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0521790646 - On the Success of Failure: A Reassessment of the Effects of Retention in the Primary Grades, Second Edition

Karl L. Alexander, Doris R. Entwisle and Susan L. Dauber

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On the Success of Failure

A Reassessment of the Effects of Retention in the Primary Grades, Second Edition

This book is about the practice of grade retention in elementary school, a particularly vexing problem in urban school systems, where upward of half the students may repeat a grade. *On the Success of Failure* addresses whether repeating a grade is helpful or harmful when children are not keeping up. It describes the school context of retention and evaluates its consequences by tracking the experiences of a large, representative sample of Baltimore schoolchildren from first grade through high school. In addition to evaluating the consequences of retention, the book describes the cohort's dispersion along many different educational pathways from first grade through middle school, the articulation of retention with other forms of educational tracking (like reading group placements in the early primary grades and course-level assignments in middle school), and repeaters' academic and school adjustment problems before they were held back.

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*A Reassessment of the Effects of Retention
in the Primary Grades*

Second Edition

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Preface to the Second Edition

On The Success of Failure, published in 1994, evaluated academic and socioemotional sequelae of early grade retention from the vantage point of our long-term research project, the Beginning School Study (BSS). Baltimore-based and still ongoing, the BSS in fall 1982 began monitoring the educational progress of a panel of city schoolchildren just as they were starting first grade. The study group was mainly low-income (two-thirds) and just over half African-American (55% – all but a few of the rest were White). Over the elementary years many were held back – 40% through fifth grade. *Success* sought to determine how the decision to have these children repeat a grade affected them. Was it helpful, as intended, or harmful, as critics of the practice contend? The question has great practical import, especially for children like the BSS participants – disadvantaged, minority youth who often struggle at school.

Success covered the first 8 years of the group's schooling. It reviewed not just grade retention but also the ways other forms of educational tracking (e.g., special education and ability grouping) shape school experiences. Using multiple approaches, including matched controls, statistical adjustments, and before–after comparisons, the book was as comprehensive as possible at the time.

There is now much to add, but relatively little to change. We have continued to monitor the panel's life progress over the years since *Success's* publication, so that now we are able to examine high school dropout in relation to grade retention. High school dropout persists at epidemic levels in places like Baltimore – for example, 42% of the BSS panel left school without a degree, a figure in line with estimates for other high-poverty cities (*Education Week* 1998). We now can ask: to what extent

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is grade retention implicated in their dropout? The main reason for revising and updating *Success* is to explore this question. A second reason involves seismic changes in the education policy arena since publication of the first edition. We comment on these first.

The timing of the first edition of *Success* (fall 1994) coincided with the beginning of the current debate over promotion policy. Swings between relaxed promotion standards (e.g., social promotion) and merit-based promotion standards are nothing new, of course (e.g., Larabee 1984; Lawton 1997; Olson 1990; Rothstein 1998), and voices from within the academic community have weighed in all along (e.g., occasions like the symposium on grade retention at the 1991 meeting of the American Educational Research Association, "Retention: Processes and Consequences of a Misguided Practice"). But retention practices burst into the national spotlight when President Clinton proposed ending social promotion in successive State of the Union addresses (1998, 1999). The national response was nothing short of dizzying – Blue Ribbon reports appeared (e.g., American Association of School Administrators 1998; Heubert and Hauser 1999; U.S. Department of Education 1999), school systems scrambled to adopt "get tough" promotion policies (e.g., King and McCormick 1998; Mathews 2000; Toch 1998; White and Johnston 1999; Wildavsky 1999), and the media switched into high gear. A 5-year Lexis-Nexis newspaper search of references to "social promotion" that started in September 1994 (around the time of *Success*'s publication) turned up 431 articles, of which 80% appeared *after* President Clinton's 1998 speech.

With *Success* in the mix, we found ourselves drawn into the debate. Conscientious journalists, we discovered, strive for balance on controversial matters, such as retention. The momentum of the day favored strict enforcement of rigorous promotion standards, but many in the media and the public at large worried about the effect of those standards on children who failed to achieve them. Was grade retention an appropriate response? Critics of retention are easy to find within the scholarly community (e.g., Darling-Hammond 1998; Hauser 1999; Reynolds, Temple, and McCoy 1997), but who will speak for the other side? We are not enthusiasts for holding children back. Still, *Success* did not find unequivocally against retention, so we found ourselves (mis)cast in that role. Because our research as reported in *Success* has not always been treated fairly by our critics (e.g., Shepard, Smith, and Marion 1996), this second edition of *Success* clarifies our position on the educational effectiveness of retention during the primary grades *in the context of recent*

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calls to end social promotion. We also respond, in an appendix, to technical criticisms directed at the original analyses.

The first edition of *Success* reported that retention did *not* set back children in the BSS panel academically. Instead, in most instances retained children's test scores and marks improved after retention. Moreover, retention was *not* an emotionally scarring experience for these youth, perhaps because it was so common. These conclusions about children's response to retention in the primary and middle grades remain unchanged from the earlier edition (keeping in mind that they apply to a disadvantaged study group and not necessarily to the United States as a whole). Chapter 11, however, which is new and covers the high school years, shows that grade repetition substantially elevates BSS children's dropout risk, even allowing for other differences between retainees and nonretainees, for example, differences involving achievement test levels and family factors.

This evidence on the connection between retention and dropout presents us with something of a conundrum. Retention, so far as we can determine, does not impede BSS children academically or assault their self-esteem in the early years, yet something about the experience apparently weakened repeaters' attachment to school. In presenting this new evidence, this second edition of *Success* tries to fashion a coherent interpretation, one that embraces old *and* new – early positive and then later negative effects of retention.

The first edition followed the study group through the first 8 years of school, the elementary and middle school years for those promoted each year. Mirroring the pattern citywide at the time (Kelly 1989), almost 17% of the BSS panel was held back in first grade, and after 5 years in school 40% had repeated at least one grade. The policy climate then shifted dramatically. Following the national trend (e.g., Lawton 1997; Olson 1990), in the early 90s the Baltimore City Public Schools moved toward a "no fail" promotion policy. As a result, the systemwide retention rate plummeted, from 8.9% in 1990 over grades 1–6 (combined) to 3.0% in 1993 (Bowler 1994). However, members of the BSS panel were entering their ninth year of school (1990) when this policy shift occurred, so their retention experiences were framed by a very different policy context.

The first edition of *Success* assessed one kind of institutional response to a difficult question: when children like those in Baltimore are not keeping up, is it better to hold them back or move them ahead? *Success* examined the experience of first grade, second grade, and third grade repeaters specifically, monitoring their academic progress from the fall

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of first grade, *before anyone had been held back*, to the end of seventh grade (in the case of repeaters) or eighth grade (in the case of children never retained). This time frame extends 4 to 6 years after children's retention and overlaps their move from elementary school into middle school, which in Baltimore occurs between the fifth and sixth grades.

Those benchmarks are referenced to the 1988/89 school year, 4 years before the group's expected ("on-time") high school graduation in spring 1994. Having continued monitoring these children's academic progress, we now know that just a fourth of the BSS panel graduated on schedule. Some were 1 year or more behind and graduated late. Others gave up and left without a degree. Altogether, it took 7 years for all members of the study group to conclude secondary school. The earliest departure was that of a student who left after 8 years of school with a sixth grade education; the last left after 15 years without a high school degree.

Participants in the BSS all started school together as first graders in fall 1982, but from that point forward they moved along very different educational paths. Chapter 4 sketches the cohort's complicated history of single, double, and even triple retentions, as well as assignments to special education after retention over the first 8 years. This early history deflected many BSS youth from their original graduation timetable, but whether it had the further effect of taking them off the path to eventual graduation could not be explored until now, an omission that has been pointed out in commentary on the first edition (e.g., Dawson 1998b). However, with mode of high school exit known for 92% of the original group, we are able now to pose a key question about dropout in relation to grade retention: does repeating a grade increase dropout risk for BSS youth, as much prior research indicates (e.g., Jimerson 2000), or do the academic benefits of retention documented in the first edition of *Success* carry over to dropout also? Chapter 11 addresses this longer-term issue.

The Beginning School Study is not a narrow study of retention or dropout. Rather, it is a broad-based survey of children's academic and personal development. To our knowledge, it affords a longer and more detailed perspective on retention and dropout than any other research so far available on retention's consequences. And it is focused on a population in which these problems are severe. For research purposes, it is useful to examine "worst cases," those youth who most need help, with the clear understanding that findings for such a group can inform policy

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for other like groups but do not necessarily generalize to “average” or “advantaged” groups.

We would not expect the causes of retention in suburban or middle-class families necessarily to mimic causes identified in the BSS panel. Nor would we expect consequences to be the same. Repeating a grade in a school where grade retention is common, as in the BSS, is probably a far different emotional experience from being the lone repeater in a school where retentions are more rare. Such contextual differences need to be examined but are beyond the scope of the BSS.

Finally, a few words of thanks are in order. We are indebted first and foremost to the children and families of the BSS who have worked in partnership with us these many years. Without their goodwill and generous cooperation the BSS would not be possible. Members of the BSS panel realize no great personal gain from indulging our intrusions. Certainly they give much more than they receive. But they are part of something important. We hope they realize that and derive a measure of satisfaction from that knowledge – some do, we know. The first edition of *Success* was dedicated to these precious young men and women and their parents. We dedicate the second edition to them also, and especially to the 17 known deceased members of the study group whose lives have been cut tragically short.

Next in line for grateful tribute are the core staff of the BSS. For almost 20 years the work of the BSS has been done “in house” – developing survey instruments; tracking and interviewing respondents; coding, cleaning, checking, and entering data; maintaining the data archive; and, of course, posing questions of the data. This complicated, challenging enterprise has evolved into what is essentially a small, dedicated survey research center. Continuity and competence are key to making it work well, and the core BSS staff has delivered handsomely on both scores. Sona Armenian, Binnie Bailey, Joanne Fennessey, Linda Olson, Anna Stoll, and Mary Ann Zeller make up the current BSS infrastructure. Those six extraordinary women have averaged 14 years of magnificent service to the BSS. Each has a job description, but in practice the division of labor on the BSS is highly fluid. Everyone pitches in when needed and where needed. A special word of thanks is due Anna Stoll for her patience and perseverance in giving order to our scraps of text and seemingly endless changes while helping prepare this manuscript. We are blessed to have such fine friends and colleagues.

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Beyond the core, BSS staffing expands and contracts on an “as needed” basis. Included in the mix have been many able graduate and undergraduate research assistants, more than a dozen during the last 2 years alone. One is Nader Kabbani, a Ph.D. candidate in economics while working with the BSS. Nader, who last year completed his doctoral studies, is coauthor of Chapter 11. Another is Nettie Legters, who received her Ph.D. in sociology in 1996 and is now a research scientist at The Center for the Social Organization of Schools, an education research and development center located here at Hopkins. Nettie is coauthor of Chapter 10.

A special debt of gratitude is owed the field operatives and data management staff who worked with us on the age 22–23 Young Adult Survey, used in this edition of *Success* to determine high school completion. More than 20 assistants participated in the effort, which achieved 80% coverage of the original group after 17 years. While Alice Keith and Ken Ruffin were in the field doing interviews and respondent tracking, a small in-office army worked on telephone tracking, telephone interviewing, and data processing – coding, cleaning, entering, and checking.

We also have obligations to acknowledge outside the BSS family. Securing financial support for a project like the BSS is not easy. There is no 20-year “sustaining” award. Rather, we have had to fund the project piecemeal along the way and hope that adequate resources would materialize in time to prevent major gaps. A series of overlapping, multiple-year awards supported the work. Becky Barr, John Rury, Patricia Graham, and Ellen Lagemann at The Spencer Foundation; Lonnie Sherrod, Beatrix Hamburg, and Karen Hein at the Grant Foundation; Nevzar Stacey at The Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI); and Bill Bainbridge at the the National Science Foundation (NSF) all were of great help in securing the resources we needed.

Finally, thanks are due our editors at Cambridge University Press. Julia Hough, who helped usher through the first edition of *Success* and arranged for us to “pitch” the second, has been succeeded by Philip Laughlin. We appreciate the help and support both have given.