Notes for
Proposal for a Year-Long Student-Centered Elementary Promotion Policy for CPS
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1. We propose replacing wholesale student flunking with Personal Learning Plans.

A Personal Learning Plan (PLP) is a plan created for an individual student when the school determines he/she needs extra help in one or more academic areas. The PLP is written by the teacher with input from other school professionals and paraprofessionals and the students' parents. The PLP provides evidence of the student's particular academic weakness or weaknesses. This evidence must come from a variety of sources besides standardized test scores. The PLP specifies what strategies will be used to help the student improve. The PLP is not an Individual Education Plan, which is required for students with disabilities, but an IEP may be used as a PLP.

CPS's role in the PLP: Instead of its current top-down elementary promotion policy, which wastes money, sets up multiple barriers rather than multiple measures of student progress, and has been proven not to work, CPS's role should be to make sure that schools have adequate resources to implement each PLP, that PLPs are being implemented, and that they are effective. CPS should monitor the progress of these students and annually report on overall progress with PLP implementation.

2. We propose ending the misuse of standardized test scores to flunk students.

Over the years, CPS has used arbitrary, self-determined cut-off points on Iowa Test of Basic Skills reading and math scores, Illinois state reading and math scores, and, most recently, reading and math scores on nationally-normed tests embedded in the annual state test, to determine whether or not a 3rd, 6th or 8th grade student will be promoted.

Using a test for a purpose for which it was not designed is considered an improper use by test makers, the nationally-accepted standards for the testing profession, the state of Illinois, and the U. S, Department of Education.

Harcourt Assessment, which makes the SAT-10, states in their Guide for Organizational Planning,

Another misuse of standardized achievement test scores is making promotion and retention decisions for individual students solely on the basis of these scores. This is an undesirable practice for a number of reasons. Perhaps the most important reason is that national standardized achievement tests are not built to serve this purpose...they cannot provide complete coverage of any local curriculum....Achievement test scores may certainly enter into a promotion or retention decision. However, they should be just one of the many factors considered and probably should receive less weight than factors such as teacher observation, day-to-day classroom performance, maturity level, and attitude. (Stanford Achievement Test Series, Ninth Edition:Guide for Organizational Planning Harcourt Brace Educational Measurement. 1997. Pp. 43-44.)

In a letter written to PURE on May 11, 2009, Marcilene Dutton, Deputy General Counsel, Illinois State Board of Education, stated:

Using ISAT scores as the basis for student promotion and retention is not an ISBE policy or practice.

A January 27, 2009 e-mail from Judith Steinhauser, representing ISBE, to a CPS parent, stated:

the purpose of ISAT, its reliability and validity authenticated by a staff of psychometricians, is to calculate school accountability which is reported to the federal government as Adequate Yearly Progress. It is not the intention of the state to use the test for anything else.
The ISAT “professional practices” manual lists under “Prohibitions: Actions that must be avoided when reporting test results”:

- No person or organization shall make a decision about a student or educator on the basis of a single test.


When a statewide or districtwide test is being used to determine student promotion, the state or district must be able to provide professionally acceptable evidence that the test is valid and reliable for the purpose for which it is being used. If a state or district chooses to use a test as a principal criterion for decisions about student promotion, the test must be designed for this use and there must be evidence that it is appropriate to use the test as a sole or principal criterion.

The National Research Council, in their major study on student assessment, states this principle clearly:

(A)n educational decision that will have a major impact on a test taker should not be made solely or automatically on the basis of a single test score. Other relevant information about the student’s knowledge and skills should also be taken into account. (National Research Council, High Stakes: Testing for Tracking, Promotion, and Graduation, 1999. Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press. p. 3.)

Standard 13.7 of the Standards for Psychological and Educational Testing reads as follows:

In educational settings, a decision or characterization that will have a major impact on a student should not be made on the basis of a single test score. (Standards for Psychological and Educational Testing. 1999. American Psychological Association, Association for Educational Research and Assessment, National Council on Measurement in Education)

The Code of Fair Testing Practices in Education prepared by the Joint Committee on Testing Practices calls on test users to:

Avoid using a single test score as the sole determinant of decisions about test takers. Interpret test scores in conjunction with other information about individuals. (Code of Fair Testing Practices in Education. (2004). Washington, DC: Joint Committee on Testing Practices. (Mailing Address: Joint Committee on Testing Practices, Science Directorate, American Psychological Association, 750 First Street, NE, Washington, DC 20002-4242; p.9.

CPS claims that they use multiple measures, but this is false. In fact, CPS has established multiple barriers to promotion, while falsely contending that they are multiple measures. After PURE filed a discrimination complaint against the policy in 1999, CPS began to include classroom grades and attendance in the promotion decision. But instead of using these other criteria as true multiple measures, which testing experts recommend, the policy uses them as multiple barriers.

It is critical to understand the difference between multiple barriers and multiple measures. Under multiple barriers, the student must meet all of several listed criteria. Under multiple measures, also called multiples sources of evidence, the various measures are combined, not used separately. True multiple measures may, for example, use a weighting system to reflect the proportionate usefulness of different assessments. Alternatively, results may be added together using a point system to come up with a total number, or one or more positive results may compensate for, or “outweigh,” a less positive outcome.

As noted above, the test makers themselves say that the test:
should be just one of the many factors considered and probably should receive less weight than factors such as teacher observation, day-to-day classroom performance, maturity level, and attitude (emphasis added).

In fact, in the current Policy, each measure acts as a single deciding factor, each of which on its own can be used to retain the student. In other words, CPS students must meet district-wide assessment (DWA) cut scores and grade standards and attendance standards in order to be promoted without attending summer school.

Test scores alone are explicitly used in several of the Policy's high-stakes decisions. For example, eighth grade students are banned from graduation with their classmates if they do not meet all of these measures. Students whose DWA scores were below the cut off point must pass one end-of-summer-school test in order to be promoted to the next grade.

Other useful information as student attendance, academic performance throughout the school year, and faculty recommendations are readily available. These factors are indeed considered when a student successfully exceeds the cut-off score, but then only in a negative sense; low attendance or a failing grade will also bar that student from graduation or send him or her to summer school.

Stated simply, students can be hurt by their attendance and academic performance, but these measures cannot help them. They are multiple barriers, not multiple measures, which means that each one of the measures is a single high-stakes measure.

3. We propose going back to the common-sense idea of using report card grades as the best indicator of student progress.

PURE’s proposal for a Year-long Student-centered Elementary Promotion Policy for CPS may sound familiar. In fact, it's a lot like the way CPS and most other schools worked before high-stakes testing took over, and like the practice of the schools attended by the children of President Obama, Mayor Rahm Emanuel, and other people who make education policy for CPS students.

It's true that in “the good old days” in Chicago, many children were given passing grades whether they had learned the material or not. This so-called “social promotion” became a political term designed to blame teachers and students rather than address the lack of resources and support behind many students' failure to progress. The non-educators who took over CPS under mayoral control decided that using test scores would be a more reliable guide for promotion decisions than teacher grades. But, as we've seen above, they were very wrong.

In fact, according to FairTest, despite all the differences between courses and grading standards, high school grade point average (GPA) is still the best predictor of first year college grades – a better predictor that the national, standardized SAT. As a student moves through college, SAT scores become even less accurate predictors, with high school GPA and rigor of courses trumping the SAT in forecasting bachelor's degree attainment. ([http://www.fairtest.org/10-myths-about-sat](http://www.fairtest.org/10-myths-about-sat))

In fact, report card grades are the only evaluation tools that take into consideration the students' work over time and across all key areas of learning. They are the only evaluations done by experienced, qualified adults who personally observe and assess each student's progress.

Of course, students’ grades should be reviewed by the school principal, by peers, by parents, and occasionally by state evaluators. They may be compared with standardized test scores, with previous years' grades and other
information, with the students' grades in other classes, etc. It is the responsibility of school officials to address any problems with a teacher's report card grading history. But report card grades should never have been replaced by unreliable, one-shot standardized test scores.

4. We propose an end to CPS's failed policy of flunking students.

More than 40 years of educational research has found that flunking students is risky, can have harmful effects, and leads to higher dropout rates.

(Do)cumenting the real effects on children of retaining them a grade or more has been among the most heavily researched topics in education over the past thirty years. The collective verdict from hundreds of studies 'firmly indicates that retaining students...has negative effects on students' achievement in later grades, has negative effects on student' attitudes toward school, their self-esteem and their social adjustment; dramatically increases the likelihood that students will drop out of school; is disproportionately applied to racial and ethnic minority students; and is strongly associated with criminality and incarcerations during the students' adult years.' (Sacks, Peter. 1999. Standardized Minds. Perseus Books, Cambridge, MA 1999. p. 104, citing Jaeger affidavit in Eric V. et al v. Johnson County Board of Education, filed 1997).

What does research from across the country say about retention? This research indicates that few practices have such negative effects. Researchers use a process called "meta-analysis" to combine data from a number of studies on a particular topic, like retention. Meta-analysis indicates that retention is either harmful or ineffective (Holmes, 1989). Students retained are a quarter of a standard deviation worse off on educational outcome measures than comparable students who are promoted. These negative effects are even stronger for academic achievement alone. When children of the same age were compared, the retained group lost .45 standard deviation in achievement on average. Evidence indicates that failing a grade is strongly tied to dropping out of school later. Being retained is as strong as low achievement in determining whether a student drops out or graduates. For example, in Austin, Texas, repeating a grade increased the chances of a white female dropping out by 17% and increased an African American male's chances of dropping out by 38% (Grissom and Shepard, 1989). This is a very powerful negative effect. (House, Ernest R. 1998. The Predictable Failure of Chicago's Student Retention Program. Presentation at "Rethinking Retention" conference, November 1998. Published by Designs for Change. pp. 17-18.)

Research in Chicago confirms the policy's failure and the damage it causes: The conclusion of the Consortium on Chicago School Research in its landmark study, Ending Social Promotion, could not be clearer:

Did retaining these low-achieving students help? The answer to this question is decidedly no. In the third grade, there is no evidence that retention led to greater achievement growth two years after the promotional gate, and in the sixth grade, we find significant evidence that retention was associated with lower achievement growth (emphasis added).

The Consortium also found that the CPS promotion policy has made the dropout rate worse. Students CPS flunked were 25% more likely to drop out by age 17. A multi-year study of CPS's student promotion policy found that flunking students increased their chances of dropping out by age 17 by 25%, and the chances of their dropping out by age 19 by 29%. The study concluded that

students with very low achievement were even less likely to graduate than before the policy was implemented....Racial gaps in school completion also grew after implementation of the (promotion) gate....In addition, the very high dropout rates among students already old-for-grade who failed the eighth grade test suggest that the combined effects of the gates at third, sixth, and eighth grade may be more adverse than that of the single gate at the eighth grade. (Nagaoka, Jenny, and Melisa Roderick. 2004. Ending Social Promotion: The Effects of Retention. Chicago: The Consortium on Chicago School Research.)
There is ample scientific evidence that flunking can increase student stress levels and lower student self-esteem and sense of efficacy as learners.

As teachers and administrators are pressured to implement policies designed to “end social promotion,” students are threatened with retention if they do not meet academic standards or perform above specified percentiles on standardized tests. It is unclear if this threat is effective in motivating students to work harder. However, this pressure may be increasing children’s stress levels regarding their academic achievement. Surveys of children's ratings of twenty stressful life events in the 1980s showed that, by the time they were in 6th grade, children feared retention most after the loss of a parent and going blind. When this study was replicated in 2001, 6th grade students rated grade retention as the single most stressful life event, higher than the loss of a parent or going blind (Anderson, Jimerson, & Whipple, 2002). This finding is likely influenced by the pressures imposed by standards-based testing programs that often rely on test scores to determine promotion and graduation.

Analysis of multiple studies of retention indicate that retained students experience lower self esteem and lower rates of school attendance, relative to promoted peers (Jimerson, 2001). Both of these factors are further predictive of dropping out of school. (Allensworth, Elaine. 2004. Ending Social Promotion: Dropout Rates in Chicago after Implementation of the Eighth-Grade Promotion Gate. Chicago: The Consortium on Chicago School Research.)

5. We propose that the millions spent on flunking students be redirected to programs that work.

Flunking students results in an additional year of schooling. At the current CPS-estimated per-pupil annual expenditure of some $11,000, CPS spent nearly $100 million to retain 9,000 children in 2008.

The current promotion policy generates other costs as well. In his study, The Predictable Failure of Chicago’s Student Retention Program, mentioned earlier, Ernest House reported that “In Chicago the summer schools cost $25 million in 1996, $34 million in 1997, and $42 million in 1998. Chicago's extra teachers and after-school programs for retained elementary students cost at least $12 million.”

The Consortium expressed concern about this high cost:

In the end, the practice of retention is monetarily and academically costly. It involves investing in an extra year of schooling. It makes students overage for grade, and as a result, increases the risk of school dropout, an outcome with a substantial set of social costs. Instructionally, high-stakes testing leads to substantial costs in time on test preparation, and it directs resources away from early intervention. If an expensive policy is simply not working, as concluded in this report, it would make little sense to invest more money in it rather than to redirect that money toward alternatives (emphasis added). (Ending Social Promotion p. 53)

Yet nearly 10 years after this report was written, CPS continues to throw good money after bad, to the tune of over $1 billion since the program began in 1996.

The cost of failed education policies is mind-boggling. Cutting the dropout rate in half would yield $45 billion annually in new federal tax revenues or cost savings, according to the Columbia University report, The Costs and Benefits of an Excellent Education for America's Children, (Henry Levin et al, “ 2007). The study breaks the savings down this way:

- The average lifetime benefit in terms of additional taxes paid per expected high school graduate is $139,100.
- The average lifetime public health savings per expected high school graduate (achieved through reduction in Medicare and Medicaid costs) is $40,500. For black females, the highest users of these programs, the figure is $62,700.
• The average lifetime crime-related cost reduction per expected high school graduate is $26,600.
• Being a high school graduate is associated with a 40 percent lower probability of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF); a 1 percent lower probability of receiving housing assistance; and a 19 percent lower probability of receiving food stamps. For college graduates, the probability reductions are 62 percent, 35 percent and 54 percent.

In addition to improved assessment practices, other sound, research-based alternatives to flunking and high-stakes testing to address our children's critical educational needs, which could be implemented using the savings from ending retention. A good summary of these ideas can be found in the report, “North Carolina Early Grade Retention in the Age of Accountability,” based on a review of research and of successful practices of North Carolina schools with good records of low retention rates and high achievement levels:

• Start early.
• Implement interventions in the context of the regular classroom setting.
• Coordinate and communicate with teachers and staff.
• Involve parents.
• Provide after school support.
• Offer enriched summer activities, presenting review material in new ways.
• Emphasize literacy.
• Provide high-quality professional development to all staff on working with at-risk students.
• Connect with community resources.
• Provide “can-do” leadership.