

# An 'F' for Social Promotion



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## Executive Summary

Social promotion is the practice of advancing students to the next grade even if they have not met the academic requirements of their current year. Generally, advocates of social promotion focus on the problems they associate with grade retention or repetition.

- The argument for social promotion rests primarily upon the claim that students kept behind end up worse off academically and emotionally than those socially promoted.

Despite the widespread use of social promotion in North American schools, there are good reasons to question this practice.

- Social promotion leads to graduates who lack the necessary knowledge and skills for academic success.
- Social promotion results in significant ability disparities among students in individual classrooms.
- Many of the criticisms leveled at grade retention (i.e., higher dropout rates and damage to self-esteem) apply to social promotion.
- The negative effects of grade retention have been exaggerated.
- Social promotion has a negative effect on student motivation.

The practice of promoting students without sufficient regard to academic ability or achievement needs to end. There are circumstances where students will benefit from extra time in a particular grade or course.

## Introduction

For many years, a vigorous debate has existed in educational circles surrounding the practice of social promotion. Should teachers make failing students repeat grades or is it better to promote them with their peers? Although both sides of this argument have their advocates, the latter position has become dominant in Canada. In fact, very few students in kindergarten through grade 8 are held back (“failed” in old-fashioned parlance).

However, the other side in this debate has not received an adequate hearing, as the evidence for social promotion is less definitive than its supporters claim. In fact, there are a number of good reasons for not promoting students before they have demonstrated reasonable proficiency with the knowledge and skills taught in their present grade. Perhaps the educational pendulum has swung too far to one side on this issue.

***Should teachers make failing students repeat grades or is it better to promote them with their peers?***

## The Case for Social Promotion

Social promotion is the practice of advancing students to the next grade level even if they have not fully met the academic requirements in their present year of school.<sup>1</sup> Students progress with their peer group even if they are unable to meet the expected achievement levels.

Arguments made on behalf of social promotion tend to focus on problems associated with grade retention. They are as follows.

- Educational research shows that while grade retention sometimes leads to short-term academic gains for students, the benefits fade within three years. In addition, students held back one or more grades are twice as likely to drop out of school.<sup>2</sup>
- Students retained in one or more grades develop lower self-esteem than students promoted with their peers. Forcing students to experience failure damages their self-esteem and makes it less likely for them to succeed in the future.<sup>3</sup>
- Retaining students leads to substantial increases in the cost of educating them. Since it costs thousands of dollars to educate a single student for a year, retaining students is very expensive with little measurable benefit.<sup>4</sup>

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## Problems with Social Promotion

Despite the widespread support for social promotion in Canadian schools, there are at least five good reasons to reconsider this practice.

- *Social promotion leads to graduates who lack the necessary skills for employment.*<sup>5</sup>

Promoting students from grade to grade without requiring the achievement of clear standards leads to an increasing number of functionally illiterate and innumerate high school graduates. In Ontario, almost one in six grade 10 students is unable to pass the provincial basic literacy test.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, a recent survey by the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education found that only 36 per cent of Ontario residents have a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in their public schools.<sup>7</sup>

Clearly, social promotion undermines the meaning and value of a high school diploma by sending the message that mastering academic standards is not required for high school graduation.

- *Many of the criticisms leveled at grade retention (i.e., higher dropout rates and damage to self-esteem) apply to social promotion.*<sup>8</sup>

Obviously, students know when they are promoted despite their lack of achievement and skills. As such, promoting students does little for their self-esteem and, in fact, probably does more harm than good. No wonder socially promoted students have higher dropout rates than other students.<sup>9</sup>

Nevertheless, advocates of social promotion point to studies showing that students held back a grade often have substantially higher dropout rates than students promoted with their peers.<sup>10</sup> However, this research does not adequately distinguish between serious and marginal academic weaknesses in students. That is, it is reasonable to expect that students who have been retained would be those with the weakest academic records and naturally those most likely to drop out of school.

Realistically, it is not clear that the research shows that grade retention, in comparison with social promotion, is more likely to produce high school dropouts. Research cannot show that social promotion is superior to grade retention without actually examining the impact of both retention and promotion on the academic achievement and dropout rate of students. In other words, there is no clear causal linkage between grade retention and dropping out of school. While grade retention is not a perfect solution, it may be

**While grade retention is not a perfect solution, it may be preferred to promoting very weak students...**

preferred to promoting very weak students to the next grade where they are more likely to fall further behind their age-grade peers.

- *Recent educational research indicates that the negative effects of grade retention are exaggerated.*<sup>11</sup>

The Beginning School Study, a long-term research project that began in Baltimore in 1982, examined the socio-emotional and academic effects of retention on a large group of students in their first eight years of school. These researchers found that the negative emotional effects of grade retention on students were significantly less than expected, and children retained in a grade normally experienced increases in their test scores and grades.<sup>12</sup> While these researchers recognized problems with retaining students for another year in a specific grade, the problems were less significant than widely assumed. The results of this major study strongly suggest that many educators have been too quick to dismiss the merits of keeping struggling students in a grade for an additional year.

- *Social promotion results in significant ability disparities among students in individual classrooms.*

When students are promoted into grades for which they are not adequately prepared, teachers have to cope with a wide range of performance levels. Consequently, it is unrealistic to expect teachers to effectively educate all students when a significant number of them are not able to function at the same level as their classmates. While teachers should adapt their lessons to meet the needs of their students, this principle needs to be balanced against the need to maintain specific academic standards at each grade level.

- *Social promotion has a negative effect on student motivation.*<sup>13</sup>

While advocates of social promotion usually focus on students who are having academic difficulties, there are also students who are academically capable but for whatever reason are not academically successful. These students must learn that graduating from school consists of more than simply putting in time. Social promotion sends the unfortunate message that effort and attitude make little difference in school. This is a poor way to prepare students for life beyond school.

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## Conclusion

***Post-secondary institutions and employers must be confident that students who receive diplomas have the necessary skills and knowledge...***

The practice of social promotion in Canadian schools needs to be re-evaluated as it is important for all students to receive a good education. Unfortunately, social promotion makes it impossible to know whether this is actually happening. Post-secondary institutions and employers must be confident that students who receive diplomas have the necessary skills and knowledge to function in post-secondary institutions and as productive citizens in society. The practice of social promotion undermines this by allowing students to be promoted despite not having mastered the necessary knowledge and skills.

Instead of implementing strict no-fail policies, school boards should enact policies that help teachers and principals do what is best for their students. There are times where retaining students in their current grade would be appropriate because of serious academic deficiencies or because they have not put in the required effort. Similarly, there are times when students have fallen slightly short of the standards for promotion to the next grade, but they have worked hard throughout the year and they have shown promising improvement. If the teachers are confident that the deficiencies can be made up during the holiday period or in the next grade, we see no reason why the students could not be promoted. However, this decision should be made by the teachers and the principal in consultation with the students' parents, and in light of a realistic prognosis of their probable success.

The key is that school boards, teachers, principals, and indeed parents, need to use common sense in deciding on whether or not students should be promoted. Principals and school boards are not doing their students any favours when they force teachers to promote them to the next grade regardless of their achievement and effort. This should be obvious to virtually everyone. As a result, it is reasonable for school boards to avoid rigid no-fail policies and ensure that the responsibility for promotion or retention lies with the professionals who are most directly accountable, the teachers and principals in consultation with the students and their parents.

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