

Grade retention draws many different opinions

By Michelle Woo
The Arizona Republic

As the school year ends, some parents will be faced with a difficult decision: whether to keep their child back a year.

Perhaps the child has not mastered grade-level reading skills or has difficulty following instructions. Some children might be retained if they have missed several school days because of illness or multiple moves.

Educators disagree on whether grade retention is an effective solution to getting students on track. Some say that struggling students can use the extra year to review and understand concepts they weren't able to grasp the first time around. Others say that taking a child from his classmates is a traumatic experience that can lead to years of low self-esteem.

Marlo Archer, a Tempe psychologist specializing in kids, teens and families, says that social promotion, or allowing students to move ahead in school regardless of their achievement, takes away the focus on educational accountability.

"We put kids through the system, saying, 'OK, you're ready now,' when they're not," Archer says. "We're lying to them. When we retain students, we hold students accountable. We're sending the message to all students that they need to master the material."

Archer says teachers should keep students and parents informed throughout

When retention is recommended

Try to understand why the teacher is requesting retention. Ask to see some of your child's work compared with that of other children of the same age. If the teacher mentions behavioral or maturity problems, ask for examples.

Keep the teacher informed about your child, such as whether he or she developed normally. Also, tell the teacher what your child is like at home, so the teacher can compare that with at-school behavior.

Be aware of stresses on your child that may affect performance at school. Examples: a new baby in the home or a recent move.

Request assistance from other school resources, such as a guidance counselor or the special-education staff. They may have helpful insights.

Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Development at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

the school year of what academic skills are expected, instead of surprising them with a retention notice right before summer vacation. Children will push themselves to succeed, she believes, if they

realize there are consequences to performing below the standards.

But many educators say teachers and parents should try alternatives to retention, as studies have shown that retained children perform better at first, but fall behind again in subsequent years. Some studies have shown that students who have been kept back are more likely to drop out of school later on, and that students who are retained more than once have a very small chance of graduating.

"If you don't need to retain, don't do it," says Carol McLean, a developmental and educational psychologist in Tempe. "If kids think they're not smart enough to be with their friends, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy."

McLean says alternatives might be one-on-one tutoring or remedial summer school.

"Parents should ask: What has the teacher tried to do to help?" McLean says. "Students might need alternative types of instruction. Often, it's a change in teaching methods that helps a child, rather than time."

An educator might try placing the child in a smaller group setting, or breaking down the material into smaller chunks. The teacher can try using auditory techniques if the child is an auditory learner, or visual techniques if he is a visual learner. McLean says parents and teachers should work together to find ways of getting the child caught up.