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## An Evaluation of the Promotion Policy of the Iron County Schools

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AN EVALUATION OF THE PROMOTION POLICY OF  
THE IRON COUNTY SCHOOLS

by

Claudia J. Forsyth

A seminar report submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF EDUCATION

in

Elementary School Administration

APPROVED:

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Claudia J. Forsyth

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## INTRODUCTION

In 1931, the Department of Superintendents, National Education Association, in their Ninth Yearbook, put "Pupil Promotion" as first in a listing of five factors needing study. In 1966, more than three decades later, the effects of promotion or nonpromotion, still remain the subject of serious consideration among educators. The problem has been the subject of research studies and many opinion articles.

The Iron County School District, Cedar City, Utah, has advocated a policy of careful evaluation for each child considered for nonpromotion. The philosophy of the district which advocates adjusting instruction to meet individual differences should eliminate, except in rare cases, the need for nonpromotion. The policy, however, has not been accepted without opposition or argument; for there are those who feel that the sole responsibility of the school is to meet the academic needs of the child and that grade standards must be met.

### Statement of Problem

The problem chosen to be reviewed in this report is "An Evaluation of the Procedure for Retention and Promotion in the Iron County Schools."

Question to be answered is:

1. Does a review of the literature support the generalizations and procedures on which the retention and promotion procedures of this district are based?

#### Significance of the Problem

The Administration of Iron County ascribes to a philosophy of individual instruction. The basic beliefs of this district are well-defined in written form. Teachers coming to work in this district are acquainted with and are required to work within the framework of this philosophy. Since a basic belief of this district is one of helping each individual child to realize his potential, then the matter of school progress becomes more than the child's ability to reach an arbitrarily set grade standard.

#### Basic Assumptions

For the purpose of guiding teachers and administrators in decisions regarding grade placement of children in the schools, a promotion policy has been written and has been placed in the personnel handbook of this district (pp. 47-49). This policy is included in the Summary and Evaluation section of this paper.

It would seem important that these generalizations and procedures be documented with research which would provide a more justifiable basis or point up their shortcomings. The generalizations and procedures need to be related to research

in the field to determine (a) which are valid, (b) which need modification, (c) those which should be discarded and (d) those which may have been overlooked.

It is assumed that a review of research data concerning promotion practices will provide a basis on which to establish the criteria for the critical examination of the district promotion policy.

#### Limitations of the Study

This study will be limited to considering promotion and nonpromotion practices. It will not consider acceleration as a separate problem. Nor will it consider the promotional practices of the ungraded school as the district whose policy is under consideration has a graded organization. It will also concern itself primarily with the elementary grades.

#### Definition of Terms

##### Elementary

The terms elementary grades are defined as pertaining to kindergarten through six, inclusive.

##### Individualized instruction

Teaching undertaken in a manner that provides for each individual within a classroom. Consideration is given to the individual differences insofar as emotional, social, physical, and the intellectual growth are concerned.

## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The Review of the Literature related to the problem of promotion and nonpromotion has been organized and categorized into four areas;

- Promotion practices and achievement,
- Promotion practices and variability of achievement,
- Promotion practices, habits, attitudes, and behavior, and
- Promotion practices and personal social adjustment.

### Promotion Practices and Achievement

An important question which must be asked when a child is retained is what academic progress will take place. This question has been the subject of research by all those who have concerned themselves with investigating the problems of promotion and retention.

A study by Cheyney and Walker (1933) observed that lack of readiness for work of a given grade is largely due to a slow learning rate which will not be improved by repeating a grade.

Kowitz and Armstrong (1961) attempted to find answers to this problem through a latitudinal study made on a group of pupils who had been retained before grade seven. Significant differences were found in groups that had failed and groups that had not. Their conclusions were:



In reading and arithmetic, the achievement of the group that had not been retained was well above the achievement of the group that had been retained. The fact that those who had not made normal progress continued to form a separate group that showed less achievement, even after retention, suggests that their extra year had not eliminated the difference in their achievement. This finding is especially notable since as a result of their retention they were being compared with a group that was a year younger and less experienced. (Kowitz and Armstrong, 1961, p. 437)

Arthur (1936) conducted a study of sixty children who repeated first grade. Nineteen were girls and forty-one were boys. These were not chronic repeaters but just children whom the teacher thought it advisable for them to repeat. These children were matched with a group of non-repeaters on the basis of mental age. From the data it appears that the average repeater of the group studied, learned no more in two years than did the average non-repeater of the same mental age in one year.

Arthur raises the question as to whether it would not have been wiser to have postponed reading, the cause of failure, until the individual was mature enough to profit by it.

Saunders (1941) stated as a conclusion to his study:

It may be concluded that nonpromotion of pupils in elementary school in order to assure mastery of the subject matter does not often accomplish its objective. Children do not appear to learn more by repeating a grade but experience less growth in subject matter achievement than they do promoted. Therefore, a practice of nonpromotion because a pupil does not learn sufficient

subject matter in the course of a school year, or for the purpose of learning subject matter is not justifiable. (Saunders, 1941, p. 77)

Sixty-six low achievers who had been non-promoted and had repeated the third grade were matched case for case with a like number of low achievers who had been promoted to the fourth grade. The matching was done on the basis of sex, IQ, chronological age and achievement test data. There was also great similarity in their educational environment. Worth and Shores (1960) who reported this research stated that, in a school system where a relatively rigid system of grade placement of both pupils and content exists, low achievers in the language arts are likely to do as well when they are promoted as when they are non-promoted.

Coffield and Blommers (1956) undertook an investigation on the relative quality of educational achievement in which they matched promoted and non-promoted pupils. Ninety-three repeaters were matched with a promoted classmate on the basis of the particular achievement variable studied.

They reported that the retained children in their study do improve academically. They did not, however, achieve what was expected of them. Failed pupils averaged only six months in academic gain during the repeat year and still failed to achieve the norm for the grade involved. Although academic progress had taken place, it may be inferred from this study that it was no greater than might have taken place had the pupils been promoted.

Coffield and Blommers in their concluding remarks said:

Failure, in the form of nonpromotion, as a device to ensure greater mastery of elementary school subject matter does not appear justifiable in the light of the findings of this investigation. From the results reported, it would seem that slow learning children who are required to repeat a grade and slow learning children who are promoted, ultimately perform at about the same level when this performance is measured in the same higher grade, in spite of the fact that the failed have spent an added year in attaining this higher grade. It is not the intent to imply that a child should never be failed as he progresses through elementary school. However, if the consideration is solely a matter of educational achievement, it does seem clear that little is gained by requiring the repetition of a grade. (Coffield and Blommers, 1956, p. 249)

Other researchers report some academic gains for repeaters. Lobdell (1954) reports from a study of one school district, that 29 per cent of the pupils made good progress, 40 per cent made fair progress, and 31 per cent made poor progress. He concluded that careful selection of the children who are to repeat a grade, guided by definite criteria painstakingly applied in each case, can bring about success, during and after the year of repeating, for a larger per cent of children than previously available data might lead one to expect.

#### Promotion Practices and Variability of Achievement

It has been advocated by some educators that a policy of nonpromotion for low achievers would reduce the spread

of abilities with which a teacher would have to work. Caswell (1942) reported on a study of forty-six schools with varying rates of slow progress.

He concludes:

In the schools studied, there is a chance relationship between rate of slow progress and the variation of achievement in grade groups. A school with a high rate of slow progress appears to stand as good a chance of having a given amount of variability in achievement within a grade group as a school with a lower rate of slow progress. This being true, the schools with high rates of nonpromotion do not tend to have grade groups less difficult to instruct because of small variability of achievement than schools with lower rates of nonpromotion. (Caswell, 1942, p. 278)

In his discussion of promotion policies and variability of achievement, Caswell included the following quote from Akridge (1937):

The evidence can be regarded as showing a strong presumptive, but not a conclusive, tendency for irregular pupil progress to increase rather than decrease heterogeneity in achievement within a given group of pupils after they enter Grade One together . . . Irregular pupil progress probably operates to increase heterogeneity in achievement among pupils of approximately the same chronological age. (Akridge, 1937, pp. 23 and 26)

Coffield and Blommers (1956) reported that they found no significant differences in general level or variability of seventh grade achievement between schools having high and low rates of nonpromotion.

Lennon and Mitchell (1955) made a survey of age-grade relationships over a period of thirty-five years. They stated that it was probable that relaxing achievement

standards for promotion had given rise to greater variability in educational attainments than was formerly the case. However, they thought the teacher's task would be easier today because he would be dealing with a group more homogeneous in chronological age. They reasoned that closeness in chronological age would put the group closer together in physical, social, and emotional development.

From their study of two school districts' promotional policies, Kowitz and Armstrong (1961) drew this conclusion:

Thus, even when pupil retention was used as an administrative device to encourage achievement and to limit the range of pupil achievement that the teacher must face in the classroom, pupils who were retained formed a distinct group at a lower level of achievement. (Kowitz and Armstrong, 1961, p. 439)

Cook (1941) compared eighteen schools very similar in all respects except in promotion policy. In the nine pairs of schools, the range of ability was tested in eleven achievement fields. He found:

(1) The high percentage of over-age pupils retained in the upper grades of schools with high standards of promotion reduced the mean intelligence of the classes and lowered significantly the achievement average of the grades when compared with schools with more lenient standards of promotion.

(2) The hypothesis that pupils of equal mental ability achieve more in schools with high standards of promotion is not substantiated by this study.

(3) The range of specific ability with which the teacher has to cope in the upper grades in schools with high ratios of over-ageness is not significantly less than in schools with low ratio of over-ageness.

#### Promotion Practices, Habits, Attitudes and Behavior

Of concern to many educators are the effects the non-promotion may have on the child. Sandin (1944) studied the effects of nonpromotion on the behavior of pupils. He found they were more likely to receive reproof and punishment than were regularly promoted pupils. Their so-called "misbehavior" consisted primarily of whispering, day-dreaming, inattentiveness, poking and tripping others, and engaging in activities other than studying.

A group of three hundred children were in a study done by McElwee (1932). Her study was concerned with determining differences in personality traits of accelerated, average, and retarded (nonpromoted) children. She concluded that the non-promoted seemed to possess the desirable traits to a less degree than the other two groups. The non-promoted children were markedly disinterested in and indifferent toward their school work. Their effort was considerably less than that of the children whose school progress had been normal. Although the non-promoted children were the most disobedient

of the three groups they compared favorably with the children of normal school progress with regard to quietness, calmness, quarrelsomeness, stubbornness, excitability, and talkativeness.

An interesting study was made by Otto and Melby (1935) in an attempt to assess the threat of failure on pupil behavior. Teachers in the experiment were told to alter their teaching in any way except one set of teachers reminded the children frequently that they would be retained if they did not work hard. The other teachers assured their pupils they would all be promoted. It was concluded that children who are assured that they will be promoted do as well as those who are reminded throughout the term that they must do good work or suffer nonpromotion.

A more recent study by Goodlad (1954) suggests that repeating a grade is detrimental to the social and personal development of boys and girls. The evidence presented, together with evidence from other studies that repetition is not conducive to greater efforts or achievement and that it is associated with undesirable school attitudes and behavior, seriously questions nonpromotion as a valid educational practice.

That some relationship between grade progress and undesirable character traits exists, was established by

a study conducted by Farley, Frey and Garland (1933). However, it did not show the cause of the relationship. It may be that poor character traits handicap the progress of children, or on the other hand, it may be that non-promotion has encouraged the development of undesirable traits. The writers concluded that if grade failure does have an adverse effect on character development, careful consideration must be given to every pupil failure lest character be sacrificed.

Further studies by Farley (1936) quoted by Goodlad (1952) report findings which indicate that the failing child receiving less satisfaction from his work, tends to become discouraged and frequently antagonistic.

#### Promotion Practices and Personal-Social Adjustment

The question of the effect of nonpromotion on personal-social adjustment has not been resolved by existing research. Afinson (1956) attempted to find answers to this question through a comparison of the social adjustment of junior high boys and girls. He matched fifty-nine pairs of boys and fifty-seven pairs of girls. A member of each pair had been retained in elementary school. His findings showed an advantage for non-repeaters over repeaters in social-personal adjustment as revealed by the Symonds-Block Student Questionnaire. However, he cautions that he found poorly adjusted and well adjusted both in repeater



and non-repeater groups. He suggested that similar research might be carried out in a district which did not have such careful plans of promotion as the one he investigated.

Marrison and Perry (1956) carried on independent studies in different school districts. Both studies were designed to determine if nonpromotion would have damaging effects on the social status of older children. From the data reported it seemed clear that over-age children were not well accepted by their class peers. Both studies used sociometric tests to determine which children were chosen for friends in play, work, and social situations. The studies upheld each person's findings.

Their conclusions stated:

These data further support the findings from studies of promotional policies which have emphasized the importance of keeping the child with his own age group in order to avoid detrimental effects on his personality and his educational progress. The studies described in this report would seem to show that a lower degree of social acceptance is a further detrimental effect on the over-age child, who is usually over-age because of nonpromotion.

One of the basic human drives is for stature in the group. Through no fault of his own, the over-age child tends to be deprived of the opportunity of achieving status. He fails to receive recognition from his teachers for academic achievement and loses status with his peers because of difference in age. All these considerations point toward the importance of keeping the child with his own age group. (Marrison and Perry, 1956, p. 220)

Sandin (1944) used sociometric rating scales, check lists, observation, and interviews to study aspects of social and personal adjustments of non-promoted pupils. In general, he found that non-promoted children tended to choose companions from grades higher than their own. He also observed that these children were pointed out by classmates as children who associated with pupils from grades other than their own, and that they were discriminated against in the selection of study companions. This last finding did not hold true, however for the first grade, where non-promoted children received significantly more than their expected share of choices.

Goodlad (1954) conducted research which he hoped would answer questions raised by other investigators about the area of social adjustment. He used instruments which would give the selected children an opportunity of rating themselves, give all children an opportunity to rate one another, and give teachers an opportunity to rate the subjects selected. His subjects consisted of a group of fifty non-promoted first grade children and fifty second grade children of like ability.

Some conclusions of his study were:

1. The promoted children were rejected significantly less by classmates as persons not desired for very best friends.

2. Promoted children increased, while non-promoted children decreased, their bonds of mutual acceptance.

3. Non-promoted children tended to seek out one another, setting up little cliques within the larger group.

4. Some newcomers sought out these older classmates for friends; other disliked the repeaters and complained of "bullying" from them.

5. The non-promoted children seemed to be lacking in certain social skills requisite to amicable group relationships.

6. There was evidence that the non-promoted children, more than the promoted children, both sensed and experienced the disapproval of their peers.

The study further revealed, however, that neither all the selected promoted children nor all the selected non-promoted children were consistently well or poor adjusted; there was considerably overlapping between groups and among the individuals of any one group. The total body of evidence suggests the closer affiliation of undesirable social and personal adjustment characteristics with nonpromotion than with promotion. Although the exact causal nature of this affiliation cannot be ascertained with finality, there are clearer indications that nonpromotion is the less defensible educational practice.

## SUMMARY AND EVALUATION

The study and Review of the Literature generally indicated that nonpromotion has very doubtful value, academically, personally, and socially. All the research studied proved that the problem was very complex, and that while nonpromotion was seriously questioned, blanket promotions were not advocated as a panacea.

The studies all seemed to substantiate each other in the conclusion that nonpromotion as a device to insure mastery of elementary subject matter is not justifiable. Evidence as presented indicated that little was ever gained by repetition of a grade.

Some researchers (Sandin, 1944; McElwee, 1932; and Farley, 1936) found evidence which pointed to more undesirable habits, attitudes, and behavior on the part of the unpromoted. Others (Morrison and Perry, 1956; Goodlad, 1954; and Sandin, 1944) found children suffering from non-acceptance in their social groups. While the studies reviewed were not all completely in agreement on which was the cause and which was the effect of these maladjustments, they all agreed that the possibility of nonpromotion being the cause, made it, in most cases, unjustifiable.

When schools with rigid and lenient promotion policies were studied, it was found that the total school programs did not suffer from lenient promotion policies. Their achievement levels ranked as high as did the schools which held to rigid promotion policies. There seemed to be no evidence that a policy of non-promotion for low achievers would reduce the spread of abilities with which a teacher would have to work.

The generalizations, upon which the following promotion policies of Iron County are based, were evaluated in light of the research studied.

1. Promotion in the elementary school.

- (a) The aim of the elementary school is to place each child in the physical and social setting which frees him and challenges him to work to his capacity.
- (b) It is difficult to define a grade. There is much evidence to support the reality of individual differences within a group of pupils comprising any grade in school. Studies indicate that, "When a random group of six-year olds enters the first grade, two percent of them will be below the average four-year olds in general mental development and two percent will be above the average eight-year olds. Disregarding the extreme two percent at either end, there is a four-year range in general intelligence. By the time this group has reached sixth grade, the range will have increased to almost eight years." The range becomes greater as children move through school.
- (c) There is a comparable range in physical and social development. With this range in many phases of development, it is unrealistic to have a single standard of achievement for any one grade which must

- be met by all students before moving to the next grade. The alternative is to take each child where he is and develop a program in line with his capacities and interest.
- (d) Teachers and administrators are more apt to place children well if a broad base of assessment is used to determine where each can work productively. This broad base includes academic achievement, chronological age, physical maturation, preference for age play groups. Objective data, and subjective evaluations, (teacher observations, counselor recommendation, parent conferences) are used to arrive at judgments for placing students.
  - (e) We encourage parents, teachers, and children to give priority to what is learned, how it is learned, the permanency and value of what is learned, rather than to the external mechanics of grade placement.
  - (f) There may be need for greater flexibility in placing pupils in a group for a year. Boys and girls who seem maladjusted and/or unproductive in one group may find the climate and activities of another group challenging and worthwhile. The basis for shifts in working groups should be what is good for the child. (Cook, 1955, pp. 168-172)

It would appear that in the main, these generalizations, which urge the recognition of individual differences in the matter of grade placement, are supported by the research done in this field. Goodlad (1954, p. 326) spoke of a philosophy of school progress which will take a child "from where he is to where he can go."

Worth and Shores (1960) concluded:

It would seem, however, that neither promotion or nonpromotion in itself is a very satisfactory solution to the instructional problem posed by the low-achiever. A better solution appears to lie in the development of more flexible curricula, and special methods and materials which will facilitate individualized instruction. (Worth and Shores, 1960, p. 52)

While the intent of the generalizations in the policy under question are clear to the author, it would seem that they should be clarified further if they are to be understood by those less familiar with the philosophy of the school. It would seem that each statement in the policy should be stated in such a manner that it would give strength to the task of deciding the complex problems connected with school progress.

Statement (a) as presently stated, leaves undefined what the district believes is freedom for the child. Statements (b) and (c) are concerned with the reality of individual differences. While these appear to be quite briefly and adequately explained, the issue is confused with the statement: "It is difficult to define a grade." It would seem that these sections fail to explain that the philosophy of the school is one of continuous progress within a graded organization. Grade designations being used for the purpose of grouping children using one common factor; some degree of closeness in chronological age.

Generalizations (d) and (e) depend on adequate communication for their effectiveness. It would appear

that not only should the teacher and the consultants in the school be in communication but that the parent also should be given frequent opportunities to assess the child's progress. While the district's present plan of parent teacher conferences has done much to foster parental understanding of pupil progress, adequate communication between home and school needs to be especially stressed at times when crucial decisions are to be made.

Perhaps, as generalization (e) mentions that children need to be helped with understanding the value of what is learned, rather than the grade in which it is learned, greater effort should be extended to help children understand the educational decisions made for them.

Ilg and Ames (1964) commented on the importance of parental acceptance:

If parents themselves really accept the importance of having a child in a grade which suits his abilities, in most cases it is remarkably easy for them to convey this acceptance to the child. (Ilg and Ames, 1964, p. 323)

Statement (f) of the policy opens the way to a non-promotion if necessary. The assumption seems to be that this would take place after a careful consideration of all factors listed in the foregoing generalizations. As this could be accepted as the key statement in the policy, it would seem that this should be more specific and give definite guidelines for the statements of procedure which follow in the policy.



A study by Shane (1953) gave criteria to be used for decision-making in nonpromotion. These criteria seem to have implications for a critical evaluation of statement (f). Briefly summarized the criteria are:

1. The decision as to whether a child is to progress at the same rate as his age mates should be made only after careful study of the child's total development.

2. Insofar as they can be detected, the causes of his difficulties rather than the mere fact that he is not faring well in academic work should be the basis for deciding this rate of progress.

3. The academic progress that a child makes in any one year is insufficient in itself for reaching a decision as to whether he is to spend additional time in the elementary school. The trend of a child's growth, intellectually, socially, physically, and emotionally, should be studied over a longer period.

4. If it is necessary for a child to be transferred to a group of younger children, that is to remain longer at the same level, great care needs to be exercised to insure that he is not re-exposed to experiences which meant too little to him before.

Chansky (1964) in his conclusions gives suggestions which should be considered in grade placement. He states that the question to be considered might not be whether

a child should be promoted or retained but rather with which teacher should a child be placed in order to do him the most good. Grade placement might make only slight difference. The teacher-pupil interaction is a variable which requires further exploration.

The second part of Iron County's promotional policy contains the procedure to be followed in making decisions regarding promotion or nonpromotion. The procedures listed (a) through (g) follow:

Policy regarding special promotions, deferments, and retentions in the elementary school:

- (a) The teacher identifies the problem and consults with the principal.
- (b) Referral is then made to counselors and curriculum personnel.
- (c) In light of evidence, the group cited above will make a decision.
- (d) Teachers and others, if desired, will confer with parents.
- (e) Parents may make their own decision with regard to entry into Kindergarten; however, group decisions may prevail in other situations.
- (f) A dated record of actions taken is to be placed in cumulative record.
- (g) The superintendent of schools is to be advised in writing of actions taken.

In evaluating procedure (a), it would seem that others beside the teacher might possibly identify the problem. The teacher is recognized as the key person because of the close association with the child, but the parent, too, has intimate knowledge of the child's growth and could very possibly be the one to raise the question of school progress. An observant principal, who sees many children, might raise questions as to proper placement. It would seem that any one of the people most closely concerned with the welfare of a child could initiate action in his behalf.

Procedures (b) and (c) contain the most important steps in the policy. It is inferred here that a case study will be made and decisions rendered. The decision will then be taken to the parent. In light of research studied, it would seem vital that the parent be included in the decision-making. While no definite total body of research is available on parental attitudes and the success of retention, many studies referred to the importance of this factor as they reported their investigations.

Procedures (d) and (e) should be modified in light of the evaluation suggested for the preceding steps. Parents need to be given the facts which have been gathered by the school personnel about the child's problems. They, also, should be given the evidence from research which will help them in their decision.

Procedures (f) and (g) are routine steps which should be followed. Some questions were raised in opinion articles about leaving a written record of retention in a child's confidential record. It was stated that a child might be prejudged by later teachers. It would seem to the writer that a professionally written explanation of actions taken would be of importance to future decisions made for the child.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended first, that a committee of teachers, administrators, and supervisors examine the promotion policy of Iron County. The research and evaluations made in this study might well serve as their starting point for further study and action in this area. Second, it is recommended that definite guidelines for case studies and subsequent action be established. Third, that procedures be planned to involve parents well in advance of any action so that their cooperation and understanding can be secured. Fourth, that a follow-up study of children who have been retained in this district be made. This study might add pertinent data which would aid in further decisions.

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