

# Grade repeats stay low

## Reading effort credited; others cite social promotion loophole

09:42 PM CST on Monday, November 7, 2005

By **TERRENCE STUTZ** / The Dallas Morning News

AUSTIN – The big push against social promotion in Texas public schools has been more like a little nudge so far.

A new study from the Texas Education Agency on grade retentions – the number of students who flunk at each grade level – indicates that the percentage of students held back has barely changed, despite a heavily touted state crackdown on automatic promotions.

In 2004, just 2.6 percent of students in third grade – where the primary focus on social promotion has been so far – had been held back.

That was fewer than the previous year, the first time that students were required to pass the reading section of the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills to progress to fourth grade.

The percentage was also only marginally higher than the three previous years, when there was no requirement to pass the exam. State officials had predicted that as many as one in eight students might have to repeat third grade under the new law.

While the report details trends at all grade levels, the numbers for third grade are among the most significant findings because those students must now pass the reading section of the TAKS to advance.

In lower grades, the numbers were much higher, perhaps because schools are trying to help children before they get to the all-important third grade. The number of students retained in first grade was more than twice that of third grade.

### Explanations

State officials attributed the low failure rate in the third grade to teacher training and reading intervention programs that begin in kindergarten and continue through the early elementary grades. Last spring, fifth-graders became the second class required to pass the TAKS before promotion.

But state researchers noted that the retention rate was held down somewhat by a provision in the law that allows a student who has failed the TAKS in three chances to be promoted if his principal, teacher and parents agree.

According to the study, 46.4 percent of students who failed the test repeated the third grade. The rest were promoted after their parents successfully appealed.

Still, educators and researchers suggested the problem of social promotion – passing students based on age rather than achievement – was not as great as former Gov. George W. Bush contended when he persuaded the Legislature to launch the program shortly before he became president.

Sandy Kress, former education adviser to Mr. Bush, said the low retention rate among third-graders should cause school districts to take a closer look at the committees that can promote students who fail the test.

"School superintendents and principals ought to be sure that the standards used by these committees are rigorous and follow the intent of the law," Mr. Kress said.

Mr. Kress said he cannot judge whether the promotion committees are operating as intended and noted that many of the students are improving thanks to intensive help after they first fail the TAKS.

"But if people begin to become lax in making these decisions ... then the effectiveness of the program could be compromised," he said.

#### The standards

Others said the standards for passing the high-stakes exam may be too low.

"I hesitate to say teachers are doing a great job because the standards for student assessment in Texas are lower than in other states," said Chris Patterson, research director for the Texas Public Policy Foundation, a conservative think tank.

Richard Kouri of the Texas State Teachers Association played down the significance of the third-grade requirement, noting that more students failed in kindergarten, first and second grade before the rule took effect – and there are still higher retention rates in those grades.

"In talking to our elementary teachers, the prevailing philosophy is that you don't want to let a kid go too far through school behind the rest of his or her class," Mr. Kouri said. "The best time to catch a student up is in the earliest grades."

Mr. Kouri also said the negative impact of retention on a younger student is not as great as in the later grades. In other words, the older the child gets, the more aware he is that he's not advancing with his classmates.

About 6.4 percent of first-graders – 21,101 pupils – were held back after the 2003-04 school year, according to the TEA study. In third grade, 8,196 were held back.

#### Other findings

The education agency's study, released last week, also found:

- In elementary grades, retention rates were highest in first grade, followed by second grade and kindergarten. Fifth grade was lowest – about 1 percent – and fourth and sixth grades were slightly higher.
- In secondary grades, the failure rate was highest among ninth-graders, where 16.5 percent of students began their second year of high school as freshmen. The percentage, while high, reflects improvement since 1999, when 18.8 percent of ninth-graders were retained.
- Overall, 4.7 percent of all Texas students were repeating a grade in 2004-05. That figure – representing 187,037 out of 4 million students – was unchanged from the previous year.
- Black and Hispanic students were far more likely to be retained than white or Asian students. About 6 percent

of all black and Hispanic children were retained in 2004, compared with 2.9 percent of whites and 1.8 percent of Asian students. Among students from low-income families, 5.7 percent were held back.

"The disparities in retention rates across ethnic groups were significant," TEA researchers concluded. They noted that black and Hispanic elementary students were nearly twice as likely to be held back.

Debbie Ratcliffe, a spokeswoman for the education agency, credited teacher training and reading programs for the low retention rate in third grade. The state has spent more than \$500 million on such programs since 1999, when the law to curtail social promotion was enacted "There hasn't been a spike [in retentions] at third grade because we are identifying the kids who need help much earlier," Ms. Ratcliffe said. "It is better if you nip the problem in the bud rather than wait for the child to fail."

She also said kindergarten and first grade "will probably always have higher retention rates, for emotional and social reasons as much as academic reasons. Sometimes, people just guess wrong about when a child is ready for school."

The high failure rate among ninth-graders is long-standing and stems in large part from the different course structure in high school, where students need to pass at least six classes each year to advance. High school students now need 24 credits to graduate – or six credits per year.

Unlike elementary schoolchildren, high school students only have to retake the classes they fail.

But the failure of so many ninth-graders has been cited as a key factor in the state's high dropout rate, as some students get discouraged by their inability to pass classes when they reach high school.

"Our concern is that we have been focusing in Texas on improvement in the early grades but not paid as much attention to students when they reach high school," said Ms. Patterson of the Texas Public Policy Foundation.

E-mail [tstutz@dallasnews.com](mailto:tstutz@dallasnews.com)

## FAILING THE STANDARD

A look at what happened to third- and fourth-graders who failed social promotion standards in 2003-04:

### THIRD GRADE

Students who failed standard: 8,621  
Students promoted anyway: 4,618 (53.5%)\*  
Students retained: 4,003 (46.4%)

### FOURTH GRADE

Students who failed standard: 61,776  
Students promoted anyway: 58,120 (94.1%)  
Students retained: 3,653 (5.9%)  
Students whose fates are unknown: 3 (less than 0.1%)

\*The state report specifies that 1,496 students were promoted by grade-placement committees composed of a parent, teacher and principal. The reason for the other 3,122 students' promotions is unclear, partly due to incomplete records, the state said.

## HELD BACK

Texas' social-promotion standards took effect starting with third-graders in the 2002-03 school year. So far, the standards haven't seemed to substantially affect the number of children held back. Here's how many third-graders the state has retained for any reason over the past decade:

1994-95	3,453 (1.3%)
1995-96	4,251 (1.5%)
1996-97	4,400 (1.6%)
1997-98	5,373 (1.9%)
1998-99	7,129 (2.4%)
1999-2000	6,862 (2.3%)
2000-01	7,659 (2.5%)
2001-02	7,636 (2.4%)
*2002-03	8,924 (2.8%)
2003-04	8,196 (2.6%)

\*First year of social promotion standards for third-graders

SOURCE: Texas Education Agency

---

Online at:

<http://www.dallasnews.com/sharedcontent/dws/dn/education/stories/110805dntexpromotion.16a3454f.html>