sites are classrooms in public schools, including inner city, high poverty, high-risk schools. In even the most difficult inner city, high-risk schools in cities such as Washington D.C., Houston, Los Angeles and Seattle, at the end of five years of intensive teacher training on how to deliver scientific evidence-based reading instruction, *94 to 96% of all third graders were reading on grade level*. Prior to this intervention, approximately 70% of the third graders the Washington D.C. schools were reading *below* grade level. The research studies include a strong emphasis on teacher coursework, observation, consultation, and collaboration (Thomas, 2002).

This new knowledge is not being utilized by every district, every school, and every teacher in every classroom. Thus, it is critical to promote these new methods throughout the education system.

Transferring and translating the knowledge gained in studies into scientifically based classroom practices is a complex undertaking. Effective teaching that leaves no child behind requires teachers to have a skill set that is tremendously intricate, sophisticated and based upon converging scientific evidence. Highly effective teachers continually monitor pupil progress and then design (and re-design) lessons that meet the specific, individualized needs of each student (Lyon and Thomas, 2003; Bennett and Rolheiser, 2001). Teachers, therefore, must be provided with state-of-the-art ongoing, continuous professional development delivered by experts. That is, teacher learning at the school level must be carefully supported by a consistent and systematic flow of correct information and instruction from experts, especially in low performing schools, in order to prevent the dissemination of misinformation in these groups.

If we know that teacher quality makes a decided difference in the quality of student learning, it seems both logical and ethical to place emphasis and investment on improving teacher quality across the board. Statewide, district-wide and school-wide intense professional development for the vast numbers of current teachers and ongoing comprehensive redesign of our university teacher preparation in reading instruction for aspiring teachers should become our strategic priorities. It is critical, however, that our enthusiasm be bridled with knowledge of best practices.

The National Staff Development Council (NSDC) has developed and revised a set of standards for staff development that is directly linked to increased student achievement (NSDC, 2001). The standards provide a framework for ensuring that staff development is responsive to the needs of educators and their students. NSDC groups the standards around context, process and content as follows:

### **Context Standards**

Staff development that improves the learning of all students:

- Organizes adults into learning communities whose goals are aligned with those of the school and district. (*Learning Communities*)
- Requires skillful school and district leaders who guide continuous instructional improvement. (*Leadership*)
- Requires resources to support adult learning and collaboration. (*Resources*)

## Process Standards

Staff development that improves the learning of all students:

- Uses disaggregated student data to determine adult learning priorities, monitor progress, and help sustain continuous improvement. (*Data-Driven*)
- Uses multiple sources of information to guide improvement and demonstrate its impact. (*Evaluation*)
- Prepares educators to apply research to decision making. (*Research-Based*)
- Uses learning strategies appropriate to the intended goal. (*Design*)
- Applies knowledge about human learning and change. (*Learning*)
- Provides educators with the knowledge and skills to collaborate. (*Collaboration*)

## Content Standards

Staff development that improves the learning of all students:

- Prepares educators to understand and appreciate all students, create safe, orderly and supportive learning environments, and hold high expectations for their academic achievement. (*Equity*)
- Deepens educators' content knowledge, provides them with research-based instructional strategies to assist students in meeting rigorous academic standards, and prepares them to use various types of classroom assessments appropriately. (*Quality Teaching*)
- Provides educators with knowledge and skills to involve families and other stakeholders appropriately. (*Family Involvement*)

(National Staff Development Council, 2001).

The NSDC standards move away from workshop "sit and get" staff development models and into serious learning. The reason is straightforward: workshops by themselves do not get the results we desire (Joyce and Showers, 2002). To reach maximum effectiveness, a staff development model must include both presentation and follow-up support in order to ensure improvement. Follow-up must be planned and adequately funded. According to NSDC, some experts believe that 50% of the resources set aside for staff development initiatives should be directed to follow-up.

Options for follow-up support include coaching, modeling and demonstration lessons, peer visits, collegial support groups, mentoring study groups, and audio taping or video taping learners. Follow up strategies enable teachers to focus on the new skills and their impact on students, and move from skill attainment on an imitative or re-synthesizing level to extendible, manipulable, and innovative levels that allow them to problem-solve real time, real world, unpredictable problems that occur in classrooms filled with diverse learners (Joyce and Showers, 2002).

The differences in the three levels of impact in the chart below, as they apply to a training model, are thus: Level I - Understanding Concepts; Level II - Skill Attainment (can follow a recipe); and Level III –

Application of Innovative Problem Solving (able to change the recipe like a master chef to fit the needs of diverse students).

Relationship Between Levels of Impact and Components of the Staff Development Training Model			
Components of Training	Levels of Impact		
	Concept Understanding	Skill Attainment	Application of Innovative Problem Solving
Presentation of Theory & Practice	85%	15%	5-10%
Modeling	85%	18%	5-10%
Practice and Low-Risk Feedback	85%	80%	10-15%
Coaching Study Teams Peer Visits	90%	90%	80-90%

Source: NSDC, Adapted from the research of Bruce Joyce.

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Paul Pastorek, Louisiana's Superintendent of Education and former president of the Louisiana Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, sums it up: "Research says the most important link to student success is having highly knowledgeable and skilled teachers in the classroom. We have not provided our teachers with enough information on how children learn and what it takes to learn to read. Equipping teachers with that new knowledge will allow them to reap the rewards they want for the children they teach." (Thomas, 2002).

Dennis Sparks, NSDC's executive director emeritus, issued a challenge in 2002: Within five years, all teachers will have access to high quality professional development. If it is to be met, the challenge will require active commitment and support from educators, policy makers, parents, and community members alike.

But we cannot stop there. In order to be successful, and in order to sustain and institutionalize our efforts, leadership that understands and provides the context and infrastructure necessary for teacher and student success must be developed at the university, district, school and classroom levels. If leaders are to cultivate a deep understanding of the complex conditions that must be in place to develop such a model, they must also be involved in learning the complexities of what teachers must master.

Michael Fullan argues that this will require that school principals reach beyond instructional leadership. "Some school districts have embraced the development and support of the school principal as instructional leader (Fink & Resnick, 2001), but despite these good beginnings, the principal as instructional leader is too narrow a concept to carry the weight of the reforms that we need for the future. We need, instead, leaders who can create a fundamental transformation in the learning cultures of schools and the teaching profession itself" (Fullan, 2002a).

Fullan (2002b) also cautions that school leadership must become change leaders, and clarifies that being a change leader is very different from being a content expert: "There is a difference between being an expert in the content of an innovation vs. being an expert in the change process. In other words, it is possible to be a leading expert in literacy for example, while being a disaster as a change agent in getting it implemented. In our training we teach people about the process of change – how to understand and work with 'the implementation dip', the importance of developing relationships with others not so committed to the idea, how not to get frustrated by overload and the pace of change, etc. Understanding the vicissitudes of the change process is a key to working on large scale change."

It seems, then, that in order to dramatically reduce grade retention, remedial services, referrals to special education and school dropout rates, we must build the both the teacher and leadership capacity that is necessary for widespread implementation of scientific, research-based instruction that we know works in the classroom. Thus, the objectives:

- Identify and put into place all critical contextual conditions necessary to implement research-based instruction that we know works in the classroom.
- Develop, implement, test and refine models that will guide both preservice education and training for teachers as well as continuing education for teachers currently serving students in the classroom.
- Develop, implement, test and refine models for building educational leaders at the university/college level, the district level, the school level and the classroom level.

Time is ticking. With children's lives at stake, and especially our most vulnerable children, we cannot afford to keep doing business as usual. We know too much to leave even one child behind.

Teachers and school leaders need, want and deserve to have the support and tools they need to produce optimum success in their classrooms. With serious focus and resolve, we must pick up the gauntlet and accept Dennis Sparks' challenge to ensure that all educators in all schools will experience high quality professional development by 2007. Highly effective, highly equipped teachers in every classroom can fundamentally wipe away the need for even a discussion on grade retention and special education services based on failure.

**NO CHILD SHOULD EVER BE LEFT BEHIND AGAIN.**

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*Alice Thomas is president and CEO of the Center for Development and Learning.*