

# ENDING SOCIAL PROMOTION WITHOUT LEAVING CHILDREN BEHIND: THE CASE OF NYC

Evaluation of NYC's Promotion Policy by the RAND  
Corporation

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# RAND'S EVALUATION PROJECT

- RAND Corporation was awarded a contract as a result of a competitive bidding process and engaged to conduct an independent, longitudinal study for the purposes of evaluating the effectiveness of 5th grade promotion policy.
- The study was conducted between March 2006 and August 2009 and examined several aspects of the 5<sup>th</sup>-grade promotion policy:
  - Factors affecting the implementation of the policy
  - The impact of the policy on student academic achievement and socio-emotional outcomes
  - The links between implementation, components of the study and desired outcomes
- The study tracked four cohorts of 5<sup>th</sup> grade students: 3 cohorts that were subject to the promotion policy (2004-2005, 2005-2006, and 2006-2007) and a comparison cohort that was not (2003-2004).
- As a supplement, RAND also evaluated student academic and socio-emotional outcomes for three cohorts of 3<sup>rd</sup>-grade students: 2 cohorts that were subject to the 3<sup>rd</sup>-grade policy (2003-2004 and 2004-2005) and a comparison cohort that was not (2002- 2003).

# IMPORTANT TERMINOLOGY

Throughout the final report, RAND focused on two groups of low-performing students.

- **Students needing services** - Those students who scored Level 1 or a low Level 2 on the 4<sup>th</sup>-grade assessments or who had been previously retained in grade. These students were identified as needing additional help at the beginning of the school year.
- **At risk of retention students** - Those students who failed (scored Level 1) the spring assessments in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade. These students were offered other chances to meet the promotion standards (such as portfolio review and summer assessments) and were mandated to attend Summer Success Academy sessions.

# KEY RESEARCH QUESTIONS

RAND identified seven major research questions.

1. What types of supports did schools and Saturday and summer sessions provide to students?
2. What were the trends in student achievement for students held to the policy?
3. Relative to comparable groups of students, how did 5<sup>th</sup> graders needing services at the beginning of the year perform on the spring assessments?
4. Relative to comparable groups of students, how did students at risk of retention perform on the summer assessments?
5. Relative to comparable groups of students, what were the future academic outcomes of students at risk of retention?
6. What were the socio-emotional outcomes of students subject to the promotion policy?
7. What were the lessons learned about the design and implementation of policies from NYC's experience and those of other states and districts with similar promotion policies?

# METHODOLOGY

- RAND used data from elite interviews with agency officials, teacher and administrator surveys, and over 80 case studies of schools and intervention sites to evaluate the implementation process.
- Students' standard test scores as well as attendance records from Saturday Preparatory Academies (SPAs) and Summer Success Academies (SSAs) were analyzed to determine the academic impact of the promotion policy.
- RAND statistically accounted for the citywide upward trend in achievement results in order to isolate the effect of the promotion policy.
- RAND used 2 “look alike” comparison groups:
  - The students in the cohort prior to policy implementation
  - The students who scored just above the treatment threshold (Low Level 2 students).
- RAND used data gathered from student surveys administered in 3 of the 4 years of the study to capture the socio-emotional impact of the promotion policy. Student responded to questions that measured their 1) confidence in math, 2) confidence in reading, and 3) sense of school belonging. The results for three groups were compared: student who were at risk and retained, those who were at risk but promoted, and those who were not at risk.

# MERITS OF THE STUDY

This study is a significant contribution to knowledge on the implementation and impacts of promotion policies for the following three reasons:

- It is one of only a few longitudinal studies to examine the implementation and effects of a promotion policy on both academic and nonacademic outcomes for a large group of students. There are analyses of both qualitative and quantitative data collected from several different sources and utilizing a variety of methods.
- The study uses powerful statistical methods to compare students impacted by the study to those in a control group. These methods provide compelling evidence regarding the impact of the promotion policy.
- NYC is studied in the context of other jurisdictions that have implemented similar policies and provides valuable guidance on best practices for implementing a promotion policy.

# KEY FINDINGS: ACADEMIC OUTCOMES

- Most **Students needing services** performed better on the 5<sup>th</sup> grade assessments than they would have in the absence of the policy. In ELA, students scored 0.10-0.21 standard deviations higher. In math, students scored 0.03-0.07 standard deviations higher.
- **Students who attended Saturday sessions** more frequently scored better on the spring math assessment – between 0.075 and 0.10 standard deviations higher for 14 sessions versus 7.
- **Students who attended a SSA** performed better on the summer math assessment than if they had attended a regular summer school but not as well in ELA.

# KEY FINDINGS: ACADEMIC OUTCOMES

- Most **Students needing services** performed better on the 7<sup>th</sup> grade assessments than they would have in the absence of the policy. In ELA, these students scored 0.08 to 0.21 standard deviations higher. In math, these students scored 0.09 to 0.16 standard deviations higher.
- **Students at risk of retention** and subsequently retained in Grade 5 performed significantly better on the 7<sup>th</sup> grade assessments than they would have in absence of the policy. In ELA, these students scored 0.57 to 0.63 standard deviations higher. In math, these students scored 0.38 to 0.43 standard deviations higher.
- Retained students had better long-term outcomes than some at-risk students who were promoted.

“In general, retained students performed better than at-risk promoted students in their cohort on the same-grade assessment (though they took these assessments in different years). Students promoted via appeals tended to do more poorly than their cohort peers. These trends were consistent in ELA and Mathematics.” (p. 188).

# KEY FINDINGS: IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS

- NYC followed best practices as identified by the National Research Council, which recommends that test-based promotion policies are enhanced by early identification of and intervention for struggling learners, as well as multiple criteria for promotion decisions.

“Other states and districts considering adopting promotion policies would do well to consider the key components of the NYC policy in their own design.” (p. 190).

- Administrators reported that the promotion policy focused the instructional efforts of schools, made parents more concerned about student progress, and provided additional resources to support low-achieving students.
- Schools that offered one-on-one tutoring in math to some or all students needing services increased the probability of passing the spring mathematics assessment. Results for ELA one-on-one tutoring were also promising in some models as well.
- Administrators reported the policy made it more difficult for schools to retain students who passed the state assessments but who school officials felt were unprepared for 6<sup>th</sup> grade.

# KEY FINDINGS: SOCIOEMOTIONAL IMPACT

- Overall, retained students did not report negative socio-emotional effects.
- Students who were retained actually expressed higher levels of school belonging than both the at-risk promoted and not-at-risk students two and three years after the retention decision.
- Retained students also gained confidence in math over time, even surpassing the confidence of at-risk promoted students.
- Three years after the retention decision, there was no significant difference in reading confidence between at-risk promoted students and retained students.

# KEY POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Continue early identification of students and provision of AIS.
- Enable AIS providers to work consistently with students who need services.
- Consider the expected duration and participation when constructing Saturday programs.
- Continue to encourage struggling students to attend summer school.
- Collect data on interventions being provided to at-risk students to determine the relative cost effectiveness of different support services.
- Continue to monitor the effects of retention on students as they progress into high school.

# CONCLUSION

“We found positive near-term benefits of NYC’s promotion policy. Students affected by the 5th-grade promotion policy performed better than they would have in absence of the policy in the 5th grade and into 7th grade. In addition, the study found no negative effects of retention on students’ sense of school belonging or confidence in mathematics and reading over time. [W]hile the policy has not been in place long enough to address...long-term questions, the near term benefits found by the study hold the possibility of longer-term benefits as well.” (Page xxvi)

# APPENDIX

- Highlights of the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade analysis
- Project costs
- NYC's Current promotion policies
- Data collection overview

# KEY FINDINGS: 3<sup>rd</sup> GRADE ANALYSES

- Overall, the results were very similar to those for the 5<sup>th</sup> grade cohorts.
- 3<sup>rd</sup> graders at risk for retention did better on both the math and ELA assessments than they would have in the absence of the policy.
- Students who attended SSA sessions more frequently performed better on the summer math assessment than students with low attendance.
- Students who were retained in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade outperformed their low-Level 2 peers by 0.58 standard deviations in ELA and 0.48 standard deviations in math on the 5<sup>th</sup> grade assessments.
- As with the 5<sup>th</sup> grade cohorts, retained 3<sup>rd</sup> graders expressed a significantly higher sense of school belonging than both not-at-risk and at-risk promoted students.

# PROJECT COSTS

YEAR	PAYMENT
Year 1	\$745,238
Year 2	\$852,332
Year 3	\$877,516
Year 4	\$890,893
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>\$3,365,979</b>

# NYC's CURRENT PROMOTION POLICIES

- > **GRADES 3, 5, & 7.** Students must score at Level 2 or above on both the Math and English Language Arts (ELA) state tests. Students who do not meet these requirements may 1) appeal a promotion decision (student work is reviewed against a standardized rubric) or 2) attend summer school and retake tests in August. Students who score at Level 2 or above in both Math and ELA on the August tests are promoted, as well as students who show Level 2 work via portfolio review.
- > **GRADE 8.** In addition to meeting the requirements for Grades 3, 5, & 7, students in Grade 8 must pass all core courses (ELA, Math, Science, & Social Studies). If a student fails one or more core courses, they must attend summer school and pass the course they failed during the school year in order to gain promotion.
- > **POLICY TIMELINE.** The Grade 3 policy was implemented in 2004, Grade 5 in 2005, Grade 7 in 2006, and Grade 8 in 2009.
- > **GRADES 4 & 6.** Multiple criteria are used to determine student promotion decisions, which are ultimately made by schools. Criteria include: achieving learning standards as evidenced by student work, teacher observation, and grades; scoring at Level 2 or above on Math & ELA assessments; 90% attendance. If schools determine that students did not meet these criteria they can mandate that they attend summer school and retake the tests in August in order to be promoted. Students who score at Level 2 or above in both Math and ELA on the August tests are promoted.
- > **MODIFIED CRITERIA.** Certain Students with Disabilities, English Language Learners, Overage students, and Previously Retained students have modified promotional criteria .

# DATA COLLECTION OVERVIEW

	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4
Literature Review	X			X
Elite Interviews with Agency Officials Responsible for Supporting Schools	X			X
Elite Interviews with States and Districts with Related Policies	X			X
Case Studies				
• Schools	X	X	X	
• Saturday Preparatory Academies (SPA)	X	X		
• Summer Success Academies (SSA)				
Web-based Surveys				
• Principals/Academic Intervention Team leaders	X	X	X	
• SPA administrators		X		
• SSA administrators	X			
Student Surveys		X	X	X
Data on Schools, SPAs, SSAs	X	X	X	X
Longitudinal Data on Students: At-Risk Status, Program Attendance, Test Scores, Promotion Status	X	X	X	X