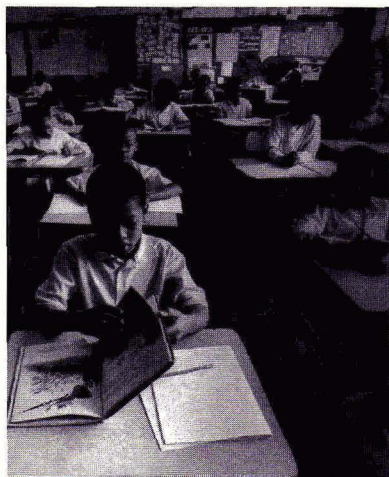


Interpretive Summary: Ending Social Promotion

RESULTS FROM THE FIRST TWO YEARS



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Chicago's effort to end social promotion is an integrated set of initiatives designed to focus attention on lower performing students and raise their test scores on the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS) to minimum promotional cutoffs—during the year before testing, over the summer, and for those who are retained, during the next year. By using minimum test scores as the criteria for promotion and by using the threat of retention if these criteria are not met, the initiative seeks to increase student effort and focus program resources and teacher attention on improving basic skills. Those third, sixth, and eighth graders who fail to meet the test cutoffs in May are given a second chance to meet the test criteria after more intensive instructional time in reading and mathematics in a summer school program, Summer Bridge. Most of those who fail again in August are retained. The initiative uses the retention year, combined with a second round of program supports, to try to redress continued poor performance.

This report focuses on three broad areas. First, it describes the implementation of the policy during the first two years, examining the flows of students through the policy during 1997 and 1998. Second, it compares ITBS achievement trends for students affected by the policy to those of students before the policy

was implemented and looks at trends in students' test performance in the year before and after promotion or retention. And, third, it examines ethnic and gender differences in the effects of the policy. This summary focuses on the main findings of the report and highlights the questions they raise for policymakers both locally and nationally.

Testing the Theory of Action in Chicago: Were More Students Meeting the Test Cutoffs?

The premise of the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) policy for ending social promotion is that setting minimum test-score standards for promotion and providing extra instructional time to students during the school year and summer will allow more students to meet the minimum test cutoffs for their grade. We began to evaluate this claim by comparing the performance of students who were subject to the policy in 1997 and 1998 with that of a previous group of CPS students (third, sixth, and eighth graders in 1995) who were not subject to the promotional criteria.

There have been impressive increases in the proportion of students who meet minimum test-score cutoffs for promotion. Overall, many more students had ITBS scores that met the minimum cutoff required

for promotion in 1997 and 1998 than before the policy. In this respect, the CPS policy looks like a success. Increases in the sixth and eighth grades reflected both improvements in student performance during the school year and the Summer Bridge program. The proportion of all sixth graders who reached the minimum promotional cutoff was 20 percent higher in 1997 than in 1995 and 21 percent higher among eighth graders. In the second year of the policy, passing rates among sixth graders were even better.

Third grade is an area of concern. There was little increase in the proportion of third graders who met the minimum cutoff in reading from May 1995 to

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May 1997. The performance of third graders during the school year was better in 1998 than in 1997, but these improvements were largely concentrated among those students who had skill levels already close to the cutoff. More third graders eventually reached the promotional cutoff because of increases in their test scores after Summer Bridge. Indeed, perhaps the most positive finding in this report is that across all three grades the Summer Bridge program—and the second chance it affords—has been one of the most successful aspects of the policy, accounting for a large proportion of the improvements in passing rates.

The performance of students with low skills showed the greatest improvement. Most impressive is that increases in passing rates were greatest among students with the lowest skills. We called students *high*

risk if they needed to increase their ITBS scores by 1.5 GEs (Grade Equivalents; 1.5 equals one year and five months) or more in a year in order to meet the promotional test cutoff and *moderate* risk if they needed “average” to “above average” test-score gains in the promotional testing year (.5 to 1.5 GEs). We used this wide category for moderate risk because there is so much test-score fluctuation from year to year. In 1995, about half of the students who had test scores from the previous year already close to the cutoff (about .5 GEs below) actually didn’t meet the test-score cutoff by the end of the school year.

Many CPS students fell into one of these risk categories. Almost half of third graders and almost 40 percent of sixth and eighth graders had such low reading scores that they could be considered at risk of failing to meet the promotional cutoffs. Among high risk students, the proportion who were able to meet the test cutoff increased from 4 to 34 percent among sixth graders and from 12 to 49 percent among eighth graders between 1995 and 1997.

The picture is mixed on whether getting students up to a test-score cutoff in one year allows them to do better the next year. The argument for getting more students to meet a minimum test-score cutoff is that this lays the basis for long-term school success, while promoting them without basic skills places them in a position of falling farther behind. We took a preliminary look at this claim by comparing test-score trends in the year before the promotional grade, over the summer, and in the year after retention and promotion for students in 1995 (pre-policy) and 1997 (first-year policy). The evidence is quite mixed. The good news is that the larger proportion of students who made the cutoff in May 1997 had two-year test score gains that were comparable to the smaller proportion of students in 1995 who would have met the promotional cutoff had it been in place. This suggests that an increased number of students are now on track under the policy.

At the same time, however, large test score increases in Summer Bridge were not followed by improved performance the next year. While Summer Bridge raised students’ performance briefly, there is no evidence that it altered the overall pattern of

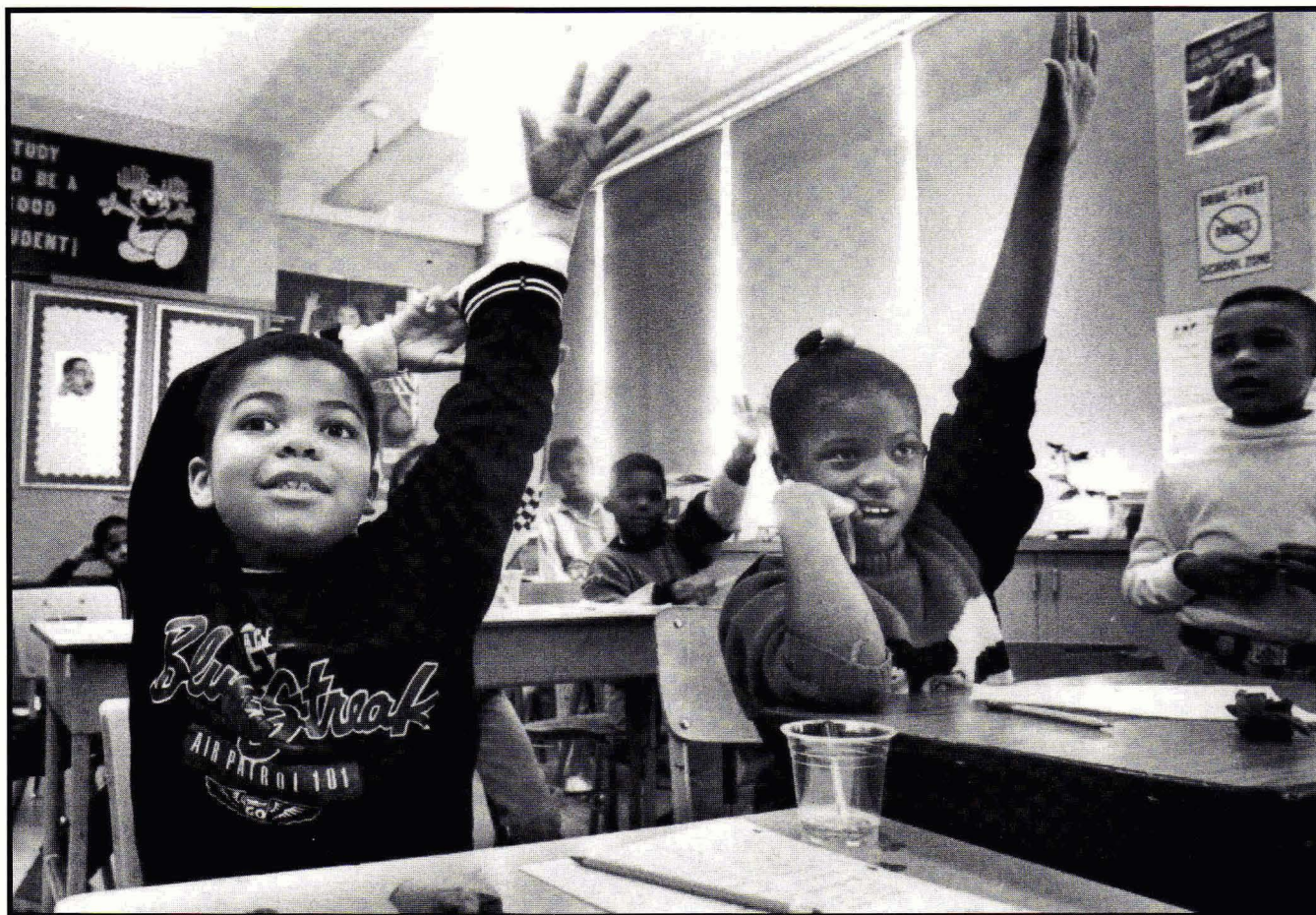
school-year achievement for these students. After Summer Bridge, students reverted to learning about as much the next year as they did previously.

As a result, Summer Bridge, at least in the short run, allowed students to stay on track by compensating for poor school-year gains with large summer gains. Trends in test scores among students promoted after Summer Bridge are certainly positive when compared to the experience of students who were previously socially promoted. Nonetheless, these students' weak school-year gains relative to summer meant that they remained at risk for retention the next time they faced the test cutoff. This interpretation suggests that positive summer experiences cannot compensate for weak school-year instruction and that these students need improved instruction across their school careers. It also suggests that students in Summer Bridge may be a particularly vulnerable group of students who might well need sustained attention across their school careers.

What Do We Know about the Progress of Retained Students?

This report also addressed the most controversial aspect of the promotional policy: the decision to retain students. Even if the policy produces benefits for students who are promoted, the continued feasibility of this initiative will ultimately depend on whether CPS can effectively address poor performance among students who are retained. Results from the first group of retained students are far from sanguine. Only one-fourth of retained eighth graders and one-third of retained third and sixth graders in 1997 made "normal" progress during the following school year, meaning that they stayed in the school system, were again subject to the policy, and passed the test cutoff the next May.

Thus, retained students did not do better than previously socially promoted students. The progress among retained third graders was most troubling. Over the two years between the end of second grade and



the end of the second time through third grade, the average ITBS reading scores of these students increased only 1.2 GEs compared to 1.5 GEs for students with similar test scores who had been promoted prior to the policy.

How do we interpret the performance of retained students? In short, Chicago has not solved the problem of poor performance among those who do not meet the minimum test cutoffs and are retained. Both the history of prior attempts to redress poor performance with retention and previous research would clearly have predicted this finding. Few studies of retention have found positive impacts, and most suggest that retained students do no better than socially promoted students. This is clearly the most difficult problem to address. The CPS policy now highlights a group of students who are facing significant barriers to learning and are falling farther and farther behind. These students are now identified as not meeting the promotional criteria and are retained, while in the past they were socially promoted. How best to advance the learning of students whose test scores are not improving remains unclear.

How do we interpret the weaker effect of the policy in the third grade? Another key finding in this report is that the performance of third graders was significantly poorer under this policy than that of sixth and eighth graders. In some ways, this finding is surprising. The rhetoric of early intervention surmises that intervening in sixth and eighth grade would be too late to remediate poor skills. In retrospect, however, the initial design of this policy may be more appropriate for older students.

The CPS initiative relies heavily on incentives for students to work harder and on producing large gains in short intensive periods such as summer school. In this respect, the finding about third graders might not be surprising. Eighth graders face the greatest costs in not meeting the test cutoff (they don't go on to high school) and have the greatest capacity to shape their school performance through their own motivation and effort. It might also be true that eighth graders are at a time in their development when they can more easily learn in intensive periods of immersion. In contrast, third graders may be less sensitive to the threat of re-

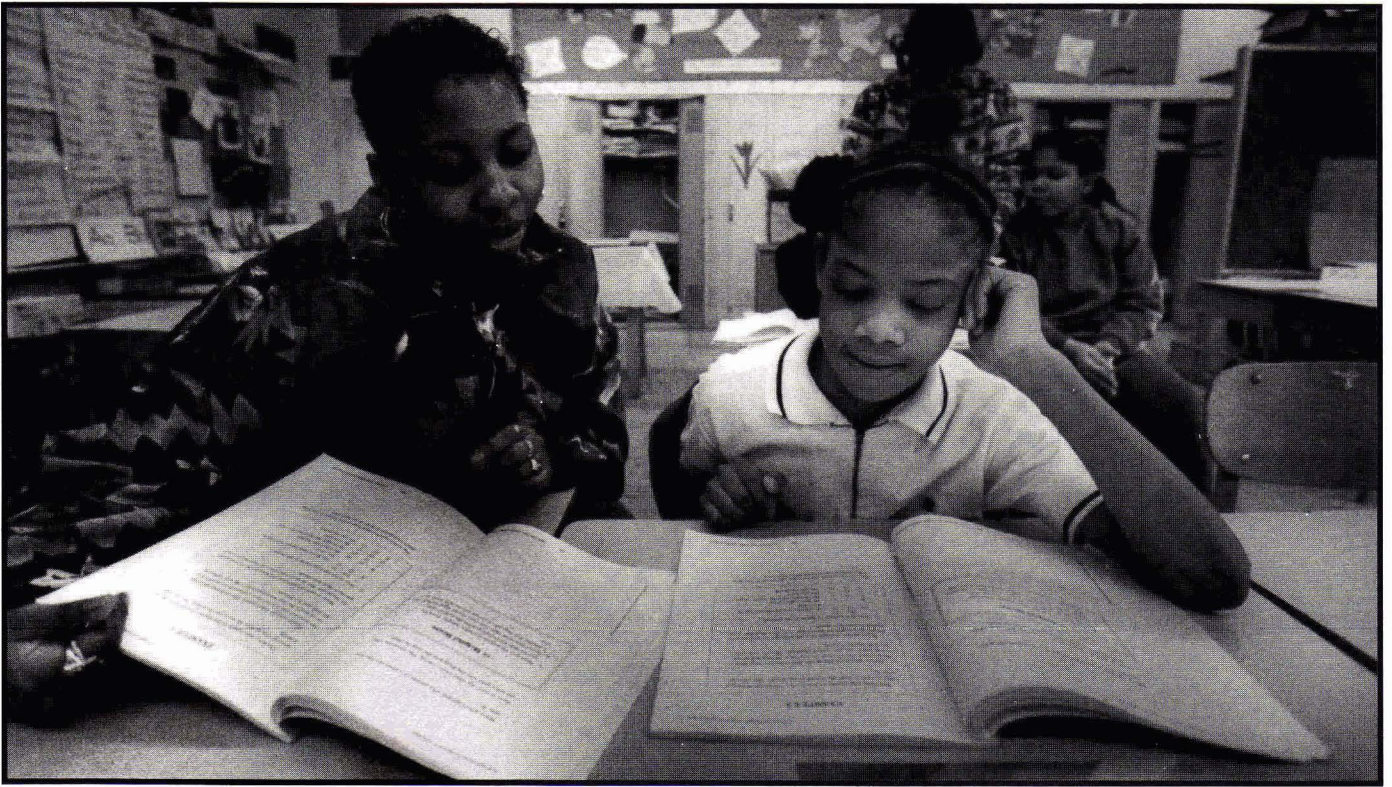
tention, less able to shape their own learning by effort, and less likely to overcome barriers through intensive learning spurts.

Putting the Findings of the Report in Context: The Chicago Approach to Ending Social Promotion

One of the purposes of this report was to set out for a national audience the various components of the Chicago policy and its implementation process during its first two years. All eyes are on Chicago in this regard. CPS has embarked on a rigorous attempt to raise standards by focusing on individual student performance.

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This policy is often described as a “get tough” approach, but our look at the design and implementation of the policy finds that there are two aspects of Chicago’s efforts often overlooked in the national debate. First, the initial design of the policy reflected a concern that students who are bilingual and those who have special education needs should not be held to the same strict standards as other students in their grade. As a result, almost one-third of third graders were initially excluded from the promotion policy. In the first two years, the administration also liberally used waivers, particularly among Latino students, both prior to the retention/promotion decision and in assessing the progress of retained students the second time through this policy. The use of waivers, or of promoting students who did not meet the minimum test-score cutoff, allowed Chicago to substantially reduce the proportion of students who were retained. Without such flexibility in the



Chicago policy, its initial impact would have been much more disconcerting.

We do not mean to suggest that Chicago should end waivers or have all students included under the policy. Rather, we argue that the simplistic “sound bites” and rhetoric often used by those on both sides of the debate to characterize Chicago’s efforts are misleading and ultimately dysfunctional. Such oversimplification encourages critics to ignore the complex evolving nature of the policy and the serious commitment it signals to raising student achievement and providing extra supports for students at every stage of the learning process. It also encourages other districts to truly “end social promotion” without any of the safety nets, supplemental education resources, and attention to refining the policy at work in Chicago. The Chicago experience demonstrates the realities of urban education, where high rates of immigration and the complexities of children’s lives substantially complicate the idea of setting test cutoffs and then easily applying them. National efforts spurred on by the politically appealing rhetoric of “get tough” policies will be misguided if they do not also pay attention to the importance of flexibility at the local level, particularly as policies interact with sensitive areas such as bilingual education.

Second, we emphasize that early experience with the Chicago policy drives home the importance of carefully setting test scores for promotion, paying attention at each step along the way to which students the policy applies to, attending to the needs of those students who do not meet cutoffs, and committing resources to program initiatives. One point stands out clearly: The CPS is committing enormous fiscal resources to this initiative in the form of extended day programs, summer school, and extra years of school with reduced class sizes. While a full accounting of the specific consequences of each of these initiatives will take several more years to accrue, even at this relatively early juncture one observation for other districts is clear: Do not attempt to implement this policy unless you are willing to invest, as Chicago has, substantial fiscal and administrative resources.

How is this policy changing? From the perspective of CPS leadership, an important and often overlooked characteristic of the Chicago effort is that the policy is intended to evolve over time. This has important implications for our research because we are studying a moving target. CPS is making continued efforts to fine-tune the policy. Many of the issues docu-

mented in this report have already been recognized and in some cases new directions have been taken.

Perhaps the most important change in the policy is the administration's plan to move beyond simple test-score cutoffs for promotion to more inclusive criteria that will include grades, attendance, and learning gains during the school year. This is an approach that would clearly be supported by many of the critics of the policy as well as testing experts who caution strongly against sole reliance on ITBS Grade Equivalents to make promotional decisions. The primary reliance on a single ITBS score, coupled with waivers, was expedient in initiating the policy, but may not continue to serve the

system well. A reformulating of the promotional criteria may be in order. In particular, CPS might consider uncoupling the criteria for participation in programs with the criteria for promotion or retention. The use of a single test score for participation in Summer Bridge, Lighthouse, and intervention programs is administratively easy to implement. But, it is clearly time for the administration to move forward with a more systematic formula for the promotional decision that formally allows for students' grades, attendance, and learning growth. In this study, we have also shown how the accuracy of test scores can be improved by using students' previous test score histories. All of these indices could be formulated into a standard, more accurate and more defensible promotional policy that continues to send a strong message to students, parents, and teachers about the importance of effort and achievement.

Concluding Comments

This report provided a first look at the implementation of Chicago's efforts to end social promotion. Our findings highlight the central tension that any school system will face in trying to raise achievement among low-performing students by using the threat of retention as a motivating factor. On the one hand, more

students are now meeting minimum test criteria for promotion. On the other hand, we find very troubling trends in the performance of retained students. And while Summer Bridge substantially helps many students, it does not appear to be enough.

In the end, the verdict is out on whether Chicago's initiatives are producing substantial benefits for students. Many of the main trends presented in this report will become clearer with another year of data collection. This additional year's worth of data will allow us to get a better look at the test-score trends of students promoted after Summer Bridge, of retained students, and of students who initially met the test cutoffs in May. Time will also allow us to determine whether schools are able to sustain efforts and whether problems can be identified early on and more effectively addressed. For this reason, a number of follow-up reports will be forthcoming. It is still quite early in this evaluation to make statements about whether the policy is working.

Another key finding in this report is that the performance of third graders was significantly poorer under this policy than that of sixth and eighth graders.



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