

ABSTRACT

GROOM, ILEETHA BROOKS. Social Promotion or Retention? Factors that Influence Committee Decisions. (Under the direction of Paul Bitting.)

The purpose of the research presented here is to identify which factors school level practitioners consider in deciding whether to retain or promote a student and to ascertain their knowledge of and training in retention research. This research illuminates the process of determining which students are promoted and which are retained, and the results will generate a theory that school administrators may use to establish policies and guidelines to assist promotion–retention committees in better serving students below grade level.

The data were gathered using focus group methodology to interview promotion–retention committees. Interviews were used to uncover what practitioners think and how their committees function. Committee member perceptions were examined to determine their effect on the decision making process. Document analysis also shed light on the training, guidance, and resources that influenced committee members' recommendations for intervention as well as retention. The data were analyzed using grounded theory. This approach involved formulating initial categories about retention by dividing information into dominant themes (Creswell, 1998). Record analysis of state and local policies and reports was used to correlate themes to support the emerging theory.

The responses from the research questions and record analysis were organized into two major categories: Committee Composition and Function and Retention Procedure and Documentation. These categories along with the North Carolina's ABCs of Accountability were filtered through the funnel of grounded theory methodology and yielded the five major themes for factors considered in the decision to promote or retain:

- Child Specific Circumstances
- Social Considerations
- Attendance
- Organized Intervention Strategies
- Parental Support for Retention

The five themes form the basis for an emerging theory that can best guide a promotion retention committee when making individual decisions that are in the best interest of the child.

The final level of analysis in grounded theory produced a completed conditional relationship guide. After analyzing the data, I derived a series of plausible relationships between concepts. As the research neared completion, the newly developed theory was articulated in the form of propositions.

The theory articulated by the propositions below form the proposed basis for a LEA policy based on grounded theory as applied to this study. Guidance for a promotion retention committee should be developed at the LEA level and be in compliance with the ABC Accountability model. This policy calls for combined effort on behalf of the committee, parents, and teachers.

The policy should include:

1. Establishment of a standing multidisciplinary committee
2. Requirement that the classroom teacher participate in the committee

3. Required detailed screening similar to the EC referral screening to ascertain the child's specific circumstances and well as social considerations
4. Close monitoring of attendance and opportunities to make up missed work
5. Professional development for entire certified staff regarding promotion and retention research including local data (including longitudinal data on retained students)
6. Timeline for the process that begins at the end of the first quarter when parents are notified
7. Requirement for teachers to complete a Personalized Education Plan (PEP) utilizing a comprehensive list of school and grade specific strategies developed by the reading specialist and curriculum specialist.
8. Limitation of retentions to one in grades K-5 and one in grades 6-12
9. Monthly Parent Information Series to inform parents about their students' performance and progress as well as offer specific strategies and resources parents can use with the child to improve academic performance

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Social Promotion or Retention? Factors that
Influence Committee Decision

by
Ileetha Brooks Groom

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APPROVED BY:

Paul Bitting, Chair of Advisory Committee

Lance Fusarelli

Carol Pope

Kenneth Brinson

DEDICATION

To my mother, you always told me I could do whatever I wanted to do with hard work. "Did you ever know that you're my hero, and everything I would like to be? I can fly higher than an eagle, for you are the wind beneath my wings."(Gladys Knight, 1988)

To John Sr., my husband, my soul mate, my best friend. I couldn't have done it without you baby. "I've had my share of life's ups and downs. But fate's been kind, the downs have been few. I guess you could say that I've been lucky. Well, I guess you could say that it's all because of you. If anyone should ever write my life story, for whatever reason there might be, you'll be there between each line of pain and glory. 'Cause you're the best thing that ever happened to me." (Gladys Knight, 1973)

To my son, John Jr., you inspire me. "Have I told you lately that I love you? Have I told you there's no one else above you? Fill my heart with gladness, take away all my sadness, ease my troubles, that's what you do." (Rod Stewart, 1993)

To my daughter Camille, you are a gift from God. "Oh, with all that I've done wrong I must have done something right. To deserve your love every morning and butterfly kisses-at night."(Bob Carlisle, 1996).

To my daughter Sydney, you make me proud to be a mom. "There can be miracles, when you believe. Though hope is frail, it's hard to kill. Who knows what miracles you can achieve. When you believe, somehow you will. You will when you believe."(Whitney Houston and Mariah Carey, 1998)

To my daughter Lindsey, you remind me of life's pleasures with your joking and laughter. "I believe the children are our future. Teach them well and let them lead the way. Show them all the beauty they possess inside. Give them a sense of pride to make it easier. Let the children's laughter remind us how we used to be." (Whitney Houston, 1986).

BIOGRAPHY

Ileetha Brooks Groom is originally from Los Angeles, California. She graduated from The Brentwood School and attended undergraduate school at the University of California Berkeley, where she received a Bachelor of Arts degree in Psychology.

She immediately began her teaching career as a charter member of Teach For America in her hometown of Compton, California. She taught first grade and kindergarten for two years, after which, she married Attorney John Groom and relocated to Chicago. In Chicago, she taught first and second grade while earning a Master of Arts degree in Elementary Education from St. Xavier University. In 1995, she and her husband moved to North Carolina.

In Wake County Public Schools she taught second grade and worked as a Title I Reading Resource Teacher. She earned the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards Certification in Early and Middle Childhood/Literacy: Reading – Language Arts. While completing her doctorate degree, Ileetha worked as an Elementary English Language Arts Consultant for the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction where she developed curriculum and conducted professional development for teachers across the state. Ileetha has presented research at the American Education Research Association National Conference. She completed her Ph.D. in Educational Leadership and Research at North Carolina State University in 2010.

Ileetha is most proud of her eighteen year marriage to her best friend John Sr. and providing love and guidance to her four children John Jr., Camille, Sydney, and Lindsey.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Purpose of the Study

As the information age of the 21st century progresses, the need for a literate society becomes ever more imperative. The federal government mandates that primary grade students be taught using scientifically-based reading strategies to ensure that no child is left behind (U.S. Department of Education, 2002a). Unfortunately, however, some students will be left behind because they have not met grade-level standards (Brady, 2003).

When students fail to meet these standards, school administrators, teachers, and parents are faced with a daunting decision: Whether or not to promote a student who has failed to meet academic standards because it would be in the student's best interests socially. The decision about grade retention versus social promotion hangs like a millstone around the necks of students who don't meet academic standards, weighing down these children with future emotional, psychological, and academic problems (Anderson, Jimerson, & Whipple, 2002). The practice of promoting students who don't meet academic standards for the sake of their social well-being is known as "social promotion" (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). "Grade retention" is the policy of holding back students who have failed to meet pre-determined academic standards. The approach to helping these students is often perceived as a dichotomous, zero-sum choice between retention and social promotion.

Policies and legislation against social promotion complicate the decision of who to retain or socially promote. To provide guidance, the U.S. Department of Education published a report about social promotion that suggests retention should never be based on a single high-stakes test but rather on a multidisciplinary team approach that considers the individual circumstances of each student (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). This dissertation employed qualitative research design to determine which factors may influence a team's decision to retain or socially promote a student.

The school systems examined in this research were governed by state policy requiring students be at or above grade level before they can be promoted. There are, however, many students who do not meet grade-level standards but continue to the next grade. State policy mandates intervention for students who are socially promoted. School-level multidisciplinary teams make the initial decision about promotion or retention. These committees review student records and meet with the teacher and parents to make decisions on an individual basis. The principal of a school, however, makes the final decision.

Some outside forces may enter into the decision-making process (Jimerson, 2001a). State bonuses and federal policies defined in the No Child Left Behind Act (U.S. Department of Education, 2002a) are two such forces. Committees may be under pressure to ensure that students moving to the next grade can pass the End of Grade exam. When students perform well on this exam, teachers may receive a financial bonus. If students perform poorly, state or local officials may intervene. Intervention will in some instances include several hours of staff development each week, and teachers would not receive additional compensation.

Therefore, committee members' decisions to retain may be affected by how they perceive grade retention and its consequences. In addition, the committee's knowledge or lack thereof about retention and promotion research and available intervention may also shape their decision.

In this dissertation, I use qualitative techniques to determine which factors influence the decision-making process of the multi-disciplinary committees and school administrators. Although there is a wealth of quantitative research about the negative effects of retention, there is limited qualitative research regarding the factors that influence a committee's decision to retain rather than promote a student below grade level. Existing research on the disparity between research and practice with regard to students repeating a grade is also limited. One possible explanation is a lack of knowledge among school level practitioners about research findings. While existing research clearly articulates the disparity between research and practice, there is no major movement toward identifying the root of this disparity or establishing practices to eliminate it. By identifying forces that affect a committee's decision about grade retention, this dissertation seeks to fill that void.

The purpose of the research presented here is to identify which factors school level practitioners consider in deciding whether to retain or promote a student and to ascertain their knowledge of and training in retention research. This research illuminates the process of determining which students are promoted and which are retained, and the results will generate a theory that school administrators may use to establish policies and guidelines to assist promotion–retention committees in better serving students below grade level.

The data were gathered using focus group methodology to interview promotion–retention committees. Interviews were used to uncover what practitioners think and how their committees function. Committee member perceptions were examined to determine their effect on the decision making process. Document analysis also shed light on the training, guidance, and resources that influenced committee members’ recommendations for intervention as well as retention. The data were analyzed using grounded theory. This approach involved formulating initial categories about retention by dividing information into dominant themes (Creswell, 1998). Record analysis of state and local policies and reports was used to correlate themes to support the emerging theory.

Background of the Study

Ayres was one of the first educators to express concern over retention. In his book on laggards, he argued that it was unfair to retain students and questioned a practice that had been cemented into the American educational system for decades:

What is the function of our common schools? If it is to sort out the best of the pupils and prepare them for further education in higher schools, then the most rigorous system, with the severest course of study and the lowest percentage of promotions and the highest percentage of retardation is the best system. But, if the function of the common school is, as the author believes, to furnish an elementary education to the maximum number of children, then other things being equal that school is best which regularly promotes and finally graduates the largest percentage of pupils. (Ayres, 1908, p. 199, as quoted in Labaree, 1984)

For over a hundred years educators, students, and parents have expressed great apprehension about what we refer to today as grade retention and social promotion.

There was a time in our nation's history when social promotion was not an issue. The earliest American schools were one-room schoolhouses with no grade-level organization. In those schools, students advanced through a series of texts at their own pace. Students recited lessons and advanced to more difficult material upon mastery. Because students worked at their own individual rates, there were no peer groups for comparison. There was no promotion or retention, just forward movement at an individual pace (Labaree, 1984).

Graded textbooks and high schools began to appear in the 1840s. The advent of graded textbooks, along with the spread of public education, led to the grouping of students. Based on the industrial model of the division of labor, grade levels replaced the one-room schoolhouse (Snyder & West, 1992). The division of labor model was considered more efficient than the traditional school system. By the early 1900s, most schools were grouped according to grade level. Now that students learned in classes rather than individually, they were required to meet standards to proceed to the next grade. Those who did not were retained until they mastered the curriculum. Chandler (1986) reported that at the beginning of the 20th century, as many as 50% of students had been retained during their academic careers. Retention remained a norm in the school system until the progressive movement took shape in the 1930s.

The progressive movement's child-centered orientation dominated most of the 20th century. According to progressives, the purpose of education is to allow students to live a

better life, and it should be related to their experiences. Grade retention is based on the notion that all students should progress at the same rate and does not factor in developmental differences. Progressives consider schools as miniature democracies that encourage students to think for themselves and that develop their individual talents and interests. They directly oppose the traditionalists' concepts of rigid memorization and drill. These theorists believe that the young are more open to change and are less corrupted by authoritarian rule and prejudices (Walker & Soltis, 1997). An increase in the study of developmental psychology supported the notion that retention was not beneficial for students because students should be allowed to progress at their individual rates (Walker & Soltis, 1997).

Dewey, considered the father of the progressive movement, believed that reality was found within the experiences of the child and that education should promote the development or healthy growth of individual experiences (Flinders & Thornton, 1997). Dewey stressed that the "educational process had two sides, one physiological and one sociological, and that neither can be subordinated to the other, or neglected" (Flinders & Thornton, 1997, p. 291).

Over a period of 50 years, social promotion would enjoy a prominent role in the American education system. Educators believed that students promoted in this fashion would suffer less social and psychological effects. Schools forced to meet the needs of students who had difficulty meeting academic standards turned to tracking (Rose, Medway, Cantrell, & Marus, 1983). The public school system would remain committed to social promotion rather than retention until the reform efforts of the late 1970s.

The American educational system spiraled downward throughout the 1960s and 1970s. During this period, average SAT scores declined steadily, serving as a wake-up call about the decline in American education. The public lost confidence in the high school diploma, and America rated poorly when compared with other developed nations. In response, several state and local school systems enacted tougher standards to ensure that students who graduated from high school demonstrated minimum competency.

The states of California and Florida were among the first to attempt school reform with policies that included mandatory testing and grade retention. In California, state law established minimum competency and detailed specific requirements for schools while allowing modest flexibility. Students were tested once in grades 4 through 9 and twice in grades 10 and 11. Students were required to demonstrate minimum competency in reading, writing, and math. Students with learning disabilities were exempted (Hart, 1978). Florida reformed its state schools through legislation that included mandatory testing and retention. Florida's Accountability Act of 1976 resulted in the Florida Statewide Assessment Program. Students were tested in grades 3, 5, 8, and 11 to determine if they demonstrated minimum competency. The reform effort, "No More Social Promotion," offered remediation to students who scored below the state-established minimum (Fisher, 1978).

The school reform efforts of the late 1970s and early 1980s resulted in increased retention rates among low-performing students; however, this increase was short-lived. Findings from retention research during this era revealed that strict adherence to retention was not beneficial to students, forcing schools once again to re-examine their opposition to

social promotion. Research showed that a large number of minority students were not showing minimum competency, which caused some to speculate that minimum competency might result in the de facto re-creation of a separate education system constructed along racial lines (Cawelti, 1978).

Schools also faced legal concerns over minimum competency. Neill (1997) listed four areas: (a) adequacy of “phase-in” period, (b) the match between the test and the curriculum, (c) the discriminatory effects on minority students, and (d) the treatment of the handicapped. In the face of mounting pressure, most school systems quietly returned to the practice of social promotion. The next era of school reform, in the late 1990s, would also address minimum competency, testing, social promotion, and retention. It is on the heels of this wave of school reform that the present research investigates promotion–retention committees.

Significance of the Study

Most retention research has analyzed the characteristics of the student to determine which factors may influence retention. Much of this research has determined that poor, minority males are more likely to be retained (Thompson & Cunningham, 2000). The uniqueness of the present study and its significance is that it examines the decision-making process of the promotion–retention committee and school administrators rather than focusing on the individual students. Moreover, research suggests that, when exercising its discretion to retain a student, committees and principals do not necessarily consider the wealth of research indicating the negative effects that are likely to result from retention. In determining which

factors influence committee decisions, the injection of research in the decision-making process is another methodological feature that makes this research significant.

This research also contributes to the existing body of literature about retention because it investigates the process. The committees and administrators examined in this research operated under guidelines imposed by state and local school systems. The guidelines were a matter of public record, but how they were interpreted and implemented in North Carolina has not been significantly researched until now.

The committee's perception of retention and how it affects their decision-making process was another factor to consider. According to Gestalt's theory of perception (Clark, 1999), the way one responds in a particular situation is determined by one's perception of the situation. The members of the committee had life experiences that provided insight into the decision-making process. Accordingly, their perceptions of retention and promotion may have influenced their decision as much as did their knowledge about the negative consequences of retention.

This research did not examine the characteristics of students that might pre-identify them as "eligible" for retention, but rather the characteristics of the committee and its individual members. Basing retention on the reasoned conclusion of a committee rather than on an objective or standardized measure, such as a test score, is an effort to individualize the decision in each child's best interest (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). If committees are constrained to completing checklists or handicapped by state or local policies, then the process loses its individuality. In addition, a committee's decision may also be based on

student information from parents and teachers that varies in quantity and quality. As in any decision-making endeavor, the background and predispositions of the participants are factors. This research seeks to illuminate the factors that guide promotion–retention committees and to develop a theory detailing how these committees can best serve low-performing students facing social promotion or retention. The research is best characterized as exploratory because it investigates the forces influencing the decision-making process of promotion–retention committees (Marshall & Rossman, 1999) in an attempt to identify salient patterns that optimize committees’ decisions about promotion and retention.

Research Questions

Grounded theory was the primary method of inquiry for studying the experiences of the promotion–retention committees to determine which factors influenced their decisions. In grounded theory, data are systematically gathered and analyzed to develop a theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). The grounded theory-oriented study’s “primary outcome. . . is a theory with specific components: a central phenomena, causal conditions, strategies, conditions, and context” (Creswell, 1998, p. 58). The guiding principle behind grounded theory is that the theory develops as the research progresses. As new data are introduced, the researcher modifies the theory and creates new questions, thereby generating a more robust theory.

The primary research question was to determine which factors influenced the decision-making process of promotion–retention committees. The following sub-questions sought to determine which contextual and intervening conditions influenced the committee’s decision-making process.

1. How were members selected for the promotion–retention committee?
2. What factors did team members consider prior to making the decision?
3. What resources, training, or guidance did members receive about reading intervention?
4. What resources, training, or guidance did members receive about social promotion and grade retention?
5. What theory can best guide a promotion–retention committee to make individual decisions that are in the best interests of the child?

Definition of Terms

External Promotion–Retention Committee: This committee, composed of teachers and a principal from another school, handles the appeals process for students retained at the school level. Central Office staff may serve on the committee in lieu of a principal. Special education personnel will be on the committee if a student with a disability is being considered for a waiver. The committee makes recommendations to the student’s principal about whether the student should be promoted to next grade. This recommendation is based on documentation presented by teachers on behalf of the student. Parents of any student being presented for review have the right to be a non-voting participant and to speak on behalf of their child.

Internal Promotion–Retention Committee: This committee is composed of faculty from the school, including classroom teachers, academic specialists, psychologists, social workers, and administrators. Students with Individualized Education Plans (IEP) may also

have other professionals present, such as a speech therapist. This committee is charged with determining which students will be retained and which will be promoted. In the event a parent appeals the committee's decision, the student goes before the external promotion–retention committee established by the local school system.

Multidisciplinary Group: A school-level team with any or all of the following: principal, general education teacher, counselor, lead teacher, school psychologist, subject area specialist, special education teacher, parent, school social worker, central office personnel, or other appropriate personnel.

No Child Left Behind (NCLB): The principle federal law affecting K-12 education. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 is the most recent reauthorization of the ESEA and is designed to close the achievement gap with accountability, flexibility, and choice.

Retention: Commonly referred to as “flunking,” retention is the policy of holding back students who have failed to meet standards.

Social Promotion: The practice of allowing students to be promoted to the next grade to satisfy their psychological and social well-being, despite their failure to meet academic performance.

Student Support Team: The purpose of the student support team (SST) is to improve the delivery of instructional services to students experiencing problems of an academic, social, or behavioral nature in school and to serve as a resource for teachers and other educators in the delivery of these services. At the school level, in some districts, this team also serves as the promotion–retention committee.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Overview

This review of literature details the underlying assumptions of grade retention and social promotion research (Marshall & Ross, 1999), provides insight into related research, and identifies gaps in research. The scope and function of promotion–retention committees vary significantly from one school system to the next and is covered as part of this study’s document analysis.

Testing

In the promotion–retention debate, test scores play a major role in determining which students are retained or promoted. The literature review addresses testing and its importance in the committee’s decision-making process. In particular, the review focuses on three issues: (a) literature that explains the different types of test scores, how they are derived and what they mean, and the misuse of test scores; and (b) race, class, and gender in testing issues; and (c) the testing of Black students.

Test Scores.

Most tests used to assess students are standardized tests, which are developed by experts and are intended to be used extensively. With these types of tests, every student has the same format, directions, and amount of time (Bracey, 1998). These tests are sometimes

referred to as Maximum Performance tests and can be further divided into three groups: intelligence tests, aptitude tests, and achievement tests. Three factors that contribute to every score are innate ability, environmental influences (including education), and motivation (Lyman, 1998).

Lyman (1998) reports major differences in how intelligence tests are defined and what content is tested. Generally, intelligence tests can be considered a test of general or scholastic aptitude. These tests may yield a single score (IQ) or several scores. They are used to predict achievement in school. An intelligence test is a norm-referenced test, meaning that student scores are based on a comparison with other people.

Aptitude tests imply prediction of academic success, and they are most often used in the selection process. This type of test may be used to classify students by ability. Aptitude is measured in areas, such as reading and math (Lyman, 1998). As with an intelligence test, an aptitude test is a norm-referenced test.

Achievement tests are designed to assess a student's current level of knowledge. Many of these tests are written locally. The North Carolina End of Grade Test (EOG) is an achievement test. Students who do not score well on this test face retention as a matter of state policy. The EOG is designed to determine whether students have mastered grade-level goals and objectives from the North Carolina Standard Course of Study. Students in grades 3-8 are tested in reading and math. Each student receives three different types of scores.

Percentile scores give a student's score in relation to a norm, allowing for a comparison between other North Carolina students who took the same test. For example, a

student who scores in the 90th percentile means he or she scored better than 90% of students who took the test. Students in North Carolina also get a developmental scale score, which measures growth by comparing a student's score from one year to the next within the same subject. Students also get achievement scores that measure a student's mastery of grade-level expectations. Although these scores measure different criteria, any combination of the three scores may be used when considering retention. Scores are only as good as the people using them when determining which student will be retained. A committee who is uninformed about test scores and how they should be used may make decisions with incorrect assumptions as part of their decision-making process.

When considering promotion and retention, researchers do not recommend using test scores as the exclusive determinant (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). Some researchers acknowledge problems with testing. Lyman (1998) discussed eight problems associated with standardized tests. Two of the most common concerns are that tests do not measure innate intelligence or creativity. Additionally, tests have been misused to label children and track them into ability groups that are seldom redefined. Also, tests can be unfair and yield inconsistent results. Finally, there has been misuse and gross misinterpretation of test results.

When a committee confronts the difficult decision of retention or promotion, their knowledge, understanding, and application of test scores can be a pivotal factor. Potential misuse of test scores can have negative effects on groups that traditionally do not perform well on standardized tests, such as students who are poor, male, or Black, and may account for the large percentage of these students who are retained.

Race, Class, and Gender in Testing Issues.

In North Carolina, as many as 40% of Black students are functioning below grade level (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 1999). For this group of students, it is crucial that promotion–retention committees recommend intervention. Retention committees make decisions that have a disproportionate effect on minority students. The high number of low-performing Black students is not unique to North Carolina but rather is a national concern. According to the U.S. Department of Education (1994), 9-year-old Black students performed lower on reading, math, and science tests than White students. Great differences were found among Blacks and Whites when measured at age 13, where “black children [were] more likely than White children to be below the modal grade for their age” (U.S. Department of Education, 1994, p. 5).

Students are more likely to be retained if they have certain characteristics. For example, students with poor academic skills with limited English-language skills who perform poorly on a prescreening assessment, have moved or been absent frequently, are small in stature, or are the youngest in their grade are more likely to be held back (Sakowicz, 1996).

In many inner-city school districts, more than half the students entering kindergarten may be retained at least once before graduating or dropping out (Karweit, 1992; Slavin, 1996). With such high stakes for Black children, the entire Black community, and society as a whole, the policy of ending social promotion must not be taken lightly. Committees have

an obligation to make decisions in a child's best interest, but this mandate is often unclear and vague mandate that is further confounded by a committee's limited knowledge about at-risk and minority students.

Many researchers agree that social promotion should end (American Federation of Teachers, 2000). The best way to achieve this goal without wholesale retention of Black children is uncertain. "Retention is most often a policy of repetition—students are given an additional year to repeat a grade to go over the same academic content, often taught the same way, that they failed to master the previous year" (U.S. Department of Education, 1999, p. 2).

Retention is not the panacea to social promotion because there are problems with retention as well. When students, Black or White, repeat a grade, they are more likely to drop out of school. Black students are, however, far more likely to repeat a grade than are White students (U.S. Department of Education, 1994). Students may develop emotional or behavioral problems or become alienated from their peers (American Federation of Teachers, 2000). If a student is Black and male, he faces an even tougher battle. Research indicates that Black males have more difficulty testing. If committees place great emphasis on test scores, Black males will be retained more than other demographic groups. The National Association of School Psychologists (2002) recognized through their position statement that Black males are more likely to be retained, and they indicate that children either living near the poverty level, in single-parent households, or both are not as successful on standardized tests and therefore may be retained at higher rates.

Research clearly indicates that minority children are retained more often (McCollum, Cortez, Maroney, & Montes, 1999; Sakowicz, 1996). Some findings suggest this outcome results from these students' poor academic performance in the class and on tests. Other research suggests that when students of equal ability level are considered for promotion, minorities are retained disproportionately (Sakowicz, 1996). A closer look at characteristics associated with testing performance may reveal some insight into committee decisions.

Several factors influence test scores (Bracey, 1998). Family income and parents' level of education are strong indicators of student performance. Income is usually positively correlated to student performance, meaning that the higher the family income is, the higher the student's test scores are. Parent's educational level is the single biggest factor contributing to higher student test scores. Poverty, motivation, personal hygiene, and cultural factors, a term Bracey (1998) used as a global category, have an effect on test scores. Issues associated with testing of Black students fall within this global category. The link between testing and retention coupled with the high percentage of Blacks retained merits a closer look at research of testing Black students.

Testing Black Students.

Bracey (1998) and other researchers have cited socioeconomic status as a factor affecting tests scores. According to Hilliard (1995,p.4), this research also enforces the notion that Blacks in America have been forced to live in nation that

has (a) deprived Black Americans of those experiences that cumulatively develop rich backgrounds, (b) denied Black people those employment opportunities and

associational outlets that enrich home life and social experience; (c) misdirected Black people's work habit, (d) instilled in a disturbingly large proportion of the nation's Black population a negative self-concept, and lack of self confidence, and (e) and distorted the school performance of Black students by a blatant failure to provide equal educational facilities or ensure that the strength of the school's teaching program are/were equally applied.

Testing is a necessary device in our society because it helps to establish a pecking order and maintain a particular world order and cultural orientation. Testing gives promotion-retention committees a starting point. Very often students come to the committee as a result of low performance on a test. Some researchers maintain, however, that there is an undeclared psychometric war on Blacks (Hilliard, 1995). Because of cultural differences between Blacks and Whites in America, there are differences in their view of reality. This contradiction results in a state of Cultural Autonomy (Hilliard, 1995). Hilliard (1995) argues that these inconsistencies along with serious flaws in psychometric assessment have depicted Blacks as inferior and have contributed to increased retention.

Taylor and Lee (1987) examine communication and language issues associated with testing Blacks (as cited in Hilliard, 1995). They maintain that Blacks taking standardized tests are required to perform tasks and manipulate communicative and language codes that are different from their cultural norms. The communication and language patterns of Blacks, particularly working class Blacks, are different from those used on standardized tests. These inconsistencies may also contribute to low test scores and limit promotion to the next grade.

Hoover, Politzer, and Taylor (1990) used a sociolinguistic perspective to study bias in reading tests (as cited in Hilliard, 1995). They concluded that linguistic and cultural differences may be at fault for low tests scores among Black students and contend that social stratification leads to linguistic and cultural biases. Members from the dominant group influence which speech varieties are accepted and taught in our schools. Like the other researchers, they maintain that the inconsistencies between the way Blacks speak and the type of speech on which they are tested is a factor contributing to low test scores. Accordingly, committees considering promotion or retention may rely too heavily on test scores in making decisions.

Another factor that may contribute to poor test scores is that children have different learning styles. Not all children thrive in the same learning environment. Research has shown that because of cultural differences Black students exhibit greater strengths in different areas than non-Black students do. Gardner (1993) defined at least seven different kinds of intelligence, and he proposed that everyone has a profile of strengths and weaknesses. Typical classrooms emphasize linguistic intelligence and logical–mathematical intelligence. Students with weak verbal skills may not perform as well in this type of classroom as they could in a classroom that supports other intelligence areas (Grant & Sleeter, 1998) and, accordingly, may face retention. Gardner’s (1993) research has shown that learning styles overlap somewhat with cultural backgrounds. These similarities exist because of cultural similarities, such as child-rearing practices. Grant and Sleeter (1998) emphasized that students must master the basics to be successful. Their work challenges school personnel to

make the most of existing curricula and capitalize on the students' strengths regardless of how they learn. This particular facet of the testing discussion is highly relevant when the possibility exists that a committee's decision to retain a student means that he or she will be taught the same things in the same way as the previous (unsuccessful) year.

Relating curriculum to the background and experiences of the students may help increase test scores among Blacks (Grant & Sleeter, 1998). The challenge is to find materials that inspire students to learn. Too often, inspiring materials are missing in the traditional classroom. Many would rather make excuses for why students cannot achieve rather than adjusting the curriculum to meet students' needs. Not only should the type of curriculum vary, but so should the delivery. Some groups of students need more structure than others (Grant & Sleeter, 1998). Other factors include the style of working and the learning modality. Knowledge about different learning styles can assist retention committee members in making well-informed decisions about students who have not done well with a traditional approach. Very often these committees make recommendations about interventions to assist the student. If a student has already demonstrated a limited academic performance with traditional teaching styles, knowledge about alternative teaching styles and learning modalities can enrich their decision about what type of interventions to recommend.

America is not a homogeneous society and decisions about promotion and retention cannot be homogenous. Educators have the responsibility to recognize the differences and serve as a resource for classroom teachers seeking strategies. Gardner (1993) does not identify one style as superior to another. He does, however, report a learning style more

prevalent in the dominant culture. Accordingly, retention committee members should not judge children because they are more comfortable with a different learning style, but rather embrace that style and help students make the most of their abilities and eliminate the greatest inequities.

Slavin (1998) questioned the role of education in reducing social inequality. Schools play a role in magnifying differences among ethnic groups. There is a gap in opportunities to achieve and in outcomes. The differences in resources between the richest and poorest schools may be as great as 1.5:1 or even 2:1. The U.S has not done as well in adding funding for minorities, when compared to other countries, like Germany, who fund more for minorities. There is renewed interest in the achievement gap between minority and White students. In North Carolina, the state legislature has devoted special funds to assist schools in closing this gap. By closing this gap, the need to retain students may be reduced. Committees making decisions about promotion should be aware that the gap exists and have a storehouse of strategies to recommend before considering retention.

School Reform Efforts and Retention

As the 20th century closed, the strength and allure of the industrial age faded and was replaced with a new economy fueled by information, communication, and technology. The rapid increase in technology in the 1990s demanded more highly skilled labor. Once again, schools were under scrutiny to increase standards and produce more literate and skilled workers. Many states and school systems enacted policies and legislation to end social promotion. Most of the new policies recommended intervention and suggested retention as a

last option (Dounay, 1999). Another common feature of policies to end social promotion was to establish committees to consider available options when students were not achieving on grade level.

As part of the Student Accountability Standards in North Carolina, the promotion–retention committee must ensure that schools understand the expectations and standards, communicate the policies (both local and state), suggest appropriate intervention strategies and programs, and provide adequate resources for intervention and acceleration (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 1999).

This committee should include parents, teachers from all grade levels, students, administrators, local board members, supervisors, business representatives, and the general public and reflect diversity in gender, ethnicity, socio-economic levels of the community, geographical areas of the LEA, and diverse opinions related to the policy and procedures. The committee will provide advice, guidance, and input into recommendations to the local board of education on policies and procedures related to the standards. (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 1999)

All school systems are also required to establish a separate committee to address parents who appeal a decision about retention. This committee should be an objective group that does not comprise any educators from the child’s home school. The appeals committee makes a recommendation to the school principal on the student’s retention or promotion, but the final decision rests with the principal.

North Carolina is part of a growing trend of states and local school systems that have established promotion and retention guidelines. These policies vary significantly among the states in several areas, including the criteria for retention (e.g. state/district assessment scores, classroom performance); which grades are specified (if any); which subjects are singled out (if any); and the final arbiter of authority (state legislature, board of education, local school board, individual student's teacher, or a combination of the above (Dounay, 1999). In general, the nation's policies can be grouped into one of four categories that are based on:

1. student's score on local or state assessment;
2. state and local requirements;
3. local, school committee, or superintendent decision; and
4. classroom performance.

Arizona, California, Illinois, Minnesota, and Oklahoma fall into more than one category because the criteria in those states are flexible and may include both types (Dounay, 1999). In Colorado, a child may be retained for deficiency in reading but promoted in other subjects. State policy makers across the country designed legislation to raise achievement and increase accountability.

North Carolina's response to reform is the "ABCs of Public Education." The ABC model focuses on strong accountability, high educational standards, teaching basics, and maximum local control. The model for elementary schools mandates that schools meet specific growth levels to be eligible for incentive awards or other recognition. Schools must not have excessive exemptions and must test at least 98 percent of their students. Schools that fall below specific levels are designated as low-performing. State standards are designed to

ensure that students have mastered skills to be successful at the next level before being promoted.

Achievement for students in grades K-2 is based on a mastery of state or local assessments. Standardized tests at the end of the year are used to assess students in grades 3-8, and student performance on the test is placed into categories called “achievement levels.” These four levels are designed to build on each other, just as students are expected to build on previously acquired knowledge. The program mandates that students who do not score at least a Level III must receive intervention. Local school districts design their own standards for promotion, and most policies include retention. The state recognizes schools based on the percentage of students passing the EOG test. Table 1 gives the school Status Labels used as part of the ABCs of Accountability.

Table 1

<u>School Status Labels</u>		
Performance Level Based on Percent of Students' Scores at or Above Achievement Level III	Schools Making Expected Growth or High Growth	Schools Making Less than Expected Growth
90% to 100% Met AYP	Honor Schools of Excellence	No Recognition
90 to 100 AYP Not Met	Schools of Excellence	No Recognition
80% to 89%	Schools of Distinction	No Recognition
60% to 79%	Schools of Progress	No Recognition
50% to 59%	Priority Schools	No Recognition
Less than 50%	Priority Schools	Low Performing

*Note. *The term "low performing" applies to a school that does not meet the expected growth standard and less than 50% of its students are performing at or above Achievement Level III. From <http://www.ncpublicschools.org/nclb/abcayp/overview/abcaypchart> retrieved January 31, 2009*

Many large local school systems have also developed policies to increase academic standards and eliminate social promotion. The influence of these policies varies greatly across the country. In school systems with strict mandates, retention rates are excessively high. Committees contribute less to the decision and rely on the mandates. In 1996, Chicago

Public Schools (CPS) became the first major school system in the nation to publicly denounce social promotion and impose a stringent policy with standards to raise student achievement (Nagaoka & Roderick, 2004). This controversial step was considered by many as the first ripple in a wave of policies ending social promotion and sparking debate about who decides which students are retained (Hauser et al., 2000; Thompson & Cunningham, 2000; U.S. Department of Education, 1999). In Chicago, promotion is based on a minimum score on a standardized achievement test, the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills, in reading and math. Students who do not meet the criteria must participate in a special summer school program and re-test at the end of the summer. Since 1996, Chicago Public Schools has retained 7,000 to 10,000 students a year (Nagaoka & Roderick, 2004). Nagaoka and Roderick reported that retaining students did not increase student achievement but did increase the likelihood that low-performing students would be placed in special education classes. Moreover, by relying on test scores rather than committee decisions, the number of students retained also increased.

Social Promotion versus Retention

As noted earlier, the disparity between research findings and school policies is a major issue in the promotion–retention debate. One possible explanation for this disparity is limited knowledge of school level educators, specifically, promotion/retention committee members, about research. This study sought to address this gap between research and policy by assessing committee members' knowledge about the effects of retention and its alternatives.

Relying on a committee to make decisions only moves the burden to a group of people; it does not alleviate the negative issues associated with retention. Labaree (1984) contends that “neither social promotion nor retention is an adequate solution to underachievement. In large measure because neither requires a change in pedagogy, content or curriculum . . . throughout the 20th century the educational pendulum has swung between these two policies approaches to student failure” (p.68).

Retention presents practical problems for the school system as well. As more students fail each year, the number of students in the classroom increases as does the costs associated with educating them. The cost of educating students for an additional year can be a large expense. Jimerson, et al (2006) report that retaining students in grades Kindergarten through third grade cost the state of Florida over a billion dollars. There are costs for intervention programs and materials. In addition, there is the uncalculated cost of increased dropouts.

In a summary of the literature of the late seventies, Robertson (1977) found common characteristics in students who repeated a grade. Minority and male students were retained at much higher rates. Low socioeconomic status and little or no parental involvement were also common factors. The percentage of students with late birthdays was greater among students retained. Primary grade students were also retained at higher rates, presumably because their social self concept was less affected. The literature of the time also indicated that classroom teachers were usually the ones who recommended which students were retained. Many policies required a committee to recommend the decision, but left the final decision to the

principal. According to Robertson (1977), too often, the committee and principal rubber stamped the teacher's decision, assuming that the teacher knew the students better.

Negative Effects of Retention

Social promotion and grade retention are problematic and are not beneficial for struggling students (Nagaoka & Roderick, 2004; U.S. Department of Education, 1999). To further complicate matters, some researchers strongly suggest that the methodology most often used to study retention and promotion is flawed and caution against drawing conclusions based on such research (Jimerson, 2001a).

Research indicates students suffer negative effects from retention. Students rate being retained as almost as stressful as the death of a parent or blindness (Sevener, 1990), and one-half of all students who repeat one grade drop out of school. The dropout rate increases to 95% when students repeat two grades, although that is very uncommon. The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP, 2002) listed the following negative effects of grade retention:

1. Most children do not "catch up" when retained.
2. Some retained students do better at first, but often fall behind again in later grades.
3. Some retained students get into trouble, dislike school, and feel badly about themselves.

In light of such negative effects, a committee making such high stakes decisions must have a working knowledge of some consequences associated with grade retention.

In response to calls for an end to social promotion, James and Powell (1977) investigated how teachers in a southeast Texas junior high school perceive social promotion. The researchers found that most teachers did not believe social promotion was beneficial or improved self-esteem. Many did not endorse the process and believed that social promotion caused further deterioration. Despite their individual opinions, the study revealed that teachers felt pressure to socially promote students. This study called for special programs to assist low-performing students.

Anderson and West (1992) tried to uncover the feelings and reactions of retained students and their parents. This study used qualitative interviews to find out if and when retention should occur and whether it was beneficial for students. All the respondents expressed a belief that retention was necessary, although not necessarily in their own circumstance. Students and parents agreed that retention aided student achievement.

West and Snyder (1992) investigated the effects of retention in elementary school on subsequent academic performance. Achievement scores of students who were retained increased the first year after retention, but the increase was smaller the second year after retention. The third year after retention, students did no better than those who had been promoted. In addition, the effects of retention were the same in rural and city school systems.

In Labaree's (1984) seminal study of social promotion, he used case studies to analyze the promotional policies in several large urban school districts. He began by detailing the history of social promotion, providing compelling evidence that the bulk of retention literature cannot be trusted because of methodological flaws and noting that, over time,

efforts switched from attacks on social promotion to endorsement of school reform efforts. Labaree suggested that decisions about promotion be based on social values shared by the community.

Fager and Richen (1999) reviewed retention and promotion studies. They discussed how many educators, politicians, and parents persist in believing that retention is beneficial regardless of research to the contrary and cited several works indicating that retention is harmful to students. They also listed the social implications of retention. Their research offered suggestions for schools that sought new approaches to educating low-performing students. Finally, the booklet described two school systems' approaches to the retention and promotion controversy.

In a review of 66 studies about retention from 1990 to 1997, McCollum et al. (1999) reported that 65 of the studies found retention was ineffective or harmful. Retained students suffered low self-esteem and their academic deficiencies were not corrected. In addition, minorities were retained at higher rates, and 40% of the grade repeaters came from the lowest socioeconomic quartile. Retention rates were highest in urban districts.

Natale (1991) estimated that 2.6 million children are retained each year at a cost of \$10 billion. She cited a report that retention is linked to low self-esteem. One strategy to combat retention adopted by some districts is to soften their standards in favor of looking at the individual student, but this idea is unpopular with parents or the public who view grade retention as synonymous with high standards. Natale (1991) stated that students need individualized instruction and that teachers need professional development.

Mantizopoulos and Morrison (1992) compared matched kindergarten students in two ways: within the same age and within the same grade. Same-age comparisons revealed that retained students scored higher the year they were retained, but this gain disappeared the following year. This finding mirrored others that gains during the retained year do not last beyond that year.

Research indicates a plethora of negative factors related to grade retention. These findings challenge school systems to implement alternatives that can help students succeed. Despite the evidence indicating that retention is ineffective, students are still retained. Because of this inconsistency between research and practice, there is a need to determine what will work to help students perform better once they have been retained.

According to current research, retaining students without offering additional assistance is ineffective (Darling-Hammond, 1998). Promoting students who have not mastered basic skills is also not effective. Such findings leave committees with a difficult decision. The U.S. Department of Education (1999) recommended early intervention and extended learning time as ways to address the problem.

Alternatives to Retention

For decades, the only options for students unprepared to proceed to the next grade level were social promotion or retention. As social promotion became associated with low standards, retentions increased. Educators and researchers across the country responded with successful alternatives to retention. A committee's decision of whom to promote or retain might be influenced by successful alternatives. The literature on alternatives characterizes the

students most likely retained and offers alternatives to retention. Very often a committee may make a recommendation for promotion or retention with intervention. The committee's knowledge of possible interventions as well alternatives is crucial to this decision.

A wealth of literature offers alternatives to social promotion and retention (Darling-Hammond, 1998; McCollum et al., 1999; Thompson & Cunningham, 2000; U.S. Department of Education, 1999). Frequently recommended alternatives include early intervention programs, delaying kindergarten, tutoring, keeping the same teacher for more than one year, mixed-age grouping, and individualized instruction.

Darling-Hammond (1998) studied alternatives for improving schools' responses to students in danger of repeating a grade and suggested four strategies. The first strategy is to have competent teachers by enhancing professional development to make sure teachers have the knowledge they need to educate a wider range of students. This alternative assumes that students facing retention have not been taught effectively. The second strategy recommends redesigning school structures to support more intensive learning. One cited example is multiage grouping. There are multiple advantages to this strategy. Struggling students are exposed to older students who model appropriate behavior and provide academic assistance. This variation in the traditional school structure provides opportunities for teachers to provide intense instruction. Darling-Hammond (1998) also advocates the practice of looping. With this type of restructuring, teachers keep the same students for multiple years. Presumably, they get to know their students better and therefore are in a better position to help students who struggle. Cross-grade grouping allows students the flexibility to change

instructional levels for different subjects. In this type of restructuring, a second-grade student having difficulty with reading may go to a first-grade class for reading but remain in a second-grade class for other subjects. This alternative benefits students who have deficits in one subject but excel in most others. They are not denied the opportunity of progressing in other subjects (Darling-Hammond, 1999). At the middle and high school level, students may have the opportunity to repeat just the classes they didn't pass rather than the entire grade. They may also be able to get a "double dose" of difficult subjects by taking two periods of the same class. The third recommendation advocates that students get support and services when needed. For this to happen, classroom assessments must better inform teachers. Once individual difficulties are identified, teachers can provide student-specific instruction and secure additional resources to help struggling students avoid retention.

Alternatives are designed to take the place of retention when students are unprepared to proceed to the next grade. Interventions are designed to assist students make the academic progress necessary to be promoted. Under North Carolina policy, promotion/retention committees have an obligation to provide intervention to students facing retention. Some very common forms of intervention cited in the literature (McCollum et al., 1999) include tutoring from teachers, peer tutoring, extended day programs, Saturday school, extended year programs and summer school, parental involvement, and cooperative learning classrooms. There is very compelling literature with specifics of how some schools implemented these interventions.

Haenn's (1999) study examined how a school system in North Carolina developed an instrument for assessing growth in summer school. The local system developed the measure based on materials 1 year below the grade level of the students in summer school. Growth was measured using the difference between the pre- and post-test performance. Findings indicated that 76% of the fifth graders and 70% of the eighth graders showed improvement.

Hartke (1999) examined social promotion and retention, focusing on successful strategies used in California to help students meet standards and avoid social promotion and retention. For each strategy, Hartke (1999) gives a brief description of the program, the funding source, and the evaluation used to determine the success of the program. This article is unique in that it includes names and telephone numbers of contact people for each suggested strategy.

As school systems seek alternatives to retention and social promotion, they do so with the understanding that the research findings indicating negative effects are methodologically sound and yield credible results, at least in most instances. There are, however, some common methodological flaws in retention research.

Methodological Flaws in Retention Research

To determine the role of research in a committee's decision about which students to retain, the quality of the research must be established. There are well-documented methodological flaws in retention research. This line of inquiry is important to the retention/promotion debate because of the stark differences between research and practice.

When considering possible causes for this disconnect, the caliber of research must be examined.

In 1975, Jackson found that most research on social promotion and retention had one of two different types of biases. The first type of design favors promotion. This design compares students promoted under normal policies with students retained under normal policies. Because students were retained, they obviously had more academic difficulty than those not retained. Accordingly, the promoted students tend to perform better. This type of research is biased towards promotion. This design fails to control for prior achievement. The assumption is that, although all students considered for retention were low performing, the lowest of this group was usually the student retained while others were promoted. So any research that compares these students should pair students with similar academic descriptors and other risk factors, such as the number of absences and birthdates. For instance, a student three reading levels below grade-level expectation is considered low performing and will in all likelihood be presented to the retention committee for consideration. Depending on other factors the committee considers, this student may be promoted. The same committee may consider a student reading six levels below grade level and decide retention is the best alternative. When comparing student achievement at the end of the next year, the promoted student will be performing better than the retained student in most instances. The research doesn't factor in that this student was performing on a higher level prior to retention. The results indicate that the promoted student is performing better and therefore the research is biased toward promotion.

The second design flaw fails to control for maturation. Research finds that students repeating a grade do better. This result is predictable because one would expect students to learn while they are in school, whether they are promoted or not. With this type of methodological flaw, the students compared may in fact be quite similar in academic performance and other mitigating factors such as parental involvement. The flaw in this methodology is based on the notion that the promoted student was exposed to higher level curriculum than the retained student. The retained student may in fact have performed equally as well as his promoted counterpart, if exposed to the higher level curriculum. This type of design does not consider what the promoted student learned in the next grade. In addition, that students are not randomly assigned has been cited as a flaw in methodology (Lindelow, 1985). Lindelow (1985) explains that the major problem in most research studies of promotion and retention involves the lack of a control group and non-random assignment.

Steiner's (1986) article recounts a brief history of social promotion and retention. She then addresses the problems in methodology that plague many research projects and offers suggestions for establishing retention criteria. She also recommends that promotion policies be flexible and use multiple measures.

Ending Social Promotion

Recent efforts have attempted to end social promotion and provide other alternatives to retention. The U. S. Department of Education's (1999) guide is designed to address these efforts, and it recommends the following strategies for ending social promotion:

1. Set clear objectives for students to meet performance standards at key grades.

2. Identify student needs early in order to provide appropriate instructional strategies.
3. Emphasize early childhood literacy.
4. Focus on providing high quality curriculum and instruction.
5. Provide professional developmental that deepens teachers' content knowledge and improves instructional strategies to engage all children in learning.
6. Set explicit expectations for all stakeholders. Including families and communities, in efforts to help end social promotion.
7. Provide summer school for students who are not meeting high academic standards.
8. Extend learning time through before- and after- school programs, tutoring, homework centers and year-round schooling.
9. Reduce class size in primary grades.
10. Keep students and teacher together for more than one year and use effective student grouping practices does.
11. Develop transitional and dropout prevention programs.
12. Hold school accountable for performance by publicly reporting school performance, rewarding school improvement, and intervening in low performing schools.

Limited knowledge and availability of these strategies are just two of many factors that may influence a committee's decisions about retaining a child. Increasingly, in an era of

accountability, testing plays a major role in a committee's decision. The level of understanding about testing and how test scores are best used are also factors that may shape a committee's determination about which students should repeat. Minority students' learning styles and cultural norms may affect how a committee proceeds. The laws and policies that grew out of school reform efforts may shape a committee's decision. In some instances, these policies may serve as guidance for committees, whereas in others they may be strict mandates that strip committees of decision-making power. Another issue that looms within the retention–promotion debate is the lack of continuity between research about retention and school system policy. The prevalence of retention despite research documenting its negative effects indicates that practitioners are either unaware of or do not take seriously the research findings. The possibility of recommending alternatives to retention depends on knowledge and availability of resources. A committee's decision may be influenced by any combination of factors.

As some schools consider options to increase student achievement, school reform models may also influence the decision-making process. The Comer School Development program was developed at Yale University in 1968 as a collaborative effort between New Haven Public Schools and the Yale Child Study Center. This process has been used to reform hundreds of schools. Dr. James P. Comer and a multidisciplinary team created a comprehensive school reform process based on six developmental pathways. Comer's theory asserts that the foundation for all learning is based on a student's physical, cognitive, psychological, language, social, and ethical development (Yale Child Study Center, 2001).

The Comer Process is actually an operating system built around three major components:

1. The School Planning and Management Team develops a comprehensive school plan, sets academic, social and community relations goals and coordinates all school activities, including staff development programs.
2. The Student and Staff Support Team promote desirable social conditions and relationships. Serving on this team are the principal and staff members with expertise in child development and mental health, such as a counselor, social worker, psychologist, or nurse.
3. The Parent Team involves parents in the school by developing activities through which the parents can support the school's social and academic programs. (Yale Child Development Program, Yale Child Study Center, 2001 p.)

The principles of the process call for the school to discuss issues and review problems in a no-fault atmosphere. There is an emphasis on developing a collaborative working relationship among administrators, teachers, parents, community leaders, school district personnel health-care workers. The last of the three principles guiding the Comer Process requires all decisions be reached by a consensus. This school reform model can be used as a school wide intervention that restructures low performing schools and gives the necessary tools to reorganize and improve student learning and reduce the number of students facing retention.

This dissertation seeks to determine which factors are considered and to what extent they influence a committee's decision. The phenomenon studied is the decision-making of the committee. There is limited research about promotion–retention committees, and the majority of existing research has investigated how the committee's decisions affect students or tracks the demographics of students retained. This dissertation investigates the contextual and intervening conditions influencing the committee's decisions in order to develop a theory about how a committee can best meet the needs of a student facing retention. The research question seeks to determine the knowledge committees used as well as determine what members think would assist them in making more informed decisions. In developing this theory, knowledge about retention and the population most affected by retention was crucial to determining the factors most frequently considered by committee members. In addition, this research seeks to determine if committee members had knowledge about research findings about not only the factors related to the retention/promotion debate but also the minority and at-risk students who form the bulk of students retained. In addition, this research seeks to develop a theory that could illuminate which factors committees consider and clearly define the scope and purpose of promotion/retention committees within a research paradigm.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study's design was guided very closely by the qualitative tradition and grounded theory. These concepts influenced not only the questions asked but also the sites and participants selected. This type of analysis required depth and insightfulness. A review of the literature revealed few qualitative studies of grade retention and social promotion. Moreover, the review exposed inconsistencies between policy and practice in promotion and retention. The details and rationale for these inconsistencies were best gathered using qualitative inquiry.

Often the decision to retain or promote a student is made by school-level personnel. Each of the members has a complex system of reasoning that influences his or her decision-making process and contributions to the team. The guiding principle behind grounded theory is that the theory develops as the research progresses. In the process of developing this theory, determining which factors influenced the decision-making process of promotion/retention committees was the guiding question. To provide a more structured flow of the focus group responses, the sub-questions sought to define and articulate subtle caveats of the decision-making process. The open-ended questions sought to illicit rich commentary, a characteristic of qualitative research.

A survey could not capture details to the extent necessary to develop a theory. In grounded theory, the general procedure calls for the researcher to develop the theory from the initial data and constantly compare incoming data to adjust the theory. This adjustment yields new questions that contribute to a more robust theory (Creswell, 1998).

Grounded Theory

As this research unfolded, the newly acquired data was used to modify existing positions and assumptions about the committee's decision-making process. At the four schools in this study, only one school had a standing promotion-retention committee in the truest sense. At two of the schools, the teams were described as "fluid" or "flexible" with the principals as the only static committee member, and each principal was interviewed. At a fourth school there was a standing committee that met only one day of the year to make the final decision on retention. This committee had four members, two of whom consented to an interview. The nature of grounded theory accommodates the adaptations in interviews. At times the existing data generated new questions that served as a leveling factor in developing the theory. Within the context of this specific research, the conclusions can hardly be considered a theory in the truest sense because data collection was limited to schools in one state. What is important, however, is that the data, though limited, contributed to the development of the theory.

The sources of data for grounded theory are the same as other forms of qualitative research including interviews, field observations, documents, and videotapes (Creswell, 1998). Also similar to other forms of qualitative work is the subjective nature of interpreting

the data. The advantage of grounded theory is that the study's subjects contribute data that is influenced by their daily lives and perspectives.

In using grounded theory methodology, the researcher derived a series of plausible relationships between concepts. As the research nears completion, the newly developed theory may be articulated in the "form of a narrative statement, a visual picture, or a series of hypothesis or propositions" (Creswell, 1998, p. 56). The process of developing the theory involves verifying the plausible relationships with more data.

Sample

The process of gaining entry is imperative to a successful research project. The initial contact with school-level personnel was made via a list-serve established by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, NCDPI, to communicate with elementary level administrators. Members of this list-serve include elementary school principals, teachers and central office administrators in North Carolina public schools. This is a restricted list-serve with approximately two hundred sixty members. At the time of the initial contact, only consultants from the Instructional Services Division of NCDPI were able to send emails or add members. As an Elementary English Language Arts consultant in that division of NCDPI, I had access to this list-serve. The e-mail included a brief introduction and summary of the research as well as the interview guide. Less than ten replies were received. I selected four schools based on their geographical location. This is considered a sample of convenience, because I had access to the list-serve due to my position with NCDPI.

The schools selected were from different school districts in different regions of the state. Including schools from diverse areas of the state contributes to the richness of this research. In certain school districts or areas of the state, community attitudes and policies about retention may have had a more pronounced effect on committee decisions. Varying the location of the schools would reduce the effects of this possibility.

Once the four schools were selected, I initiated contact with educators in the four selected districts. In one of the schools, I made contact directly with the principal. In the other three schools, central office personnel made the initial contact with the principal. I provided the IRB Informed Consent form (see Appendix A) as well as the interview guide (see Appendix B) and my introduction chapter. My initial contact was via email. I further described the research and inquired about the committee and the possibility of scheduling a date for the interviews.

At this point in the research, I learned that three of the four schools did not have standing promotion-retention committees but rather assembled a committee as needed. NC North Elementary did maintain a multidisciplinary team to consider promotion and retention. At NC South Elementary, NC East Elementary, and NC West Elementary the composition of the promotion retention committee varied based on the student in question and the availability of school personnel. Principals at NC West and NC South recommended I meet with them rather than convene a contrived version of the “fluid” non-standing committees. Both principals cited the hectic nature of end of the year activities as an explanation for limited access to committee members. The fluid nature of the committees was also a

consideration. Both principals indicated that they were a defacto member of every committee convened to consider promotion and retention. These diverse factors determined the differences amongst interview situations. In NC North and NC East Elementary schools, the data was gathered through a focus group interview with the principal and multiple committee members. There was a brief solo interview with the principal prior to the focus group interviews. The data from NC South and NC East was gathered from an interview with the principal of each school. This research is based on a total of four interviews two were with principals and two with committee members in a focus group format.

This research gathers rich detail and commentary symbolic of qualitative research. The sample in this dissertation was considered a theoretical sampling because they could contribute to the evolving theory. The interviews were tape recorded. Participants used only first names, and tapes remained confidential.

Data Collection

Focus groups, individual interviews, and record analysis were used to collect the data. Focus groups were important for gathering rich information about the factors retention committees consider when promoting or retaining students who do not meet grade-level expectations. A focus group is considered an interview with multiple individuals who are knowledgeable about the topic and have assembled to discuss this topic (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996). This type of interview has its origins in social science research and marketing research. Krueger (as cited in Gall, et al., 1996) listed several characteristics of successful focus groups. For a focus group to be effective, it should be well designed and conducted by

a skilled interviewer. The members of the promotion–retention committees were in a comfortable and familiar setting, which helped them to relax and enabled them to be more open in sharing their ideas and perceptions and making comments. Recent research using focus groups indicates that some people feel more comfortable discussing their feelings, perceptions, and beliefs when they are in a group. Another advantage to using focus groups is that it releases the interviewer from the role of the facilitator. Once the question has been asked, the members take responsibility for expressing their opinions and engaging others to do so as well.

I used a standardized open-ended interview format, with four open-ended questions, for both the individual interviews and the focus groups (see Appendix 2). The questions outlined the parameters for discourse and allowed the committee to orchestrate the responses. The commentaries provided insight into their rationale for promotion–retention decisions.

The specific application of grounded theory in this research requires a detailed explanation of procedures. The foundation of the developing theory relied heavily on the constant comparison of the data. In this research, the major sources of data were focus group and individual interviews as well as record analysis. During the initial interview, I asked questions from the interview guide and recorded responses with an audio recorder. During data collection, I also took written notes about emerging themes or categories and how they might be linked. These steps were part of the note-taking phase. I then reviewed the tapes of the interviews and began the open-coding process by forming initial categories of information (Creswell, 1998). The terms “Category” and “theme” are used synonymously.

This process is a major function of grounded theory. The same procedure was used for all the interviews. Once all interviews were completed and analyzed, two major categories emerged; committee membership and function and retention procedures. These categories can be described as the central phenomena because they appear frequently in the data and are connected to many emerging themes (Creswell, 1998). A conditional relationship guide was used to organize and analyze the themes.

Record analysis was also used to collect data. Records are written communications with an official purpose (Gall et al., 1996). One major record was North Carolina's state policy on grade retention. In addition, each school system also had individual records that related to the promotion–retention dilemma. Other records of interest included district or state materials that provided guidance to retention committee members. These records were coded similarly to the interviews to contribute to the existing categories. Memos were also used during this phase of data collection to make connections among categories.

Data Analysis

Grounded theory shapes the data analysis section of this proposal. Typically, fully developing the methodology section of a grounded theory study is difficult to do, initially. There are, however, several steps and procedures common to all grounded theory studies. As with other qualitative research, I began by organizing the data. The interviews and records yielded a wealth of data about the central phenomenon. The initial stages of analysis involved open coding. During this stage, I reviewed the data and established categories, themes, and patterns (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). I then used the constant comparative

method in conjunction with a conditional relationship guide to saturate the categories. Once the data ceased to contribute new information, a category was said to be saturated and coding was discontinued. Continued analysis led to the creation of sub-categories based on similar themes. I then determined which category represented the central phenomena of interest. I then began axial coding by examining the connections among categories. During this phase of data analysis, I sought to identify causal conditions that influenced the central phenomena as well as intervening conditions that contributed to the committee's decision making (Creswell, 1998).

The final level of analysis in grounded theory produces a completed conditional relationship guide. After analyzing the data, I derived a series of plausible relationships between concepts. As the research neared completion, the newly developed theory was articulated in the "form of a narrative statement, a visual picture or series of hypothesis or propositions (Creswell, 1998, p. 148).

The retention debate is steeped in controversy over the inconsistency between research and practice. From the data analysis, I developed a theory about the role of promotion-retention committees and supported it with the literature review to strengthen the correlations and validate the developing theory.

Research Validity

In quantitative research, validity refers to the extent to which an observed effect can be attributed to a treatment variable. The concept of validity also exists in qualitative research. Yin (as cited in Gall et al., 1996) described three types of validity criteria in

qualitative research: construct, internal and external. Construct validity is the extent to which a measure used in qualitative research correctly operationalizes the phenomena being researched. For example, in this study of factors that influenced committee decisions, a question might be constructed to determine what level of knowledge committee members had about the negative effects of grade retention. If the questionnaire asked respondents what they had read about the negative effects of grade retention, respondents who had attended staff development or conference presentations about retention may not have actually read about it but still have a high level of knowledge. In this case, the construct validity of that particular question would be compromised. Internal validity is the extent to which a researcher demonstrates that the effect of one variable on the phenomenon being studied cannot be attributed to another variable. External validity is the extent to which the findings of the research can be generalized. These terms are not used in all forms of qualitative research.

Some researchers have reconceptualized the concept of validity and used terms such as “verification,” “plausibility,” “authenticity,” “credibility,” or “relevance” (Creswell; 1998; Gall et al., 1996). Creswell (1998) uses the term *verification* rather than validity to establish qualitative research as a distinct mode of inquiry. He lists eight verification procedures for qualitative research and recommended that researchers use at least two procedures in any study. These verification procedures are: 1) prolonged engagement and persistent observation; 2) use of multiple sources or triangulation; 3) peer review or debriefing; 4) clarifying researcher bias; 5) using rich, thick descriptions; 6) negative case analysis; 7)

taking data interpretations and analysis back to the participants so they can judge accuracy; and 8) external audit. In an external audit, an external consultant reviews the research to determine if the interpretations and analysis are supported by the data.

In grounded theory, literature is used to validate the emerging theory. Validity can also be established by judging the quality of a grounded theory using seven criteria presented in Straus and Corbin (as cited in Creswell, 1998). The first criterion is to determine what grounds were used to select the sample. The second criterion questions what major categories emerged. Determining which indicators helped establish these categories is the third criterion. Number four seeks to determine what categories determined the theoretical sampling as well as what guided data collection and what is representative of the categories. Criterion five seeks to articulate some of the hypotheses pertaining to conceptual relations among categories and on what grounds were they formulated and tested. Number six is addressing the discrepancies when a hypothesis did not hold up to what was observed in the research. The final criterion seeks to determine how and why the core category or central phenomenon was selected. Determining if this was a sudden or gradual process as well as on what grounds the core category was selected helps to establish validity or verify the research. Satisfying these criteria will establish this research as a sound, well-crafted grounded theory study. Although there are differences in the terminology within the qualitative research, the concept of validity exists and is an important component in this research tradition. This research study satisfied seven of the eight criterion.

Summary

LeCompte and Preissle (1993) described theory as human constructions that “are created by developing a set of propositions, postulates, or generalizations which establish relationships between things in some systematic way” (p. 120). In qualitative research, the theoretical perspective of the researcher heavily influences data collection, research questions, and investigative techniques. Addressing or clarifying researcher bias is an important part of ensuring validity.

In grounded theory, perhaps more than in other qualitative approaches, the researcher’s ideas and predispositions influence the research development. The researcher is in fact considered an instrument in the data collection and analysis. This role as an instrument is a symbolic reference to the notion that once a researcher begins observing a phenomenon, he or she in fact changes the phenomenon.

As a qualitative researcher, is it important to clarify the lens through which reality is seen because it influences not only what is researched, but also how that research is conducted. As an African American mother with 17 years’ experience as a public school teacher, I brought a certain amount of familiarity to the subject. Neither my children nor I have ever been in danger of repeating a grade, but I have recommended it for students and family members. This being said, I would not consider myself an advocate of grade retention in all instances, but rather a cautious supporter of retention coupled with intervention. I have also socially promoted dozens of children.

It is through my eyes that the data were coded and categorized. As the interviews progressed, I had the flexibility of pursuing certain lines of inquiry and not others. This research used seven criteria presented in Straus and Corbin (as cited in Creswell, 1998) to ensure data integrity and continue the unbiased spirit of the qualitative tradition.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Qualitatively, the results of the research are fascinating. The results are presented in two major sections including School Descriptions and Themes. The primary methods for data collection were in-depth interviewing and document analysis. Marshall and Rossman (1999, p.105) describe these primary methods as part of the “core of qualitative inquiry-the staples of the diet.” The interviews were based on the interview guide (Appendix B) and varied in length and number of participants. According to Marshall and Rossman (1999), “An interview is a useful way to get large amounts of data quickly. When more than one person participates (e.g., focus group) the interview process gathers a wide variety of information across a larger number of subjects” (p.108).

There were a total of four interviews for this research. Two interviews were with principals only. Two were with promotion/retention committees using the focus group format. In both lone interviews, the principal indicated that their school did not have a set committee and that they made the decision. While this does not give the breadth of information typical of a focus group, it does provide insight into the school level interpretations of state level mandates regarding the retention process. The state does give the principal the final decision on retentions, but is also requires schools to establish committees. Both principals did appear to be knowledgeable to a certain extent about research pertaining to retention. Their interviews provide more details of their decision making process.

In the two schools that did have committees, they varied greatly. NC North had a committee with over a half dozen members depending on the student in question. The day of the interview there were eight members present. They included the principal, nurse, reading specialist, counselor, special education teacher, social worker, and a classroom teacher. This is in contrast to NC East. The committee at this school is limited to four people. These members were selected because they were available to meet at the one annual meeting. On the day of the interview, the principal and a student teacher participated in the complete interview. The school counselor did stop by after the taping and shared local documents pertaining to retention. The results of the research are analyzed to determine what factors the committee members consider in making promotion decisions.

The interviews are supported by analysis of local and state policies and forms. Reviewing the documents has provided an objective and impartial opportunity to determine what information is considered prior to retention. This section will present the results of the interviews and document analysis. For the sake of confidentiality, each school has been assigned a pseudonym indicating the relative geographical area of the state in which the school is located. This research is based on interviews at four schools, referred to as NC North, NC South, NC East and NC West.

The School Description section includes detailed demographics of each subject school and local education agency (LEA) based on that school's profile in the Education First NC School Report Card for the 2005-06 school year (North Carolina Education Research Council, 2006). "Detailed report cards for every school and district in the state are available

on the NC School Report Cards website. The report cards are a collaborative effort of the North Carolina Education Research Council, the Governor's Office and the NC Department of Public Instruction,” (North Carolina Education Research Council, 2004). Information about the local communities was gathered from the U.S. Census Bureau’s Quick Facts website (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.) The synthesis of these documents provides a historical basis for the study and allows the categorization of the interviews into themes. These themes, taken collectively, yield a litany of factors school level practitioners consider in deciding whether to retain or promote a student who does not meet grade level standards.

School Descriptions

NC North Elementary

The first school is NC North Elementary. It is a traditional school with grades fourth through sixth. It is located in a county with slightly less than 24,000 people. Major industry and agriculture support the area economy and the median household income is above the state average; only 22 percent of residents report incomes below Area Median Income (AMI). Blacks and Whites are the dominant ethnic groups at 60 and 37 percent of the population, respectively; Hispanics and Native Americans make up slightly less than 2 percent of the population.

The Local Education Agency (LEA) has one pre-kindergarten through sixth grade school and one pre-kindergarten through third grade school that feed into NC North. There is also one middle school and one high school. The LEA has undergone state intervention at

other schools and district headquarters due to low student performance on the State's ABC Accountability mandate. NC North has been designated a "Priority" school based on its having 50 to 60 percent of students at grade level or less than 50 percent at grade level. In addition, only 15 out of a possible 21 AYP targets were met during this school year. The school meets the state standard for internet capability and is at the state average for incidents of violence. There are 530 students in fourth through sixth grade. The average class size is comparable to the state average of 21 students per class. The school has 37 classroom teachers, 78 percent of whom are fully licensed teachers. While the percentage of fully licensed teachers is lower than the LEA and state average, there is very little turnover in this school. This information provides insight into the local community as well as the environment at NC North. The academic performance of students is best displayed in table form. Table 2 details performance in each grade for the 2005-06 ABCs End-of-Grade-Test. Table 3 displays performance of each student group on the ABCs End-of-Grade-Test.

Table 2

2005-06 Performance of Students in Each Grade on the ABCs End-of-Grade Tests: NC

*North Elementary School - Percentage of students' scores at or above grade level**

	Grade 4		Grade 5		Grade 6		OVERALL	
	Reading	Math	Reading	Math	Reading	Math	Reading	Math
Our School	68.6	37.8	76.2	36.6	71.8	41.6	72.1	38.7
# of Tests Taken	185	185	164	164	177	178	526	527
District	68.5	46.2	74.1	42.4	72.2	45.7	71.8	40.5
State	83.4	65.0	88.4	63.1	81.5	61.9	84.9	63.4

Note. If the number of students in a category is 5 or fewer, then results are not shown and are represented by a N/A.

* New math tests based on revised Standard Course of Study. From Education First NC School Report Cards. (n.d. 2005-06 School Report Cards) Retrieved March 2, 2007, from <http://www.ncreportcards.org/src/>

Table 3

*2005-06 Performance of Each Student Group on the ABCs End-of-Grade Tests: NC North Elementary School - The percentage of students, grouped by gender and ethnicity, who passed BOTH the reading and math tests.**

	All	Male	Female	White	Black	Hispanic	American Indian	Asian/Pacific Islander	Multi-Racial
Our School	34.0	35.9	32.2	44.5	30.1	N/A	N/A	N/A	50.0
# of Tests Taken	526	256	270	110	399	3	4	2	8
District	35.8	34.8	36.8	50.4	32.1	58.8	57.1	77.8	62.5
State	61.2	59.9	62.5	73.5	40.0	49.3	45.8	79.5	62.6

Note. If the number of students in a category is 5 or fewer, then results are not shown and are represented by a N/A. From Education First NC School Report Cards. (n.d.) 2005-06 School Report Cards. Retrieved March 2, 2007, from <http://www.ncreportcards.org/src/>

NC South Elementary School

The next school featured in this research is a traditional school with grades pre-kindergarten through fourth grade referred to here as NC South Elementary. The school is located in a city-based LEA rather than a county-based LEA. The description of the community is based on information from Quick Facts from the U.S. Census Bureau (n.d.).

The local economy is support by the textile manufacturing and construction industries. The racial composition of the local community is: 77 percent White; 16 percent Black; 6 percent Hispanic; and less than one percent Native American. About 17 percent of city's 41,000 residents are below the AMI.

The Local Education Agency (LEA) is composed of five elementary schools educating students from pre-kindergarten through the fourth grade. There is one interim school for all fifth and sixth graders which feeds the only middle and high school in the LEA. To date, this LEA has not undergone the state mandated intervention based on poor student performance. NC South met all thirteen AYP targets and was designated a "School of Progress," meeting its expected growth objectives. There were no reported incidents of violence or crime and all classrooms have internet access. Of the 419 students at this school, 47 percent are White, 26 percent Black and 26 percent Hispanic. Native Americans make up less than one percent of the population. The average class size at all grades is below the state average, as is the teacher turnover rate. NC South exceeds the state and local average for

fully licensed instructors, with 97 percent holding state teaching credentials. To the extent that the community and school environment may influence the decision making process for retention, this descriptive text provides necessary background information. Tables 4 and 5 were prepared as part of the school report card and provide more detailed information about academic performance.

Table 4

*2005/6 Performance of Students in Each Grade on the ABCs End-of-Grade Tests: NC South Elementary School - Percentage of students' scores at or above grade level**

	Grade 3		Grade 4		Grade 5		OVERALL	
	Reading	Math	Reading	Math	Reading	Math	Reading	Math
Our School	82.2	63.0	85.2	55.6	N/A	N/A	83.5	59.8
# of Tests Taken	73	73	54	54	N/A	N/A	127	127
District	75.4	58.1	81.6	61.8	84.8	55.3	80.8	57.9
State	82.9	67.8	83.4	65.0	88.4	63.1	84.9	63.4

* If the number of students in a category is 5 or fewer, then results are not shown and are represented by an N/A.* New math tests based on revised Standard Course of Study. From Education First NC School Report Cards. (n.d., 2005-06 School Report Cards) Retrieved March 2, 2007, from <http://www.ncreportcards.org/src/>

Table 5

*2005-06 Performance of Each Student Group on the ABCs End-of-Grade Tests: NC North Elementary - The percentage of students, grouped by gender and ethnicity, who passed BOTH the reading and math tests.**

	All	Male	Female	White	Black	Hispanic	American Indian	Asian/ Pacific Islander	Multi- Racial
Our School	55.1	60.0	50.0	65.2	41.7	46.4	N/A	N/A	33.3
#of Tests Taken	127	65	62	69	24	28	0	0	6
District	54.9	55.0	54.9	63.8	41.4	48.7	28.6	75.7	53.8
State	61.2	59.9	62.5	73.5	40.0	49.3	45.8	79.5	62.6

Note. If the number of students in a category is 5 or fewer, then results are not shown and are represented by a N/A. From Education First NC School Report Cards. (n.d.) 2005-06 School Report Cards. Retrieved March 2, 2007, from <http://www.ncreportcards.org/src/>

NC West Elementary School

The third school will be referred to as NC West Elementary School. It is located in a county of about 43,000 with tourism and education as the main industries. Eleven percent of residents live below the AMI. This is well above the state average, but calculations do consider the large number of college students in the county who, although below the AMI, are not typical of others in this population, in terms of education level and earning potential. The county is 95 percent White with Blacks and Hispanics composing just about 2 percent of the population each. Less than one percent of local residents report being Native American. NC West is one of eight pre-kindergarten-to-eighth grade schools that feed into the only high school in the county. The LEA has not received mandatory intervention related to poor student performance. The state has designated NC West as a “School of Distinction” for consistently meeting expected growth objectives. This honor indicates that 80 to 90 percent of students are at grade level. As one might expect, this school also met all fifteen AYP targets. Like the previous schools, there have been no reported acts of violence or crimes, and all classrooms have internet access. The 532 students who attend this school have an average class size that exceeds the state average. 90 percent of teachers are fully licensed and stable, as indicated by the 5 percent turnover rate. The demographics listed here offer some insight into the local community and school climate. The academic performance of students is best viewed comprehensively in Tables 6 and 7.

Table 6

2005-06 Performance of Students in Each Grade on the ABCs End-of-Grade Tests:

NC West Elementary Grades 3 – 6 - Percentage of students' scores at or above

*grade level**

	Grade 3		Grade 4		Grade 5		Grade 6		OVERALL	
	Reading	Math	Reading	Math	Reading	Math	Reading	Math	Reading	Math
Our School	89.3	85.7	>95	78.1	>95	83.9	94.4	84.9	>95	81.7
# of test taken	56	56	73	73	56	56	54	53	362	361
District	90.1	85.8	92.5	79.8	>95	77.4	>95	81.0	94.4	81.0
State	82.9	67.8	83.4	65.0	88.4	63.1	81.5	61.9	84.9	63.4

* If the number of students in a category is 5 or fewer, then results are not shown and are represented by an N/A.* New math tests based on revised Standard Course of Study. From Education First NC School Report Cards. (n.d., 2005-06 School Report Cards) Retrieved March 2, 2007, from <http://www.ncreportcards.org/src/>

Table 7

*2005-06 Performance of Each Student Group on the ABCs End-of-Grade Tests: NC West Elementary - The percentage of students, grouped by gender and ethnicity, who passed BOTH the reading and math tests.**

	All	Male	Female	White	Black	Hispanic	American Indian	Asian/ Pacific Islander	Multi- Racial
Our School	81.2	84.9	76.5	83.8	N/A	21.4	N/A	80.0	83.3
# of Tests Taken	361	199	162	334	2	14	0	5	6
District	79.5	80.3	78.6	80.9	61.9	42.0	N/A	76.5	68.2
State	61.2	59.9	62.5	73.5	40.0	49.3	45.8	79.5	62.6

Note. If the number of students in a category is 5 or fewer, then results are not shown and are represented by a N/A.

From Education First NC School Report Cards. (n.d.) 2005-06 School Report Cards. Retrieved March 2, 2007, from

<http://www.ncreportcards.org/src/>

NC East Elementary School

The last school detailed is a traditional pre-kindergarten-to-fifth grade school. During the 2005-06 school year there were 1,071 students enrolled. This number is significantly higher than the state average of 505. There is a new school opening in the fall to relieve the overcrowding. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, this school's county has more than 152,000 residents. It is important to note that although 69 percent of this county is considered rural, it serves as a "bedroom community" to a very large, urban county. NC East is less than a mile from the county line, and most of its students are more urban than rural. The demographic composition of the student body is as follows: white - 82 percent; black - 15 percent; Hispanic - 8 percent; and Native American - less than one percent. Approximately 12 percent of residents were below the AMI at the time of this study. This is slightly less than the state average. The majority of workers are either employed by private companies or government agencies.

NC East's county is the largest LEA studied here, with a total of 43 schools. A unique feature in the LEA is the one kindergarten-to-twelfth grade school. There are 26 elementary schools, 10 middle schools, and 6 high schools. The state has not intervened in this LEA, having deemed student achievement sufficient. NC East is considered a "School of Distinction" because at least 80 percent of the students are on grade level. The school also achieved "High Growth" and made all seventeen AYP targets for the school year in which the research was collected. Similar to other schools studied, there have been no acts of crime

or violence, and NC East exceeds the state average for technology, with all classrooms having internet access. All of the classes are taught by fully certified teachers and the turnover rate is 17 percent. The average class size is comparable to state averages. These demographics provide details that compliment the academic description of the school presented in Tables 8 and 9.

Table 8

*2005-06 Performance of Students in Each Grade on the ABCs End-of-Grade Tests:
NC East Elementary - Percentage of students' scores at or above grade level**

	Grade 3		Grade 4		Grade 5		OVERALL	
	Reading	Math	Reading	Math	Reading	Math	Reading	Math
Our School	77.3	90.1	80.5	89.9	70.7	85.7	76.4	88.7
# of Tests Taken	141	141	149	149	133	133	423	423
District	62.5	82.2	64.1	79.2	61.3	75.8	60.6	77.6
State	54.5	73.2	59.2	72.8	55.6	69.6	55.6	69.9

Note. If the number of students in a category is fewer than five, then results are not shown and are represented by a N/A. New reading tests based on revised Standard Course of Study. From Education First NC School Report Cards. (n.d.) 2005-06 School Report Cards. Retrieved March 2, 2007, from <http://www.ncreportcards.org/src/>

Table 9
*2005-06 Performance of Each Student Group on the ABCs End-of-Grade Tests: NC East Elementary - The percentage of students, grouped by gender and ethnicity, who passed BOTH the reading and math tests.**

	All	Male	Female	White	Black	Hispanic	American Indian	Asian/ Pacific Islander	Multi- Racial
Our School	73.5	72.4	74.9	78.7	50.9	61.5	N/A	N/A	68.2
# of Tests Taken	423	232	191	314	57	26	N/A	N/A	22
District	56.6	54.4	59.0	67.6	35.1	37.1	50.0	76.9	50.5
State	50.9	48.6	53.2	64.4	29.5	34.6	34.6	65.9	51.7

Note. If the number of students in a category is 5 or fewer, then results are not shown and are represented by a N/A. From Education First NC School Report Cards. (n.d.) 2005-06 School Report Cards. Retrieved March 2, 2007, from <http://www.ncreportcards.org/src/>

This study sought to determine what factors school-level personnel use when making decisions about promotion and retention. The statistical and demographic content highlighted above offer an objective representation of not only the schools interviewed but also the LEA and surrounding community. These descriptors may impact the factors considered for retention. For instance, in a community with a large number of military families committees may consider the mobility of students more favorably than in others. In a community with a high percentage of Spanish speaking students, the availability of ESL resources may influence a committee's decision. The school-level personnel that consider promotion and retention may be influenced by community standards and norms. As such, a rich description of the communities surrounding the schools in this research provides necessary detail.

The next section is focused on presenting results of the interviews at all four schools organized around major themes. Quotes from school personnel will be anonymous, and cited as personal communication from a specific school with the month, day, and year of the interview.

Categories and Themes

The interviews yielded high quality data, focusing on the retention process and which factors are considered. The data has been organized into common themes and each theme was listed on a Conditional Relationship Guide (see Appendix C). The Conditional Relationship Guide is a research tool used in grounded theory research. The procedure assists researchers with comparing, contrasting, and analyzing themes and categories. The two

major themes are: 1) Committee Composition and Function and 2) The Retention Process and Documentation.

Committee Membership and Function

In 1999, the North Carolina State Board of Education (NCSBE) called for the formation of a Promotion Retention Committee and outlined a procedure for retaining students who are not performing at grade level (NCSBE, 1999). This procedure resulted in The Student Accountability Standards Policy. The Policy specifically states,

- (4) The LEA shall appoint a committee to review student promotion requests. This committee shall be composed of teachers and either principals from other schools or central office staff and shall make recommendations to the student's principal about whether the student should be promoted to the next grade. This recommendation shall be based on documentation presented by teachers on behalf of the student. Special education personnel shall be on the committee if a student with a disability is being considered for a promotion. Parents of any student being presented for review shall have the right to be a non-voting participant, and further shall have the right to speak on behalf of their child. (NCSBE, 1999)

A fair reading of this policy would suggest that district personnel who have never met or worked with the student actually have a legal right to make the decision to promote or retain, subject to the principal's veto. Later, a special note in the policy states, "While this policy provides a mechanism for considering promotion requests, all promotion decisions must be

made in accordance with both State and local policy” (NCSBE, 1999). State policy indicates that principals have the final call on grade placement.

These seemingly contradictory statements have left LEAs with the responsibility of interpreting and implementing the policy using their own discretion. The composition, formation, and function of the committees – as well as the role of the principal – varied significantly in the schools studied.

NC North Elementary School – Promotion/Retention Committee

NC North elementary was the only school that used a truly multidisciplinary team as the promotion/retention committee. NC North employed a standing committee to make their decisions. The committee was composed of a representative from each grade level, counselor, school nurse, reading specialist, instruction specialist, special education teacher and administrator. The Student Staff Support Team (SSS Team) served as the committee to initiate the referral process for children with exceptional needs.

The entire SSS Team, including the principal and seven others who will be referred to collectively as “the committee” was interviewed all at once using a focus group format. Once a student is referred, the classroom teacher is invited to join the committee to provide firsthand knowledge about the child’s progress, behavior, and any other matters that the committee should consider. The committee has the option to recommend additional testing and screening. In addition, the committee may recommend different forms of intervention (as discussed later in this chapter). The committee collectively makes major decisions about

the possibility of retention. It is a committee in the truest sense because it meets on a regular schedule and has a definite membership. According to the principal, “We develop a form that we send to the parent and we give instructions to teachers of what to actually write on the report card when that child is being recommended for our summer school program” (NC North Interview, Personal Communication, June 6, 2006).

This level of involvement by the entire committee is not seen at the other schools in this research. At NC North, the principal and the team functioned as one unit with regard to the promotion/retention decision. It is important to note that most members of this committee work directly with the student. Direct involvement gives them relevant knowledge of the student, his progress and abilities, and his attitude and persona – all factors to consider when making the promotion/retention decision (NASP, 2002).

In addition, members’ participation on the committee was based on their abilities to contribute to the dialogue from various disciplinary perspectives. There did not appear to be any exercised seniority by the principal with regards to decisions about promotion or retention. Based on the interview, it appears that the committee as a whole works together to make a decision in the best interest of the student. The role of the principal is infused with that of the committee.

NC South Elementary School – Promotion Retention Committee

The principal at NC South takes a much more active role in the promotion/retention dialogue. At NC South Elementary, there is no standing committee. The principal and the

student's classroom teacher solicit input from other teachers involved with the student. Every student referred has a different committee chaired by the principal. Accordingly, at NC South Elementary, the sole interview was with the school's principal. He made his role very clear: "I am the principal and I do have to make the final decision about what grade to place someone in, so my point of view is the final point of view that counts. But I don't want teachers *not* to bring me retention candidatesthey are going to hear my philosophy" (NC South Interview, Personal Communication, June 5, 2006).

NC South Elementary occasionally utilizes a district-level waiver committee to review retention and promotion decisions. This committee evaluates all the information presented and makes a recommendation.

The teacher comes and they give you the background of the child...and then they bring work samples through the course of the year to demonstrate that the child has been doing grade level work. They bring AR records, writing samples....If they demonstrate to the committee that this is just a one shot deal that this child has been doing grade level work all year. The committee that I sat on.... we said no to one and we said yes to twoit's not...an automatic thing....We didn't really have any evidence that the child (to be promoted was doing grade level work)...I don't know whether that principal decided to promotion or not (NC South Interview, Personal Communication, June 5, 2006).

In this scenario a committee of educators considers all relevant information prior to making a decision about retaining or promoting a student.

Students may go to the waiver committee if the teacher requests it or the parents disagree with the school-level decision and believe their child has been doing grade-level work. The principal/interviewee has served on a waiver committee previously, and he provided valuable insight into how the waiver committee functions: “It’s a system wide committee....the teachers that work aren’t teachers at our school” (NC South Interview, Personal Communication, June5, 2006).

Initially, this appeared to be a committee functioning according to the NCSBE policy regarding a promotion retention committee. Upon further discussion I came to learn that this committee is for students being considered for retention because they did not pass the EOG, but they have demonstrated grade level proficiency by some other standard such as local assessments or classroom performance. The committee members have no official forms or outlined procedure. The committee members write notes about their feelings and comments on if the work presented is grade level work. Once they make a decision, the student’s principal has the final word on grade placement.

At NC South, there is a school-level assistance team that initiates the special education referral process, but it does not function as a promotion/retention committee. Teachers who interact with a student being considered for retention confer and the principal makes the final decision that is subject to review by a district level committee. At this school, the principal, not the assistance team makes the decision about which students to retain or promote, even students in the exceptional children’s program.

NC West Elementary School – Promotion Retention Committee

At NC West, the committee is described as “fluid.” The principal indicated that the promotion/retention decision is made by a committee composed of the “principal, the child’s teacher, any other support personnel who work with that child. And we also bring in the parents”. NC West Elementary does not utilize a committee in the truest sense - the only time the “committee” meets is in reference to a particular child. NC West does not use a standing committee approach; there are no regularly scheduled meetings throughout the year and committee participants do not make decisions with regard to the promotion of a student. Accordingly, the interview conducted at NC West Elementary was with the principal.

At NC West, a school-wide assistance team handles the referral process for exceptional students. A teacher may request advice from the assistance team, but a majority of students who are retained are not formally referred to the assistance team. “When teachers have conflicting evidence of strong periods of academic growth then laps back and haven’t shown growth parent and teacher may be just in quandary. Three to five kids [on the retention list] a year come to our assistance team just for some advice” (NC West Interview, Personal Communication, June 9, 2006).

For most of the year, decisions that affect whether or not a student is retained are made solely by the classroom teacher unless he or she asks the assistance team for advice. It is not until March that the “fluid committee” takes form. The principal says that the teacher will

...ask for those students' names in March and then we start having those meetings all through March, April, and even into May. . . We sit down together child by child and we can make the decision at that point or we say we're gonna waitwait for 3rd grading period assessment or even the end of year assessment we just decide on each child as a group whether we're gonna go ahead and decide at that point or whether we're gonna wait for more information to come in." (NC West Interview, Personal Communication, June 9, 2006).

This committee's decision making process may extend to the end of the school year. This gives them more data to assist them in making an informed decision.

NC East Elementary – Promotion/Retention Committee

NC East Elementary had perhaps the most detached promotion retention committee. According to the principal, members are selected based on their time availability. The interaction of potential committee members with the student - or lack thereof - is not a consideration. For the school year during which I conducted this research, the principal, counselor, and an assistant principal, in turn, all served on the committee. The principal of a new school opening to relieve over-crowding at NC East was also included on the committee. While membership in the committee is firm, they only meet briefly at the end of the year. They do not contribute to the ongoing process throughout the school year. The interview at NC East Elementary was conducted with the principal and one committee member.

The members in the committee meet the week prior to End of Grade (EOG) testing to consider retention for kindergarten through second grade. Retention in grades three through five are made after the EOG. The committee has not been involved with any decisions regarding intervention or other recommendations to increase student achievement prior to this meeting. The only intervention the committee considers is retention. The fate of forty-seven students was decided during a one-day meeting by four committee members who had not worked directly with the students. This is a departure from state recommendations (NCSBE, 2005).

In addition to the retention committee, NC East Elementary also has an assistance team that begins the initial stage of referral for the exceptional children program. If we see that children are having difficulty in specific areas or with specific skills, if we see that children have inattention, if we see that children are not developing cognitively at the rate an average child might be for that grade level, teachers refer for interventions and we go through that process (NC East Interview, Personal Communication, June 5, 2006).

The principal does acknowledge that actually knowing something about the student being considered for retention can be helpful. There is some overlap between students reviewed by the promotion retention committee and students referred to the assistance team. When students go through both processes they benefit from the counselor's insight and knowledge of their progress. There are classroom teachers on the assistance team. The same is not true of the promotion/retention committee. At NC East Elementary, the role of the principal and even the existence of a promotion/retention committee are far from

standardized. The same can be said of the retention process. The next section delves into the different retention procedures.

Retention Procedure and Documentation

Despite major differences among retention procedures in the schools studied, all public schools in North Carolina are governed by state mandated Student Accountability Standards/Gateways:

Gateway 1 – Grade 3

- Effective in the 2001-2002 school year
- Meet local promotion requirements
- Demonstrate grade-level proficiency by scoring at Level III or above on the state end-of-grade tests in reading and mathematics

Gateway 2 – Grade 5

- Effective in the 2000-2001 school year
- Meet local promotion requirements
- Score at Level III or above on state end-of- grade tests in reading and mathematics
- Score at or above proficiency level 2.5 on the grade 4 writing assessments

(North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2006)

In addition to the Gateways, all students have the same number of opportunities to pass the End of Grade test. Within three weeks from the original test date, students unsuccessful in

passing the End-of-Grade test are offered remediation by the LEA prior to the retest.

Students who are not successful in passing the EOG retest are offered focused intervention, usually in the form of summer school. After the focused intervention, students are given a third opportunity to pass the test. As with most questions of procedure, individual LEAs and schools have their own interpretations and implementations of these policies.

NC North Elementary School – Retention Procedure and Documentation

At NC North Elementary, according to the Principal, the “SSS Team embodies the promotion retention committee.”

There is some overlap between the process for retention and the process for referral to the exceptional children’s program. The retention process begins when teachers notify parents that their child may be in danger of retention at the end of the third quarter. NC North’s principal says, “It gives them an opportunity to work with the teacher, make parent teacher conferences, make any kind of adjustments that will help their child to perform better in the last grading period before it gets to a point where we have to decide on retention or summer school or promotion based on the end results” (NC North Interview, Personal Communication, June 6, 2006).

During the interview, the SSS Team revealed that students are identified at the beginning of the year as low-performing based on previous test scores and grades.

NC North starts at the fourth grade. Presumably, all students have some school records indicating their ability to do grade-level work. Although parents are not officially notified about the possibility of retention until the end of the third quarter, low-performing

students receive multiple forms of intervention designed to avoid retention throughout the school year. (These interventions are detailed in a later section.) If the student's academic records do not indicate a need for intervention, but a teacher determines that a student is struggling and could likely benefit from assistance, he or she can refer the student to the SSS Team. The process begins with a teacher referring a student to the SSS Team by gathering and completing a checklist (See Appendix D). The committee looks at the student's grades throughout the year and his or her end of grade test scores. One member recalls,

Before the teacher would come in, we present the students to the group in here and explain this is who we're meeting on in from this room and so forth it gives us some background information then the teacher comes in, we already know who she's gonna talk about and then they give further information. We also have an example of student work, it's included as well. (NC North Interview, Personal Communication, June 6, 2006).

The teachers coming before the SSS team have used the Comer model to gather and organize their information. Their data centers on the six developmental pathways identified by Dr. James Comer. Because NC North is a Comer school, teachers are trained to interact with students based on their physical, cognitive, psychological, language, social, and ethical development (Yale Child Development Program, Yale Child Study Center, 2001). Teachers use the Comer Wheel to indicate a student's various abilities. They detail their daily observations and document the level of parental involvement, as well.

Many students presented to the SSS Team functioning as the promotion/retention committee have been formally referred to the team and have gone through the screening process. NC North has an advantage over the other schools studied here because often the SSS Team has a full multidisciplinary screening of students being considered for retention and is familiar with their background. A detailed letter notifies parents of the proposed screening (See Appendix E). The SSS Team has the advantage of using the details gathered in the “Focus of Concern/Screening” folder (See Appendix F). This document addresses six areas, including:

Parent Conference/ Contact Record

Parent Notification Requirements

Classroom Observation

Screening Committee Data

Records Review, Health Screening, and Social Functioning

Intervention Strategies

Request for copies of student’s work

Once this checklist has been completed and the information obtained, the screening begins and the SSS Team initiates the assistance process. Although this process is not mandatory for the promotion/retention decision at NC North, the data gathered gives the team a more complete picture of the student and his or her abilities. There is considerable overlap with students facing retention and students referred to the SSS Team. One committee member commented, “Another way that we know all these students is that we are

the SSS Team and sometimes have met all of these students on other occasions prior to them coming before us at the end of the year” (NC North Interview, Personal Communication, June 6, 2006).

Another member echoed the sentiment, saying, “that’s why it works really good to have the SSST and the promotion together” (NC North Interview, Personal Communication, June 6, 2006).

Students brought before the committee for retention discussion have participated in numerous forms of intervention throughout the school year. (These interventions are detailed in a later section.) For students in a Gateway year, summer school is mandatory if they do not receive a Level III or IV on the EOG. For students who fail to attain a successful score on the EOG after their third opportunity, the “Exceptional Children” program also comes into play and determines whether a child would benefit from the summer school program, if they would benefit from being retained or replaced the next year with a remediation plan, everything is individualized for the student. The integration of the promotion/retention committee and the Student Staff Support Team at NC North facilitate an informed decision making process.

NC South Elementary School – Retention Procedure and Documentation

NC South Elementary has an outlined procedure for grade retention. The initial phases of the process seemed somewhat vague or open to interpretation based on the principal’s description:

The first screen is children who're not reading on grade level. Actually, the first screen is probably children who seem socially immature in the classroom. So, I think the first thing a teacher begins thinking about is for this child, it looks like they actually may not be in the age cohort. They check birthdays to see. We have a lot of children who start school ...with birthdays in September and October actually in August too. Really, in some ways closer to the age cohort the year behind them than they are to that age cohort or just as close to that (NC South Interview, Personal Communication, June 5, 2006).

There is, however, a form that guides the promotion/retention decision at NC South Elementary (See Appendix G). This form does not provide detailed guidance regarding the information required to make the decision. Essentially, the form serves as a timeline and provides space for teachers to record notes from conferences with parents and the principal.

At NC South, the retention decision-making process begins relatively early - no later than the third week of the second semester. The teacher schedules a conference with parents, the principal, and any additional support staff to discuss concerns about classroom performance and progress. This is the first discussion about the possibility of retention. At this conference, local assessments and class work are reviewed. According to the principal, the focus at this conference is "what kind of remediation or intervention can we use to help this student make progress?" (NC South Interview, Personal Communication, June 5, 2006). The teacher discusses what types of intervention she has used previously. There is also discussion about a child's participation in other programs such as ESL, Title I, or Exceptional

Children. For some children, this may also serve as the initial phase of the referral process to the school's exceptional children program. Based on the principal's description, the conference is fairly informal.

At the end of the third quarter, another conference discusses student progress. The focus of this conference is, "Why is [interventions implemented after initial conference] not working?" According to the principal, the loosely defined committee "takes a look at progress across the board....we discuss other factors like ESL if language is a factor, we don't want to consider retention once the language kicks in the rest follows" There is a third conference with the principal and teacher no later than the first of May. The teacher makes a recommendation and the principal determines grade placement. During this interview, the principal candidly admitted that he has "to be totally convinced that retention will benefit the child, and [he is] not easily convinced" (NC South Interview, Personal Communication, June 5, 2006).

For students in third grade, a Gateway year, summer school is mandatory if they are unsuccessful in passing the EOG test. Students who are unsuccessful in passing after a third testing may be retained. The principal at NC South makes the decision "after [he gets] all the information and looks at the total picture". At NC South a multidisciplinary team handles the referral process for the exceptional children's program. This team is seldom consulted for retention conferences unless the child is in the exceptional children's program. The principal indicated that the grade level teachers and reading specialist have enough knowledge about

school-wide interventions that “they don’t use the committee for decisions about regular ed” (NC South Interview, Personal Communication, June 5, 2006).

The retention process at this school primarily involves the principal and teachers working with the student under consideration. There is no standing promotion/retention committee. The principal makes the final decision once he has considered several factors identified in a later section.

NC West Elementary School – Retention Procedure and Documentation

The process for students facing possible retention at NC West Elementary is similar to the processes at the other researched schools. The major difference is when the process is initiated. The principal explains:

It starts as early as October. We have our very first grading period that usually ends mid-October. At that point, a parent conference is held with every child in the school. Parents and teachers sit down and review what’s been going on academically and socially the first nine weeks of school...If at that first grading period we see some issues where the child is having difficulty, we might talk with the parent and brainstorm - what are some other things we can do to help this child succeed? We may start some interventions at this point (NC West Interview, Personal Communication, June 9, 2006).

This process starts an entire quarter earlier than in the schools previously considered here. The distinction is not that students at the other researched schools do not receive early

intervention; the difference is the urgency with which possible retention is discussed with parents. At the end of the second quarter, the teacher judges whether the student is making progress based on classroom assessments. Parents are notified in January at the end of the second quarter if their child is not making progress with the interventions. Throughout the third and fourth quarters, teachers continue to “tweak” the interventions to help struggling students. It is not until March or April that the “fluid” committee enters the retention process.

For some students, it is early spring when the committee decides whether students are making sufficient progress to be promoted. For others, the committee waits until the EOG and uses its result as a tipping point. The principal stated, “the [EOG is the] final indicator of how they’re doing and the decision is made at the end of the school year.” For students attending summer school, the principal exercises sole discretion; she alone, without the assistance or perspectives of a committee, meets with the summer school teacher and discusses the progress of the students facing retention and makes the decision in July.

At NC West, successful completion of the EOG does not guarantee promotion. The principal strictly adheres to and enforces local standards for promotion. Students are required to pass all core curricula, including English, Math, Science, and Social Studies. This is the only school to specifically indicate that promotion is based on successful completion of local standards as well as the End of Grade test.

There is a Student Support Team at NC West Elementary, but it is seldom utilized as part of the promotion/retention deliberation. There are rare exceptions – if the student is in

the exceptional children's program or the teacher needs advice. There is a very detailed process for referring students to this team. Based on the school's procedure, students who are retained do not go through this process. The principal and teachers will meet and discuss the student's achievement. There is no checklist or form indicating what kind of data is to be considered, although the principal believes that a teacher should let "common sense" be his or her guide, saying:

They always bring assessment results from the first, second, and third grading period. They always bring samples of student work. They always have their work and they also have a solid on-grade-level child's work so we can all see and compare. Its writing and its math there's always a clear picture of what "on grade level" looks like. Anecdotal stories from the teacher about classroom behavior, or frustration whenever they're attempting certain tasks, repeated need for one on one help (NC West Interview, Personal Communication, June 9, 2006).

Although there are no mandatory forms as part of this procedure, there is a list of suggested items for teachers to gather in order to establish the students' academic and social issues.

The procedure at NC West Elementary is very fluid and flexible. The principal mentioned that there is no district policy articulating a specific retention process. While the flexibility allows for consideration of various factors, the failure to have a district-wide policy leaves individual schools to their own devices – which can be a tremendous challenge for individual schools to create a comprehensive policy that affords students and parents

appropriate opportunities to address their concerns while providing fair treatment to all students.

NC East Elementary School – Retention Procedure and Documentation

NC East Elementary subscribes to the district policy regarding the retention process (See Appendix H). While somewhat generic, it clearly states that,

Students identified for possible retention in grades K-8 should enter the Assistance Team Process by or before the end of the second grading period. Parents will be notified in writing at the time of the referral of the possibility of retention. Grade placement is the responsibility of the principal. . [] retention decisions for K-8 shall be made by the principal with input from the Assistance team, the teacher and the parent. (NC East Interview, Personal Communication, June 5, 2006).

NC East Elementary has created a school level form (see Appendix I) that assists teachers in gathering the necessary information to consider retention. It is important to note that the school procedure is not entirely compatible with the district policy. The Assistance Team functions as the first step in the exceptional children's referral process, similar to the process at the other schools described here. The district policy clearly indicates that students facing possible retention should be referred to the Assistance Team by the end of the second quarter. However, the steps of referring a student to the Assistance Team are not a part of the retention process at NC East Elementary; because of this glitch some students were retained who were never referred to the Assistance Team. The Assistance Team's process at NC East is similar to the other three schools. Quarterly conferences are required to monitor progress,

and interventions are suggested during the conferences. A distinct difference between the promotion/retention process and the Assistance Team process is that students who find themselves in promotion/retention discussions do not receive the detailed screenings that are required as part of the Assistance Team process.

The principal sees tremendous value in the detailed screening process. She finds a “lot of insight into the student progress and knowledge about their progress and lack of progress... [it] is a valuable process.” (NC East Interview, Personal Communication, June 5, 2006). One retention committee member remarked at how “helpful it is when teachers have filled out the folders and have everything in them.” (NC East Interview, Personal Communication, June 5, 2006). She found the expanded documentation from the Assistance Team to be helpful in the decision-making process. With the principal and at least one committee member acknowledging the usefulness of the Assistance Team procedure, it is remarkable that the school continues with a process for retention that is clearly inconsistent with existing LEA policy. The school level retention process requires an intervention plan. It is not as formal as an IEP; it is a general plan for using interventions and monitoring progress.

Summary

This research investigated both the Promotion Retention Committees and the school-level processes for retaining students. Of the schools studied, only one school had an actual committee – a standing, multidisciplinary team--that brought multiple perspectives to the discussion. Other researched schools utilized a rather ad-hoc approach - a hybrid of

committee and dominant individual principal to make its decisions. At these schools, the “committee” was activated on an “as needed” basis, held irregular meetings, maintained varying levels of membership, and demonstrated a markedly reactive approach. At these schools, school-level personnel not necessarily operating as a committee made the decisions about which students to promote and which students to retain.

The results of interviews indicate that while all schools adhered to many of the processes mandated by the North Carolina Accountability Standards, their interpretations of what the standards actually require and their decisions about when to implement those standards varied widely. The variations appeared to be the result of individual principals’ attitudes towards retention, what factors they chose to consider and the weight assigned to those factors in the decision making process. The next section will analyze the factors commonly considered using a conditional relationship guide which, according to Wilson-Scott (2008), “identifies relationships of the categories” or themes being analyzed.

Analysis of Themes

The results of this study were analyzed using a grounded theory tool known as a “conditional relationship guide” (Wilson-Scott, 2004). This allows data to be “grouped and conceptually labeled” (Wilson-Scott, 2004). The factors school-level personnel, principals, and promotion retention committees use to make decisions about which low performing students to retain are organized and presented based on the concept of a conditional relationship guide rather than on a school-by-school basis. As mandated, all schools used

End-Of-Grade test scores as well as students' individual academic grades. In addition, there were other individual factors used to make each decision. The analysis examines the frequency with which these factors were considered in the process and emerged as a theme.

The major themes include:

- Child Specific Circumstances
- Social Considerations
- Attendance
- Organized Intervention Strategies
- Parental Support for Retention

Child Specific Circumstances

“There is not really a school system policy on retention. That’s done school by school, class by class, kid by kid”

(NC West Interview, Personal Communication, June 9, 2006).

The overarching theme for these four schools was individualization of the decision to retain or promote. At three of the schools studied, there was a checklist of items to review when considering promotion or retention. Although NC West had no printed form, there was an accepted understanding of what types of materials should be included in the decision making process. Initially, one might consider this a technique for standardizing the process.

However, discussions with school-level personnel reveal that each and every decision is made based on a child's specific circumstances.

Review of the interviews indicates that in no instance was the decision to retain or promote made in relation to another low performing student. When considering retention, an individual student is considered, not standardized factors like test scores or grades; simply because two students have the same grades and test score, does not mean that they will be promoted or retained in tandem or that the decision to promote or retain one is interdependent on the decision about the other. There are considerations for "what type of progress the student has made after intervention" or "their past academic history" (NC South Interview, Personal Communication, June 5, 2006).

The principal at NC South adds to his deliberation whether a retained student "will catch a sibling" or whether it is best to promote one student while retaining his or her twin.

When students are not successful due to easily remedied factors, such as poor attendance, the principal at NC South is reluctant to make the decision to retain a student. As an example, he cited the fate of some low-performing ESL students stating, "If it's a language thing we've got to be real careful with that. We don't want to take a child out of their cohort. When the language kicks in the academic progress is going to kick in" (NC South Interview, Personal Communication, June 5, 2006).

He takes a similar approach to students with Attention Deficit Disorder, "if its attention deficit it's not a retention candidate, because of other factors." The level of parental

involvement with a student's academics is also an idiosyncratic factor examined by each researched school. A low-performing student with parental support – in the form of homework assistance and academic engagement – will have a higher probability of promotion versus a student who lacks similar support. At NC East Elementary, the committee considers a parent's "willingness to provide support in the summer and [. . .] agreement to provide academic support at home by monitoring student performance and student work"

Further, traumatic events like divorce or death of a family member or close friend can influence the decision to promote or retain. At NC North Elementary, the principal shared the unique case of a student who lost his mother:

We also take into consideration if their lives, if they've lost a grandparent or parent that year or their parents have gone through a divorce. That can have a great impact on a child's performance. If that child has shown adequate progress up until that time, then something traumatic has happened in their lives, then it would be reasonable to say that because of past experiences and the data showing the longitudinal data of that child shows that if those circumstance hadn't occurred in their lives then they most likely would have continued on that same course of growth... so that might be the variation between a student being placed instead of being retained. Because there are extenuating circumstances, everything is very individualized for each child. We have had a couple of our children this year who have lost parents in a car accident or

through cancer, through one way or another. So it's a great impact. I have one little girl, a fourth grader, who lost her mother this year to cancer. So that's a very devastating effect on a child to lose their mother at such an early age, ten years old. So with counseling services for that child and monitoring that child throughout the year to make sure that they don't, through depression through despair, slip into grades dropping and having problems, we've got to look at that aspect as well. Children, they bounce back pretty quickly but it still may cause an impact on their performance. If that is something that is evident by our documentation then we take that into consideration. Next year, the child might have performed lower than expected. But they've had that traumatic experience in their personal lives then the committee may feel that, that child may do better the next year given that they've overcome that obstacle (NC North Interview, Personal Communication, June 6, 2006).

The principal at NC West also indicated that the "fluid" committee will take all factors into consideration, "whether it's a temporary situation or something that's going to be ongoing for the child. You know we have a lot of kids that are within some kind of family turmoil at some point in the year and we always take that into consideration."

This research reveals that regardless of school, local, and state policies that may suggest otherwise, each student is really considered individually based on each child's specific circumstances. Based on state policy, a student in a Gateway year should repeat the grade if he or she is unsuccessful at all attempts to pass the EOG. The research reveals that

although that is a consideration, there are many factors to be considered for individual students. Principals have the final decision on grade placement and which factors to consider.

Social Considerations

“If we retain a child we’ve actually made it possible for them to drop out of school a year earlier, grade wise. . .” (NC West Interview, Personal Communication, June 9, 2006).

Social considerations encompass a broad area of concerns including age, size, maturity, adolescence, self-esteem, and birth date. The principal at NC South describes the first screening as when a teacher notices “children who seem socially immature in the classroom”. Their rationale is quite involved and takes a long-term look at the ramifications for not only the child considered but also his or her peers.

They may start first grade or Kindergarten later. They may have been retained in first or second. They get to fourth or fifth and they may be retained there. They are now becoming much older and larger than [the other] children. So it becomes that age appropriateness has to be a factor in placing them to the next grade level or whether they be retained again. It might be where the child may be real border line, and academically needs to be retained because of their grades, but because of their size and age they really need to be placed in the next grade for their benefit and the other student’s benefit. Or else you get into a situation on up into high school where you have a twenty-one year old in the same class as a fourteen year old. So it would have to be addressed early on to keep them on task, keep them as close to their grade level

proficiency as much as possible but not staggering them so that they are fifteen years old and still in the sixth grade. Keep them with their peers. It's not a social promotion at all; it's based on age appropriateness and size appropriateness and in the best interest of all children (NC South Interview, Personal Communication, June 5, 2006).

Many principals and team members not only consider the impact a student's age has on the decision to retain, but also the effects retention could have during adolescence. The principal at NC East Elementary explained,

One of the things that I'm sure you know is that research shows that by the time that a child becomes a freshman, if that child has been retained more than once the likelihood of dropping out is much greater. So, that is certainly a factor we look at, the age of a child. I mean, how old will this child be as a freshman in high school. We look at size, maturity, emotional stability, again their social interaction with their peers in addition to academic performance. We try to factor everything. And that's why our decision is not cut and dry all the time. It's a lot of discussion, a lot of close examination. Because so many things affect the child's future progress, we want to put the child in a position to be successful in the future. And not be in the position of feeling behind (NC East Interview, Personal Communication, June 5, 2006).

This was not the only committee member that gave very serious consideration to the problems students might face during adolescence.

It is really easy to look at a six-year-old and make a decision about retention, but if you make yourself project that on out to looking at a sixteen year old, then what kind of ramifications this could have to their lives? ... If we retain a child we've actually made it possible for them to drop out of school a year earlier, grade wise. If we could not retain children then they have to go through at least tenth grade. Maybe by then they are interested in a particular field or some extracurricular activity might grab their interest or something might happen by then, that second year of high school, which might be the key to keeping them there. Those are the kinds of things we have discussions about (NC South Interview, Personal Communication, June 5, 2006).

The age and social maturity of a student must and should be considered. At some schools, the specific type of curriculum may be a factor in considering retention. One principal believed that students would not face stigmas about their inability to do grade level work because the school's reading program groups students by reading ability rather than grade.

Let's say you're in first grade, reading below grade level well your reading instruction in second grade is going to be where you are. Our guided reading starts where the child is... there has to be a real strong reason for it (retention) to be in first grade and usually it has to do with age and the social maturity thing, it's usually not just because we think they're.... at risk because of their running record or because of

class assessment...it's not an automatic process (NC South Interview, Personal Communication, June 5, 2006).

Early birthdays were a common consideration factor at all researched schools. The informal investigation by one principal revealed that many students having difficulty and possibly facing retention had late birthdays. She shared that “she had seven kindergarteners being retained this year and six of them have early [in the school year] birthdays” (NC South Interview, Personal Communication, June 5, 2006). This school addressed the concern by:

Creating what we call a transitional kindergarten this coming year, a class for young kinders. And it will be taught by a teacher who has both pre-k and kindergarten teaching experience and our goal is for us to meet the needs of these young children without them having to experience the failure that retention often causes. At the end of that year they may then proceed to a standard regular kindergarten or go on to first grade, depending on their progress. The students will not have the retained label ... It'll be a logical progression from transitional to regular to first. We're hoping this strategy will help younger students get more time to get developmentally ready for first grade (NC South Interview, Personal Communication, June 5, 2006).

Attendance

“If they extend beyond those twenty days, they have to make up those days” (NC North Interview, Personal Communication, June 6, 2006).

Another major theme for all researched schools was student attendance. Surprisingly, this was not viewed the same way at all schools. At NC West Elementary, attendance was not a major consideration for students considered for retention:

Attendance is not a factor in a retention decision, I mean it can be that a child's just missed so much school that they've been unable to keep up, can't keep up or don't have the skills necessary. Then there are kids with who have attendance problems who do fine academically. It's not a solid criteria point we use that would make the decision or break the decision (NC West Interview, Personal Communication, June 9, 2006).

At NC East Elementary, the Principal recognized that for some students attendance may be a problem, but not in all instances: "Attendance and discipline are also considered" as part of decision making process. One committee member reported that as she reviewed folders, she looked at the attendance of a student.

NC North Elementary has a school intervention designed to address the needs of students who are not doing well because of poor attendance.

You know a student has to be in school 160 days of the school year out of a 180 school year. They have twenty days maximum to be absent for whatever the reason might be. If they extend beyond those twenty days they have to make up those days (NC North Interview, Personal Communication, June 6, 2006).

Students are offered two options to make up the instruction time missed due to excessive absences:

We have an after school tutoring program called the Family Literacy Center - students in the evening time can come and they log in and they work on the computer on math and reading skills and for four hours of time in the literacy center they could make up for one full day of school (NC North Interview, Personal Communication, June 6, 2006).

The second option at NC North is a truncated summer school. “For instance if a child has to make up one or two days, we allow them to come to the summer program for one or two days to compensate they ...missed in the regular school year” Both programs are staffed by certified teachers. The principal at NC North remarked, “They have full tutoring services. It’s not babysitting”. Another issue related to attendance is the transient nature of some students. In some instances, a student who has changed schools frequently may be considered by the committee when deciding if retention is the best decision. One committee member explains, “We also have a lot of students that for lack of a better term, flip-flop. They’re here with us a while then they’re in a neighboring school. Then they’re back. That’s always a factor” (NC North Interview, Personal Communication, June 6, 2006).

Organized Intervention

School districts shall provide focused intervention to all students who do not meet statewide student accountability standards. This intervention shall involve extended

instructional opportunities that are different and supplemental and that are specifically designed to improve these students' performance to grade level proficiency. Students who do not meet promotion standards shall have personalized education plans with the following components: diagnostic evaluation, intervention strategies, and monitoring strategies. Strategies may include, but are not limited to, alternative learning models, special homework, smaller classes, tutorial sessions, extended school day, Saturday school, modified instructional programs, parental involvement, summer school instruction, or retention (NCBE, 2005).

The North Carolina State Board of Education Policy on Local Accountability Procedures lists several strategies LEAs can use to provide focused intervention. The schools in the present study approached the concept of intervention from multiple perspectives. There were several common interventions – for instance, mandatory summer school for students who were not successful in passing the End-of-Grade test.

During the interviews, several specific commercial interventions, as opposed to intervention strategies, were discussed. Among these commercial interventions were Accelerated Reader, Appalachian Reading Program, Comer Model, Compass Lab, Edutest, Guided Reading, and Study Island (See Appendix J). Each of these four schools employed a distinct system of access and organization of the intervention strategies. All participants were asked about specific interventions used. Many immediately mentioned the commercial interventions like Accelerated Reader or Study Island. When pressed to come up with

specific strategies, the principal at NC South Elementary indicated that his teachers “have a store house of knowledge” The teachers also meet regularly with the reading specialist to consider strategies. He further explained a procedure used at a high school in the LEA where one teacher visits another class to learn strategies from a more experienced teacher. Further, he mentioned that a student’s assignments might be modified if they were not doing well. However, he seemed to be unable to say which specific strategies were being used. When asked about a central location for all the strategies, he indicated that his teachers have a million ideas about what to do. However accurate this statement may be for a veteran teacher, the same is not true for new teachers or teachers with only one or two years of experience. There was no centralized location for the intervention strategies. The situation was very similar at NC West.

At NC West Elementary, the principal indicated that the Assistance Team had a binder of resources. At this school, however, retained students do not receive intervention from the Assistance Team, thus negating the potential usefulness of the resource binder. Moreover, at NC West, because there is no centralized location for intervention strategies, teachers are left to comb through their personal experience to find intervention strategies that will be effective for students working below grade level.

At NC East Elementary, the counselor who serves on the retention committee and the SS team is the singular resource regarding effective interventions. There is no institutional knowledge. At NC West, classroom teachers are primarily responsible for coming up with

specific strategies to remediate students. NC North Elementary articulates a different vision from the other researched schools. As part of their participation in the Comer Model for School Development, they have a treasure chest of intervention strategies. This invaluable resource is The Comer Field Guide, and it lists specific interventions and gives examples of when it is appropriate to use the interventions. Also, as part of the Comer Model, the faculty has several opportunities a year to receive professional development. This professional growth exposes these teachers to innovative and unique strategies and explores which strategy will be most effective for students who may be facing retention.

The four schools studied varied in many ways. One uniting factor for all schools was their strong desire to make decisions for the best interest of their students. In addition, all four principals had a strong involvement in the retention process. Under state law, such principal involvement is mandated. But, like many other mandates, there is often a breakdown between policy and implementation. For issues pertaining to which students get promoted, these principals sampled from all four regions of the state are actively involved in the process . . . eventually.

Parental Support for Retention

“If the parents don’t support it, it’s never gonna work”

(NC South Interview, Personal Communication, June 5, 2006).

Parental response to retention spans the spectrum – from anger, to denial, to acceptance and acquiescence, to resignation. NC West Elementary maintains a policy that a

parent must support the decision to retain or the student is promoted: “If the parent doesn’t support it’s never gonna succeed for the child..... if I go over their head, it’s my decision....It’s incredible the road blocks a parent will throw up in the teacher’s face and in mine. It’s just not a good situation for the child” (NC West Interview, Personal Communication, June 9, 2006).

In reference to a specific incident, the principal recalled, “because of the parent’s strong opposition [to retention] we are promoting this kindergartner to first grade, knowing she’s lacking so many of the basic skills she’ll need to succeed in first grade” (NC West Interview, Personal Communication, June 9, 2006).

Parental attitudes are not considered as strongly at NC East Elementary. The decision to promote or retain is made with less consideration for parental objection. The principal revealed that “every parent that has come who does not support retention has told me that their child would be devastated - emotionally and socially. For some, it will be hurtful and harmful”. Acknowledging that the final decision is hers, she declared that “I use my best professional judgment.”

At NC North Elementary, the Comer model mandates that decisions be made by consensus. This approach leaves little room to retain a student without parental support. The Comer model also mandates that committees consider the developmental pathways before considering retention. The principal at NC South Elementary indicated that “it is difficult to convince me that [a given student] will benefit from retention” At this school, parental

attitudes towards retention are also considered as major factors in the decision making process.

At the other researched schools, parental support for retention is considered as part of the decision making process, but it does not have the same level of influence as at NC West Elementary – where parental support is mandatory. All principals acknowledged that the final decision on retention is within their discretion, and all indicated that they take as many factors into consideration as they can to come up with the decision that is best for the child.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

This chapter will discuss the factors considered in retention and promotion by answering the research questions. It will also look at how closely and to what extent factors considered are consistent with what research indicates as best practices. In the tradition of grounded theory, the results emerge as a theory about factors that should be considered when promoting or retaining low performing students. In addition, based on the entirety of the research, the study will make recommendations for future research and practice.

Discussion

This research was based on five questions. Responses to each question contribute to an overall understanding of the specific inquiry. The research questions guiding this study were developed with the assumption that all Local Education Agencies (LEA) and public schools in North Carolina were aware of and in compliance with every facet of the ABC Accountability Policies, specifically the section of Student Accountability Standards/ Graduation Requirement that requires each LEA to appoint a committee to review promotion/retention cases (NCSBE, 1999).

The first question investigated the selection process for members of the promotion/retention committee. This process varied at each school. At NC North, the promotion retention committee was a true multidisciplinary team. It included a representative from each grade level and other school level professionals, including a school

nurse, counselor, and school psychologist. This type of membership is recommended by the U.S. Department of Education (1999) as well as the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) (2003). Leckrone and Griffith (2006) call on social workers to “help teachers and administrators understand the implications of retention and advocate for alternative policies, services and intervention” (p. 56). Because of the negative effects of grade retention (Bowman, 2005), a committee composed of members with multiple perspectives can better serve all the developmental needs of children facing grade retention. At NC South and NC West, there were no standing committees, but rather informal groupings of the principal, teacher, and resource personnel such as the reading specialist or the ESL teacher. Although this type of committee seems to contradict recommendations for a multidisciplinary committee, it complies with another frequent recommendation that strongly suggests all students be considered individually (NASP, 2003; U.S. Department of Education, 1999).

For these two schools, the members of the committee have firsthand knowledge about the students under consideration. This is an advantage in the sense that the committee members have a personal connection to the students. In the fourth school, NC East, the committee members were selected because they “had time” according to the principal. There was no requirement that committee members even meet the children under consideration. This type committee composition is not supported by research and does not appear to be in the best interest of the student.

Responses to the second research question yielded a multitude of factors considered prior to making the decision to promote or retain. These factors emerged as themes in the research. They are grouped into five broad areas including; Child Specific Circumstances, Social Considerations, Attendance, Organized Intervention, and Parental Support for Retention. These factors are discussed in the chapter on results.

All respondents indicated that they had received professional development on reading interventions. The responses indicated a lack of institutional knowledge regarding these interventions at all schools except NC North. NC North, a Comer school, is structured on this school improvement model. The field guide for teachers lists a variety of reading interventions based on the different developmental needs of students. It is important to note that only in the NC North interview did I question teachers. Classroom teachers would be in a better position to specifically list the reading interventions. At the other sites, administrators answered the questions. Major research on alternatives to grade retention all recommends reading intervention as a major consideration for avoiding grade retention (Jimerson, Pletcher, & Kerr, 2005; Johnson, 2001; NASP, 2003; U.S. Department of Education, 1999).

The fourth question inquires about resources, training or guidance pertaining to social promotion or retention. None of the schools interviewed had any specific professional development about social promotion or grade retention. All principals attempted to quote statistics on the increased dropout rate among retained students. This was an indication that

although they had not received specific professional development about the issues, they were aware of some common concerns associated with grade retention. Two principals reported reading journal articles but were unable to provide citations. One of these two also indicated that he shared an electronic journal article he received from a principal's list serve with his entire staff a few years prior to the interview, but was unable to locate the article for review. Despite research indicating the negative consequences of retention, it is still a common practice (Black, 2004; Bowman, 2005; Leckrone & Griffith, 2006). This research question was included to determine if school level personnel was actually aware of research findings. Based on the responses, it appears that there is a limited knowledge of the research. How this knowledge influences the decision making process can be seen when investigating the social considerations theme. During all interviews, all interviewees expressed a concern about how retention in elementary years might affect students during adolescence.

The final research question inquired about a theory that could best guide a promotion retention committee to make individual decisions in the best interest of students. All four schools cited that decisions should be guided by what was best for the individual student. One principal characterized the creation of a transitional kindergarten as a policy that addresses the best interest of children facing retention due to factors that might be influenced by age. This transitional kindergarten strategy is based on the notion that children are not prepared academically or developmentally for kindergarten because they start school at a younger age than their peers with earlier birthdays. NC North cited the Comer model and size developmental pathways as a theory that can assist in making the decision to promote or

retain. The theory based on the factors that emerged as themes during analysis is discussed, *infra*.

Emerging Theory

The purpose of this study was to determine what factors promotion retention committees consider when determining which low performing students to retain. Grounded theory was specific methodology of choice. The research was gathered primarily through the use of a focus group interview with a multidisciplinary committee serving as a promotion retention committee, an interview with two members of a four member committee and two interviews with only principals. Local procedures, policies, and referral documentation were part of the record analysis. This provided data and an additional level of analysis that was used to answer the research questions and articulate an emerging theory based on the factors considered.

The responses from the research questions and record analysis were organized into two major categories: Committee Composition and Function and Retention Procedure and Documentation. These categories along with the ABCs of Accountability were filtered through the funnel of grounded theory methodology and yielded the five major themes for factors considered in the decision to promote or retain. Figure 1 depicts this level of analysis. The five themes form the basis for an emerging theory that can best guide a promotion retention committee when making individual decisions that are in the best interest of the child.

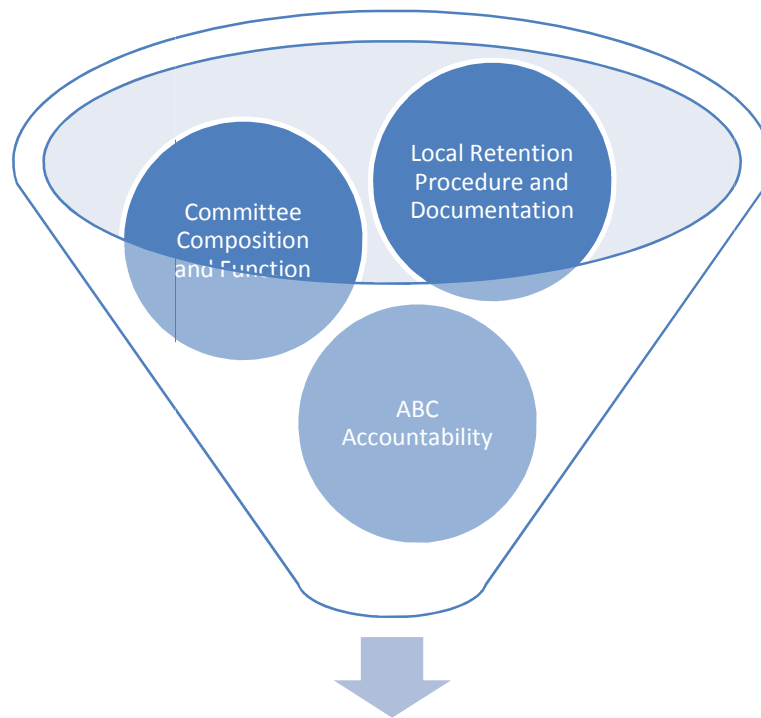


Figure 1 Factors for Considerations

- Child Specific Circumstances
- Social Considerations
- Attendance
- Organized Intervention
- Parental Support for Retention

Narrative Statement

According to Creswell (1998) “the centerpiece of grounded theory research is the development or generation of a theory....This theory, developed by the researcher, is articulated toward the end of a study and can assume the form of a narrative statement (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), visual picture (Morrow & Smith, 1995), or a series of hypothesis or propositions (Creswell & Brown, 1992)” (p. 56).

The theory articulated by the propositions below form the proposed basis for a LEA policy based on grounded theory as applied to this study. Guidance for a promotion retention committee should be developed at the LEA level and be in compliance with the ABC Accountability model. This policy calls for combined effort on behalf of the committee, parents, and teachers.

The policy should include:

10. Establishment of a standing multidisciplinary committee
11. Requirement that the classroom teacher participate in the committee
12. Required detailed screening similar to the EC referral screening to ascertain the child's specific circumstances and well as social considerations
13. Close monitoring of attendance and opportunities to make up missed work
14. Professional development for entire certified staff regarding promotion and retention research including local data (including longitudinal data on retained students)
15. Timeline for the process that begins at the end of the first quarter when parents are notified
16. Requirement for teachers to complete a Personalized Education Plan (PEP) utilizing a comprehensive list of school and grade specific strategies developed by the reading specialist and curriculum specialist.
17. Limitation of retentions to one in grades K-5 and one in grades 6-12

18. Monthly Parent Information Series to inform parents about their students' performance and progress as well as offer specific strategies and resources parents can use with the child to improve academic performance

These propositions are based on research. Some of the specific literature is referenced below to further elaborate on the role of research in the promotion retention debate. All of the schools utilized some of the propositions to a greater or lesser extent. In bridging the gap between research and practice as it relates to retention and social promotion it is imperative to clearly articulate the links between the propositions and existing research.

Proposition one calls for the establishment of a standing multidisciplinary committee. The state of North Carolina (NCDPI, 2006) and the federal government (U.S. Department of Education, 1999) recommend that schools have a committee composed of various school personnel that can contribute their professional expertise to the decision making process shared by the entire body. There is no firm recommendation on who the members should be, but most certainly the team would include a school administrator, counselor, reading specialist, social worker, and the classroom teacher. Other professionals that may prove invaluable depending on the student in question include the ESL teacher, speech therapist, and special education teacher. An advantage to having a standing committee that meets regularly throughout the year is that it provides members with an opportunity to grow professionally and learn from repeating the process established to consider a student for grade retention.

The classroom teacher should always be a member of a committee. NASP (2003) issued a position statement about grade retention in which they called for all students to be considered on an individual basis taking into consideration specific factors that may contribute to the student's poor progress. Darling-Hammond (1998) echoes this position as does Grant (1997b). Achievement should not be measure by a single factor like a test score. A classroom teacher will have insight and details necessary to make the best decision for the child.

In addition requiring detailed screening similar to the EC referral screening to ascertain the child's specific circumstances and well as social considerations will also contribute to a more detailed assessment of the students needs (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). Instruction should be targeted towards the specific needs of the student (Denton, 2001). A detailed screening will facilitate this process. Close monitoring of attendance and opportunities to make up missed work will also reduce the need some students have for intervention and remediation (Kober, 2001).

Another serious consideration is professional development for the entire certified staff regarding promotion and retention research including local longitudinal data on retained students (Jimerson, 1999). Darling-Hammond (1998) also advocates professional development for teachers so that they are better equipped to handle the needs of struggling students.

NC State Board of Education (2005) very strongly recommends a timeline for the retention process. Ideally, it should begin at the end of the first quarter when parents are

notified of their student's lack of progress. This provides parent with advance notice and opens the lines of communication early in the process. Parental support is imperative (Johnson, 2001) and (NASP, 2003).

Requiring teachers to complete a Personalized Education Plan (PEP) utilizing a comprehensive list of school and grade specific strategies developed by the reading specialist and curriculum specialist will provide targeted instruction (Grant, 1997a).

Many of the negative effects of grade retention could be mitigated by placing restrictions on the frequency of retentions for a particular student (Jack, 1975) and (Labaree, 1983). Limiting retentions to one in grades K-5 and one in grades 6-12 might slow the dropout rate associated with retention (Roderick, 1995).

Finally, NCLB mandates regularly scheduled parent information meetings to inform parents about their students' performance and progress as well as offer specific strategies and resources parents can use with the child to improve academic performance (U.S. Department of Education, 2002b). All major research indicates that parent support and acceptance is crucial to student adjustment after retention.

As schools and school districts consider developing a procedure that implements some or all of the propositions, the multidisciplinary team should take the lead in crafting the process.

When a committee is multidisciplinary, knowledgeable, and the classroom teacher has implemented appropriate strategic interventions, an intelligent, justifiable and individualized decision can be made. It should be one that parents can support because the

committee and parents have collaborated throughout the year. All parties can honestly pursue the best interest of the individual child. Figure 2 is the visual representation of the model.

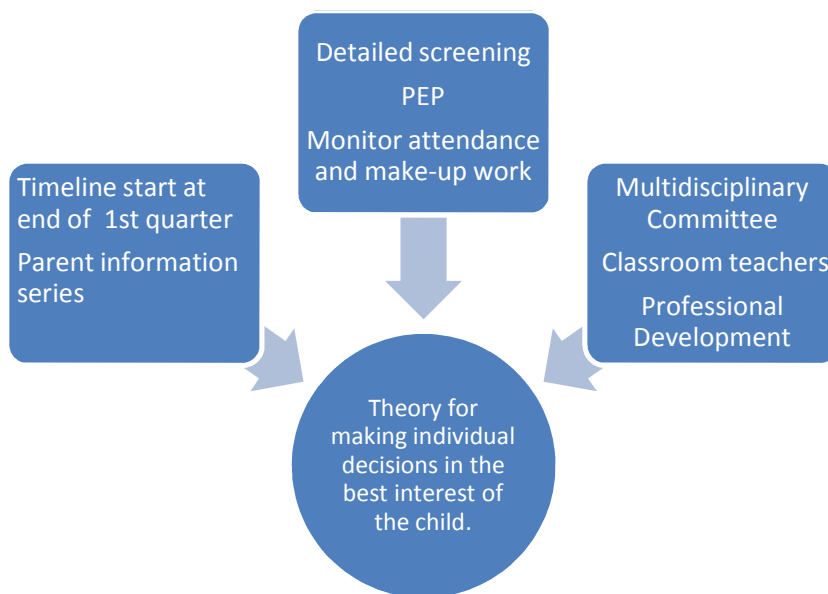


Figure 2
Visual Representation

The theory-based policy proposal is intended to insure that, unlike some of the students at the schools in the study, those facing grade retention have a complete and detailed screening that provides the basis for a knowledgeable committee to make an informed decision in the student's best interest. At the school level, there should be an annual professional development meeting where the policy is reviewed and adjusted for the upcoming school year. In order to increase ownership of this policy, grade level teachers should develop grade level expectations based on state and local standards. They should also maintain a common set of exemplars indicating the expected standards. In addition, reading

and curriculum specialists should update and adjust the intervention strategies to accommodate new resources like computer programs or textbook adoptions. These measures will institutionalize a body of knowledge and a process for comprehensive decision making.

This research sought to investigate what factors are considered when determining whether or not to promote a low performing student. Of course, the best way to avoid retention is to insure all students get a quality education from a highly qualified teacher and grow up in a home with supportive parents who emphasize education. Mastery of these issues would all but eliminate the need for a theory that guides the promotion retention conflict.

Future Research and Limitations

During this research there seemed to be several inconsistencies between existing LEA and state policies. Of the four LEAs researched, only one had promotion retention policies in compliance with the state mandate. One principal reported that there was no district policy pertaining to retention. In another school, the procedure was not in compliance with the LEA policy. Research that investigates the differences in state, local and school level policies related to retention would provide valuable knowledge to all. In addition, tracking retained students in a scientifically-based longitudinal research project would also contribute to the literature. A pilot studies to investigate the potential for implementation of the theorized policy standards would also yield valuable insight. Finally, to the extent that fidelity to the ABC Accountability program will help retention committees make decisions in the best interest of the child, research on how many LEAs are in compliance would be useful.

There are limitations to this study. The use of focus groups may have inhibited participant response. In some instances, participants may not have been fully conversant about all the factors that affect the decision making process to avoid being judged by others, or by the researcher.

Another problem associated with interviews at a school during school hours are the distractions, including the PA system, ringing bells, and noisy classes in the hall. During the interviews, all these distractions interfered with taping the interview. There were some sidebar conversations. In grounded theory, the interviewer must not only accommodate tangents, but encourage some that may contribute to the development of the theory. This requires a skilled and knowledgeable interviewer.

The privacy regulations for public schools are also a limitation. Members may be reluctant to share some aspects of individual cases for fear of breaching the anonymous student's privacy. For instance, some may be reluctant to share the personal problems that contributed to low performance where the student lived in an abusive home. Assuring the strict confidentiality of schools, school personnel and students can minimize these limitations.

As is typical with most qualitative research, observer effect may also be a limitation. The very presence of a researcher changes the behavior and possibly the responses of the focus group members. Their perception of me as an authority figure may have biased their responses. Participants may give inaccurate responses in an attempt to please the researcher or to make themselves look more favorable.

Finally, the small number of schools limits the research as well. It does not allow for a broad sample of committees operating under different local policies. In some school systems, committees may be influenced by entirely different factors. For instance, in a school system with extended summer school, retention may be recommended less frequently than in a school system that does not offer summer school. In addition, there are interventions that can change the dichotomous nature of promotion and retention. Multiage grouping and extended kindergarten are two examples of alternatives that would give committees options other than social promotion or retention. These options were not available at the schools in this research. Perhaps a national panel should research the effectiveness of alternatives to social promotion and retention in order to establish a scientifically based consensus regarding the age old debate.

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APPENDIX

APPENDIX A

North Carolina State University
INFORMED CONSENT FORM for RESEARCH

Title of the Study:
Social Promotion or Retention?
Factors that Influence Committee Decisions

Principal Investigator: Ileetha Groom **Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Paul Bitting**

We are asking you to participate in a research study. The purpose of this study is to learn about the factors committees consider when determining which low performing students are promoted or retained.

INFORMATION

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to discuss the factors you consider when determining which low performing students are promoted or retained. You will be interviewed as part of the promotion retention committee. The interview will be no longer than ninety minutes. This research will be simulated at a total of four other North Carolina schools.

RISKS

There is no risk associated with this research. All your responses will be confidential.

BENEFITS

This study seeks to determine what factors committees consider when recommending promotion or retention for low performing students. As a result of this research, educators will have access to high quality research to inform and guide them as they make future decisions about promoting and retaining students. Teachers will benefit from this research, because they will have access to a list of factors that committees consider. Based on this information, teacher will have guidance about which factors to focus on when working with low performing students in danger of grade retention. Students will benefit because the educators making decisions about their future will have guidance based on sound research.

CONFIDENTIALITY

The information in the study records will be kept strictly confidential. Data will be stored securely in a locked brief case and on the computer as password protected digital documents. No reference will be made in oral or written reports which could link you to the study.

COMPENSATION

There will be no individual compensation for participating in this study.

CONTACT

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact the researcher, Ileetha Groom, at 142 Lansing Drive, Benson, NC 27504 or 919-807-3833. If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact Dr. Matthew Zingraff, Chair of the NCSU IRB for the Use of Human Subjects in Research Committee, Box 7514, NCSU Campus (919/513-1834) or Mr. Matthew Ronning, Assistant Vice Chancellor, Research Administration, Box 7514, NCSU Campus (919/513-2148)

PARTICIPATION

Your participation in this study is voluntary; you may decline to participate without penalty. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty and without loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed your data will be returned to you or destroyed at your request.

CONSENT

“I have read and understand the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study with the understanding that I may withdraw at any time.”

Subject's signature _____ Date _____
Investigator's signature _____ Date _____

APPENDIX B

PAGE 2

Interview Questions

What factors influence the decision making process of retention-promotion committees?

Sub-questions

- How are members selected for the promotion–retention committee?
- What factors do team members consider prior to making the decision?
- What resources, training, or guidance do members receive about at-risk students?
- What resources, training, or guidance do members receive about reading intervention?
- What resources, training, or guidance do members receive about social promotion and grade retention?

What theory can best guide a retention–promotion committee to make individual decisions that are in the best interests of the child?

APPENDIX C

Conditional Relationship Guide Theme				
School	Time Code	Quotes and Comments	Supporting Literature	Corresponding time code/interview
NC North				
NC South				
NC West				
NC East				

APPENDIX D

NC NORTH CHECKLIST

Instructions for completing the Focus of Concern/Screening

Please follow this checklist to insure all the necessary information has been completed before returning the folder to the SSST Chair. Leave this checklist attached and initial each item as it is recorded in the folder.

- _____ 1) Complete the Student Information and (I) Parent Conference/Contact Record. (Must include *two contacts*.)
- _____ 2) Complete the enclosed parental notification letter, *obtain* an administrator's signature, *mail* original copy to the parent and *enclose* a copy in the folder. *Record* the date sent in (II) Parental Notification section on the front of the folder.
- _____ 3) (III) Classroom Observation will be completed in conjunction with someone from SSST.
- _____ 4) (IV) Screening Committee Data - *Section A* should be completed from the student's cumulative file - *Section B* will pertain to the student's general health - *Numbers 3 and 4* will be done by the nurse and speech instructor and returned to you (memos are enclosed and should be given to these people for completion).
- _____ 5) (V) Intervention Strategies - State your area(s) of concern and list strategies you have used for the student. Use specific dates for the beginning and end and check the results. *DO NOT USE on going* for the ending date.
- _____ 6) *Enclose* copies of the student's work and any other significant facts.

APPENDIX E
NC NORTH FOCUSED SCREENING FOLDER

Page 1

RE 1 / HCA

FOCUS OF CONCERN/ SCREENING

Student: _____ School: _____
 Sex: _____ Race: _____ Grade: _____ Parent/Guardian: _____
 Date of Birth: ____/____/____ Age: _____ Address: _____
 I.D. Number: _____ Telephone: _____

I. Parent Conference / Contact Record

A. First Contact / Attempt Date: ____/____/____
 School Person Making Contact: _____ Position: _____
 Type of Contact: _____ School Conference _____ Letter/Note _____ Home Visit _____ Phone Call _____
 Other: _____
 Purpose: _____
 Comments on Conference: _____

B. Second Contact / Attempt Date: ____/____/____
 School Person Making Contact: _____ Position: _____
 Type of Contact: _____ School Conference _____ Letter/Note _____ Home Visit _____ Phone Call _____
 Other: _____
 Purpose: _____
 Comments on Conference: _____

II. Parental Notification of Screening Procedures Form (RE2) Sent
 Notice Sent by: _____ Date: ____/____/____

III. Classroom Observation

Observer: _____ Position: _____ Date: ____/____/____

<p>A. Subject Observed</p> <p>_____ Language Arts _____ Social Studies _____ Music _____ Science _____ Free Time _____ Physical Educ. _____ Art _____ Math Other: _____</p>	<p>B. Learning Situation</p> <p>_____ One-to-One _____ Small Group _____ Class _____ Independent</p>
--	--

C. Student Behavior

<p>_____ Attentive _____ Sits quietly _____ Talks out of turn _____ Easily distracted _____ Overactive, restless _____ Talks excessively _____ Immature behavior _____ Withdrawn _____ Works well independently _____ Disruptive _____ Trouble finding place _____ Disorganized work habits _____ Avoids eye contact</p>	<p>_____ Difficulty copying from board _____ Careless, doesn't complete tasks _____ Constantly out of seat _____ Contributes to class discussion _____ Short attention span _____ Friendly _____ Displays leadership ability _____ Easily frustrated _____ Aggressive toward children _____ Obscene language</p>	<p>_____ Neat appearance _____ Demands excessive attention _____ Perseverates (repeats behavior) _____ Daydreams _____ Tries to control others _____ Avoids groups _____ Cooperative _____ Doesn't follow directions _____ Unusual language _____ Speech problem Other: _____</p>
--	---	---

Additional Comments (if any): _____

APPENDIX E

NC NORTH FOCUSED SCREENING FOLDER

Page 2

RE 1(a) / HCA

Student: _____ School: _____ Grade: _____

IV. Screening Committee Data Collection

A. Records Review – School History

1. Attendance Pattern (indicate where problems occurred):

Grade					
Days Enrolled					
Absences					
Tardies					

2. Past and Current Subject Marks (three most recent, if appropriate):

School Year	Grade	Subject/Mark	Subject/Mark	Subject/Mark	Subject/Mark

3. Review of Previous Testing:

a. Instrument Used: _____ Date: _____ Results: _____

b. Instrument Used: _____ Date: _____ Results: _____

c. Group Standardized Test Scores (record percentile scores)
Name of Test: _____

Subtest	Year / ____	Year / ____	Year / ____
Reading			
Language			
Math			
Total Battery			
Other			

B. General Medical – Health Screening

1. Describe any serious illness or accident since birth:
 _____ Date: ____/____/____ Hospitalized () Yes () No
 _____ Date: ____/____/____ Hospitalized () Yes () No

2. Other Relevant Health Information:

3. Visual Acuity
 Far Pass/Fail (Circle one) Date: ____/____/____
 Near Pass/Fail (Circle one) Date: ____/____/____

4. Hearing Pass/Fail (Circle one) Date: ____/____/____

C. Social Functioning, Environmental and Cultural Status
 Information concerning the social, environmental and cultural status of this student has been reviewed.
 () Yes () No
 Comments: _____

APPENDIX E
NC NORTH FOCUSED SCREENING FOLDER

Page 4

RE 1(c)/ HCA

Student: _____ School: _____ Grade: _____

VI. Based on information gathered during the screening process, it is the decision of this committee to:

A. First Meeting
(Check One)

1. Refer for evaluation.
2. Continue regular education program with new strategies for _____ weeks.
3. Continue regular education program with strategies proved effective during screening process.

Explanation of the above checked action: _____

Committee Members' Signatures	Position	Date
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

B. Second Meeting (Only needed if A(2) is checked above)
(Check One)

1. Refer for evaluation.
2. Continue regular education program with strategies proved effective during screening.

Explanation of the above checked action: _____

Committee Members' Signatures	Position	Date
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

Revised 7/04

APPENDIX F

NC NORTH FOCUSED SCREENING PARENT LETTER

Page 1

RE 2

PARENTAL NOTIFICATION OF SCREENING PROCEDURES

Date: ____/____/____

Dear _____

Your child, _____, is having difficulty in these areas of the school program: _____

We plan to begin a screening process for your child so that we may be able to offer suggestions about ways he/she can best be served in our school program.

The screening process may result in either of the following:

1. A referral may be made for more in-depth evaluation, which could result in consideration for special education services. You will be asked to be a part of the team making decisions concerning your child. As the parent(s) or legal guardian(s) of a child involved in the screening process, you will be notified and asked for your consent before we do any individual testing.
2. No referral for additional tests and evaluation will be made if the screening information and interventions provide assistance for your child to be successful in the regular education class.

The screening process generally takes four to six weeks before the team can determine whether or not a referral for evaluation is needed. You may be asked to plan with us during the screening process. You will be asked to participate during the referral process.

The screening process may include these steps:

1. Use of various classroom interventions
2. Vision, hearing, and health screening
3. Classroom observation
4. Review of school records
5. Speech-language screening
6. Parent conference(s)

Please call _____ if you have questions. The telephone number where this individual can be reached is _____

Sincerely,

Principal / Designee

(Date)

Revised 6/01

APPENDIX G

NC SOUTH PROMOTION RETENTION FORM

Page 1

Woodrow Wilson Elementary School
Kannapolis City Schools

Date: 05-Jun-06 Grades 3-4 Personalized Education Plan

	Teacher Grade 1: Koelbl
	Teacher Grade 2: Gaige
	Teacher Grade 3: Knox
	Teacher Grade 4: Van Ighem

Part I: Descriptive Information

Student Name: Destiny Johnson Grade: 4

SSN: #Name? Birthday: 1/13/1995 Interests: _____

Parent(s)/Guardian(s): #Name? Telephone (H): #Name? Telephone (W): _____

Attendance Pattern: 17 Days Missed Grade 2 2003-2004
4 Days Missed Grade 3 2004-2005
Days Missed Grade 4 2005-2006

Special Needs: _____
Interventions: retain K01; FS1/03;

Testing Accommodations: (R=Reading; W=Writing; M=Math) _____

Part II: Diagnostic Information

Reading ERCI Grade 1: 25.9 RCCC 1st Gr: _____ MCCC 1st Gr: _____ NNAT: 96
Bunninn Record Grade 2: 31+ RCCC 2nd Gr: 2.92 MCCC 2nd Gr: 2.77 NNAT Sub Tests: RA SR
Johnson SV PC

Grade 3 Progress					Grade 4 Progress					Grade 5 Progress				
Beg Lev	1st 9wks	2nd 9wks	3rd 9wks	4th 9wks	Beg Lev	1st 9wks	2nd 9wks	3rd 9wks	4th 9wks	Beg Lev	1st 9wks	2nd 9wks	3rd 9wks	4th 9wks
CCCR	3.20	3.37	3.43	3.55	CCCR	3.85	4.88	4.98	5.20	5.29	CCCR			
CCGM	2.72	2.85	2.92	3.02	CCGM	3.50	4.10	4.2	4.25	4.35	CCGM			
STAR	2.7-3.8				2.4-3.4				STAR					
RTtestlet	60	38	58		RTtestlet	64	34	44		RTtestlet				
MTtestlet	56	62	49		MTtestlet	64	44	38		MTtestlet				

Local Option Testing Grade 3 Ja. Ap 05
Reading Ja: 238 / 2 Reading Ap: 238 / 2
Math Ja: 249 / 3 Math Ap: 249 / 3

Local Option Testing Grade 4 Feb. Ap 06
Reading Feb 06: 240 / 2 Reading April: 243 / 2
Math Feb 06: 248 / 3 Math April 06: 249 / 3

EOG Developmental Scale Score/Level Grade 3 2005				EOG Developmental Scale Score/Level Grade 4 2006			
Reading Pre Test	237	/	3	Post Test	237	/	2
Math Pre Test	231	/	3	Post Test	254	/	3
Writing	/			Reading Retest	/		
				Math Retest	/		
				Writing	2		

APPENDIX G

NC SOUTH PROMOTION RETENTION FORM

K-2 Retention
Melvin W. Fogg, Jr., Principal
800 N. Walnut St.
Kannapolis, N.C. 28081

In accordance with the Woodrow Wilson retention concerns, the initial conference between the principal and teachers has been held by the fourth week of the second semester on the following student.

Student: Baheem Boyde Grade: 1

Date: 2/22/05 Birthdate: 10/25/97

Reasons for considering retention:

Baheem is reading at a 5/6 right now. He has a difficult time following directions and starting tasks when first asked, to. He is a great speller, but is unable to read those words within the text. He does not do well on re-tellings and does not use reading strategies. Also below 66 in math.

Rebecca D. Benham _____
Teacher Principal

Teacher Teacher

APPENDIX G

NC SOUTH PROMOTION RETENTION FORM

Page 3

II. In accordance with the Woodrow Wilson retention concerns, a conference with the student's parents has been conducted at the end of the third nine weeks grading period. The reasons for considering retention have been explained and discussed with parents.

Student: Raheem Boyde Date: 3/22/05

Comments:

Raheem is still reading at a 5/6. He continues to not use reading strategies ~~and~~ to figure out unknown words. He is improving in math, ~~and~~ but still is not writing in complete

Luven Boyde
Parent(s)

M. W. Z...
Principal ^{thoughts}

Rebecca Tamham
Teacher

Teacher

III. In accordance with the Woodrow Wilson retention concerns, the second conference with the principal and student's teachers has been conducted no later than May 1st.

Student: Raheem Boyde Date: 5/3/05

Comments: Raheem is reading at a 7-8. He is below grade level in reading, writing and math. I feel he will benefit more from another year in first grade, than from being a struggling 2nd grader.

Rebecca Tamham
Teacher

Principal

Teacher

Teacher

Luven Boyde

APPENDIX G

NC SOUTH PROMOTION RETENTION FORM

Page 4

IV. In accordance with the Woodrow Wilson retention policy, the teacher shall make a written recommendation to the principal regarding the promotion or retention of the student. Before making this recommendation, the teacher will take into consideration the student's social and emotional adjustment, age, physical size, and academic achievement.

Student: Raheem Boyde Date: 5/20/05

Teacher Recommendations: I still feel strongly that Raheem would be a very successful 1st grader ~~next~~ next year. He continues to read at a 7-8 level ^{and} he is unable to write complete thoughts and coherent narratives. He also has a difficult time in math with counting up and back on the number ~~line~~ ^{line} and with math facts. I feel he will struggle academically and socially in the 2nd grade. I feel another year in 1st grade would help him mature and develop into a successful ~~student~~ student. His mother would prefer him to go to 2nd grade. Raheem is going to be tutored this summer by Ms. Currie and he is

Teacher: Rebecca Q. Bunham
going to attend the reading program at UNCC. His mom would like to see how the summer goes before retaining him.

APPENDIX G

NC SOUTH PROMOTION RETENTION FORM

Page 5

concerns, the final decision is made by the principal. This decision concerning grade placement has been made after completing the required conferences, reviewing the student's academic records and information, and considering the recommendations of the student's parents and teachers.

Student: Kaheem Date: _____

Final Decision:

 Promote

Principal: M.W. Foy

APPENDIX H

NC EAST LEA RETENTION POLICY

Page 1

PROMOTIONS AND RETENTIONS*Policy Code:*

3440

There are three standards which must be met for promotion to the next grade in grades K - 8 or to receive course credit in grades 9 - 12. Students must meet all three standards for promotion or to receive credit for a high school course. The three standards are attendance (see JCBE Attendance Policy), a test standard (see JCBE Student Accountability Policy), and local teacher/principal standards as defined in this policy.

The Board of Education acknowledges the need for thoughtful decisions in the matter of retaining students. Teachers in grades K - 12 are responsible for the early identification of any student considered at risk. Students identified for possible retention in grades K - 8 should enter the Assistance Team process by or before the end of the second grading period. Parents will be notified in writing at the time of the referral of the possibility of retention.

Grade placement is the responsibility of the principal. Local retention decisions in grades K - 8 shall be made by the principal with input from the Assistance Team, the teacher, and the parent. In making these decisions, principals shall consider the following:

K - 2

- Student reading level
- General report card performance
- Work samples
- Previous retentions
- Student participation in special programs
- Success of any intervention plan
- Available standardized test data
- Attendance (reference Attendance Policy for specific guidelines)

3 - 5

- Student reading level
- General report card performance
- Work samples
- Previous retentions
- Student participation in special programs
- Success of any intervention plan
- Available standardized test data
- Attendance (reference Attendance Policy for specific guidelines)
- Performance on State End-of-Grade tests (reference Student Accountability Policy for specific guidelines)

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6 - 8

Student reading level

General report card performance (A student should pass 3 of the 4 core academic subjects of language arts, math, science, and social studies and have an overall average including electives of 70 weighting the courses based on the amount of time spent in the course.)

Work samples

Previous retentions

Student participation in special programs

Success of any intervention plan

Available standardized test data

Attendance (reference Attendance Policy for specific guidelines)

Performance on State End-of-Grade tests (reference Student Accountability Policy for specific guidelines)

In grades 9 - 12, promotion and retention is based on units of credit, which may be earned by successful completion of specific courses as referenced in JCBE Graduation Requirements Policy. In addition to student performance in the classroom, the awarding of credit for high school courses is affected by attendance and by performance on End-of-Course tests. High school teachers should provide written notification to parents and students by or before mid-term if the student is at risk of failing a course for any reason.

It is the responsibility of the school principal to determine the appropriate grade level for each student. The principal's decision may be appealed in accordance with JCBE Student and Parent Grievances Policy, but may be appealed to the board only if there is an alleged specific violation of a local board policy, state or federal law or regulation, or State Board of Education policy.

While acceleration ahead of grade level and subject acceleration should be approached with caution, gifted students may be advanced after thorough evaluation of student aptitude, achievement, performance, behavior, interest, and motivation as outlined in the "Standards for Grade and Subject Acceleration". Questions of acceleration should be referred to the Academically Intellectually Gifted School Review Team.

Legal Reference(s): G.S. 115C-288, -105.41, -45(c)

Adopted: July 20, 1982
 Amended: November 9, 1982
 Amended: March 11, 1986
 Amended: August 13, 1991
 Amended: February 8, 2000
 Amended: April 23, 2002

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PROMOTION AND RETENTION OF STUDENTS

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(Continued)

GATEWAY 3- GRADE 8

Effective in school year 2001-2002, students in grade 8 must demonstrate proficiency:

1. By scoring at Level III or above on the end-of-grade test in reading; and
2. By scoring at Level III or above on the end-of-grade test in math; and
3. By making adequate progress in developing writing skills, as demonstrated by scoring at or above proficiency level 2.5 on the grade 7 writing assessment, or by demonstrating a similar level of performance on locally developed and scored writing samples during grade 8. (If a student does not score at or above proficiency level 2.5 on the grade 7 writing assessment, the school shall provide intervention and assistance to develop writing skills.); and
4. By earning a passing grade (70 or above for the year) in: math; combined reading and writing; and at least one of the two other core subjects (science or social studies).

Attendance: Students must meet the attendance requirements set forth in Policy 6000.5 during their 8th grade school year or they shall be retained.

Students who fail to meet the attendance requirement or who do not demonstrate proficiency at the levels indicated above shall not be promoted to grade 9, unless determined otherwise by the school principal, in consultation with a student's parent(s) and teacher(s).

GATEWAY 4 -HIGH SCHOOL

A. High School End-of-Course Requirements

1. Students enrolled in courses with an End-of-Course (EOC) test must score at least a 70 on the State's adjusted score and meet all other requirements (attendance, written work, test scores, homework, etc.) in order to receive credit for the course.

A student who fails to score at least a 70 on the state EOC test (but is meeting all other requirements) may receive credit for the course if:

- the student chooses to retake the test before the end of the year and scores a 70 or higher, or

APPENDIX I

Intervention Glossary

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Accelerated Reader - The Accelerated Reader program is a guided reading intervention in which teachers are closely involved with student reading of text. It involves two components, the Accelerated Reader software and Accelerated Reader Best Classroom Practices (formerly called Reading Renaissance). The Accelerated Reader software is a computerized supplementary reading program. Accelerated Reader relies on independent reading practice as a way of managing student performance by providing students and teachers feedback from quizzes based on books the students read. Accelerated Reader Best Classroom Practices are a set of recommended principles on guided independent reading (or teachers' direction of students' interactions with text) that ensure Accelerated Reader is implemented with integrity

http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/reports/beginning_reading/arr/

The Appalachian Reading Center, Inc. - The Appalachian Reading Center was founded in 2004 to improve the reading skills of the people of Appalachia. The Appalachian Reading Center, Inc. will accomplish this by providing reading tutoring through one-to-one and small group instruction using structured language approaches. The Appalachian Reading Center, Inc. will also provide coaching services to parents who are home schooling their children through modeled tutoring sessions and instructional support. Additionally, The Appalachian Reading Center, Inc. will provide training for educators and parents in how to best implement structured language approaches. The Appalachian Reading Center, Inc. is not affiliated with any government programs or county schools. We exist as a non-profit agency designed to provide excellent remediation for students with language-based learning disabilities.

Appalachian reading center **<http://www.appalachianreading.org/>**

Comer Model - James Comer's School Development Program, also known as the Comer Process, is intended to improve the educational experience of poor minority youth. Improvement is attained by building supportive bonds among children, parents, and school staff to promote a positive school

climate. The School Development Program is designed to create a school environment where children feel comfortable, valued, and secure. In this environment, children will form positive emotional bonds with school staff and parents and a positive attitude toward the school program, which promotes the children's overall development and, in turn, facilitates academic learning. The School Development Program relies on staff collaboration and parent involvement to promote expectations of high student achievement. Each Comer school implements the program differently depending on the personalities of its staff and the specific needs of the school and its students. Each Comer school is governed by the following three teams: The School Planning and Management Team, The Mental Health Team, and The Parents' Group.

<http://www.med.yale.edu/comer/downloads/Joyner-TransformingRevChapter02.pdf>

Compass Computer Lab – Compass Learning® specializes in creating comprehensive solutions to improve student performance using research-based curriculum, standards-aligned content, individualized learning and differentiated instruction, management and assessment tools. The learning activities are enhanced with grade-appropriate content, animations, and audio and video instruction. Our focus is to provide highly engaging, interactive content that fosters an interest in learning. While working through the activities, students can use offline resources as well to extend, enhance, and transfer knowledge. Compass Learning helps students, educators, and parents in the ongoing pursuit of higher achievement. Customizable, easy-to-read reports provide the information educators need for data-driven decision making. As students move through the curriculum, Compass Learning Odyssey allows educators to easily monitor individual, group, and class progress through comprehensive quizzes and tests.

<http://www.compasslearningodyssey.com/educators.htm>

EduTest Assessment - PLATO® eduTest Assessment is a comprehensive online assessment solution for grades K–8 that quickly identifies strengths and needs for students, classrooms, schools, or entire districts and guides instructional decisions to improve student achievement over time.

Teachers use its Strengths & Needs reports to pinpoint exactly how individual students and classes performed against each state standard, allowing them to customize individual and/or group learning by targeting instruction where it is needed most.

PLATO eduTest Assessment also provides an item and test authoring tool that allows a

district to edit our assessments or create their own to satisfy additional needs in specific subjects, grades, and languages.

<http://www.plato.com/Secondary-Solutions/Assessment/PLATO-eduTest-Assessment.aspx>

Guided Reading - Guided reading is an instructional approach that involves a teacher working with a small group of students who demonstrate similar reading behaviors and can all read similar levels of texts. The text is easy enough for students to read with your skillful support. The text offers challenges and opportunities for problem solving, but is easy enough for students to read with some fluency. You choose selections that help students expand their strategies. You select books that students can read with about 90 percent accuracy. Students can understand and enjoy the story because it's accessible to them through their own strategies, supported by your introduction. They focus on meaning but use problem-solving strategies to figure out words they don't know, deal with difficult sentence structure, and understand concepts or ideas they have never before encountered in print.

Guided reading gives students the chance to apply the strategies they already know to new text. You provide support, but the ultimate goal is independent reading.

<http://teacher.scholastic.com/products/guidedreading/pdfs/whatis.pdf>

Study Island - Study Island is the national leader in Web-based standards mastery and assessment preparation programs. The kindergarten to high school programs are extremely grade-specific, age-appropriate, and are built directly from the NYS Standards. As students move through the self-paced program in either our standard test mode, CPS session, interactive, educational game mode, or put pencil to paper with a printable worksheet, they receive instant feedback and automatic remediation. Teachers are provided with real-time, diagnostic reports that are used to accurately guide their instruction, create specialized classes and assignments, and help them set the appropriate difficulty level of the program on a per student basis. Administrators and teachers can monitor the progress of all students longitudinally by their SINI and DINI categorization from Kindergarten through graduation, which informs district and school-wide initiatives.”

<http://www.edutech.org/training.cfm?subpage=551470>