



Consortium on Chicago School Research

## PRESS RELEASE

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### **Retention Policy Fails to Improve Low-Performing Students' Achievement and Increases Dropout Rates**

**Chicago, IL, April 6, 2004**—The Chicago Public Schools' retention policy has not helped the city's low-performing students, according to two new studies by researchers Jenny Nagaoka, Melissa Roderick, and Elaine Allensworth at the Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago.

Chicago's policy, implemented in 1996, continues to be one of the most controversial education initiatives today. Under the policy, students are retained in the same grade based primarily on their third-, sixth-, and eighth-grade scores on the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills. Between 7,000 and 10,000 students are retained each year across the three grades.

Over the past five years, Consortium researchers have been investigating the effects of the Chicago Public Schools' initiative. The two reports released today center on the effects of third- and sixth-grade retention on students' test-score improvements and on the effect of eighth-grade retention on dropout rates.

*In Ending Social Promotion: The effects of retention*, Nagaoka and Roderick track retained third- and sixth-grade students' academic progress and estimate the effects of retention on achievement gains. They compare the achievement growth of students who scored slightly below the test-score cutoff to comparison groups of similarly low-achieving students.

“Whether we use very basic comparisons or advanced statistical models, our results are consistent. Retention did not help low-performing students,” says Roderick.

In the third grade, retention did not improve achievement gains. But the report finds significant negative effects of retention at the sixth grade. After two years, the achievement

gains of retained students were about 6 percent lower than those of comparable promoted students. Additionally, close to 20 percent of retained third and sixth graders were placed in special education within two years of the retention decision—a rate three times that of other low-achieving students.

Roderick notes that while after-school and summer-school programs assisted many students in avoiding retention, there were few supports provided for the students who were retained. “Retaining students under policies like Chicago’s presents teachers with an extremely difficult problem,” explains Roderick. “What do teachers do with a student who is struggling, has been consistently behind, but needs to make substantial progress in a short period of time? The Chicago administration gave little guidance or support to teachers in addressing that problem. It’s not surprising that teachers and schools increasingly turned to special education as the answer. The problem is that there is little research support for the idea that special education effectively helps with students’ reading problems.”

“These students were falling substantially behind their peers even before they reached the third and sixth grade,” adds Nagaoka. “And once they entered these grades, neither social promotion nor retention closed the achievement gap. Given this evidence, waiting until third or sixth grade to intervene is too late and is not a judicious use of resources.”

Allensworth, author of the companion report, *Ending Social Promotion: Dropout rates in Chicago after implementation of the eighth-grade promotion gate*, compared groups of students prior to and after the implementation of the retention policy in 1996. Results show that the costs of the policy outweigh the benefits for very low-achieving students. While dropout rates did not increase systemwide because of steady improvements in dropout rates among average and high-achieving students, dropout rates increased among the lowest-achieving students—those the policy intended to help. Thousands of low-achieving students have been held back from entering high school, elevating these students’ risk of dropping out of school by age 17 by 8 percentage points, on average.

“Students who have been retained previously in school are especially vulnerable for being retained again in the eighth grade. And overage students who fail the eighth-grade standardized test drop out of school at exceptionally high rates,” notes Allensworth.

“Racial disparities in dropout rates also grew, as dropout rates declined for Asian, Latino, and White students but not for African-American students. These students were disproportionately more likely than students of other races to be retained and thus to drop out,” adds Allensworth.

“The bottom line is that, without substantial supports, neither social promotion nor retention will improve low-performing students’ learning gains. But retention puts these students at risk for other problems,” says Roderick. “The school system needs to provide early interventions to these students before they reach the third grade. And we need to provide more support to teachers as they manage the needs of these low-performing students in the later grades.”

The Consortium on Chicago School Research aims to conduct research of high technical quality that can inform and assess policy and practice in the Chicago Public Schools. By broadly engaging local leadership in our work, and presenting our findings to diverse audiences, we seek to expand communication between researchers, policy makers, and practitioners. The Consortium encourages the use of research in policy action, but does not argue for particular policies or programs. Rather, we believe that good policy is most likely to result from a genuine competition of ideas informed by the best evidence that can be obtained. Founded in 1990, the Consortium is located at the University of Chicago.

Because of the highly technical nature of these studies, the authors sought assistance from external reviewers with appropriate methodological and substantive expertise. Professor Richard Murnane, Harvard University, and Professor Lorrie Shepard, University of Colorado, reviewed Roderick's report. Professor Aaron Pallas, Columbia University, and Professor Stephen Raudenbush, University of Michigan, reviewed Allensworth's report.

These reports reflect the interpretations of the authors. Although the Consortium's Steering Committee and external reviewers provided technical advice and reviewed an earlier version of each report, no formal endorsement by these individuals, their organizations, or the full Consortium should be assumed.

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