



# Middle School Grade Retention

# District Leadership Forum

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# 1) Executive Summary

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## Key Observations

**Administrators at profiled districts rarely retain middle school students, citing the ineffectiveness of retention on student academic and behavioral outcomes.** For example, administrators at **District C** and **District F** retain fewer than 1 percent of middle school students each year. Contacts at profiled districts cite research that demonstrates retained students are less likely to graduate high school on time and more likely to drop out of school.<sup>1</sup> Further, retained students tend to show poor socioemotional adjustment, low self-concept, and an unfavorable view of school, compared to their peers.<sup>2</sup>

**Design a retention policy around grade promotion criteria to convey that administrators prioritize student success over failure.** Administrators at **District C**, **District D**, and **District E** hold formal retention policies. Although administrators at these districts rarely retain students, contacts cite the importance of a formal retention policy to clearly communicate grade promotion expectations to students, teachers, and parents. District administrators should communicate to stakeholders that these policies serve to give each student the optimal chance to achieve grade-specific standards.<sup>3</sup> At profiled districts, retention policies generally complement grade promotion criteria, which include successful curriculum completion, attendance, and performance on assessments. Grounding retention policies in promotion criteria frames academic expectations positively and helps to garner stakeholder support.

**Offer interventions that address academic and behavioral deficiencies of at-risk students to minimize student retention.** Administrators at most profiled districts embed opportunities into the school day for students to complete missing assignments and work on remediation. For example, middle school administrators at **District A** integrate missed work completion time in a block that usually comprises an elective, lunch, and physical education. At **District F**, students take a 30-minute course at the end of each day to hone content-specific deficiencies. In addition, administrators at several profiled districts provide multi-tiered intervention during the school day to address the behavioral and socio-emotional needs of at-risk students. By integrating these opportunities into the school day, administrators ensure that all students have access to interventions aimed at minimizing the risk of retention.

**Prioritize proactive communication with parents of at-risk students to understand and address causes of low academic performance, and ultimately reduce retention.** Administrators at **District C**, **District D**, and **District E** emphasize communicating regularly and clearly to parents of at-risk students to share student progress and challenges. Together, teachers and parents work closely to diagnose factors (e.g., poor attendance, challenges at home) negatively impacting academic performance, determine which interventions might work for students, and ultimately reduce the likelihood of retention. For example, to boost student attendance, administrators at **District A** invite parents to meet with school leadership and discuss the impact of attendance on student outcomes and learn about available resources (e.g., clothing assistance, before- and after-school care). Contacts note that this approach has helped increase attendance for students and minimize retention.

1) "How does Repeating a Grade Impact Students' High School Persistence and Behavior?" RAND Corporation.

[https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_briefs/RB10025.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB10025.html)

2) "Meta-Analysis of Grade Retention Research: Implications for Practice in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century." School Psychology Review.

<https://www.cde.state.co.us/sacpie/metaanalysisofgraderetentionresearch>

3) "Ending Social Promotion in Grades K-8: Insights Regarding Policy Implementation." RAND Corporation.

[https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/working\\_papers/2006/RAND\\_WR424.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/working_papers/2006/RAND_WR424.pdf)

## 2) Student Retention Processes

### Impacts of Retention

In this report, **retention** refers to the practice of requiring a student to repeat a grade level. **Promotion** refers to allowing a student to move to the next grade level.

### Middle School Administrators at Profiled Districts Cite Research on the Ineffectiveness of Retention to Explain Low Retention Rates

Advocates of retention believe that repeated grades for low-performing students provide a necessary opportunity to master content and skills, and align with the increased emphasis on standards and accountability in education.<sup>4</sup> However, research demonstrates and contacts at profiled districts note that retention does not lead to clear academic or social benefits.<sup>5</sup>

### Negative Academic and Behavioral Impacts of Retention<sup>6</sup>

#### Academic



- Less likely to graduate high school on time
- More likely to drop out of school

#### Behavioral



- Poor socioemotional adjustment
- Low self-concept
- Unfavorable view of school

Due to the ineffectiveness of retention on student achievement and outcomes, middle school administrators at profiled districts rarely retain students.

### Middle School Retention Rates at Profiled Districts

District Name	Retention Rate
District B	0 retained students in 2017-2018 year
District C	Less than 1 percent of 400 students each year
District E	0 retained students from 2012-2013 to 2017-2018
District F	Fewer than 1 or 2 students of 300 students each year

\*Contacts at **District A** and **District D** report very low middle school retention rates but did not cite exact rates.

4) "Ending Social Promotion in Grades K-8: Insights Regarding Policy Implementation." RAND Corporation.

[https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/working\\_papers/2006/RAND\\_WR424.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/working_papers/2006/RAND_WR424.pdf).

5) "Grade Retention and Social Promotion." National Association of School Psychologists. <https://www.nasponline.org/x26820.xml>; "How Does Repeating a Grade Impact Students' High School Persistence and Behavior?" RAND Corporation.

[https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_briefs/RB10025.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB10025.html); "Status and Trends in the Education of Racial and Ethnic Groups." National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/raceindicators/indicator\\_RDA.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/raceindicators/indicator_RDA.asp); "Winning the Battle and Losing the War: Examining the Relation Between Grade Retention and Dropping Out of High School." Psychology in the Schools.

<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/pits.10046>; "Meta-Analysis of Grade Retention Research: Implications for Practice in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century." School Psychology Review. <https://www.cde.state.co.us/sacpie/metaanalysisofgraderetentionresearch>.

6) Ibid.

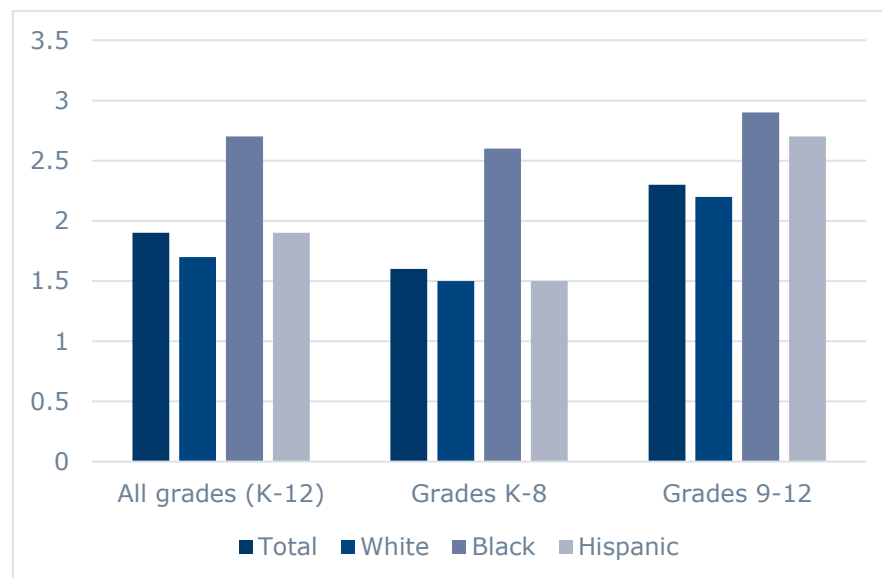
Administrators at profiled districts often cite retention as the last option after they have tried other interventions. For example, contacts at **District E** emphasize that administrators only retain a student if they demonstrate academic challenges that are not sufficiently met by multi-tiered intervention supports, do not qualify for special education services, and are delayed socially. Contacts at **District D** and **District F** note that most retentions at their districts result from parents strongly advocating for retention of their student.

## Retention Disproportionately Affects Students of Historically Disadvantaged Backgrounds

Not only does retention negatively impact students, research also demonstrates that school, family, and individual factors correlate with the likelihood of retention. For example, administrators are more likely to retain students who come from low socioeconomic backgrounds and single-parent households.<sup>7</sup>

Contacts at **District F** emphasize that retention disproportionately affects socioeconomically disadvantaged and non-white students. Research confirms that administrators disproportionately retain students of color compared to their white peers.<sup>8</sup> According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), retention rates across kindergarten to 12<sup>th</sup> grade in public and private schools decreased from 3.1 to 1.9 percent, between 2000 and 2016.<sup>9</sup> However, across this time frame, administrators retained black and Hispanic students at higher rates than white students. For example, in 2016, administrators retained black students at 2.7 percent while they retained white students at 1.7 percent, across kindergarten to 12<sup>th</sup> grade.

## Elementary and Secondary Student Retention Rates in Public and Private Schools in 2016<sup>10</sup>



Contacts at District F note that retention is often more a reflection of a student's home life than their cognitive level and ability to learn. For example, a student who has a high cognitive level and who understands the content might refuse to do

7) "Meta-Analysis of Grade Retention Research: Implications for Practice in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century." School Psychology Review.

<https://www.cde.state.co.us/sacpie/metaanalysisofgraderetentionresearch>.

8) "Status and Trends in the Education of Racial and Ethnic Groups." National Center for Education Statistics (NCES).

[https://nces.ed.gov/programs/raceindicators/indicator\\_RDA.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/raceindicators/indicator_RDA.asp).

9) Ibid.

10) Ibid.

homework simply because they do not find value practicing something they have already mastered. Further, students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds do not have equal access to resources (e.g., assistance with homework at home, external tutoring, parental involvement in the school community) that could prevent academic failure. Therefore, these students may face retention for inequitable factors, rather than due to their cognitive ability.

## Retention Policy Design

### Create a Formal Retention Policy to Communicate Grade Expectations to Stakeholders

**District C, District D, and District E** established a formal retention policy published in the online district handbook. Although administrators at District C and District E rarely retain students, contacts at both districts cite the importance of a formal retention policy to clearly communicate grade promotion expectations to students, teachers, and parents.

Contacts at **District A** and **District F** note that they do not hold a formal retention policy due to the ineffectiveness of retention on student outcomes.

### Middle School Retention Policies at Profiled Districts

School District	Formal Retention Policy?	Retention Criteria
<b>District C</b>	Yes	May be retained: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Does not complete curriculum</li> <li>Demonstrates poor attendance</li> <li>Does not show grade-level performance on district assessments</li> </ul>
<b>District D</b>	Yes	May be retained or required to attend summer school: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fails two or more core subjects (i.e., math, language arts, history, science) for the year or</li> <li>Receives three or more "F"s in the fourth quarter</li> </ul>
<b>District E</b>	Yes	Will be retained: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fails three or more of the following subjects: language arts, math, science, social studies, spelling, and an average of all other subjects</li> </ul> May be retained: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fails two of the subjects listed above, based on a review of the grade in all subjects taken during the year</li> </ul>
<b>District F</b>	No	May be retained: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fails two or more subjects</li> <li>Misses more than 18 days of school and was not on homebound or hospital instruction</li> </ul>
<b>District A</b>	No	May be retained: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Demonstrates severe truancy to a point where administrators do not have sufficient information to determine student mastery of grade-specific skills</li> </ul>
<b>District B</b>	No	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Decentralized retention decision process (i.e., per school)</li> <li>District administrators currently working to formalize a retention policy</li> </ul>

## Contextualize Retention Policy in Grade Promotion Criteria to Emphasize Student Success Over Failure

Administrators at **District C**, **District D**, and **District E** integrate grade promotion criteria into retention policy language. For example, administrators at District C discuss promotion and retention in the same section of the district handbook. Districts should contextualize retention policies within grade promotion criteria in order to prioritize the language of successful students. Research confirms the importance of communicating to stakeholders that promotion and retention policies serve to give each student the optimal chance to achieve grade-specific standards.<sup>11</sup>

### Middle School Promotion/Retention Criteria at *District C*



#### **Successful Completion of the Curriculum**

Students must pass all core subjects with a 0.50 GPA or higher and receive no more than five total failing grades for the year.



#### **Attendance**

Students must have no more than 5 percent (of the total school year) unexcused absences or 10 percent excused by a parent without medical documentation.



#### **District Assessment Performance**

Students must demonstrate grade level performance or evidence of consistent progress on district assessments.



#### **No Social Promotion**

No student will be promoted based upon age or other social reason not related to academic performance.

Middle school administrators at all profiled districts consider successful curriculum completion, attendance, and performance on assessments when determining whether to promote a student. Consider explicitly defining the components of successful curriculum completion to communicate academic expectations to students, parents, and teachers.

11) "Ending Social Promotion in Grades K-8: Insights Regarding Policy Implementation." RAND Corporation. [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/working\\_papers/2006/RAND\\_WR424.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/working_papers/2006/RAND_WR424.pdf).



## Successful Curriculum Completion Criteria for Middle School Students at Profiled Districts

### Criteria



#### District A

- Student must pass at least four of six subjects (which includes passing four of the five core subjects).



#### District C

- Student must pass all core subjects with a minimum 0.50 GPA.
- Student must receive no more than five total failing grades for the year.



#### District E

- Student must pass more than three of the following subjects: language arts, math, science, social studies, spelling.

## Communicate Expectations Against Social Promotion, Which Leads to Negative Outcomes

Administrators at all profiled districts do not socially promote students (i.e., moving students to the next grade level when they have not mastered grade-specific standards). Five out of six profiled districts explicitly communicate expectations against social promotion in online handbooks. The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) confirms that social promotion is not an educationally sound practice.<sup>12</sup> Social promotion can create frustration for promoted but unprepared students, negatively impact student motivation and effort (i.e., by sending the message that all students can move to the next grade without working hard), give parents a misguided idea of their students' progress, and force teachers to simultaneously teach students who are underprepared and those who are ready to learn.<sup>13</sup>

## Implementation

### Establish a Timeline to Communicate Formal Retention Decisions to Students and Parents

Administrators at **District E** notify parents at least by midterm of the third quarter to request a formal meeting if administrators plan to recommend retention for a student. Administrators finalize the retention decision in the fourth quarter. Similarly, administrators at **District B** determine whether they should retain a student by March.

While districts should establish a deadline to notify parents and students of the final retention decision, contacts at **District F** emphasize the importance of reaching out to parents at the earliest indication of the possibility of retention, to diagnose causes of low academic performance and discuss appropriate interventions. For example, middle school teachers at **District A** notify parents that they might consider their student for retention by parent-teacher conferences in February. This timeline ensures that administrators and teachers can provide appropriate interventions to at-risk students to minimize the risk of retention.

<sup>12</sup>"Grade Retention and Social Promotion." National Association of School Psychologists. <https://www.nasponline.org/x26820.xml>.

<sup>13</sup>"Ending Social Promotion in Grades K-8: Insights Regarding Policy Implementation." RAND Corporation. [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/working\\_papers/2006/RAND\\_WR424.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/working_papers/2006/RAND_WR424.pdf).

## Understand Existing, School-Level Retention Processes Before Creating a Districtwide Retention Policy

Contacts at **District B** recommend that district administrators work closely with school principals to understand trends and approaches behind current retention processes prior to establishing a formal districtwide retention policy. This collaboration allows district administrators to understand principals' existing perceptions on the effectiveness of retention, identify points of process improvement, and gather buy-in for a districtwide policy.

Prior to beginning work on a formal retention policy in 2017, administrators at District B surveyed school leadership (i.e., principals, teacher representatives). This process allows district administrators to surface any disconnect in retention approach between school and district leadership, and then provide targeted professional development to remedy the disconnect. For example, if the survey demonstrated one school with high retention rates, this could correlate with the school leadership's favorable stance on retention. In response, district administrators could provide targeted professional development on the negative impacts of retention.

### Example Survey Questions for School Leadership on Existing Retention Procedures at *District B*



#### Retention Rates

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- How many students did school administrators retain in the last year?
- At which grade levels were students retained?



#### Intervention Approach

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- What interventions did school administrators put in place for students at risk for retention?
- How often did school administrators involve parents in conversations on retention and interventions?
- How often did school administrators contact parents of academically at-risk students?
- How did school administrators partner with parents (if at all) during the process?

## Anticipate a Multi-Year Planning and Implementation Process for Retention Policies

Contacts at several profiled districts used a multi-year process to establish and implement a formal retention policy. For example, administrators at **District D** just finished the second year of a five-year plan for identifying and implementing interventions tailored to individual students' needs. These interventions are aimed at reducing the likelihood of retention. Administrators at **District B** have been working to formalize and implement a retention policy for the last two years.

Administrators at **District E** created a formal retention procedure five years ago, motivated by a change of leadership and direction of the board. Contacts at the district acknowledge that it can take time to gather teacher understanding of and buy-in for a new retention policy. In a RAND Corporation study on promotion and retention policies, administrators at profiled districts leveraged a gradual rollout process to build awareness and understanding of the retention policy, to develop

appropriate structures and procedures (e.g., appeals committee, detailed rules), and to adjust the policy based on initial results.<sup>14</sup>

## Elementary Retention Comparison

### Kindergarten Readiness Accounts for Slight Differences Between Elementary and Middle School Retention Approaches at Profiled Districts

Like the middle school level, administrators at most profiled districts rarely retain elementary school students. However, specific factors associated with kindergarten impact retention decisions at some profiled districts. While administrators at **District F** rarely retain elementary students overall, contacts note that any retention at the elementary level usually occurs with kindergarten and first grade students. Contacts highlight that many students who enter kindergarten at the district are not prepared for a structured classroom environment (e.g., did not attend pre-kindergarten), which can impact retention decisions.

At District F, teachers might retain a kindergarten student if the student is younger than most kindergarten students (i.e., turned five years old during the kindergarten year) and is socially delayed; did not have preschool experience and struggled to acclimate to the expectations of a structured classroom setting (e.g., self-regulation, interaction with peers); and would benefit from a second year of kindergarten to close the academic achievement gap.

Similarly, contacts at **District A** cite that state law impacts administrators' response to kindergarten truancy and subsequently, kindergarten retention rates at the district. Because compulsory education begins at six years old in **District A's** state, there are no legal ramifications for truancy before age six. This means administrators do not have any means to ensure that a five-year-old student attends school. Thus, administrators at District A might retain a kindergarten student if they miss a significant number of days of school, and therefore do not have enough time in school to master kindergarten academic standards.

### Administrators at Profiled Districts Hold Similar Grade Promotion Criteria for Elementary and Middle School Students

In general, profiled districts establish similar approaches to grade promotion and retention at the elementary and middle school levels.

Notably, while administrators at **District D** hold the same grade promotion criteria for both elementary and middle school students (i.e., curriculum completion, attendance, performance on standardized tests and other assessments), administrators do articulate more detailed retention criteria for elementary school students.

Administrators consider retaining a kindergarten student if, despite applied classroom interventions, they have not demonstrated core knowledge and skills for pre-reading, writing, math, and behavior.

14) "Ending Social Promotion in Grades K-8: Insights Regarding Policy Implementation." RAND Corporation. [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/working\\_papers/2006/RAND\\_WR424.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/working_papers/2006/RAND_WR424.pdf).

## Retention Criteria for Students in Grades One through Five at *District D*

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Student achievement according to the Common Core State Standards | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Local common assessments, <a href="#">AimsWeb</a> benchmarking, <a href="#">Renaissance Learning/Star Screening</a> |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Student report cards   | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Classroom assessments   |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Unsuccessful classroom interventions                             | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Attendance reports  |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Standardized achievement tests                                   | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Other factors: social maturity, emotional maturity, previous retentions, physical maturity/development              |

### 3) Reducing Retention Rates

#### Overview

#### Instead of Retaining or Socially Promoting Students, Track Student Progress and Provide Interventions for Academically At-risk Students

Due to the ineffectiveness of retention on student outcomes, districts should minimize retention rates. However, social promotion is not an educationally sound alternative. Districts must ensure that teachers do not promote students who have not mastered grade-specific standards. All profiled districts, regardless of formal retention policy, offer multiple interventions for academically at-risk students, so that administrators rarely retain students. An effective alternative to retention and social promotion is closely monitoring student progress, proactively identifying students who might be at risk for retention, and providing interventions both inside and outside of the school day to support these students.

#### Classroom Practices

#### Monitor Student Progress Frequently to Identify and Proactively Intervene with Students at Risk for Retention

Administrators and teachers at **District B**, **District C**, **District D**, and **District E** regularly track student progress and challenges throughout the school year to best determine how to support academically at-risk students.

#### Tracking Middle School Student Progress and Retention Risk at Profiled Districts

##### Daily



- **District C:** Teachers meet to discuss how students are progressing towards or struggling with curriculum completion. The principal and assistant principal join meetings once every other week.
- **District E:** Teachers meet to review students' reading and math progress.

##### Weekly



- **District D:** Teachers meet in professional learning communities (PLCs) to discuss appropriate interventions for students who are struggling. Teachers select one or two students for administrators to review. The middle school principal, social worker, special education director, and school psychologist meet every other week to discuss these selected students.
- **District E:** Teachers meet to discuss students' academic progress in core subjects.

##### Monthly to Quarterly



- **District B:** Teachers and administrators meet every six to eight weeks to monitor students receiving interventions.
- **District B:** Teachers participate in data summits three times during the school year and once during the summer to review all students' academic performance.
- **District E:** Teachers meet quarterly for a formal meeting to discuss students' overall academic performance and behavior.

By discussing student progress and performance on a daily, weekly, and quarterly basis, teachers and administrators at **District E** can immediately identify when students demonstrate the first signs of academic challenge, and respond accordingly with appropriate interventions, to ultimately minimize the risk of retention.

During quarterly data summits, teachers at District B review students' academic performance rooted in classroom data (e.g., formative assessments), benchmark assessments, summative evaluations, and when available, state test scores.



### **Administrators Use Data to Ensure Equitable Opportunities for Student Learning at *District B***

Given that retention disproportionately affects students of specific racial and socioeconomic backgrounds, the NASP recommends that district leadership establish equitable and effective learning opportunities for students from diverse backgrounds.<sup>15</sup> In quarterly data summits, teachers at **District B** frame conversations on student academic performance in terms of equity, by breaking down outcomes into different student groups. Teachers discuss unique challenges of each group, analyze data from student focus groups, and brainstorm how administrators can better support students.

## **Encourage Teachers to Grade for Learning Outcomes, Not Work Completion, to Prevent Inequitable Retention Practices**

Administrators at both **District C** and **District F** standardized late work policies to limit any discrepancies that might lead to inequitable retention practices. For example, administrators at District F do not allow teachers to assign zeros or take any points off for late assignments. Administrators first established a "no zero" policy after noticing that many students were failing classes simply because they did not submit completed homework. Although District C does not hold a formal "no zero" policy, administrators began encouraging teachers to avoid assigning zeros for late work three years ago and today, teachers rarely do.

At the same time, administrators at District C standardized a more lenient late work policy. Currently, administrators mandate that students with missing work attend a work completion session during lunch, afternoons of early dismissal Fridays (early dismissal due to staff development), and/or Saturday school. Teachers may choose to reduce the assignment grade by 10 percent if not completed by the next school day, and by 20 percent thereafter. Teachers must give a minimum grade of 70 percent if a student completes the assignment "within a reasonable amount of time" (per teacher discretion). In the past, teachers would give zeroes for late work submitted after two or three days.

## **Strategies to Minimize Inequitable Grading Practices**



Encourage against assigning zeroes



Standardize late work policy



Eliminate grade reduction practices that do not involve student learning (e.g., taking points off if a student did not write their name on their paper or used spiral notebook paper instead of loose leaf)



Standardize the breakdown of a course grade into assessments and homework

<sup>15</sup>"Grade Retention and Social Promotion." National Association of School Psychologists. <https://www.nasponline.org/x26820.xml>.

After discovering that each middle school teacher maintained their own grading preferences, administrators at District C also standardized the student assessment process to ensure consistency in grading expectations. Ensuring consistency in grading minimizes teacher discrepancies and biases that may lead to inequitable retention practices. Middle school teachers at the district now all base 70 percent of student grades on assessments and 30 percent on homework and practice. Assessments include tests, quizzes, and other classroom-based exercises that demonstrate student knowledge (e.g., exit slips).



"We're not just going to retain students and fail students because they don't meet the expectations of one teacher on one day or on a series of days. We're not going to allow students to perceive themselves as failures in a school environment."

– **Superintendent, District E**

## Student Interventions

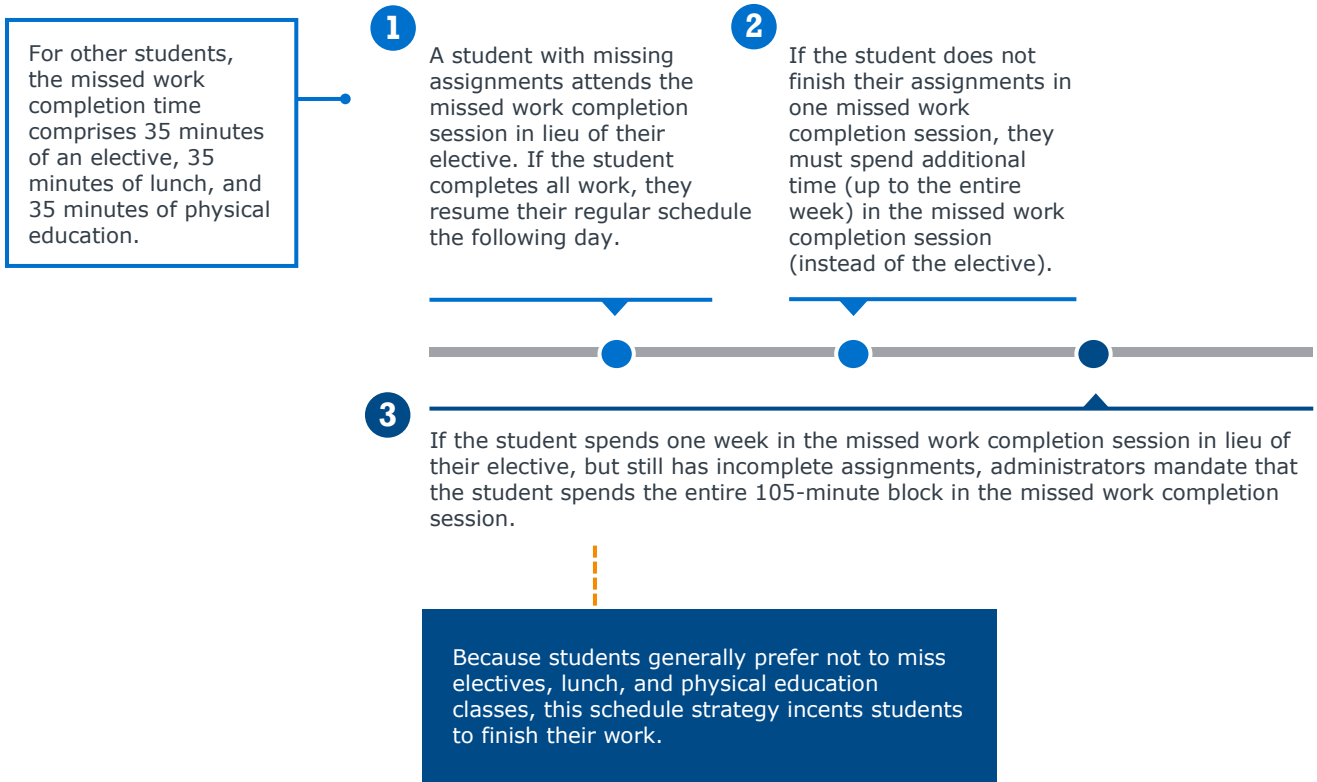
### Provide Opportunities for Students to Complete Missing Assignments Before, During, and After the School Day

Missing work often results in students falling behind in class and becoming at-risk for retention. To remedy that, administrators at most profiled districts offer opportunities before, during, and after school for students to complete missing assignments to ensure they are engaging with classroom content and working towards mastering grade-level standards.

By mandating that students complete missing homework during lunch and after school, contacts at **District F** highlight that administrators teach students how to take responsibility for their learning outcomes. Administrators emphasize that by providing a quiet, structured setting and offering homework assistance when needed, students do not have the opportunity to make excuses for not completing their homework.

Middle school administrators at **District A** embed missed work completion time into a block during the middle of each school day. All middle school teachers send a list of students with missing work to the principal on Fridays. Administrators notify a student in their first period on Mondays if they need to attend the missed work completion session that day. Similarly, administrators at **District C** provide opportunities for students to finish incomplete work during their elective class.

## Missed Work Completion Time and Process for Middle School Students at *District A*



Administrators at District A, District C, and District F provide an after-school study hall a few times a week (spanning 45 minutes to one hour) for students to complete assignments and receive assistance from teachers. Administrators at District A and District F offer a late bus option for these students to accommodate transportation needs. In addition, administrators at District C provide students a before-school session (i.e., 45 minutes before school starts) to complete their work.

## Provide Remediation Opportunities to Boost Students' Understanding of Content

Administrators at profiled districts build remediation into the school day to ensure all students have access to interventions aimed at minimizing the risk of retention. For example, all middle school students at **District F** take a 30-minute course at the end of each day. The course is content- and grade-specific and serves as an opportunity for students to hone deficiencies or dive deeper into content for enrichment.



## Daily Remediation/Enrichment Course at *District F*

### Placement

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- All students attend this daily course. If students demonstrate academic deficiencies, they attend a remediation course. Students who do not demonstrate academic deficiencies attend an enrichment course (i.e., dive deeper into content and skills).
- Administrators identify students' areas of deficiency from [Renaissance Learning/Star Screening](#), state-mandated tests, and classroom work.
- If a student shows deficiencies in both reading and math, administrators place students in a reading course because the district prioritizes reading goals.
- Nearly all students at the district demonstrate at least one or two areas of deficiency in reading (e.g., fluency, comprehension, literary devices), so most do benefit from remediation.

### Design

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- Teachers assign grades to hold students accountable for progress towards individual remediation plans.
- Course focus typically changes every quarter, unless a student could benefit from remediation in one area for two consecutive quarters.



### Examples of Courses

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- Remediation/enrichment: reading, math
- Enrichment: music, art



### Incentives

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- Teachers often reward hard work in reading and math remediation courses. For example, if a student reaches their weekly goal by Friday, they may be permitted to spend the last 15 minutes of the course as free time (e.g., go outside).
- Administrators try to assign students at least one enrichment course (i.e., music, art) every year, to boost student engagement.

Middle school students at **District D** can receive remediation in math and English Language Arts (ELA) during an 80-minute elective period. At the middle school, two teachers teach math and two teachers teach ELA per grade. Math and ELA teachers communicate weekly during scheduled PLC meetings to determine student eligibility for this intervention.

## Approach to Remediation in Math at *District D*

The two ELA teachers follow the same process as their math colleagues.

- 1 Two math teachers each take half of the group of students placed in math remediation and parallel teach (i.e., teach the same unit at the same time).
- 2 During the first and third week of the month, teachers focus on a specific skill (e.g., addition, subtraction) and assign activities for students to practice that skill.
- 3 Teachers assess students at the end of the week.
- 4 Based on assessment results, teachers either spend the following week reteaching the skill or diving deeper into the skill (i.e., enrichment).

In addition, administrators at some profiled districts offer remediation opportunities before and after school for academically at-risk students. For example, middle school teachers at **District E** offer one-on-one reading sessions with students for 30 minutes before school starts. Contacts at the district note that students who participate in the reading sessions generally increase their reading levels. Administrators at **District A** offer once-a-week, after-school tutoring in ELA and math.

## Offer Multi-Tiered Intervention During the School Day to Address Holistic Needs of Students

The RTI framework includes universal screening, multi-level support systems, regular progress monitoring, and data-based decision making. For more information, review EAB's brief [Response to Intervention](#).

The NASP recommends providing multi-tiered intervention to address academic, behavioral, and social-emotional needs of at-risk students.<sup>16</sup> For example, administrators at several profiled districts use Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) and/or Response to Intervention (RTI) with students to provide this multi-tiered support.

Administrators at **District B** have been strengthening their multi-tiered system of support for at-risk students for the last three years. For example, administrators are currently piloting an initiative to analyze the impact of intervention timing on student outcomes and retention. At one half of the schools in the district, administrators recommend and implement RTI for at-risk students in January. At the other half of the schools in the district, administrators begin this process in October. (Previously, principals would inform district administrators of any retained students at the end of the school year.) District administrators plan to meet with principals this summer to discuss intervention timing. Early anecdotal evidence demonstrates that administrators applying interventions in October appreciate having multiple data points and note that early multi-tiered intervention seems to reduce retention rates.

## Offer Summer Program for Students to Remediate Skill Deficiencies and/or Recover Course Credit

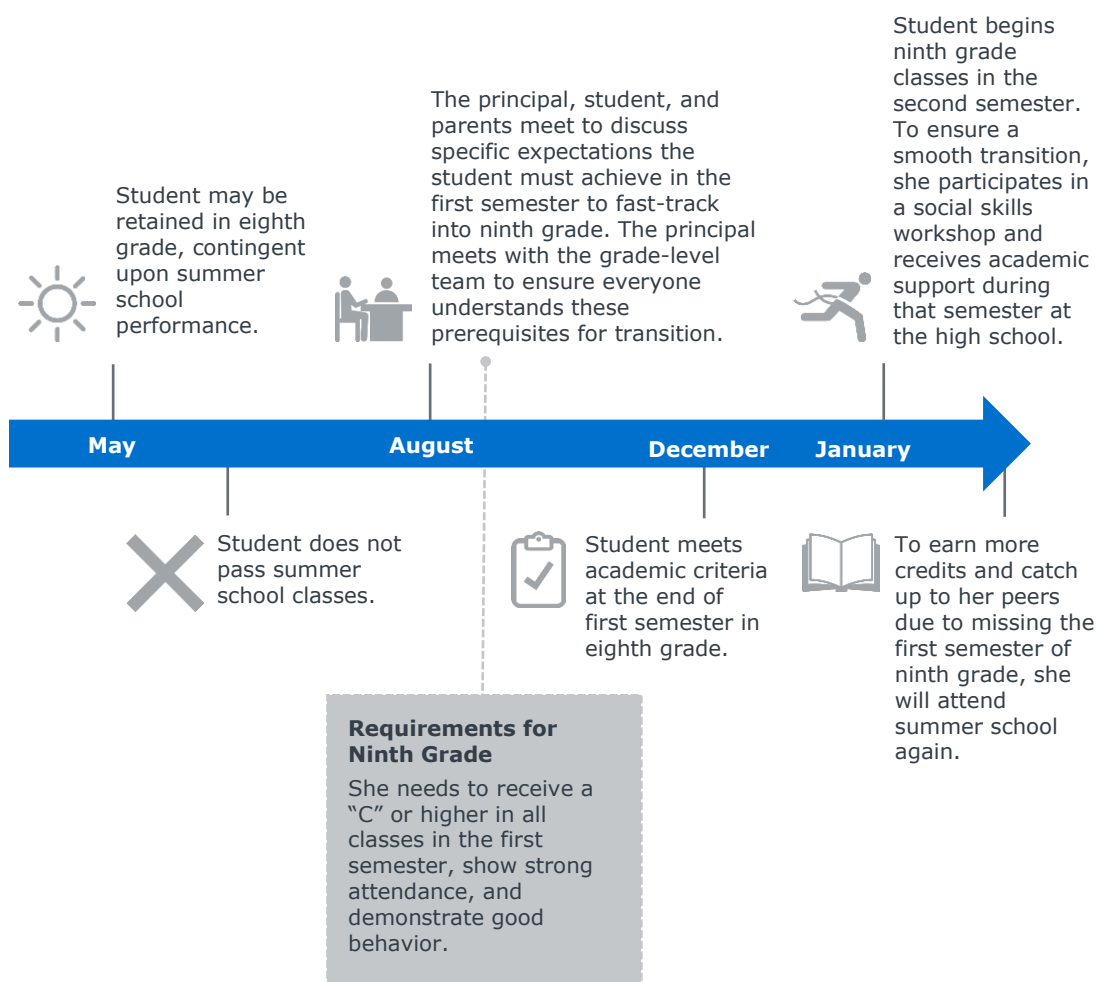
To remediate skill deficiencies in ELA and/or math, administrators at **District D** encourage or mandate summer school for some students. For these students to be promoted in the fall without daily content-specific remediation, students must pass summer school classes with a "D" or higher and miss no more than three days.

<sup>16</sup>"Grade Retention and Social Promotion." National Association of School Psychologists. <https://www.nasponline.org/x26820.xml>.

However, contacts note that administrators rarely retain students, even if they do not pass summer school. Instead, administrators prioritize continued remediation to support academically at-risk students.

Contacts at District D suggest that administrators could minimize retention by allowing grade promotion halfway through the year in specific circumstances (e.g., not social promotion). For example, administrators established the below process to fast-track retained eighth graders into ninth grade during the second semester of the school year.

### Profile of Retained Eighth Grade Student Fast-Tracked into Ninth Grade at *District D*



Administrators at the district attribute the successful outcome of fast-tracking in this example to parent involvement and support as well as close collaboration between the middle and high school principals. Due to semester- instead of year-long courses at the high school, eighth grade students transitioning into high school can enroll in lower-level classes during the second semester and not be considered behind. Contacts note that reinstating students into the grade level with their chronological peers helps maintain graduation rates and reduce dropout rates districtwide. Administrators do not provide a similar opportunity for retained sixth and seventh grade students, because these students would be too far behind in grade level.

Administrators at **District C** provide summer credit recovery for some retained students, on a case-by-case basis. Specifically, if students successfully complete 30 hours of remedial education, they can move on to the next grade. This year, administrators recommended two middle school students for this option.



### **Districts Use Retention Rates to Gauge the Effectiveness of Retention Policy and Interventions**

Contacts at several profiled districts prioritize low retention rates as a marker of success of retention policy and interventions. Contacts at **District A** additionally note that increased test scores would demonstrate the effectiveness of a retention policy and interventions and report an increase in scores on internal districtwide assessments. Contacts at **District C** also cite gathering anecdotal evidence from teachers as one way to measure the effectiveness of interventions.

## **Parental Involvement**

### **Communicate Proactively with Parents of Academically At-Risk Students to Address Retention Risks**

Administrators at **District C**, **District D**, and **District E** emphasize the importance of regular and clear communications to parents of academically at-risk students to share student progress and challenges. Parents often have helpful insight into their students' ability to learn and achieve. Together, teachers and parents can work closely to diagnose factors (e.g., poor attendance, challenges at home) negatively impacting academic performance, determine which interventions might work for students, and ultimately minimize the likelihood of retention.

Middle school administrators and teachers at District C identify students who may be at risk for retention as early as mid-term of the first trimester, and promptly notify parents then. Administrators inform parents of tailored interventions for their students, such as assigning specific seating arrangements during study hall, sending home progress reports every Friday, and pulling students out of their elective class to complete missing work.

## Communication Tactics with Parents at *District D* and *District E*

### Communicate student progress and challenges via:



- Phone calls
- Emails
- Parent-teacher conferences

### Boost attendance using:



- Mail letters
- Phone calls
- Home visits

### Notify parents that student is academically at-risk:



- At the end of the first quarter if a student has failed one or more classes, administrators send home a letter.

## Engage with Parents to Provide Support for Students at Risk for Retention Due to Poor Attendance

At some profiled districts, truancy represents a noteworthy factor that might lead to retention. To boost student attendance, administrators at **District A** prioritize strong relationships with parents. For example, when a student misses a significant number of school days, administrators send a letter home. The middle school nurse, principal, and psychologist connect with parents by phone to better understand the cause of poor attendance. Administrators also invite parents to meet with school leadership to discuss the impact of attendance on student outcomes and learn about available resources.

## Middle School Attendance Problem-Solving Meetings at *District A*

Meeting Attendees	Examples of Resources Offered	
 Middle School Principal	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Add extra bus routes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Offer free before- and after-school care
 School Psychologist	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Provide clothing assistance	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Provide school supplies
 Teacher	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Make alarm phone calls	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Educate parents on importance of attendance on student outcomes
 Parent(s)	 Student	



### **Leverage Social Media to Educate Parents on Importance of School Attendance**

Contacts at **District A** cite generally low parent involvement at the district but have found that social media serves as an effective way to communicate with harder-to-reach parents. Parents on the middle school improvement team recently started a parent Facebook group to help disseminate information on the positive impact of attendance on academic outcomes. Contacts note that the district's overall approach to boosting attendance (i.e., attendance problem-solving meetings, notifications by mail and phone, social media messaging) has increased attendance for students who would typically miss up to 11 to 12 days of school.

## 4) Stakeholder Engagement

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### Communication

#### Leverage Multiple Channels of Communication to Inform Stakeholders of District's Retention Policy

Administrators at profiled districts use multiple channels to communicate retention policies to parents, students, and teachers, to ensure that all stakeholders understand grade promotion expectations. Contacts at **District B** and **District C** recommend asking school principals to communicate and lead discussions on the district's retention policy.

#### Channels to Communicate Retention Policy to Stakeholders at Profiled Districts

##### Parents and Students



- Online district handbook
- Regular newsletters
- Parent-teacher conferences
- Student-teacher conversations

##### Teachers



- Principal-teacher conversations
- Professional development

In a RAND Corporation study of promotion and retention policies, administrators at profiled districts created a one-page, family-friendly brochure describing promotion expectations and included a list of answers to frequently asked questions; provided an explanation of promotion and retention policies in the first report card home; and trained staff members to explain the policy in phone calls with parents.<sup>17</sup> Many administrators emphasized the importance of early communication and notification to stakeholders to garner credibility and support for the policy.

#### Gather Input and Provide Professional Development to Mitigate Teacher Pushback to Retention and Ensure Compliance

RAND Corporation cites involving stakeholders in retention policy design as an effective strategy for gathering widespread support.<sup>18</sup> Contacts at **District D** emphasize that district administrators involve school administrators and teachers in the process of creating retention criteria to mitigate teacher pushback. In addition, middle school administrators and teacher leaders on a school improvement team at District C work together to gather buy-in for changes in grading policies and support for the new retention policy. By garnering support for and compliance with the retention policy, district administrators can ensure that teachers are not socially promoting students.

17) "Ending Social Promotion in Grades K-8: Insights Regarding Policy Implementation." RAND Corporation. [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/working\\_papers/2006/RAND\\_WR424.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/working_papers/2006/RAND_WR424.pdf).

18) Ibid.

District administrators should provide training to ensure that teachers understand and comply with the retention policy and know how to support students who are at risk for retention. Contacts at **District F** note that garnering teacher buy-in for the retention process, specifically around grading policy changes, has been challenging.

For example, one common perspective is that if teachers allow students to turn in homework assignments late or do not assign zeros, then teachers fail to prepare students for the professional setting, where missing a deadline or failing to complete tasks could lead to negative, irreversible consequences. To gather teacher support for grading policy changes, administrators at the district organize internal professional development and encourage external professional development for teachers.

### Strategies to Garner Teacher Buy-In for Districtwide Retention and Intervention Approach

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Explain negative impact of retention on student academic and social outcomes.  | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Demonstrate examples of when retention might not accurately reflect a student's cognitive levels.                                       |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Instruct teachers on trauma-informed education.  | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Provide evidence of positive data-based outcomes of different types of interventions.   |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Demonstrate the impact of equitable grading practices on student outcomes.   | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Offer one-on-one remediation and counseling to teachers to understand why they should replace retention with alternative interventions. |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Provide encouragement and positive role-modeling for equitable classroom practices through professional development. | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Consistently communicate and reinforce retention policy and intervention expectations.  |

### Establish Positive Messaging and Active Dialogue with Students to Boost Engagement with Interventions

Administrators at profiled districts leverage different communication strategies and settings to encourage students to engage with interventions. To convey to students that interventions represent opportunities to succeed, rather than punishment, teachers at **District E** and **District F** prioritize building rapport with students and establishing a dialogue around the positive impact of interventions like remediation.

For example, a teacher might ask a student struggling to read, "Would you like to read better?," "What do you think might help?," and "How can we work on this together?". By asking a series of constructive questions, the teacher encourages the student to take agency over their learning outcomes. The teacher also positions themselves as an advocate for students' academic success. By ensuring that students engage in interventions that lead to increased academic outcomes, district administrators can minimize retention rates.



## 5) Research Methodology

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### Project Challenges

Leadership at a member district approached the Forum with the following questions:

- What are student retention rates at contact districts? How do rates vary by grade level at contact districts?
- What student retention policies and processes do contact districts employ?
- What student retention policies or processes do contact districts employ for middle school students (i.e., sixth, seventh, eighth grades)?
- How do contact districts assess and identify middle school students who are at risk for retention during the school year?
- How do contact districts support middle school students who are at risk for retention?
- How do contact districts reduce student retention in middle school?
- How did contact districts initially implement middle school student retention policies?
- How do contact districts communicate middle school student retention policies to stakeholders (i.e., students, teachers, parents)?
- How do contact districts ensure compliance from teachers and administrators with middle school retention policies?
- How do middle school retention policies compare to elementary school retention policies (i.e., kindergarten to fifth grade) at contact districts?
- How do student retention policies impact student outcomes at contact districts?

### Project Sources

The Forum consulted the following sources for this report:

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[https://nces.ed.gov/programs/raceindicators/indicator\\_RDA.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/raceindicators/indicator_RDA.asp).

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<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/pits.10046>.

## Research Parameters

The Forum interviewed school and district-level administrators.

### A Guide to Districts Profiled in this Brief

District	Location	Approximate Enrollment
District A	Midwest	850
District B	Midwest	6,200
District C	Midwest	950
District D	Midwest	2,000
District E	Midwest	60
District F	Midwest	750