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Stakeholders' Perceptions on Mandated Student Retention in Early Childhood

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Jennifer Mankins

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2017

Abstract

Stakeholders' Perceptions of Mandated Student Retention in Early Childhood

by

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M.Ed., University of Texas at Arlington, 2011

M.Ed., University of Central Oklahoma, 2001

B.S.Ed., University of Central Oklahoma, 1999

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Abstract

Reading is one of the primary goals of the early elementary grades. When students start to struggle with this complex skill, educators and parents search for solutions to rectify quickly mounting gaps before a child falls too far behind. In the State of Oklahoma, lawmakers have passed a law requiring mandatory 3rd grade retention for students who do not pass the state reading test. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine the perceptions of stakeholders who had experienced implementation of mandated student retention in early childhood. The study is informed by Bourdieu's cultural capital theory of social distinctions, Bloom's taxonomy theory, and Festinger's social comparison theory. Seventeen participants, including 2 parents, 8 teachers, and 7 administrators, took part in face-to-face interviews and focus groups to provide data on 3rd graders in 4 schools in an Oklahoma district. Responses from interviews and focus groups were audiorecorded, transcribed, and coded for themes. Nine themes emerged from data analysis. These themes reflected participants' concern for the potential damage to students' self-esteem, an increase in dropout rates, and that the 3rd grade is too late for retention. On the positive side, participants indicated mandatory retention permitted retention that had been previously refused, and provides time for maturity, as well as the opportunity for success for struggling students. However, study participants also opined that mandatory retention created new challenges for students, teachers, and schools. Findings guided the development of a policy recommendation to create social change within the participating district, empowering educators to help parents better understand this law and prepare their children for the 3rd grade assessment by outlining a plan for early identification and creating programs for struggling students.

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Dedication

This project is dedicated to my family who has supported and encouraged me throughout this journey. Thank you to my husband, Richard, who never questioned my quest for “more.” You provided me with the time I needed to work and motivated me to start again when I was stuck. Thank you for never giving up on me. To my mom and pops: I thank you for your love and unwavering belief in me. I appreciate all of your prayers, support, and pep talks throughout this process. Finally, to my daddy in heaven: I am sad you are not here to celebrate this milestone with me, but in my heart I know how proud you would be. Thank you for teaching me that hard work pays off. I love you all very much and appreciate your help and patience with me as I worked to reach this goal.

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Section 1: The Problem

Introduction

Decision makers in the state of Oklahoma believe third grade retention will provide much needed support to failing readers. In an effort to end social promotion, the practice of allowing a student to progress to the next grade level because of age with or without the skill set needed for success, the state has written and passed a third grade mandatory retention law. In this qualitative case study, I explored the perceptions of the parents, teachers, and administrators who were directly affected by the new law. The purpose of this study was to examine various stakeholders' perceptions of mandated student retention in early childhood in four third grade classrooms in a specific district in Oklahoma.

Definition of the Problem

During the 2013-2014 school year, the State of Oklahoma implemented a law that requires schools to retain third graders who are not reading at grade level (Oklahoma HB 3218). Now, students may be retained up to two times before being promoted. While there are some exemptions, the law includes special education students and English language learners (ELLs).

Early intervention may be critical for remediating reading difficulties. Oklahoma lawmakers have attempted to ensure students are reading on grade level by employing a mandatory retention clause included in the Reading Sufficiency Act (RSA) modeled after a Florida law implemented a few years ago. The Oklahoma RSA law stated:

Beginning with students entering the first grade in the 2011-2012 school year, if the reading deficiency of a student, as identified based on assessments administered as provided for in subsection B of this section, is not remedied by the end of third grade, as demonstrated by scoring at the unsatisfactory level on the reading portion of the statewide third grade criterion-referenced test, the student shall be retained in the third grade (p. 5).

There are six good cause exemptions, and the exemptions are detailed and specific about which children are exempt from this law (Oklahoma SB 630). For example, children who have been retained are not exempt, can be retained again, and do not automatically fall under the good cause exemption category. The state has created a mid-year promotion path for students who are able to pass the test after the beginning of the next school year. This would mean that third grade students who were retained may have the opportunity to retake an alternative assessment mid-year, perhaps in November, and upon meeting the state's criteria, these students would be moved to fourth grade in November or December of the school year. This leaves some educators concerned about curriculum issues and gaps during transitions in grade levels during the middle of a school year.

The new law had a provision for students during the 2013-14 and 2014-15 school years allowing them to avoid retention if school officials and the parents felt it was in the students' best interests (Oklahoma HB 3218). These students may be promoted by an expert team who evaluates their ability and progress throughout interventions. For the 2013-14 and 2014-15 school years, a student not qualified for automatic promotion under

paragraph 4 of this subsection may be evaluated for probationary promotion by a Student Reading Proficiency Team composed of:

- (1) the parent(s) and/or guardian(s) of the student,
- (2) the teacher assigned to the student who had responsibility for reading instruction in that academic year,
- (3) a teacher in reading who teaches in the subsequent grade level,
- (4) the school principal, and
- (5) a certified reading specialist.

The student shall be promoted to the fourth grade if the team members unanimously recommend "probationary promotion" to the school district superintendent and the superintendent approves the recommendation that promotion is the best option for the student. If a student is allowed a "probationary promotion", the team shall continue to review the reading performance of the student and repeat the requirements of this paragraph each academic year until the student demonstrates grade-level reading proficiency, as identified through a screening instrument which meets the acquisition of reading skills criteria pursuant to subsection B of this section, for the corresponding grade level in which the student is enrolled or transitions to the requirements set forth by the Achieving Classroom Excellence Act (Oklahoma HB 3218, p. 6-7).

Because this probationary promotion provision was acknowledged as a useful tool for some students whom educators believed did not need to be retained, yet did not meet

a good cause exemption, the legislature extended the 2-year limit for using the probationary promotion. With House Bill 3218, lawmakers allowed students to be eligible for automatic promotion during the 2016-2017 and the 2017-2018 school years, with one caveat. They raised the expectation for student performance. The law now states “beginning with the 2016-2017 school year, students who score below the proficient level on the reading portion of the third grade assessment...shall be retained” (Oklahoma HB 3218, p. 28). This includes students who score unsatisfactory, as well as students who score in the limited knowledge category, thus increasing the numbers of students affected by this mandatory retention law.

The purpose of this study was to examine various stakeholders' perceptions of mandated student retention in early childhood and determine if the law implemented during the 2014-2015 school year is supported by all stakeholders or if support varies among subpopulations. Through this study, the perceptions of retention were examined and compared with the research on the long-term effectiveness of retention. Range, Holt, Pijanowski, and Young (2012) found that "current research does little to sway the views of practitioners" (p. 19). In this study, I addressed confusion in the State and frustration among stakeholders. I provide further insight on the issues surrounding mandatory retention legislation and recommendations for effective use of retention whether mandated or not. This research provides the stakeholders of a specific school district and the State of Oklahoma with a better understanding of the current perceptions of the current reading retention laws and how those laws relate to research. It also provides

comparisons of the beliefs about retention and what has been found in research to work best for learners who may be struggling.

This qualitative case study involved an in-depth study of a specific situation or group and an analysis of that system. The research was focused on a particular topic embedded in its real-life context (see Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 2009). In this study, stakeholder perceptions of retention were studied and analyzed, especially those perceptions regarding the procedures and processes leading up to the retention year, with the long-term goal of improving the process so that fewer students are retained. In this case study, I explored perceptions of how the stakeholders feel the new law and mandatory retention has impacted this population at specific school sites within this district.

The district being studied is a larger district located in a suburb in Oklahoma . It is the third largest district in the state of Oklahoma, serving a student population over 21,000, and is one of the highest performing. The district currently has 35 schools within 159 square miles including: 25 elementary schools, six junior high schools, three high schools, and an alternative school. In May 2013, a tornado leveled two of the elementary schools and the technology building. It also greatly damaged one of the junior high schools and the administration building. District officials worked to restore and rebuild through the following school year and reopened the technology center, administration building, and two new buildings replacing the elementary schools that were hit, while also working towards adding an additional elementary and junior high school due to growth.

Although the district has always had a high standard for student achievement, the district must work to maintain expectations and curricular standards across the district as it continues to grow and expand. It is common for the district to add 500-700 elementary students each year. This would be equivalent to adding a whole elementary school of students even though these students must be added to existing buildings. In addition, there are a larger number of students in need of the free and reduced lunch program. During the 2013-14 school year, 18 schools qualified for Title I services by demonstrating that at least 40% of the students attending qualified for the free or reduced lunch program. According to district documents these percentages range from 41%-79%. In 2005-06, only nine schools qualified for Title I services, ranging between 41%-71%, based on the economic conditions of the families in the community. The average for all schools has changed from 34.83% to 45.75%. The demographics continue to change and, as a result, the challenges faced by the district increase.

Since more students come from homes of poverty, they may lack school preparation. District teachers and administrators recognize the gaps in preparation among incoming kindergarteners. While pre-kindergarten is offered in many districts due to ample state funding programs, it is still an optional program and is not provided for all students. Some children enter school knowing how to read, while others do not know the letters in their names or how to hold a pencil. This ultimately affects the pace of student progress and changes the depth of content that can be introduced. Teachers and administrators in the district struggle to adapt the curriculum in a manner that works for

all their students. With a controversial law in question, many educators look for signs of where the gaps in learning began for each student.

The Oklahoma State Legislature has tried to address this inequity and social promotion of struggling students by creating mandatory retention for third graders who do not read on grade level as evidenced by the Oklahoma Core Curriculum Test. While this law was modeled after other states that have had varying levels of success with similar laws, it was created by policy makers with little input from educators. There appears to be a large gap between the research on retention and the expected results of this law (Hennick, 2008; Jimerson & Ferguson, 2007; Norton, 2011; Range, Dougan, & Pijanowski, 2012; Wilson & Hughes, 2009).

After the law was created and the first group of third grade student scores reported, a new bill was introduced to the legislature, Oklahoma HB2625. This bill changed the policy and allowed a team including the parent, administrator, teachers, and others to make an informed decision about the promotion or retention of a student not reading at grade level. While the bill passed both the House and the Senate, the Governor vetoed it. However, the veto was overridden by both the House and the Senate and was filed with the Secretary of State as law (Oklahoma HB 2625).

When the assessment was administered in the spring of 2014, 171 third grade students in the district scored unsatisfactory, placing them at risk for mandatory retention. Even with the new provision allowing a committee to have the final decision, these students were to be retained unless the committee could justify why they should otherwise be promoted. The district was also responsible for creating a summer academy

for these students in addition to the summer school programs already in place and funded by the district according to district administrators.

Although the summer academy was not mandatory for the 171 students who did not pass the spring assessment, students were strongly encouraged to attend. At the end of this month-long program, students were provided an alternative state-approved assessment that, if passed, would enable students to be promoted to the fourth grade. According to district administrators coordinating the program, out of the 171 students who were offered the summer academy, 43 students were promoted through one of the six good cause exemptions allowed by the state. Only 84 out of the 128 remaining chose to attend the summer program. At the end of the session, ten passed the alternate assessment and achieved promotion. The remaining 74 were given one more opportunity in August on an alternative assessment and then the opportunity to be considered for promotion by a committee if they were unable to pass the previous assessments. The district coordinator indicated that the committee was charged to identify specific reasons why a specific student should be promoted, such as issues that interfere with their ability to test even when capable of working on grade level.

Rationale

Evidence of the Problem at the Local Level

There are conflicting views on how to best address the needs of students who struggle in reading. Decision makers at the State Department of Education in Oklahoma, as well as 32 other states with legislation in place, believed that mandatory retention and ending social promotion is the solution to this problem (Education Commission of the

States, 2012). However, students who are retained face myriad long-term effects that are nearly impossible to counteract with good instruction (Bornsheuer, Polonyi, Andrews, Fore, & Onwuegbuzie, 2011). The current study provides insight into the perceptions among stakeholders in a school district. I will explore the perceptions of parents, teachers, and administrators in regard to mandatory retention and then compares those perceptions with the current research on the effectiveness of student retention. These data will allow district officials as well as building administrators to identify the current perceptions and practices surrounding the current retention mandates. As leaders compare these practices with the research on effects of retention and best practices for struggling learners, they can make informed decisions about how to best address those in most need.

Evidence of the Problem from the Professional Literature

To best understand this problem, perceptions, or beliefs about how mandatory retention has affected students forced to repeat, were compared with current research on both short and long-term effects of retention in early childhood grades. Understanding the variations in perceptions among parents, teachers, and administrators regarding retention versus social promotion of young learners provided greater insight into the challenges these learners encounter. Retention appears to be a remediation tool often used within the school district and the state. Bearing this in mind, one of the expected outcomes was that perceptions of the effectiveness of retention may not align with the existing research on the long-term effects for students who experience grade level retention.

In addition, educators should also consider instructional design. By comparing the perspectives of the stakeholders on the mandatory retention law, information is also gathered and interpreted subsequently with respect to instructional design, and in turn educators are aiding students in constructing their understanding of knowledge required for promotion to the next grade level. Educators can assist students with creating this understanding by identifying how struggling students best learn and determining how to accommodate for deficits through intentional instructional design using a backward design approach. By identifying the end goal and using it at the beginning of planning stages, teachers can create an instructional plan that is aimed toward meeting the student's specific needs. This allows for an intervention or remediation plan to be created, strengthening the overall program for the struggling learner rather than allowing students to repeat a year and participate in the same lessons and experiences for a second time (Martin, 2011).

Finally, it is important to examine theories and conceptual frameworks that support early intervention and learning theories such as social learning theory and Albert Bandura's self-efficacy theory (Grusec, 1992). When evaluating the effectiveness of retention, the whole child must be considered. The effects of retention on a child's self-efficacy should be considered when researching perceptions on retention as a tool for remediation (Wu, West, & Hughes, 2010). In this theory, "the social cognitive approach finds the source of change in maturation, exploratory experiences, and, most important, the imparting of information by social agents in the form of guided instruction and modeling" (Grusec, 1992, p. 785).

Definitions

Several terms were used in the specific context of this study. For the purpose of this study, the following operational definitions of technical terms and special words were applied:

Alternative assessment: An alternative standardized reading assessment is an assessment that is approved by the state of Oklahoma that will verify or provide a second opportunity for students to show proficiency. The State Department of Education mandated that the alternative assessment had to be the spring version of the assessment and given no less than 30 days after the previous test was administered.

Early childhood: Early childhood within the context of this study encompasses students who are third graders or younger (Morgan, 2017).

Good cause exemption: For those students who do not meet the academic requirements for promotion, a school district may promote the student for good cause only (Reading Sufficiency Act, 2012).

Grade retention: Refers to students repeating a grade level for any reason rather than promoting them to the next grade level, whether it be mandatory or voluntary.

Mandatory retention: By law, schools must retain third grade students scoring unsatisfactory on the Oklahoma Core Curriculum Assessment (Reading Sufficiency Act, 2012).

Portfolio assessment: Students demonstrate mastery of state standards through an assessment created by the teacher or district including a collection of work provided and

documented by the classroom teacher throughout the year. By demonstrating mastery, students qualify for a good cause exemption.

Social promotion: A practice where students are promoted to the next grade level whether or not they are academically ready for the grade they are promoted (Greene & Winters, 2006).

Summer academy programs: A summer academy reading program within the Reading Sufficiency Act implemented by the state of Oklahoma has been defined as a scientific research-based program taught by teachers who have successfully completed professional development in the reading program or who are certified as reading specialists (Reading Sufficiency Act, 2012).

Significance

Oklahoma educators make choices about grade retention and social promotion based on perceptions, experiences, and the guidance of leaders both at local and state levels. While this newly enacted law has restricted their choice about retaining struggling third graders, it may also be influencing retention practices in other grade levels (Reading Sufficiency Act, 2012). By examining the perceptions of grade retention in early childhood, local leaders can identify if teacher and administrator perceptions align with the realities in current research. Students who have repeated a grade level have higher risks for dropping out, unemployment, smoking, violent activity, incarceration, and negative occupational outcomes (Hennick, 2008; Jimerson & Ferguson, 2007; Norton, 2011; Range, Dougan, & Pijanowski, 2012; Wilson & Hughes, 2009). In addition, "despite extensive research conducted... that retaining students in grade is, at best, a

flawed practice, many schools in the U.S. continue to view retention as a testament to holding students accountable" (Akmal & Larson, 2004, p. 2).

Guiding/Research Questions

There are many long-term consequences that accompany grade retention. Multiple researchers have found that students who are retained are more likely to drop out of high school, have more discipline problems, are less engaged, miss more school, and more likely to rate grade retention as one of the most stressful life events, higher than the loss of a parent and going blind (e.g., Goos et al., 2013; Gottfried, 2013; Hennick, 2008; Holmes, 2006; Jimerson & Ferguson, 2007; Jimerson & Kaufman, 2003; Lynch, 2014; Range, Dougan, & Pijanowski, 2011; Stearns, Moller, Blau, & Potochnick, 2007).

While teachers are aware that there is a higher dropout rate later in their educational careers with students who must repeat a grade, educators continue to retain students as if the risk is worth it (Range, Pijanowski, Holt, & Young, 2012). This may be due to large student gains in test scores obtained in the initial year of instruction after grade level retention even though the gains are often short lived (Holmes, 2006; Huddleston, 2015). By exploring the perceptions of stakeholders, this data will inform those who can help create a learning culture where retention is a common practice even when research continually indicates negative outcomes.

The primary goal of the study was to examine the challenges faced by stakeholders and the effects on perceptions when state lawmakers choose to enforce retention based on high stakes testing. This growing trend has continued through many states searching for ways to force schools, teachers, and children to perform at higher

levels. In this study, I identified perceptions of parents, teachers, and administrators about retention to determine how the school district may best implement the new law in a way that is effective and fair. Data were collected from parents, teachers, and administrators using a variety of qualitative tools to provide answers to the research questions. This data provided valuable insight on the perceptions of the appropriateness of the new law regarding third grade retention.

RQ1: What are parents', teachers' and administrators' perceptions of the third grade retention law implemented by the state of Oklahoma during the 2013-2014 school year?

RQ2: Do parents/ teachers/ administrators agree with mandatory retention? If so, why? If not, why not?

RQ3: What are the perceived long-term effects that will result from mandatory retention?

RQ4: What are the perceived benefits that will result from mandatory retention?

RQ5: What are the perceived challenges that mandatory retention will cause for the school? For parents? For children?

Review of the Literature

Retention, or the act of a student repeating a grade level in an effort to master skills that he or she lacks, has been studied many times. Using educational databases including ERIC and SAGE, key words such as *grade level retention*, *social promotion*, and *state mandated retention* were used to find research about the practice of retention. The research almost unanimously indicates that the risks for students who are retained are

far greater than the benefits of the additional year of instruction in the same content (Balitewicz, 1998; Cham, Hughes, West, & Im, 2015; Goos et al., 2013; Gottfried, 2013; Lynch, 2014; Norton, 2011; Raffaele Mendez, Kim, Ferron, & Woods, 2015; Stearns et al., 2007; Tingle, Schoeneberger, & Algozzine, 2012). However, social promotion has become the target of many policy makers who insist that in order to ensure that no child is left behind, some must keep some back through mandatory retention. According to Cham et al. (2015) and Penna and Talerico (2005), many studies have indicated that student retention is the "single most powerful predictor of dropping out of school" (p. 13). Dropping out of school has many more consequences for these students including a greater chance for criminal activity and incarceration, greater opportunities for family dysfunction, fewer career opportunities, and diminished lifetime earnings (Penna & Talerico, 2005). Additionally, students who are identified as behind, even at the earliest grades, often come from lower income families and/or English language learners (Carta et al., 2015; Kim, Mazza, Zwangiger, & Henry, 2014; Lane, Prokop, Johnson, Podhajski, & Nathan, 2014; Lee & Bierman, 2015; Schmit, Matthews, & Golden, 2014; Sylva, 2014). The research is vast and provides insight on many aspects connected with the practice of student retention.

Mandatory retention provides additional stress as teachers prepare students for standardized tests. Unfortunately, this forces some teachers to choose which students to focus their efforts on and provide the most assistance to boost scores in a way that would create the most improvement, or at least the appearance of improvement. Often, this extra attention is provided to those just barely under the passing standard instead of the

lowest achieving students (Huddleston, 2015). This creates an even more profound impact when considering that the quality of the teacher-student relationship in these early grades has a significant influence on a student's success (Diamond, Justice, Siegler, & Snyder, 2013; Sandilos, 2014). There is no clear answer; "retaining a student in grade may or may not impact students' academic achievement" (Warren, Hoffman, & Andrew, 2014, p. 433).

Theoretical Foundations

The theoretical foundation for this study can be found in a compilation of theories. Bourdieu's cultural capital theory suggests that people are driven by social distinctions, behaviors, and choices that they are not aware of (Bourdieu, 1984; Winkle-Wagner, 2010). Bourdieu (1984) argued that the school's cultural habits and the family's cultural habits often work together to transfer and create the cultural norms of the students. The closer these habits are, the more harmonious the transmission. Ultimately when the cultural norms do not align, students are filtered away from the dominant group (Winkle-Wagner, 2010).

Bloom's theory suggests that student success is partially determined by non-academic qualities such as self-confidence (Bloom, 1974; Fowler & Boylan, 2010). These qualities along with personal factors such as the student's health, financial, or family obligations affect the student's ability to perform and succeed in school. These personal factors are often noted as characteristics of students who are retained. Furthermore, many have found that these children have diverse learning needs, and by addressing the specific needs of the student with teachers who provide a high level of

support and expertise, the school's needs are met and achievement rises (Greenwood et al., 2015; Jimerson et al., 2006; Kaminski, Powell-Smith, Hommel, McMahon, & Aguayo, 2015).

Festinger's social comparison theory brings Bourdieu's theory and Bloom's theory together by suggesting that students use cues from their environment to determine their abilities as well as those of their peers (Festinger, 1954; Wu, West, & Hughes, 2010). Within the school environment, children receive multiple cues from the teacher and other students about their abilities and the abilities of their peers. The social constructivist view expresses that the individual child and his or her background greatly influence their suitability to their group as well as their social and cultural development (Martin, 2011).

Finally, when considering creating a change in practice that may or may not align with existing perceptions, Fullan's (2006) change theory can help with understanding the steps necessary when creating educational reform. Fullan advocated for building capacity with a focus on results. In addition, it is a combination of factors such as creating a moral purpose, providing resources, and creating a peer leadership and support system that makes the motivational difference. By examining the perceptions of teachers and comparing them to best practices found in current research, specific needs can be identified and a plan made to build the capacity needed to create social change within the educational system.

Literature on Retention

Currently 3.5% of first graders and 1.5% of third graders are retained each year (Turney & Haskins, 2014). Furthermore, one third of children entering school are not

ready and about 5-7% of children are retained in kindergarten (Lonigan, Purpura, Wilson, Walker, & Clancy-Menchetti, 2013; Ma, Nelson, Shen, & Krenn, 2015; Schippers, 2014; Winsler et al., 2012). While there are not many studies that indicate positive effects of retention, a few indicate that many times students show progress or higher performance during the initial weeks or months of being retained in a grade level. Students' abilities increase during the initial retention year and then fall again when the student is promoted to the next grade and is not provided with the additional supports offered within the year of retention (Chen, Hughes, & Kwok, 2014; Huddleston, 2014; Moser, West, & Hughes, 2012).

In addition, students retained in early grades are often later placed in special education programs due to learning disabilities (Baenen et al., 1988; Nagaoka & Roderick, 2004). In fact, children retained in kindergarten may never catch up to their peers (Raffaele Mendez et al., 2015). This could be because educators look to a one-size fits all approach to meet the needs of difficult-to-teach students (Beebe-Frankenberger, Bocian, MacMillan, & Gresham, 2004). If a student is not learning at the pace of his or her peers within a class and remediation does not occur through early intervention, retention becomes an option early in the year. Unfortunately, this often leads to long term academic obstacles for students experiencing significant reading challenges (Lam & McMaster, 2014).

Regardless of when students are retained, the strongest effect on their performance on state testing is the initial year of retention, with results declining in later years (Baenen et al., 1988; Dombek & Connor, 2012; Gleason et al., 2007; Hennick,

2008; Moser et al., 2012; Huddleston, 2014; Rachal & Hoffman, 1986; Schnurr et al., 2009; Schwerdt & West, 2012; Tingle et al., 2012; Wu et al., 2008). The hope is that the short term positive effects of retention will strengthen these students' skills enough to help them improve in later grades (Hilbert & Eis, 2013; Mariano, 2013). However, these same students often experience later difficulties that make it hard for educational professionals to make accurate assessments of the effectiveness of the retention strategy (Schnurr et al., 2009).

Some students also may benefit from positive social interactions during the year of retention. These social interactions occur in early grades as students' peers acknowledge the retained student's classroom competencies that are initially higher than students within the grade level for the first time (Gleason et al., 2007). Unfortunately, one of the hazards of retention is that student performance appears to be higher within a particular grade level after struggling students are retained. These scores are initially inflated as the struggling students display a stronger performance on material that is easier during a second year in a grade level. This inflation creates encouragement for teachers who wrongly believe that retention is working (Holmes, 2006). Educators often believe that retention is successful because they do not see the difficulties that most retained students experience later in their educational careers (Schnurr et al., 2009). Furthermore, there is little data to support grade retention regardless of when the student is retained (Silberglitt, Jimerson, Burns, & Appleton, 2006). Grade retention benefits erode as these students advance in grades and encounter new or unfamiliar curriculum objectives (Wu et al., 2008).

If educators continue to use grade retention as an option for ending social promotion, it is imperative that they have a full understanding of the possible outcomes. Unfortunately, the number of negative effects far outweighs the initial benefits that have been found to occur with some students. The research provides numerous examples of students who experience negative long-term effects. The effects included "academic achievement, disciplinary problems, self-esteem, engagement with schooling, and social capital" (Stearns et al., 2007, p. 229). It has been estimated that as many as 15% of students repeat a grade each year and up to 50% of kindergarteners may expect to be retained at least once before they graduate (Akmal & Larsen, 2004; Hennick, 2008). Retaining students sets them up for future challenges including more disciplinary issues, low self-esteem along with a pessimistic outlook for the future, fewer bonds with instructors, and less engagement in school (Stearns et al., 2007).

Carifio and Carey (2010) explored how the grading and assessment system may affect student performance resulting in grade retention. They found in some cases that students may not struggle with content as much as they struggle with understanding the expectations of the teacher and performing within the chosen grading system. Those that do not penalize students with scores less than 50% are more soundly based in theory and support students as they work to improve their skills (Carifio & Carey, 2010). Other alternatives include enhancing professional development for teachers working with struggling students, redesigning school structures such as practices and procedures to support intensive learning, providing students with support services as they are needed, using classroom assessments to better inform instruction, and providing outreach or

training for parents to help incorporate school-based practices at home. (McCollum, Cortez, Maroney, Montes, & Intercultural Development Research Association, S. T., 1999); Sime, 2014; Steiner, 2014; Tingle et al., 2012; Vandecandelaere, Schmitt, Vanlaar, De Fraine, & Van Damme, 2015).

With much research indicating that educators should avoid irreparable hazards when retaining students, it is hard to believe that many states are creating legislation that mandates grade retention for students based on state testing. As state leaders implement these programs, evaluations help to modify how to adjust these mandates when pieces of the law do not work. Stakeholders must provide legislators with policy alternatives if the current options prove to be unsuccessful (Brown, 2007).

Florida appears to have made significant gains through their mandated retention laws (Ladner & Burke, 2010). Florida's educational policies included public school choice, private-school choice, charter schools, virtual education, performance pay for educators, alternative teacher certification, an accountability plan for schools, and the ban on social promotion. After two years, the grade retained Floridian students were making significant gains in reading when compared to the controlled group (Ladner & Burke, 2010; Rose & Schimke, 2012), although it has been found that other states that replicate their grade retention laws fail to demonstrate the gains and show fewer sustainable gains. Examining student progress in Chicago after an attempt to end social promotion, researchers found that many students were promoted without an explanation for exempting them from grade retention. Researchers indicated that when a social

promotion policy is improperly implemented, the results can be counterproductive and detrimental to students (Greene & Winters, 2006; Robelen, 2012).

Perceptions about Retention

Witmer (2004) found that even though teachers knew that retention was an ineffective practice for struggling students, they continued to recommend the practice out of a lack of other options within their current system. Other researchers found that even when the research indicates negative consequences, practitioners continue to demonstrate the same beliefs and grade retention practices, leading to student performance consistent with the expectations of the teacher's beliefs about the abilities of these particular students (Goldstein, Eastwood, & Behuniak, 2014; Range et al., 2012). Lack of options paired with pressure from legislation to ensure that no child is left behind promotes grade retention practice regardless of an educator's knowledge of the research.

The research on student perceptions may be the most difficult to assimilate into an understanding of this practice. Penna and Talerico (2005) gathered many stories from students in which all expressed feelings of a loss of hope through the grade retention process. The students studied indicated that there were few changes or adaptations to the grade they repeated. Often these students reported that they used the same materials to complete the same assignments and assessments they previously failed. Furthermore, these students were often teased and bullied by others within the school. Stone and Engel (2007) argued for the need to explore grade retention policies and practices from various viewpoints to fully understand the implications of the strategy.

Implications

To decide on future practices, stakeholders must be informed and clear about how retention affects the district, the school, and the family. It is negligent to haphazardly retain students without considering the possible ramifications. Implications of this study include the possible effects the results of the study may have on the local school district's policies and procedures on retention. A white paper version of the findings will be provided to the district, as well as the complete study if requested. As leaders are informed regarding the perceptions among the district, they will be able to determine future directions for the district and structure further professional development that support district initiatives. Furthermore, the study will provide further information on social promotion within the context of application within a structure mandated by a state agency.

Summary

Social promotion is not a viable option for students in the 21st century. Grade retention creates a new set of problems for struggling students, eventually leading to major consequences in their lives (Stearns et al., 2007). To make things more challenging, even when educators know of the possible consequences of grade retention, they still choose it as the better option.

By examining and interpreting the perceptions within the context of previous research related to retention, a broader understanding of the processes is available as leaders continue to search for the best solution. As a result, a policy recommendation has been created to assist the district in filling possible gaps in instruction to improve the

quality of instruction within early grades providing early intervention and increasing student achievement.

Section 2: The Methodology

Introduction

The goal of this study was to provide stakeholders with a better understanding of the practice of grade retention in Oklahoma. To demonstrate the current practices of retention and social promotion, it was necessary to at beliefs and motivations behind these practices. By comparing the perceptions of stakeholders about the newly instated mandatory retention law in the State of Oklahoma (Reading Sufficiency Act, 2012), the district, schools, educators, and parents will be able to more deeply understand mandatory retention and implement a proposed policy recommendation as they move forward in educating struggling learners.

Design

In this study, the approach that appeared most appropriate was a qualitative case study. This method provided a detailed description of a situation such as a program, allowing the readers to fully experience the setting and situation (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 2009). By exploring the perceptions of those most affected by mandatory retention laws, readers can recognize the challenges and frustrations within the group studied. This method involved an in-depth study of a specific situation or group and an analysis of that bounded system. The research was focused on a particular topic, mandatory third grade retention, embedded in its real-life context in a particular school district (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 2009).

When determining the design, a quantitative design was not selected because the study would not be experimental or correlational in nature. Furthermore, the study did

not lend itself to qualitative designs such as narrative research designs that tell a story because this study is not a story that could be told about a particular student or teacher (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 2009). If one student who had been retained were the focus of the study, the design could have been a narrative research design. Likewise, grounded theory design that would result in the creation or modification of theory would not be an option because the goal is not to have a theory about why students are retained, but rather a plan to address the needs of the students in order to create fewer retentions.

Due to the number of participants being studied, including multiple stakeholders from multiple locations, and the specificity of the situation or scenario, a case study allowed for a broader understanding of the situation and experiences that have created this culture. It allowed for an in-depth examination of the practice of mandatory retention and the perceptions that surround it among those directly affected. By collecting the data through different sources such as in-depth interviews and focus groups, the dialogue in the interviews and focus groups from various stakeholders contributed to a fuller understanding of all aspects of the study. It provided a picture of the impact the new law and mandatory retention has had among third grade students, families, classrooms, and school sites within this district. The data from interviews and focus groups provided the most information and insight within this particular district. With this understanding, leaders can better understand the practice of mandatory retention and how the stakeholders feel about the process, and gain insight on how to best implement the law in a way that provides the greatest benefit to all involved.

The purposive sample population for this study included parents of third grade students from four third grade classrooms within a specific district in Oklahoma in jeopardy of mandatory retention, third grade teachers, and both building and district administrators who agreed to participate at specific schools within the district that are identified as having the most retentions occur through the process outlined in the law. This type of sample was chosen because these participants were best able to provide insight which would in turn help to generate a theory about the perceptions of the new law regarding mandatory retention within the school and district. Administrators invited to participate included the building principals and district personnel such as the Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and the Assistant Superintendent of Elementary Education. Those who agreed to participate and met inclusion criteria of being a stakeholder at one of the four schools most affected by the mandatory retention law were included in the study.

Permission was solicited from participants to include them in the study. For this study, permission from the district, the specific elementary schools included in the study, the individual teachers being studied, as well as the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) was obtained. In addition, those participating in the study were provided with specific information about the study and their rights regarding the study with an informed consent document. By signing the consent form, participants indicated that I had shared all of the risks involved with participating in the study and other pertinent information and that the participants agreed to participate, understanding that

they could withdraw from the study at any time. This safeguard protected the study and those participating from actions that may have interfered with the results of the study.

To gather information on perceptions of this program, I collected data primarily through focus groups and interviews. Demographic information of those participating in the study was gathered prior to beginning the focus groups and interviews to assist with data collection (see Appendix B). As the requests for participation were sent out, information was included on safeguards and the parents', teachers', and administrators' right to decline participation. By gathering data through interviews and focus groups, participants had the option to provide as much or as little uncensored input without threat of repercussions. Pseudonyms instead of participants' names were not used in the findings because specific participants' names were not used. Participants were informed during the focus group that all responses would be kept confidential and were encouraged to share all opinions and viewpoints. Furthermore, as the information was gathered, names were listed separately from the data and connected only by an identification code. As the data were coded, the names were removed from the information and stored in a secure location.

According to Bogdan and Biklen (2007), data interpretation refers to "developing ideas about your findings and relating them . . . to broader concerns and concepts" (p. 159). Researchers must learn to take data and develop strands through patterns or processes such as coding. By finding commonalities or relating the data to previous theories, accurate interpretations are made. To determine if the interpretation is

trustworthy, I must look for biases and crosscheck with other data to confirm if the interpretation can be verified or replicated.

While it is difficult to avoid personal bias, I recognized my own biases. In addition, I was diligent about data collection by including only observations instead of interpretations, which were saved for the analysis portion of the research, as well as being very clear about the identification of statements that are interpretations of the data that was gathered. For this study, triangulation appears to be one of the most useful strategies to establish validity. By gathering data among multiple sources (teachers, principals, district administrators), and using various methods including focus groups and interviews, I was able to triangulate the data to find validity among these various sources.

Research Questions

To compare the stakeholders' perceptions about grade retention with research findings and to determine how the school district may best implement the new law effectively, data were collected and analyzed to report on the beliefs of the district participants being examined in the study. This case study provides valuable insight on the perceptions of the appropriateness of the new law regarding third grade retention and paints a picture of how grade retention is currently implemented within the district. To identify themes and obtain a greater understanding of current practices, the following questions and sub questions were used within the study:

- What are parents', teachers', and administrators' perceptions of third grade retention law implemented by the state of Oklahoma during the 2013-2014 school year?

- Do parents, teachers, and administrators agree with mandatory retention? If so, why? If not, why not?
- What are the perceived long-term effects that will result from mandatory retention?
- What are the perceived benefits that will result from mandatory retention?
- What are the perceived challenges that mandatory retention will cause for the school? For parents? For children?

Participants

The purposeful and limited sample included parents, teachers, and administrators of third grade students from four of the district's schools. The four schools were selected through the identification of the number of students retained according to the Reading Sufficiency Act law (2012) as indicated by a district administrator. After comparing the number of students eligible for mandated retention at all of the 25 elementary schools in the district, the four schools with the most students retained were identified. I invited principals, curriculum specialists, and assistant superintendents to participate. The principal at each school was contacted by phone, told about the study and asked to participate. All four principals agreed. District administrators were also contacted by phone when asked to participate.

After permission to participate was obtained from the principals, third grade teachers from each of the four schools were contacted through email and invited to participate in a focus group for teachers after school. These teachers were asked to

provide handouts extending an invitation for parents to participate with families of third grade students in the selected schools by placing them in weekly folders that were already sent home. I hand delivered the flyers to each of the four schools within the next 2 school days after contacting the participating schools. Teachers were asked to send an electronic version of the invitation through email to the parents of all current third grade students if email addresses were available. Parents were provided with three separate options to attend a focus group specifically for parents of third grade students. These options included both during the day and after school. These invitations to participate included information on the safeguards in place and the parents', teachers', and administrators' right to decline participation. Confirmation of receipt of their intent to participate was sent as a paper version and electronically when access was available.

All third grade parents, teachers, and administrators within the four sample schools were invited to participate. This included 364 families, 17 teachers, four principals, and three district administrators. Flyers were sent two times with dates and contact information for participants to be able to contact me by phone or email to indicate they would participate. Those who volunteered and agreed to participate by contacting me through email or by showing up to the focus group were included in the study.

This type of sample was chosen because the participants were able to provide insight about their perceptions of the new law regarding mandatory retention within the school and district. Teachers were invited to participate in a focus group separate from the focus group opportunities where parents were invited to encourage the most participation from both groups. After many opportunities were offered, 17 individuals

agreed to participate in the data collection processes. Of the 17, two were parents, eight were teachers, and seven were administrators.

By including various types of participants in the study, the data provided deep and rich information about the district participating in the study. Furthermore, by inviting participants from multiple schools identified as having the most students and families affected by the mandate, effort has been made to provide satisfactory saturation of the population. Since lower numbers participated than originally expected, additional focus group opportunities were provided for participants. To obtain accurate results, focus groups were conducted until participants stopped showing up for focus groups. Although three attempts were made to ensure an adequate sample size, only two parents participated, thus limiting the feedback from this stakeholder group.

Measures were taken for the protection of participants' rights. Participation was voluntary and names of participants were kept confidential within the confines of the focus group. Participants' names were not included in the results of the study. Recordings of the focus groups and interviews were transcribed by me, and no one else to ensure further privacy of the participants and the opinions shared. Demographic data and recordings are secured and available only for my review of this study.

Role of the Researcher

Permission was obtained from participants to include them in the study. After permission was granted from the Walden University IRB, approval number 11-13-15-0348955, permission was obtained from the school district, the specific elementary schools included in the study, and the individual teachers, administrators, and parents

being studied. In addition, those participating in the study were provided with specific information about the study and their rights regarding the study within an informed consent document, as well as information on how their responses and participation would be confidential. By sharing their signature on this document, the participant indicated that they had shared all of the risks involved by participating in the study and other pertinent information and that the participant agreed to participate, understanding that they could withdraw from the study at any time.

While it is difficult to avoid personal bias, I can avoid this by recognizing my own biases. As an elementary principal within the district being studied, it is important to ensure my position does not impact the study or influence participation. With this in mind, the school I am assigned to was not selected as one of the schools to be studied. In addition, I was diligent about data collection by focusing only on the focus group participants and interviewee remarks instead of making interpretations, which was saved for the analysis portion of the research.

Data Collection

To gather information on the perceptions of the participants, I collected data collected primarily through focus groups and interviews. Data were collected from specific groups of participants with similar characteristics who may be hesitant in other settings (see Creswell, 2012). I asked parents and teachers to participate in separate focus groups. Keeping them in a separate focus group allowed them to express their ideas and opinions without concerns of others' perceptions. Data were gathered from site principals, as well as district administrators, through interviews. While one-on-one

interviews are the most time-consuming, they are appropriate for participants, such as administrators, who may not want to share their opinions openly and who are articulate and able to express their ideas and beliefs in this setting (Creswell, 2012).

Focus groups were divided into no more than 10 to 16 participants (see Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 2009). Depending on the number of participants, the plan was to conduct two to three focus groups for parents and one focus group for teachers. Due to the low number of volunteers, there were multiple focus groups conducted to provide opportunities for participation. There were five opportunities provided for teachers to attend a focus group. Five teachers showed up to the second session, three were at the final session, and no teachers showed to the remaining three opportunities.

Parents were offered three options to participate. Two parents showed up to one focus group while the other two sessions had zero participants. Focus groups for teachers and parents were held at various times to accommodate for schedules including times right after school, evening times, and weekends. Participants in the focus groups were interviewed with the questions (see Appendix C). Focus groups were conducted in a neutral setting at the district administration building. Focus groups were held behind closed doors to maintain the privacy of those participating and were to last no longer than 60-90 minutes in duration but lasted between 30-45 minutes on average. Participants of each focus group were informed of their rights through the consent form and were informed that the session was being audibly recorded for data collection.

All four school site administrators agreed to participate in the study and participated in individual interviews. Interviews were scheduled at their convenience and

were conducted in each administrator's office. In addition, three district administrators agreed to individual interviews for the study.

Of the two focus group options for teachers to attend, no one attended the first focus group on December 8th. Five of the 16 invited attended the second date offered, December 9th. To encourage more participation, teachers were invited to two additional opportunities on January 4th, at 2:00pm during a school workday and after school on January 5th. While no teachers attended either of these sessions, one school offered to participate in a focus group at their school site during their instructional plan time which provided three additional teachers that participated in this focus group on site on January 14th. In total, eight of the 16 teachers invited participated in one of the teacher focus groups.

Parents of third grade students at all four schools were invited to attend parent focus groups on the morning of December 10th, and the afternoon of December 16th. They were invited through paper flyers and electronically through email. No parents showed up at either focus group opportunity. A third weekend session was offered on February 6th. Five parents positively responded that they would attend. Two parents were in attendance for the focus group.

Initially, participation was anticipated to be much larger. In fact, the sample was narrowed to four schools to ensure the number of participants would not be too large to study. However, since participation sizes were much lower than expected, strategies were implemented to obtain a larger sample to provide a more accurate portrayal of

stakeholder perceptions. The strategies used to increase participation included offering additional sessions and providing alternate locations.

Table 1

Number of Participants

| Data collection format | Participants | Number in attendance | Total |
|------------------------------|--|----------------------|-------|
| Focus group | Parents of third graders from the four selected schools | December 10: 0 | 2 |
| | | December 16: 0 | |
| | | February 6: 2 | |
| Focus group | Third grade teachers from selected schools | December 8: 0 | 8 |
| | | December 9: 5 | |
| | | January 4: 0 | |
| | | January 5: 0 | |
| Interviews | Principals from selected schools | 4 | 4 |
| | | 3 | 3 |
| Interviews | District administrators such as assistant Supt. of curriculum and assistant supt. of elementary education, reading coordinator | | |
| Total number of participants | | | 17 |

All four building principals from the schools selected, as well as three district administrators, were invited to participate in an interview before the focus groups were conducted. Each administrator that agreed to participate was interviewed using the questions in Appendix D. Interviews were conducted in each administrator's office and

lasted 30-45 minutes in duration. Participants of each interview was informed of their rights through the consent form and was informed that the session was being audibly recorded for data collection.

To establish the demographics of participants, each was asked to complete a form (see Appendix B) to provide this information while maintaining their privacy within the group. Furthermore, I provided information to the participants on their rights and information on how the participant's privacy will be maintained. The questions created for the focus group (see Appendix C) and those created for the interviews (see Appendix D) were created to provide information related to the specific research questions being investigated. Strategies for effective interviewing were used. Questions were open-ended and probed for opinions related to participants' experiences with retention that connect to and provide information on the overall questions being studied. Leading questions were avoided and I refrained from projecting judgments during the focus groups and interviews conducted.

Before any data were collected, participants were asked to sign a consent form at the beginning of each focus group or interview participation, further explaining their rights and the safeguards in place to protect their confidentiality. By gathering data through interviews and focus groups, participants had the option to provide as much or as little uncensored input as they would like to provide. Participants' names were not used in the reporting. Furthermore, as the information was gathered, names were listed separately from the data gathered and connected only by an identification code such as A-

1 for administrator 1. As the data sets were coded, the names were removed from the information and stored in a secure location in a locked cabinet.

Data Analysis

According to Bogdan and Bilken, (2007) data interpretation refers to "developing ideas about your findings and relating them . . . to broader concerns and concepts" (p.159). Researchers must learn to take the pieces of data and develop strands of meaning through looking for patterns or by thematic coding. By finding commonalities interpretations are made.

Each focus group and interview was audio recorded so the data could be transcribed and organized into generalized ideas and themes (Creswell, 2012). Since I was the only one who listened to the recordings and transcribed the information gathered, confidentiality was maintained throughout the process. Data were sorted and grouped both by school and by role, such as parent, teacher, and administrator. Then the data were sorted by research question. Throughout the research, the data gathered from the interviews and focus groups were coded and analyzed for emerging themes among the perceptions of the various stakeholders. Codes were identified as they emerged from the evidence provided through comments with similar content in the focus groups and interviews. Codes were determined when the transcripts were read through and compared and similar ideas or comments were found in the content of the dictated focus groups and interviews. By coding the data, similar results could be compared and sorted into categories as patterns, insights, and concepts appear from the data (Yin, 2003). The Atlas.ti program was initially used to assist in the organization and coding of the data

collected through various sources. However, soon it became clear that an Excel spreadsheet would allow the flexibility to gather, sort, and color code sections of the transcribed interviews and focus groups. A description of the findings was created from the emerging themes to provide a clear understanding of the results in the completed study.

Demographic data gathered from each form (see Appendix B) was tabulated and grouped to provide an overall description of those participating in the study. This information provided further insight to the results of the study when considering who participated. Of the participants of this study, three were male and fourteen were female. There were two parents, eight teachers, and seven administrators. More than half of participants, ten of them, were between the ages of 41-51. Two were between 51 and 60. Four participants were ages 31-40, while only one participant was between the ages of 18 – 30.

For this study, triangulation appeared to be one of the most useful strategies to establish validity. By gathering data among multiple sources (parents, teachers, principals, district administrators, etc.), as well as in multiple ways (focus groups and interviews) it was possible to triangulate the data to ensure reliability and accuracy among these various sources.

A participant from each stakeholder group (parent, teacher, and administrator) was asked to review the finding as a member check to determine the accuracy of the account and to ensure credibility and validity. This helped ensure that the findings were not influenced by any possible biases. While examining responses for discrepant data,

none of the results were found to be varied or in need of being removed or further analyzed. To determine if the interpretation is trustworthy, I looked for biases and crosschecked with other data to confirm if the interpretation could be verified or replicated. This was done through the member checks and triangulation. By gathering information from parents, teachers, and administrators through interviews and focus groups, the data were verified and examined from multiple sources ensuring credibility. Credibility was substantiated through triangulation and cross checking the findings of this qualitative study through various methods and the viewpoints represented (Creswell, 2012).

Data Analysis Results

After the focus groups and interviews were completed, the data were then transcribed for ease in finding patterns and themes. The program Atlas.TI was initially used for coding but was rather quickly replaced due to a personal preference with an Excel spreadsheet where data were sorted, labeled, and color coded into themes found throughout the study. The themes found were then matched back to the initial problem and questions of the study (Table 2). Within the examination of both the perceived benefits and negative effects of mandatory retention through the questions of the study, there were no discrepant cases found. There were occasional opinions and comments from a participant supporting both aspects, for and against retention. For example, one participant responded that a positive aspect of grade retention is “self-confidence if it’s handled appropriately.” The same participant responded that a negative result of

retention was self-confidence at times. Participants often expressed they had varying opinions based on experiences with individual students.

Table 2

Emerging Themes

| <i>Question</i> | <i>Themes Emerging from Focus Groups & Interviews</i> |
|--|---|
| Do parents/ teachers/ administrators agree with mandatory retention? If so, why? If not, why not? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Retention should occur in grades lower than third grade • Mandatory retention allows schools to retain students whose parents have previously refused |
| What are the perceived long-term effects that will result from mandatory retention? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mandatory retention often results in decreased self-esteem for students • Administrators are concerned with dropout rates for students later in their educational careers |
| What are the perceived benefits that will result from mandatory retention? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mandatory retention may provide time for maturity • Mandatory retention may provide opportunity for success in school to those who are struggling |
| What are the perceived challenges that mandatory retention will cause for the school? For parents? For children? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>For Students:</u> Mandatory retention is challenging for students who are poor test takers & creates stress for students whose future is determined on one day that the test is administered • <u>For Teachers:</u> Mandatory retention may take the decision-making away from the teachers • <u>For Schools:</u> Funding, increased class sizes or numbers of third grade classes is a challenge for schools and the district |
| | *Note: no perceived challenges for parents were indicated in any of the sessions |

To ensure accuracy throughout the study, data analysis procedures initially outlined were followed. Triangulation of multiple stakeholders and types of data collection contributed to the validity of the findings. After the themes were identified, the findings including the emerging themes were sent to a member of each stakeholder

group to complete a member check to verify accuracy and validity. There were no recommendations for changes to be made to ensure validity or accuracy.

Nine themes were derived from the recurring beliefs and statements that were presented repeatedly from multiple participants throughout the study, emerging from the coded data. The themes included:

- Need for Early Intervention: Retention should occur in grades lower than third grade
- Mandatory retention allows schools to retain students whose parents have previously refused
- Mandatory retention often results in decreased self-esteem for students
- Administrator concerns with dropout rates for students later in their educational careers
- Mandatory retention may provide time for maturity
- Mandatory retention may provide opportunity for success in school to those who are struggling
- Mandatory retention is challenging for students who are poor test takers & creates stress for students whose future is determined on one day that the test is administered
- Mandatory retention may take the decision-making away from the teachers
- Funding, increased class sizes or numbers of third grade classes is a challenge for schools and the district

These themes had both positive and negative connotations at times. For example, participants indicated that, if students are going to be retained, retention should occur before the third grade. An administrator stated, “we’d rather hold them back now in first grade when they can get more of those basic skills and you know that they’re going to have to build on.” This was supported by a teacher who said, “I think if they are going to do it, it needs to be in younger years where the basic skills are taught. They should have been held back in a grade where they are still doing phonics.” The parents also brought up the idea of retention occurring earlier as one said, “I think if you're waiting until 3rd grade to try to catch them up then they are two years behind.” Another parent said, “the peer pressure is only going to get worse as they get older and become more socially aware of what's going on around them.”

Participants also felt that mandatory retention provided schools with an option to retain students whose parents had previously refused retention. One teacher said, “I do like having the back up for those parents who are asked over and over and they just didn't feel it was what they needed. Even though it's what their child needed.” An administrator reinforced that, “Sometimes we run into a brick wall when we truly feel like we need to retain a child, but, yet that parent says no.”

Concerns about the dropout rate later in school was also a theme that emerged. One principal stated, “I think sometimes it can push kids to drop out. I think it can increase dropout rates.” Another administrator told a story about a specific student he was concerned about. He indicated that by retaining this student, there would be additional hardship on the family, “His circumstances at home and the area that in which his support

is not that great. It's going to be a struggle to get him through an extra year. Just to get him through that adding an extra year onto that is going to be a struggle for him.”

While examining parents', teachers' and administrators' perceptions of the third-grade retention law implemented by the state of Oklahoma, themes were evident across stakeholder groups. Looking back to the study's questions, the themes found in the study aligned and provided insight into the practice mandated by law.

While answering the questions, members of each stakeholder group were asked to reflect on their beliefs on retention as well as their reaction to the law that enforces mandatory retention for students who are unable to pass the third-grade state reading assessment. At times, there were varying views among stakeholders, but often an individual participant found it difficult to articulate a belief for or against portions of the law. For example, one administrator stated “it can be detrimental to the child's self-esteem.” However, in another section of the interview this participant stated that a benefit would be “self-confidence if it's handled appropriately.” While there were some concerns about the law overreaching, and taking some power away from the teachers who know which students need to be retained, overall, stakeholders maintained that the law helped schools more than hindered them.

Parents/ Teachers/ Administrators Agreement with Mandatory Retention

Most stakeholders expressed acceptance and even approval of mandatory retention. However, the leading area of contention was that students should be retained earlier. Stakeholders repeatedly expressed their concerns for early intervention and regret that third grade was just too late.

- “I think retention should be pushed more in the lower grades.”
(Administrator)
- “I’m all for retention if it’s truly that they need those skills to learn to read especially at that kindergarten, first, and second grade level.”
(Administrator)
- “My two lowest kids are both at the first-grade level, and they need first grade instruction. That's what they need. And they need first grade instruction all day. My third-grade instruction doesn't do anything for them.” (Teacher)
- “I think if you're waiting until 3rd grade to try to catch them up then they are two years behind.” (Parent)

Over and over, parents, teachers, and administrators, reiterated the concern that third grade is too late to help the students who are struggling. This belief is somewhat supported by previous research that suggests that “children who finish first grade with poor word recognition skill may benefit from retention if they start the repeated year with increased phonemic awareness” (Juel & Leavell, 1988, p. 579). In addition, this may be indicative of many teachers’ belief that retention is effective with students considered to be immature (Chen et al., 2014), thus providing support for retention in earlier grades. However, Evans (2012) indicated that some studies have reported that kindergarteners do not benefit from retention, while first graders have a better chance of catching up with their same-grade peers.

Some participants offered suggestions of retaining in lower grades such as kindergarten, first, or second grade. While this may be agreed upon as a more acceptable practice that demonstrates the appearance of a greater academic impact with a lesser social impact, it is hard to overlook the finding that “early grade retention (kindergarten through second grade) did not yield advantages in reading trajectories from first to eighth grade, relative to students retained later...the data fail to support retention” (Silberglitt et al., 2006; Raffaele Mendez et al., 2015). This supports the thought that reforming instruction would better serve a student than having them repeat a similar situation (Vandecandelaere et al., 2015). Still, educators indicated they are encouraging parents to retain earlier and experiencing more success with getting parents who had previously refused to retain their child to agree as teachers show them the possibility of a later third grade retention mandated by the state.

Perceived Long-Term Effects that will Result from Mandatory Retention

Even with the largely supportive community, there are still concerns that there will be a higher dropout rate and that retaining students will create self-esteem issues that will affect other areas of development. One principal thought, “we’re going to have kids dropping out of school because they can.” Another principal stated, I think sometimes it can push kids to drop out. I think it can increase dropout rates.”

Discussing self-esteem, a district administrator said, “I do think we’re going to have some self-esteem and self-concept issues with that.” Another upper level administrator said, “it can give them a negative outlook on themselves as far as why am I being retained.” When discussing her daughter, a teacher said:

I think we are at the age now where it is starting to be a bigger issue, because she is very self-conscious of the fact that she has repeated. And a lot of the kids in her class know she wasn't in their grade last year. So, when someone brings it up you can see the look on her face. She gets totally stressed out. She has major self-confidence issues with it.

One administrator indicated that the older the student retained, the harder it was and that retention can have “a very negative impact on their self-esteem. It can really deflate their self-esteem. It can really put a bad taste in their mouth for learning, which is definitely what we don’t want to do.” While the goal of retention is to improve student learning and increase success, there is still a stigma connected to retention as indicated from the responses of stakeholders.

The findings reported in the emerging themes indicate that stakeholders are aware of and have concerns about the same aspects that are found in research suggesting that grade retention does more harm than good (Goos et al., 2013; Gottfried, 2013; Hennick, 2008; Holmes, 2006; Jimerson & Ferguson, 2007; Jimerson & Kaufman, 2003; Lynch, 2014; Range et al., 2011; Stearns et al., 2007). Unfortunately, with a lack of alternatives, and a law enforcing mandatory retention, the practice continues and may even increase in usage.

Perceived Benefits that will Result from Mandatory Retention

The perceived benefits from mandatory retention were maturity and success in school. “If it’s handled the right way, retention is positive” (Parent). Participants indicated that some students just need more time to understand concepts. One

administrator said that “just giving the kiddos the gift of time” sometimes helps them perform better the next year. “I try to determine if it’s a maturity issue or if it is just an issue where they weren’t exposed to the right skills at the right time.” By retaining students, participants expressed that the maturity gained sometimes allows students to gain skills and confidence that comes with the ability to perform that they believed would allow them to succeed in later grades throughout their schooling. “Sometimes those kids that have been low, will come in the next year and feel a little bit of a leadership role, because they do know the system. They know the procedures and they know some of the things. So, they are at least a little ahead on some of that.” (Teacher).

Perceived Challenges for the School, Parents, and Children

Many challenges were identified for the students, the teachers, and the schools. Participants believed that mandatory retention created challenges for students who are poor test takers and create stress for students whose future is determined by a test that is administered on one day of the year. One administrator shared how upset children were when evaluated because they knew the importance of the assessment,

I do not like what it's doing to my kids, and having kids literally throw up on tests when they are taking tests and then having to seal those tests when they throw up on books and send them to the State Department and the tears about them not passing the test. As an adult, I don't like to be in a situation that stressful. I don't agree with that part of it.

Others gave examples of why using a test to determine promotion is not fair for all students, citing reasons such as attention deficit disorders, poor test taking skills,

childhood illnesses, and anxiety. One teacher who was also a parent indicated about her own daughter:

This [3rd grade] is the year that my daughter started having anxiety. We had to hospitalize her a couple of times because of stress issues because of the testing. It was testing! And she stressed every time they practiced for the test and had to go to the doctor. We were like ‘it is just a test.’ I couldn’t get it through her head that ‘you know what? I don’t care. Pass or fail it, it is what it is. We are going to keep plugging and doing our best.’ But she still struggled.

Participants also believed there were challenges for the teachers. Some believed that mandatory retention takes the decision-making authority away from teachers who know the students best. The concern was that a student could do well enough on the test to pass by the state standards but still perform poorly in class. If the state regulations indicated that the student could advance, the parent may not value or engage in a conversation about the teacher’s concern about everyday performance and her evaluation of the student’s abilities. One parent indicated, “When you take those options away and you make it mandatory I think you get less buy-in. The parent thinks well they're just holding my kid back because he didn't do well on some stupid test. It’s not his fault. You set up defensiveness.”

Perceptions of school and district challenges related mostly to funding. When there is a mandate to retain third graders, there is a possibility in increased class sizes or numbers of third grade classes. In addition, there is additional stress for teachers who teach this grade level. A district official indicated “we have more entry-level teachers

this year in third grade than in any other grade in the district and it's one of our most important grades but career teachers don't want to stay there. They don't want that kind of pressure.” As career teachers move to other grade levels, there is an increased challenge for schools and districts to find teachers for these classes and to provide professional development that will not only help them be successful but also to feel empowered so they will want to continue teaching third grade.

Overall, there was a wide range of challenges and concerns attached to the mandatory retention legislation by the parents, teachers, and administrators who participated in the study. Concerns about children who are poor test takers, emotional stress and anxiety about taking the test, compromised working relationships between parents and faculty, and additional workloads and stress for teachers working in third grade were significant concerns of stakeholders. While academic achievement is the desired outcome, the process to get there has created an additional layer of apprehension with emotional and even physical outcomes at times.

These concerns must be addressed with methodical techniques to alleviate the uncertainty of success for those students who are most at risk. As in Bourdieu's cultural capital theory which indicates that social distinctions unknowingly control behaviors and choices (Bourdieu, 1984; Winkle-Wagner, 2010), participants in this study identified that grade retention often leads to decreased self-esteem and it should occur in the earliest grades in order to decrease stress and provide the greatest opportunity for success in school. Bloom (1974) indicates this success is partially determined by qualities such as self confidence that can be affected by mandatory retention. If the experience of retention

happens to be positive, students may be provided an opportunity of success to build upon. Festinger's social comparison theory suggests that students will use the cues from those around them to determine their abilities and worth (Festinger, 1954; Wu, West, & Hughes, 2010). As students evaluate these cues, students may be at higher risk for dropping out in later years if they determine that they lack the ability to continue. To develop an educational system that addresses these needs and counteracts the challenge of mandatory retention, Fullan's change theory (2006) can guide the district as they develop a better understanding of the mandatory retention law for parents, teachers, and administrators, while providing a systematic way to provide additional support for students at greatest risk for retention. By creating a plan, as the one outlined in the recommended policy recommendation, many of these concerns can be alleviated.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine various stakeholders' perceptions of mandated student retention in early childhood. By doing this, results will allow stakeholders to fully understand the processes and beliefs about retention within a specific district answering the question: What are parents', teachers' and administrators' perceptions of the third-grade retention law implemented by the state of Oklahoma during the 2013-2014 school year? Teachers' and administrators' perceptions of the third-grade retention law implemented by the state of Oklahoma indicate the level to which belief aligns with theory and / or practice. The findings demonstrate that stakeholders have mixed beliefs about the appropriateness and effectiveness of mandatory retention. However, these mixed beliefs may indicate a supportive community that not only hold

concerns for struggling students, but are willing to work through and implement suggestions or mandates presented in order to best meet the needs of their students. As the study is completed and reported, educational leaders within the district can determine if there is a necessity for change in practice and consider recommendations that arise from the project.

The project as an outcome of this study is a policy recommendation provided to the district leadership and the Board of Education. Project recommendations include early intervention in high risk populations. This may consist of increased opportunities for students to attend pre-K, identification of recommended practices in high poverty areas, or practices incorporated with English Language Learners or students with special needs. Using the data from the study to determine the current practices and beliefs about mandatory retention, students can benefit from educators and administrators who have a deeper understanding of the practice of mandatory retention and a plan for how to best use resources to help those who may be affected.

Section 3: The Project

Introduction

In an effort to improve reading comprehension and end social promotion within the state of Oklahoma, lawmakers added mandatory retention to the existing Reading Sufficiency Act. This portion of law mandated that students unable to pass the state reading assessment in the third grade would repeat the grade in order to have the basic reading skills necessary to succeed in subsequent grades. With this law, students may be retained up to two times before being promoted if they continue to fail the reading assessment. Within the first 2 years of implementation, good cause exemptions and probationary promotion clauses have been added to the law in an effort to ensure equity to students in varying circumstances (Reading Sufficiency Act, 2012).

The purpose of this study was to examine various stakeholders' perceptions of mandated student retention in early childhood. Through this examination, opinions about Oklahoma's mandatory retention law implemented during the 2014-2015 school year were examined to see if the law was supported by all stakeholders or if support varied among subpopulations. The law mandates that students who do not pass a third grade state reading assessment will be retained in order to close the gap and prepare them for achieving greater success in upper grades.

To determine stakeholders' beliefs and opinions, parents, teachers, and administrators were asked to participate in focus groups or interviews to share their experiences and opinions about retention and specifically retention mandated by state law. Through these focus groups and interviews, it became evident that while the

stakeholders do hold common perceptions about the law, they also share mutual concerns. The goal of the proposed project is to provide the district with a policy recommendation that will address the concerns shared by the parents, teachers, principals, and upper administration. By creating a policy to address these issues, stakeholders will be empowered to make informed decisions earlier and provide at-risk students with viable options for early intervention.

Rationale

A policy recommendation was selected as the project genre in order to assist in filling the gap between a state mandate and a district's implementation of that mandate. As state laws are created, districts are expected to carry out mandates and fulfill the intent of lawmakers, often with little to no guidance. As new laws are introduced into a school system, it often causes a ripple effect, impacting areas that were not necessarily considered. The third grade retention law was in place for two years at the time the stakeholders participated in this study. With two years of experience with the state's practices and procedures, parents and educators had time to form opinions and express concerns with the implementation of the law.

Through analysis of the data from this study, it was evident that the stakeholders agree with the idea of retention, but all who commented believed that it should occur in grades lower than third grade. In addition, they expressed concerns about the impact it would have on self-esteem and on keeping kids in school throughout high school, possibly increasing a dropout rate later in their educational careers. One principal stated, "We're going to have kids dropping out of school because they can (at that age)." By

creating a policy recommendation, some of their concerns about challenges for students, teachers, and even the schools can be addressed by putting structures in place that will alleviate some of the anxieties created by this law.

The study showed that parents and educators shared common beliefs about mandatory retention. The study problem will be addressed through the policy recommendation provided to district leaders and the Board of Education. The plan shares stakeholders' concerns in a systematic manner and outlines a plan for early intervention and recommended remediation practices for all early learners across the district. It will allow educators to "close the gap prior to the beginning of formal instruction" (Hilbert & Eis, 2014, p. 111). Furthermore, it will provide suggestions for high risk and impoverished populations, recommendations for the creation of standards to determine when to recommend grade retention, and professional development to empower educators to teach intentionally and confidently make decisions in regards to retention.

Review of the Literature

While there may be mixed beliefs on the effectiveness and appropriateness of Oklahoma's third grade mandatory retention law, it must be implemented. In this study, perceptions of stakeholders were identified in order to gain an understanding of their perceptions of the effects of the implementation of the law. The goal, with or without the law, is for all students to learn and succeed. So, instead of preparing for the aftermath of retention, district officials can focus their energies on examining ways to proactively address the greatest challenges facing early childhood classrooms and hindering the success of some students.

To address the challenges and problems created by Oklahoma's mandatory retention law, a policy recommendation has been created for the district, outlining a plan to counteract the concerns identified in the study. This policy recommendation, in the form of a white paper, will summarize the results of the study and detail a specific plan in an easy to read format that district leaders could easily implement. Using educational databases including ERIC and SAGE, key words and phrases such as early *intervention*, *parent involvement*, *poverty*, *professional development*, *pre-K*, *full day kindergarten*, and *standards for retention* were used to find research that aligned with the proposed project recommendations.

Early Identification and Intervention

Within this study on mandatory retention, the schools selected due to high numbers of students impacted by the law were also schools that tended to have higher levels of poverty within the district. Three of the four schools that participated were identified as Title I schools with free and reduced lunch percentages over 40%. It is important to acknowledge the role that poverty plays in the acquisition of language and to address the subsequent challenges associated with it. Many children living in poverty come to school without vocabulary and alphabet knowledge equivalent to their counterparts not in poverty. Children who grow up in poverty, over 16 million in the U.S., are at risk for difficulties adjusting to the school setting and often display delays in learning behaviors and early literacy skills, which leads to difficulties in later grades and makes them more likely to drop out (Lee & Bierman, 2015; Schippers, 2014; Schmit et al., 2014).

The transition to elementary school can be a particularly difficult transition for children from low-income families who may need more support to acclimate into this learning environment (Emfinger, 2012; Kim, Mazza, Zwanziger, & Henry, 2014). While all children would benefit from early education, children from disadvantaged backgrounds benefit the most as they enter school without critically important language and literacy experiences (Goldstein, 2011; Ma et al., 2015; Sylva, 2014). A growing body of research proposes that early childhood programs can mitigate the negative effects of socioeconomic status (SES) by providing high quality reading readiness programs to prepare children for school (Lane et al., 2014). Unfortunately, these students typically will experience differences in access to resources throughout their educational careers (Sylva, 2014).

Teachers believe they can tell early on, even within the first few days of school, which children are going to be successful and which may end up being retained (Goldstein et al., 2014). By identifying these students and intervening early in their academic careers, gains can be made. Unfortunately, teachers are faced with large numbers of at risk children, who come to school with varying levels of emergent literacy skills and enter their classes with significant delays, which creates a challenge for teachers as they use limited resources to address gaps that needed to be addressed prior to attending school (Callaghan & Madelaine, 2012; Carta et al., 2014). Many times, teachers have low expectations for these students, which can create a self-fulfilling prophecy where they are expected to do poorly (Goos et al., 2013).

Early identification of reading difficulties is crucial for intervention for students who are not on track for success in literacy. Students who are affected by the mandatory retention laws typically have a long history of academic struggle, often beginning prior to their entrance into school. While some studies indicated results of short-term benefits resulting from retention for some children, these benefits have been found to diminish over time. In addition, retention was less harmful to students with the lowest academic achievement (Chen et al., 2014). There is a critical window of opportunity for accelerated reading growth within the primary grades that diminishes in later grades (Little et al., 2012). Within this study, stakeholders expressed that if students were going to be retained, it should occur before third grade. Researchers have found that efforts to improve reading skills should focus on children's early development of literacy (Lonigan et al., 2013).

Early deficits can be identified even before students are old enough to attend school. These deficits are significant in that these early struggles with reading are linked to long-term reading failure (Callaghan & Madelaine, 2012; Dion, Brodeur, Gosselin, Campeau, & Fuchs, 2010; Lam & McMaster, 2014). Some suggest the implementation of universal pre-K along with early screening for all students to ensure they are ready to begin kindergarten (Goldstein et al., 2014; Lazarus & Ortega, 2007). A third or more of kindergarteners have not had developmentally appropriate learning experiences or early literacy experiences at home to prepare them for school and face significant challenges in learning to read (Greenwood et al., 2015; Ma et al., 2015).

Struggling pre-K students who received early literacy intervention were able to close the gap and perform at an appropriate level as they moved on to kindergarten (DeLucca, Bailet, Zettler-Greeley, & Murphy, 2015; Hilbert & Eis, 2014). Early intervention to improve oral language skills is crucial because of the impact it may have on reading comprehension in subsequent grades (Connor, Alberto, Compton, & O'Connor, 2014).

Full Day Kindergarten

All four schools studied within the district have both full day and half day kindergarten programs offered to students attending their schools. The full day programs are offered through a lottery drawing. It would be important to determine if the students who were affected by the third grade retention law received half or full day kindergarten. District statistics should be examined to determine if those in all day kindergarten were more successful in passing the third grade reading assessment. There is much debate and research to support both the implementation of full day kindergarten programs as well as research that indicates the benefits are short lived (Cooper, Batts Allen, Patall, & Dent, 2010). However, when examining early intervention options, full day kindergarten for all students must be considered.

Children attending full day kindergarten outperform their half-day kindergarten peers and are less likely to be retained in subsequent grades (Bingham & Hall-Kenyon, 2013; Hall-Kenyon, Bingham, & Korth, 2009; Ray & Smith, 2010). Availability of full day kindergarten should be a priority for children at risk for reading difficulties (Duke & Block, 2012). All day kindergarten teachers have more time to spend on subject related

activities, providing more frequent exposure and manipulation of language, differentiating for a variety of learning styles, and offering interventions to low performing students (Chang & Singh, 2008; Ray & Smith, 2010). With teachers having one class instead of two half day sections, parents find that the teachers are more accessible to help them and their child (Cooper et al., 2010).

There is some evidence that the academic advantage of attending full day kindergarten may be diminished by the time students reach the third grade (Cooper et al., 2010; Votruba-Drzal, Li-Grining, & Maldonado-Carreno, 2008; Zvock, 2009). Students who benefited from this academic advantage or intervention would also benefit from ongoing additional support to maintain the initial growth experienced (Cooper et al., 2010). For example, students who come from low-income families tend to lose skills throughout the summer, while others can maintain skills previously learned (Denton, Solari, Ciancio, Hecht, & Swank, 2010).

Professional Development on Effective Instruction

To ensure all students are successful in meeting state reading standards, schools and districts must provide their teachers with the appropriate training and tools to help them succeed. Professional development is key to making changes and empowering teachers to make a difference in the lives of struggling learners. Teachers need to be active learners themselves and be provided with professional development that challenges them to ask questions that stimulate their own growth while providing them the most up-to-date information about effective practices (Cerniglia, 2012; Diamond et al., 2013).

Quality professional development considers individual teacher differences and combines multiple strategies that may include small group, face to face, online, or classroom coaching to meet various teachers' learning styles (Connor et al., 2014). Furthermore, professional development should be a continuous process that focuses on actual classroom issues, occurs within the context of the teacher's practice, and is integrated into their daily work to impact their practice (Yuen, 2012). It is not a one-shot workshop. Teachers should be exposed to focused ongoing professional development to hone their craft. As they learn techniques, they should have the opportunities to try them in class, observe others using the techniques, and collaborate with colleagues about the development of skills.

Students who enter school lacking the necessary skills to learn the standard curriculum have diverse learning needs and need teachers who can provide high levels of support and expertise (Kaminski et al., 2015). Providing joint professional development for pre-K and kindergarten teachers can help to bridge the gap into formal learning. This will allow teachers to share knowledge and create support systems to address the needs of young learners (Emfinger, 2012).

In addition, teachers often have not been prepared to work with parents and provide them with instruction on how to help their children and establish a school-home partnership, and must address the needs of growing diversity (Maud et al., 2011; Steiner, 2014). They need professional development regarding how to interact with parents in a way that promotes positive interactions within the school culture. Interactions with students is a critical component as well. The quality of teacher-student relationships as

well as classroom organization in early education positively impacts student learning (Sandilos & DiPerna, 2014).

Parent Involvement

Parental involvement is another element that educators are always working to refine. The value of involvement is in the parents' participation in school activities and positive discourse and interactions among parents and educators (Sime & Sheridan, 2014). Increased parent involvement throughout elementary school has been correlated with higher reading achievement, increased motivation, and higher test scores (Steiner, 2014). Unfortunately, parents from low socioeconomic backgrounds are less likely to participate in activities at school or literacy practices at home because of their lack of ability or confidence to complete tasks themselves (Steiner, 2014). To promote this engagement, schools must focus on providing parents instruction on how to help their children at home (Steiner, 2014).

Project Description

The project is a policy recommendation presented as a white paper to the district to address the implementation of the third-grade mandatory retention law in a large suburban district in Oklahoma. The goal of the project is to provide the district with an action plan to address specific needs derived from the perceptions of stakeholders identified through this study. As the state implemented this law, stakeholders had no choice but to retain students who did not meet the standard. With the two years of operation, parents, teachers, and administrators now have a working knowledge of what the outcomes look like and have concerns about the affects it has on some students.

While many stakeholders, if not all, agreed with the intent of the law that something had to be done to help students who were struggling to read, most indicated that they believed it (retention) needed to be done earlier addressing the most basic reading skills. This policy recommendation focuses on early intervention and creating structures that allow students to receive services and remediation at the first signs of reading difficulty.

It is recommended that the district consider implementing a policy that focuses on the early detection and remediation of literacy deficits in kindergarten, first and second grade to minimize the number of students experiencing mandatory retention at the third-grade level. The policy would include actions such as the following to address the concerns demonstrated by the stakeholders and provide programs supported by current research.

- **Early Childhood Advisory Committee:** This committee would be comprised of parents, teachers, and administrators to oversee the project and make recommendations as needed. The district early childhood advisory committee would be recommended to meet quarterly or more frequently as needed. The Dean of Curriculum or Early Childhood Curriculum Coordinator would direct the meetings and the projects of the committee, making proposals to the Superintendent and Board of Education as needed.
- **Pre-Kindergarten for all students in Poverty:** While all students currently have the opportunity to enroll in a pre-K program within the district, many students in these programs attend at a pre-K pod or another school site often not near their

home. It is recommended that schools with the highest levels of poverty house pre-K programs on site allowing families from those neighborhoods greater access to this service. Often these parents do not have access to transportation. By strategically placing these programs back in their neighborhoods, struggling families would have the opportunity to walk their children to school to attend pre-K.

- **Full Day Kindergarten for all students in Poverty:** The proposal is to expand the opportunity of full day kindergarten for students in greatest need living in poverty so that all of these students receive full day services. Currently, most schools provide one section of kindergarten that is a full day program. Other students attending kindergarten are enrolled in half day programs. By providing all students in poverty the opportunity to attend full day kindergarten classes, these students will be involved in more educational and social interactions allowing more opportunities for interventions to close the gap between struggling students and their peers (Emfinger, 2012).
- **Create a Summer Program for Identified Students:** Research shows that students who benefit from full day kindergarten often regress during the summer (Denton et al., 2010). This recommendation is to create a summer program specifically designed for targeted students in danger of losing ground over the summer. In addition, it is important that these students are provided with instruction specifically matched to their weaknesses or deficits instead of a generic summer school program.

- **Parent Engagement Events:** Proposed parent engagement events are to focus on building collaboration and community among the school and families, finding ways to create dialog and communication in order to best serve the needs of the students. Unfortunately, parents of struggling students often feel uncomfortable in school settings themselves from their own previous experiences in school. The proposed parent involvement events should be relevant activities that encourage parents to come to the school and engage in interactions with educators that will promote positive learning practices with their children.
- **Checklist to Determine Retention in Lower Grades:** Within the study, stakeholders believed that if retention were to occur, it should happen before the third grade. It is recommended that the advisory committee explore options (i.e. Light's Retention Scale, 2006) for choosing or creating retention scales that would assist kindergarten, first, and second grade teachers in knowing when to recommend retention for struggling learners. This would create a district standard and set clear expectations for promotion and retention.
- **Embedded Professional Development for PK, K Teachers, extending to 1st and 2nd:** Also proposed is joint professional development for pre-kindergarten and kindergarten teachers providing opportunities to observe each other to gain insights about best practices, and ideas about what students need to know in that grade level. As possible, this should be extended to first and second grade teachers as well. The collaboration and exchanges will strengthen the

understanding and abilities of these early childhood educators, promoting best practices.

Potential Resources and Existing Support

The district currently has a strong support system in place through an existing curriculum department. By using the Elementary Reading Coordinator, Early Childhood Coordinator and the Title I Coordinator, along with federal funds, there is existing support for the schools in most need as indicated through levels of poverty. These curriculum leaders, along with the Director of Curriculum, could be essential in the creation of the early childhood advisory committee including all stakeholders, as well as creating professional development opportunities for early childhood educators that are practical and embedded into their jobs (Yuen, 2012). In addition, they can work with teachers to develop guidelines, or find resources such as Light's Retention Scale, for each grade level to help teachers determine when it may be appropriate to retain a student in a lower grade level.

Potential Barriers

Money and space will be potential barriers for implementing full day kindergarten and providing pre-K at the schools with the highest levels of poverty. Currently pre-K is offered to almost all students who enroll. However, these classes have been moved to pre-K "pods" and housed at a few schools across the district. This works for some parents who are able to transport their children. However, at schools with families experiencing the most financial challenges, parents often walk their children to school.

For this early learning experience to benefit those in poverty, pre-K classes need to be moved back to their home school so families have access to these programs.

In most schools within the district, there are both half day and full day kindergarten programs. Those students who are not randomly drawn to attend the full day class must attend the half day option. This is a potential barrier as well. Students who are at most risk for reading difficulties need the extra support of a full day of instruction and the time to absorb the curriculum. While this may not be a possibility at all of the twenty-five elementary sites, it is important that it is provided for all students who are disadvantaged and at a higher risk.

Proposal for Implementation of Timeline

The proposed timeline for implementation will vary depending on the funding. In an ideal situation, all recommendations would be implemented within a year to ensure that students were receiving help as soon as possible. Throughout the year, the early childhood advisory committee would meet with leaders to assist in providing feedback and making recommendations as they plan for implementation the following year (see Figure 1.)

| Year 1 | |
|--------------------|---|
| August-May: | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recruit parents, teachers, and administrators to participate in the Early Childhood Advisory Committee to determine priorities and details of specific initiatives • Create grade level retention checklists or determine to use a pre-made documents such as Light’s Retention Scale (Light, 2006) |
| Year 2 | |
| August | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open sections of Pre-K and full day kindergarten in schools with the most poverty. (To be determined by the committee, suggested that all schools with 60-70% free and reduced lunch participation and above are included. • Embedded Professional Development on Parent Engagement Events • Conduct first Parent Engagement Events at each building in conjunction with Back to School Night |
| September | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Embedded Professional Development on topics such as specific interventions/remediation/strategies identified by teachers or the committee |
| October | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct Parent Engagement Events at each building in conjunction with Parent Teacher Conferences • Early Childhood Advisory Committee conducts a quarterly review of the progression of the project, making recommendations for modifications when needed |
| November | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Embedded Professional Development on topics such as specific interventions/remediation/strategies identified by teachers or the committee |

(Figure continues...)

| | |
|-----------------|--|
| December | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early Childhood Advisory Committee conducts a quarterly review of the progression of the project, making recommendations for modifications when needed • |
| January | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Embedded Professional Development on using the retention checklist |
| February | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Begin using the checklist to determine which students may need retention in grades K, 1, and 2 • Embedded Professional Development on topics such as specific interventions/remediation/strategies identified by teachers or the committee |
| March | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct Parent Engagement Events at each building in conjunction with Parent Teacher Conferences • Begin discussion of retention with parents |
| April | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early Childhood Advisory Committee conducts a quarterly review of the progression of the project, making recommendations for modifications when needed |
| May | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct Parent Engagement Events at each building |
| June | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide Summer Intervention for targeted Kindergarten, 1st, and 2nd grade students on specific deficits • Early Childhood Advisory Committee conducts a review of the progression of the project, making recommendations for the following year |
| July | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide Summer Intervention for targeted Kindergarten, 1st, and 2nd grade students on specific deficits |

Figure 1. Implementation timeline.

Roles and Responsibilities

Actions within this policy recommendation would involve various stakeholders to implement and address the needs of struggling early childhood students. It is suggested

that a member from the district's curriculum team to oversee the project, monitoring the progress and ensuring the policies were implemented. Parents, teachers, and administrators would be responsible for serving on the Early Childhood Advisory Committee to make recommendations to the Curriculum Department and to the Superintendent as needed. The curriculum department leaders would be responsible for conducting the embedded professional development for early childhood teachers and for training school staffs on conducting parent engagement events that are relevant.

Elementary school principals and teachers would be responsible for conducting the parent engagement activities, using the recommended retention checklists, participating in professional development, and identifying students for summer programs and further remediation. The curriculum department would work with the teachers to identify which students needed ongoing summer support and work with them to create a plan for their summer programs. As the researcher, I would be available for consultation as needed, providing recommendations if requested.

Project Evaluation Plan

The goal of the evaluation plan is to determine if the proposed project, the Policy Recommendation, is beneficial to the district as stakeholders continue to implement the state mandated practice. A survey will be administered before and a year after the Policy Recommendation is presented to the Board of Education. By surveying the stakeholders about the proposed projects, I will be able to determine if the Policy Recommendation created any change in current practices and if any parts were implemented. These results will be shared with the district leaders upon request.

As the implemented components of the project are evaluated, I will be able to identify if the project has a positive or negative affect on the concerns addressed in this study. The project evaluation will include formative evaluations that will occur through surveys and questionnaires conducted by the curriculum department provided to participants throughout the year after events such as professional development and parent engagement events. Furthermore, an overall survey of the stakeholders, including parents, teachers, and administrators, will occur at the end of the first year to determine the effectiveness of the project. Further evaluation will occur through yearly comparisons of the number of students retained by the third-grade retention law. Although it will take a few years to see the results, if the project is successful, a summative evaluation will show that fewer students will be forced into another year of third grade by the State of Oklahoma. In addition, if the Policy Recommendation is implemented, I will ask stakeholders to participate in focus groups and interviews at the end of the two-year cycle to determine if the project has changed perceptions of parents, teachers, and administrators about mandatory retention. Comparing the perceptions both before and after the project will provide an overall evaluation of the project.

Project Implications

Research indicates that grade level retention is a negative option for already struggling students (Bornsheuer, Polonya, Andrews, Fore, & Onwuegbuzie, 2011; Range et al., 2011; Stearns et al., 2007). Unfortunately, it is sometimes a necessity and other times mandatory. By implementing this project and focusing on early intervention and family support, there is a great possibility for social change within the community where

struggling students receive help earlier and are exposed to less of the negative consequences that occur with retention, especially in later grades. Within the district, students could benefit from early intervention and the implementation of a strategic plan for how struggling learners are assisted. Parents will have the reassurance that teachers, the school, and the district have made great efforts to ensure their children are better prepared for the state test, resulting in fewer impacted by the mandated retention legislation. Implementation of this project will support teachers, developing their craft through professional development. Furthermore, it will take some of the pressure off the third-grade teachers as they see that the district acknowledges that it is more than one year of instruction that creates a situation where a student passes or fails the third-grade test. In a larger context, this district, already a leader in the state, will be able to promote positive practices at the state level and provide examples of how they created change for those in most need.

Conclusion

The State of Oklahoma has mandated third grade retention for students who are unable to pass the state reading test. Stakeholders within the district studied agree that something needs to be done – maybe even retention. However, parents, teachers, and administrators all agreed that third grade is too late to make a difference for students struggling with literacy. Considering their concerns and current research on effective practices for students with deficits, this policy recommendation was created to address specific areas that could impact those in most need.

Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

Introduction

This study on perceptions of district stakeholders regarding Oklahoma's mandatory third grade retention law provided insight into the practice of retention within the district and beliefs about how the mandatory retention law will affect students and schools. Educators feel that they are knowledgeable about their students and what they know (or do not know) and it is offensive to some that the state has taken the authority to determine the fate of their students. "Teachers' know who they need to retain. They don't need a test to tell them that they need retained," (Administrator). But something Intervention was necessary for those students who were struggling and making it to middle or high school unable to read. The state of Oklahoma followed examples of other states who were experiencing these same challenges. The proposed project creates a plan to identify and remediate students in early childhood classrooms, hopefully addressing the deficits before students reach a point of crisis.

Project Strengths and Limitations

The strength of this project is that it attempted to involve all stakeholders within the school setting as possible to gather information needed to address the needs of those students who are struggling to learn to read. It empowers teachers by providing them with the tools they need through embedded professional development to identify and remediate deficits while providing structures such as full day kindergarten. This structure will optimize learning time for students needing more exposure to content and then

incorporate ongoing support for students who struggle to maintain concepts by providing a summer extension.

There are some limitations to this proposed project. Some students come to school already lacking language and literacy experiences and face significant challenges to learning, and need special education services due to this lack of exposure (Greenwood et al., 2015). To reach these students, the district would need to expand literacy programs to even younger children, including even children ages 3 and under. With the funding issues already present within the educational system in the state, this was not presented as an option. It appears the only feasible option would be to partner with other public agencies that are already servicing this population and encourage parents to use social services as appropriate.

In addition, funding for expanding the kindergarten program to provide full day opportunities for those in most need may be a limitation to this project. In an ideal situation, all students would be offered pre-K and full day kindergarten at their home school in order to have the greatest opportunity for exposure to the curriculum. An extended pre-K program for students entering with a deficit at 4 years old would also be beneficial for addressing gaps as early as possible.

Recommendations for Alternative Approaches

Alternative approaches to address the problem of the third grade retention law and the perceptions of stakeholders that retention should occur earlier. These approaches could include working with state leaders on making changes to the current law

to better represent the desires of the community. By providing input and lobbying for positive changes, perhaps the law could better reflect the stakeholders' views.

Another approach was recommended by an administrator who participated in the study. She recommended doing away with kindergarten and moving to a school readiness program that was based on age. In this type of program, there would be a 4-year-old school readiness class, a 5-year-old school readiness class, and a 6-year-old school readiness class. As a 5-year-old, a child could take an entry test, and if ready could go to first grade. If not ready, they would go on to the 6-year-old readiness class. Students would be prepared with appropriate skills as they tested into first grade. There would have to be some plan for students who did not pass the readiness test at age 6. But there would be a better sense of understanding of what skills were needed to be placed into that first grade class where students are expected to read.

Scholarship, Project Development, and Leadership and Change

The process of becoming a scholar, researching and analyzing can be overwhelming, exhausting, consuming, and rewarding. It takes practice and patience to review literature and search for research that relates to areas within a topic of study. With every piece read, I could feel my understanding broadening and background knowledge deepening.

I found just the research that supported existing ideas, beliefs, and experiences from the classroom (Creswell. 2012). Other times, frustration set in when I read page after page from various authors proving I was wrong. I am sure at times my family, friends, and colleagues grew tired of hearing my thoughts or latest findings on grade

retention. Through conducting this research, I developed my own skill set to analyze data and present my findings.

Using these findings to develop a project helped me to better understand the application of research and visualize that application within a real-world context. With each addition to the proposal, I questioned the necessity and possibility of implementation of the project for the district leaders. I now believe that research is most helpful when it provides viable options for practical use to improve practice (Merriam, 2009).

I have had many roles in my career. I have been a teacher, a curriculum coordinator for the district, an assistant principal, and now a principal. These have given me different perspectives that helped me as I used the research to create this proposed project. However, knowing the research gives me confidence in leadership as I propose for changes to be made.

Reflection on the Importance of the Work

Retention creates lifelong effects. I remember sitting in church as a teenager hearing a grown man admit to people that he was retained when he was asked what year he graduated. Even if he experienced none of the other negative effects that research says he could have experienced, he still felt the shame of retention and compelled to tell this group that he had been a failure in school. Children who are retained in early grades are lacking basic skills that prohibit their future success. Whether they have not been exposed or do not have the ability to perform the task, they did not choose failure. There are going to be times that educators cannot fix or remediate students' challenges.

However, it is the responsibility of teachers to help students to succeed . Overall, through this study, I found that educators are waiting too long to “fix” the problem. For more students to succeed, teachers’ efforts and energies should be focused on lower grades as soon as deficits are identified instead of mandating retention for those who have already fallen behind.

Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research

This study creates potential positive social change for students and families within the district who need additional resources for a successful start in school. By implementing these resources, it is possible to narrow or even close the gap and help students read and comprehend. For the school district, this means that there will be more work in the lower grades, but that more students will be prepared to take on more complex learning as they grow.

Implications for future research would include the possibility of a follow up study to determine if students who were receiving services in the proposed project were better prepared for subsequent grades and performing higher on state testing. Further research should also be conducted on the perceptions of retention in lower grades as an increase in retention could be expected. In addition, parent participation was a limitation of this study. Additional research is needed to gather more information on the perceptions of parents to truly gain insights on their beliefs on the mandatory retention law. Despite many attempts, only two parents participated in the focus groups of this study, providing some but not enough data to fully understand this population.

Conclusion

In an effort to end social promotion, the State of Oklahoma implemented a law during the 2013-2014 school year that mandated retention for third grade students who were unable to pass the state reading assessment. This project study provides the district with an alternative plan to help struggling students before they are faced with the consequences of retention. In this study, parents, teachers, and administrators all expressed concerns about the timing of the law. Even those in favor of retention believed that students needed help before they reached the third grade.

The proposed project study (see Appendix A) incorporates these concerns with current research on retention and literacy intervention. By systematically identifying deficits children have in pre-K and in kindergarten and providing them with extended opportunities to narrow those gaps, they can be empowered to gain the necessary skills to succeed in school and in life.

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Appendix A: The Project

**Views from the Field on Retention:
Stakeholders' Perceptions of Mandated
Student Retention in Early Childhood**

A White Paper Policy Recommendation

WALDEN UNIVERSITY

October 2017

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Executive Summary

In an effort to end social promotion, the state of Oklahoma has created and implemented legislation mandating retention for third grade students who do not pass a required standardized test. This has created a new atmosphere in early childhood grades as teachers, administrators, and parents are responding to these new guidelines.

This policy recommendation was created for the administrative leaders and Board of Education of the school district based on a qualitative case study conducted to examine various stakeholders' perceptions of mandated student retention in early childhood. Seventeen participants including two parents, eight teachers, and seven administrators took part in face-to-face interviews and focus groups to share their perceptions on retention. The goal of this policy recommendation white paper is to provide the district with the data on perceptions of those affected by this mandate and to provide an action plan to address the challenges identified. Specifically, the plan will help the district to meet the following objectives: to identify students at risk for failure sooner, and to improve instruction for these students so more will achieve success on this assessment.

The recommendation is a plan to address the needs of students who may be affected by mandated retention and includes the components of an early childhood advisory committee, pre-kindergarten and full day kindergarten for all students in poverty, a summer program for identified students, parent engagement events, checklist to determine retention in lower grades, and embedded professional development for pre-K through 2nd grade teachers. A proposed timeline for implementation is outlined, as well as a method of evaluation for the recommended proposal.

Views from the Field on Retention: A Policy Recommendation

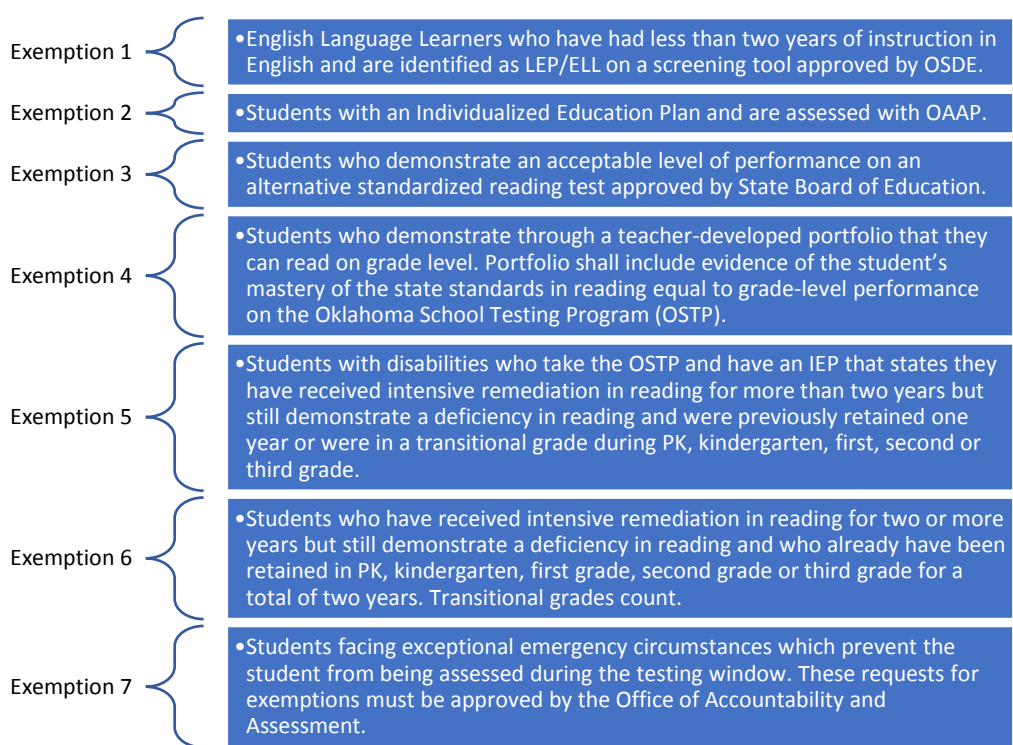
Introduction

Whether people are interested in improving educational achievement to advance the economy and ensure the United States is competitive in a global society or whether they are concerned about the success of a specific child that means the world to them, most have an opinion about the state of education in America today. The United States has moved from No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation to the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) as leaders search for ways to help those students who are struggling the most (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015). Decision makers in the state of Oklahoma believe third grade retention will provide much needed support to failing readers. In an effort to end social promotion, the practice of allowing a student to progress to the next grade level because of age with or without the skill set needed for success, the state has passed a third-grade mandatory retention law.

This legislation has led to a qualitative case study conducted with parents, teachers, and administrators from the school affected most by the third-grade retention law within this particular school district. The results of this study provided data used to create a policy recommendation that would address the needs of struggling students in jeopardy of being retained in the third grade. The goal of this white paper is to present the findings of the study including stakeholders' perceptions and offer a plan to systematically address student needs as they prepare for the high-stakes third grade assessment.

Background

During the 2013-2014 school year, the State of Oklahoma implemented a law that requires schools to retain third graders who are not reading on grade level. Now, students may be retained up to two times before being promoted, including special education students and English language learners (ENR. H. B. NO. 2625). Although there are six good cause exemptions, the exemptions are specific about which children are exempt from this law. For example, children who have been retained are not exempt, can be retained again, and do not automatically fall under the good cause exemption category.



Oklahoma HB 2625

Figure A1: Good Cause Exemptions

There is also a temporary provision for students allowing them to avoid retention if school officials and the parents feel it is in the students' best interests. These students may be promoted by a team who is evaluating their ability and progress throughout interventions.

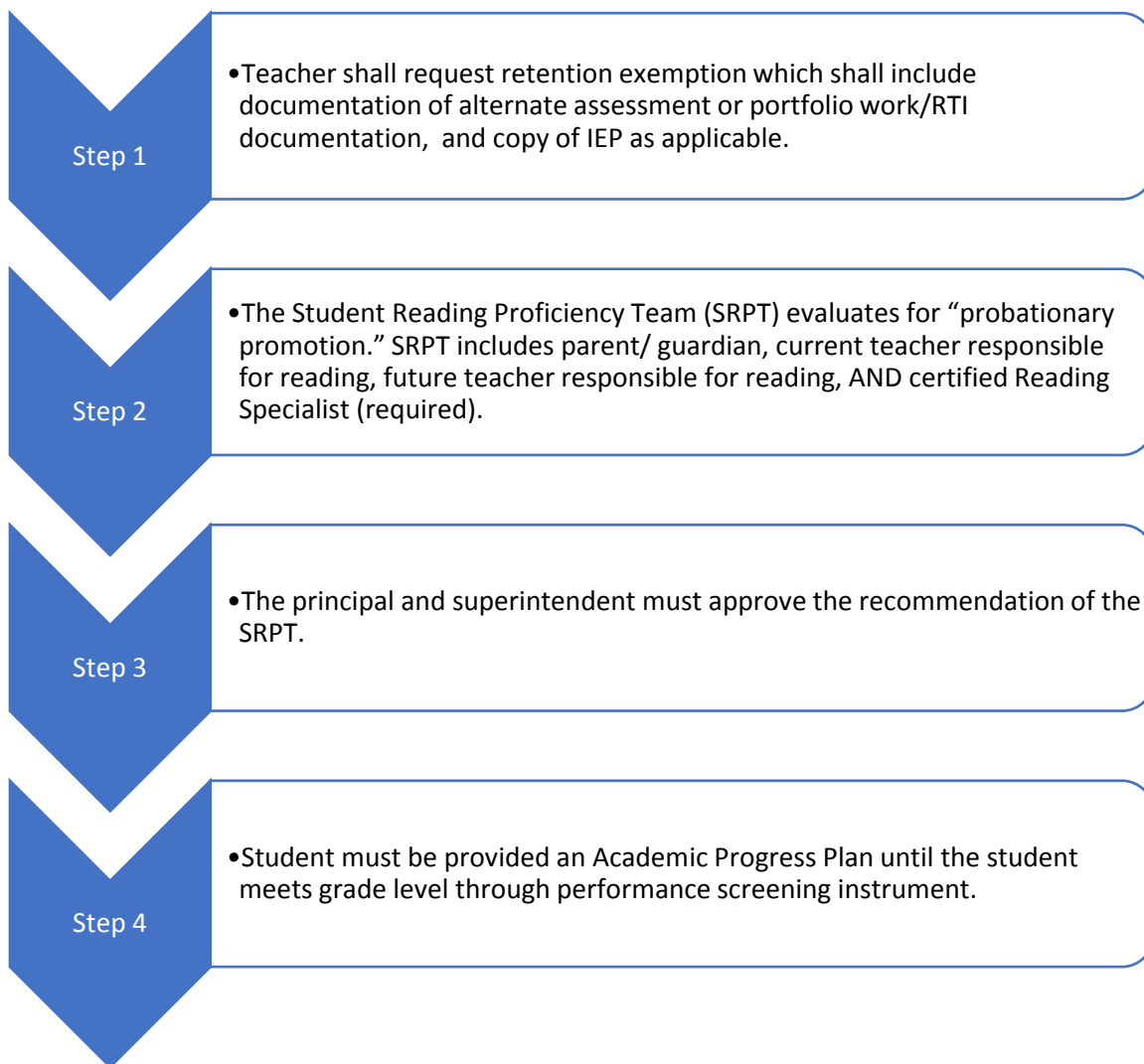


Figure A2: Probationary Promotion Process Oklahoma HB. 2625

Through the qualitative case study, a series of focus groups and interviews were conducted with stakeholders including parents, teachers, principals, and district

administrators to better understand the practice of retention, specifically within this school district in Oklahoma Public Schools. The study explored the perceptions of parents, teachers, and administrators in regard to mandatory retention. By comparing the perceptions about the newly instated mandatory retention law in the State of Oklahoma, district leaders will be able to more deeply understand the reasons behind support for and barriers to policy implementation as they move forward in educating struggling learners.

Current Research on Retention

Currently it is estimated that 3.5 percent of first graders and 1.5 percent of third graders are retained each year (Turney & Haskins, 2014). Furthermore, it is estimated that one third of children entering school are not ready and about 5-7 percent of children are retained in

kindergarten

(Lonigan, Purpura,

Wilson, Walker, &

Clancy-Menchetti,

2013; Ma, Nelson,

Shen, & Krenn, 2015;

Schippers, 2014;

Winsler et al., 2012).

While there are not many studies that indicate positive

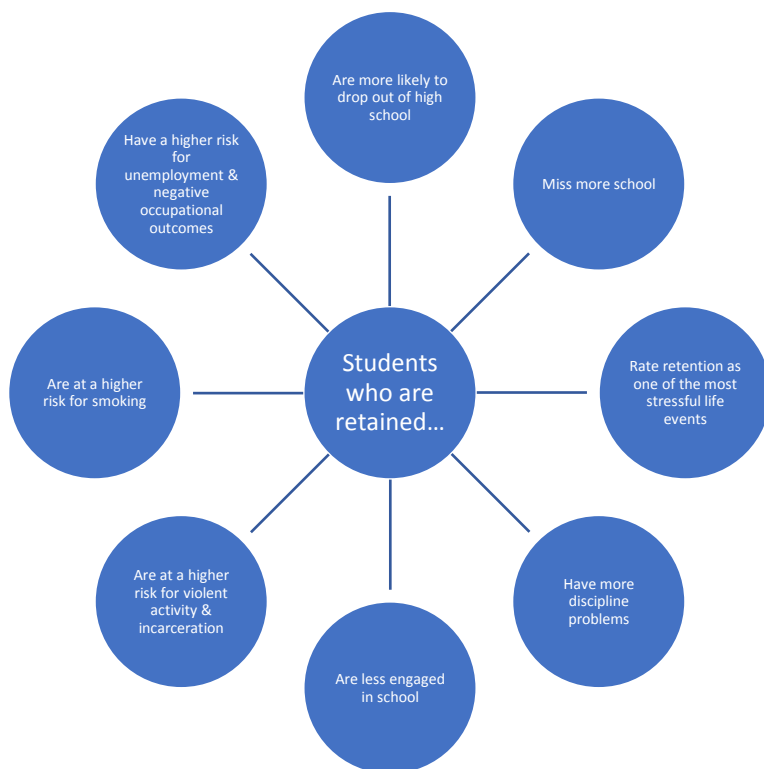


Figure A3: Effects of Retention

effects from retention, a few indicate that many times students show progress or higher performance during the initial weeks or months of being retained in a grade level. Initial benefits have been noted as students abilities increase during the initial retention year and then fall again when the student is promoted to the next grade and is not provided with the additional supports offered within the year of retention (Baenen, Austin Independent School District, T. X. O. o. R., & Evaluation, 1988; Chen, Hughes, & Kwok, 2014; Gleason, Kwok, & Hughes, 2007; Goos, Van Damme, Onghena, & Petry, 2011; Huddleston, 2014; Moser, West, & Hughes, 2012; Schnurr, Kundert, & Nickerson, 2009; Schwerdt & West, 2012; Wu, West, & Hughes, 2008). In addition, students retained in early grades are often later placed in special education programs due to learning disabilities (Baenen et al., 1988; Nagaoka & Roderick, 2004). In fact, children retained in kindergarten may never catch up to their peers (Raffaele Mendez et al., 2015). This could be because educators look to a one-size fits all approach to meet the needs of difficult-to-teach students (Beebe-Frankenberger, Bocian, MacMillan, & Gresham, F. M., 2004). If a student is not learning at the pace of his peers within a class and remediation does not occur through early intervention, retention becomes an option early in the year. Unfortunately, this often leads to long term academic obstacles for students experiencing significant reading challenges (Lam & McMaster, 2014).

Local Stakeholders Perceptions on Retention

The sample for the study included parents, teachers, and administrators (principals, curriculum specialists and assistant superintendents) from four schools with the greatest numbers of students retained in the school district. The four schools were

identified through district data on the number of students qualifying for mandatory retention according to the state law. After comparing the number of students eligible for mandated retention, the four schools with the most students retained were asked to participate in the study.

After the focus groups and interviews were completed, the responses were coded and sorted into recurring themes that provided awareness into the stakeholders' perceptions, answering the questions of the study. These themes provide insight into the practice of retention as mandated by the current state law.

Table A1: Emerging Themes

| <i>Question</i> | <i>Themes Emerging from Focus Groups & Interviews</i> |
|---|--|
| Do parents/ teachers/ administrators agree with mandatory retention? If so, why? If not, why not? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Retention should occur in grades lower than third grade • Retention allows schools to retain students whose parents have previously refused |
| What are the perceived long-term effects that will result from mandatory retention? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Retention often results in decreased self-esteem for students |

| | |
|---|---|
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Administrators are concerned with dropout rates for students later in their educational careers |
| <p>What are the perceived benefits that will result from mandatory retention?</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Retention may provide time for maturity • Retention may provide opportunity for success in school to those who are struggling |
| <p>What are the perceived challenges that mandatory retention will cause for the school? For parents? For children?</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>For Students:</u> Mandatory retention is challenging for students who are poor test takers & creates stress for students whose future is determined on one day that the test is administered • <u>For Teachers:</u> Mandatory retention may take the decision-making away from the teachers • <u>For Schools:</u> Funding, increased class sizes or numbers of third grade classes is a challenge for schools and the district |

| | |
|--|--|
| | *Note: no perceived challenges for parents were indicated in any of the sessions |
|--|--|

Nine themes created were derived from the recurring beliefs and statements that were presented repeatedly from multiple participants throughout the study, emerging from the coded data. The themes included:

- Need for Early Intervention: Retention should occur in grades lower than third grade
- Mandatory retention allows schools to retain students whose parents have previously refused
- Mandatory retention often results in decreased self-esteem for students
- Administrator concerns with dropout rates for students later in their educational careers
- Mandatory retention may provide time for maturity
- Mandatory retention may provide opportunity for success in school to those who are struggling
- Mandatory retention is challenging for students who are poor test takers & creates stress for students whose future is determined on one day that the test is administered
- Mandatory retention may take the decision-making away from the teachers

- Funding, increased class sizes or numbers of third grade classes is a challenge for schools and the district

These themes had both positive and negative connotations at times. For example, participants indicated that if students are going to be retained that retention should occur before the third grade. An administrator stated, we'd rather hold them back now in first grade when they can get more of those basic skills and you know that they're going to have to build on." This was supported by a teacher who said, "I think if they are going to do it, it needs to be in younger years where the basic skills are taught. They should have been held back in a grade where they are still doing phonics." The parents also brought up the idea of retention occurring earlier as one said, "I think if you're waiting until 3rd grade to try to catch them up then they are two years behind," paired with another stating, "the peer pressure is only going to get worse as they get older and become more socially aware of what's going on around them."

Participants also felt that mandatory retention provided schools with an option to retain students whose parents had previously refused retention. One teacher said, "I do like having the back up for those parents who are asked over and over and they just didn't feel it was what they needed. Even though it's what their child needed." An administrator reinforced that, "Sometimes we run into a brick wall when we truly feel like we need to retain a child, but, yet that parent says no."

Concerns about the dropout rate later in school was also a theme that emerged. One principal stated, "I think sometimes it can push kids to drop out. I think it can increase dropout rates." Another administrator told a story about a specific student he was

concerned about. He indicated that by retaining this student, there would be additional hardship on the family, “His circumstances at home and the area that in which his support is not that great. It’s going to be a struggle to get him through an extra year. Just to get him through that adding an extra year onto that is going to be a struggle for him.”

While examining parents', teachers' and administrators' perceptions of the third-grade retention law implemented by the state of Oklahoma, themes were evident across stakeholder groups. Looking back to the study’s questions, the themes found in the study aligned and provided insight into the practice mandated by law.

While there were some concerns about the law overreaching, and taking some power away from the teachers who know which students need to be retained, some stakeholders maintained that the law enabled schools more than hindered them by allowing them to retain students whose parents had previously refused. One teacher summed this up by saying, “I do like having the back up for those parents who are asked over and over and they just didn't feel it was what they needed. Even though it's what their child needed.”

Parents/ Teachers/ Administrators Beliefs About Mandatory Retention

Most stakeholders expressed acceptance and even approval of mandatory retention. However, the leading area of contention was that students should be retained earlier. Stakeholders repeatedly expressed their concerns for early intervention and regret that third grade was just too late.

- “I think retention should be pushed more in the lower grades.”

(Administrator)

- “I’m all for retention if it’s truly that they need those skills to learn to read especially at that kindergarten, first, and second grade level.”
(Administrator)
- “My two lowest kids are both at the first-grade level, and they need first grade instruction. That's what they need. And they need first grade instruction all day. My third-grade instruction doesn't do anything for them.” (Teacher)
- “I think if you're waiting until 3rd grade to try to catch them up then they are two years behind.” (Parent)

Over and over, parents, teachers, and administrators, reiterated the concern that third grade is too late to help the students who are struggling. This may be indicative of many teachers’ belief that retention is effective with students considered to be immature (Chen, Hughes, & Kwok, 2014), thus providing support for retention in earlier grades.

Still, educators indicated they are encouraging parents to retain earlier and experiencing more success with getting parents who had previously refused to retain their child to agree as teachers show them the possibility of a later third grade retention mandated by the state.

Perceived Long-Term Effects that will Result from Mandatory Retention

Even with the largely supportive community, there are still concerns that there will be a higher dropout rate and that retaining students will create self-esteem issues that will affect other areas of development. A district administrator said, “I do think we're

going to have some self-esteem and self-concept issues with that.” Another upper level administrator said, “it can give them a negative outlook on themselves as far as why am I being retained.” When discussing her daughter, a teacher said:

I think we are at the age now where it is starting to be a bigger issue, because she is very self-conscious of the fact that she has repeated. And a lot of the kids in her class know she wasn't in their grade last year. So, when someone brings it up you can see the look on her face. She gets totally stressed out. She has major self-confidence issues with it.

One administrator indicated that the older the student is when retained, the harder it was and that retention can have “a very negative impact on their self-esteem. It can really deflate their self-esteem. It can really put a bad taste in their mouth for learning, which is definitely what we don't want to do.” While the goal of retention is to improve student learning and increase success, there is still a stigma connected to retention as indicated from the responses of stakeholders.

The findings reported in the emerging themes indicate that stakeholders are aware of and have concerns about the research suggesting that retention does more harm than good (Goos et al., 2013; Gottfried, 2013; Hennick, 2008; Holmes, 2006; Jimerson & Ferguson, 2007; Jimerson & Kaufman, 2003; Lynch, 2014; Range, Dougan, & Pijanowski, 2011; Stearns et al., 2007). Unfortunately, with a lack of alternatives, and a law enforcing mandatory retention, the practice continues and may even increase in usage.

Perceived Benefits that will Result from Mandatory Retention

The perceived benefits from mandatory retention were maturity and success in school. “If it’s handled the right way, retention is positive” (Parent). Participants indicated that some students just need more time to understand concepts. One administrator said that “just giving the kiddos the gift of time” sometimes helps them perform better the next year. “I try to determine if it’s a maturity issue or if it is just an issue where they weren’t exposed to the right skills at the right time.” By retaining students, participants expressed that the maturity gained sometimes allows students to gain skills and confidence that comes with the ability to perform that they believed would allow them to succeed in later grades throughout their schooling. “Sometimes those kids that have been low, will come in the next year and feel a little bit of a leadership role, because they do know the system. They know the procedures and they know some of the things. So, they are at least a little ahead on some of that.” (Teacher).

Perceived Challenges for the School, Parents, and Children

Many challenges were identified for the students, the teachers, and the schools. Participants believed that mandatory retention created challenges for students who are poor test takers and create stress for students whose future is determined by a test that is administered on one day of the year. One administrator shared how upset children were when evaluated because they knew the importance of the assessment,

I do not like what it's doing to my kids, and having kids literally throw up on tests when they are taking tests and then having to seal those tests when they throw up on books and send them to the State Department and the tears about them not

passing the test. As an adult I don't like to be in a situation that stressful. I don't agree with that part of it.

Others gave examples of why using a test to determine promotion is not fair for all students, citing reasons such as attention deficit disorders, poor test taking skills, childhood illnesses, and anxiety. One teacher who was also a parent indicated about her own daughter:

This [3rd grade] is the year that my daughter started having anxiety. We had to hospitalize her a couple of times because of stress issues because of the testing. It was testing! And she stressed every time they practiced for the test and had to go to the doctor. We were like 'it is just a test.' I couldn't get it through her head that 'you know what? I don't care. Pass or fail it, it is what it is. We are going to keep plugging and doing our best.' But she still struggled.

Participants also believed there were challenges for the teachers. Some believed that mandatory retention takes the decision-making authority away from teachers who know the students best. The concern was that a student could do well enough on the test to pass by the state standards but still perform poorly in class. If the state indicated that the student could advance, the parent may not value or engage in a conversation about the teacher's concern about everyday performance and her evaluation of the student's abilities. One parent indicated, "when you take those options away and you make it mandatory I think you get less buy-in. The parent thinks well they're just holding my kid back because he didn't do well on some stupid test. It's not his fault. You set up defensiveness."

Perceptions of school and district challenges related mostly to funding. When there is a mandate to retain third graders, there is a possibility in increased class sizes or numbers of third grade classes. In addition, there is additional stress for teachers who teach this grade level. A district official indicated “we have more entry-level teachers this year in third grade than in any other grade in the district and it's one of our most important grades but career teachers don't want to stay there. They don't want that kind of pressure”. As career teachers move to other grade levels, there is an increased challenge for schools and districts to find teachers for these classes and to provide professional development that will not only help them be successful but also to feel empowered so they will want to continue teaching third grade.

Overall, there was a wide range of challenges and concerns attached to the mandatory retention legislation by the parents, teachers, and administrators who participated in the study. Concerns about children who are poor test takers, emotional stress and anxiety about taking the test, compromised working relationships between parents and faculty, and additional workloads and stress for teachers working in third grade were significant concerns of stakeholders. While academic achievement is the desired outcome, the process to get there has created an additional layer of apprehension with emotional and even physical outcomes at times. These concerns must be addressed with systematic techniques to alleviate the uncertainty of success for those students who are most at risk. By creating a plan, many of these concerns can be alleviated.

Policy Recommendation for Implementation of the Law

The proposed project is a policy recommendation to address the implementation of the third-grade mandatory retention law. As the state implemented this law, stakeholders had no choice but to retain students who did not meet the standard. With the two years of operation, parents, teachers, and administrators now have a working knowledge of what the outcomes look like and have concerns about the effects it has on some students.

While many, if not all, agreed with the intent of the law that something had to be done to help students who were struggling to read, most indicated that they believed it (retention) needed to be done earlier addressing the most basic reading skills. This policy recommendation focuses on early intervention and creating structures that allow students to receive services and remediation at the first signs of reading difficulty.

It is recommended that the district considers implementing a policy that focuses on the early detection and remediation of literacy deficits in kindergarten, first, and second grade to minimize the number of students experiencing mandatory retention at the third-grade level. The policy would include actions such as the following to address the concerns demonstrated by the stakeholders and provide programs supported by current research.

- Early Childhood Advisory Committee: This committee would be comprised of parents, teachers, and administrators to oversee the project and make recommendations as needed. The district early childhood advisory committee would be recommended to meet quarterly or more frequently as needed. The Dean of Curriculum or Early Childhood Curriculum Coordinator would direct the

meetings and the projects of the committee, making proposals to the Superintendent and Board of Education as needed.

- Pre Kindergarten for All Students in Poverty: While all students currently have the opportunity to enroll in a pre-K program within the district, many students in these programs attend at a pre-K pod or another school site often not near their home. It is recommended that schools with the highest levels of poverty house pre-K programs on site allowing families from those neighborhoods greater access to this service offering opportunities to better prepare these students for school (Lane, Prokop, Johnson, Podhajski, & Nathan, 2014). Often these parents do not have access to transportation. By strategically placing these programs back in their neighborhoods, struggling families would have the opportunity to walk their children to school to attend pre-K.
- Full Day Kindergarten for All Students in Poverty: The proposal is to expand the opportunity of full day kindergarten for students in greatest need living in poverty so that all of these students receive full day services. Currently, most schools provide one section of kindergarten that is a full day program. Other students attending kindergarten are enrolled in half day programs. By providing all students in poverty the opportunity to attend full day kindergarten classes, these students will be involved in more educational and social interactions allowing more opportunities for interventions to close the gap between struggling students and their peers (Emfinger, 2012).

- Create a Summer Program for Identified Students: Research show that students who benefit from full day kindergarten often regress during the summer (Denton, Solari, Ciancio, Hecht, & Swank, 2010). This recommendation is to create a summer program specifically designed for targeted students in danger of losing ground over the summer. In addition, it is important that these students are provided with instruction specifically matched to their weaknesses or deficits instead of a generic summer school program.
- Parent Engagement Events: Proposed parent engagement events are to focus on building collaboration and community among the school and families, finding ways to create dialog and communication in order to best serve the needs of the students. Unfortunately, parents of struggling students often feel uncomfortable in school settings themselves from their own previous experiences in school. The proposed parent involvement events should be relevant activities that encourage parents to come to the school and engage in interactions with educators that will promote positive learning practices with their children (Sime & Sheridan, 2014; Steiner, 2014).
- Checklist to Determine Retention in Lower Grades: Within the study, stakeholders believed that if retention were to occur, it should happen before the third grade. It is recommended that the advisory committee explore options (i.e. Light's Retention Scale) for choosing or creating retention scales that would assist kindergarten, first, and second grade teachers in knowing when to recommend

retention for struggling learners. This would create a district standard and set clear expectations for promotion and retention.

- Embedded Professional Development for PK, K Teachers, Extending to 1st and 2nd: Also proposed is joint professional development for pre-kindergarten and kindergarten teachers providing opportunities to observe each other to gain insights about best practices, and ideas about what students need to know in that grade level (Emfinger, 2012). As possible, this should be extended to first and second grade teachers as well. The collaboration and exchanges will strengthen the understanding and abilities of these early childhood educators, promoting best practices.

Proposal for Implementation of Timeline

In an ideal situation, all recommendations would be implemented within a year to ensure that students were receiving help as soon as possible. Throughout the year, the early childhood advisory committee would meet with leaders to assist in providing feedback and making recommendations as they plan for implementation the following year (see Figure 1.)

| | Year 1 |
|--------------------|--|
| August-May: | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recruit parents, teachers, and administrators to participate in the Early Childhood Advisory Committee to determine priorities and details of specific initiatives • Create grade level retention checklists or determine to use pre-made documents such as Light's Retention Scale (Light, 2006) |

(Figure continues...)

| Year 2 | |
|------------------|---|
| August | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open sections of Pre-K and full day kindergarten in schools with the most poverty. (To be determined by the committee, suggested that all schools with 60-70% free and reduced lunch participation and above are included. • Embedded Professional Development on Parent Engagement Events • Conduct first Parent Engagement Events at each building in conjunction with Back to School Night |
| September | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Embedded Professional Development on topics such as specific interventions/remediation/strategies identified by teachers or the committee |
| October | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct Parent Engagement Events at each building in conjunction with Parent Teacher Conferences • Early Childhood Advisory Committee conducts a quarterly review of the progression of the project, making recommendations for modifications when needed |
| November | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Embedded Professional Development on topics such as specific interventions/remediation/strategies identified by teachers or the committee |
| December | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early Childhood Advisory Committee conducts a quarterly review of the progression of the project, making recommendations for modifications when needed |
| January | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Embedded Professional Development on using the retention checklist |
| February | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Begin using the checklist to determine which students may need retention in grades K, 1, and 2 • Embedded Professional Development on topics such as specific interventions/remediation/strategies identified by teachers or the committee |

(Figure continues...)

| | |
|--------------|--|
| March | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct Parent Engagement Events at each building in conjunction with Parent Teacher Conferences • Begin discussion of retention with parents |
| April | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early Childhood Advisory Committee conducts a quarterly review of the progression of the project, making recommendations for modifications when needed |
| May | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct Parent Engagement Events at each building |
| June | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide Summer Intervention for targeted Kindergarten, 1st, and 2nd grade students on specific deficits • Early Childhood Advisory Committee conducts a review of the progression of the project, making recommendations for the following year |
| July | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide Summer Intervention for targeted Kindergarten, 1st, and 2nd grade students on specific deficits |

Figure A4. Implementation Timeline.

Conclusion

The State of Oklahoma has mandated third grade retention for students who are unable to pass the state reading test. Stakeholders within the district studied agree that something needs to be done – maybe even retention. However, parents, teachers, and administrators all agreed that third grade is too late to make a difference for kids struggling with literacy. Considering their concerns and current research on effective practices for students with deficits, this policy recommendation was created to address specific areas that could impact those in most need. There are always going to be children who need additional assistance or extra time to learn a skill or to reach a

benchmark. It is educators' responsibility to be proactive and execute a plan in attempt to address the needs of all students.

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Appendix B: Demographics Form

| Study on Retention Participant Demographics | | |
|--|--|---|
| Date: | Time: | Place: |
| Your gender: | Your age: | Your role: |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Male | <input type="checkbox"/> 18 to 30 | <input type="checkbox"/> Parent |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Female | <input type="checkbox"/> 31 to 40 | <input type="checkbox"/> Teacher |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> 41 to 50 | <input type="checkbox"/> Administrator |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> 51 to 60 | |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> over 60 | |

Appendix C: Focus Group Questions for Teacher & Parent Groups

Participants will be asked to complete the demographics form (Appendix B) as they are entering the room.

Introduction –

I will introduce myself as the researcher and explain my current role in the district as an elementary principal.

Explanation of why are we here.

I will explain what a focus group is and that we are gathering information on their experiences and beliefs about retention through our discussions in the focus group to assist in providing information for this research study of the following question:

- What are parents', teachers' and administrators' perceptions of the third grade retention law implemented by the state of Oklahoma during the 2013-2014 school year?

Ground rules for the focus group will be presented in the introduction –

All voices and opinions important.

Take turns, don't all talk at once.

It's okay to disagree.

Parents will be informed that the session will be audio-taped

After the introduction, the following questions will be used to promote discussion.

1. What are some of your experiences with retention? Where these experiences positive or negative? Why?

2. Do you imagine that retention has long-term effects?
3. What are they?
4. Are there effects to behavior? (Probe for examples)
5. Are there social effects? (Probe – like what?)
6. Are there academic effects? (Probe for examples)

7. What do you perceive that the long-term effects are that will result from mandatory retention?
8. Are there other benefits that will result from mandatory retention?
9. How have the students you know that have been retained performed after retention?
10. Are you aware of any support provided by the state to implement the third grade retention law?
11. Do you have any concerns about mandatory retention? What are they?
12. Do you have any concerns about social promotion? What are they?
13. What do you see as the answer for helping struggling readers?
14. Does retention work? Why or Why not?

Appendix D: Administrator Interview Questions

Participants will be asked to complete the demographics form (Appendix B) before the interview begins.

Introduction –

I will introduce myself as the researcher and explain my current role in the district as an elementary principal.

Explanation of why are we here.

I will explain that we are gathering information on their experiences and beliefs about retention through our discussions in the interview to assist in providing information for this research study of the following question:

- What are parents', teachers' and administrators' perceptions of the third grade retention law implemented by the state of Oklahoma during the 2013-2014 school year?

Participants will be informed that the session will be audio-taped

After the introduction, the following questions will be used to promote discussion.

1. What is your experience with grade retention?
2. What are some positive aspects of retention?
3. What are some negative aspects of retention?
4. What do you think about when considering a child for retention?

5. How do you view students who have been retained who are currently enrolled in your class? How would you prepare for them differently than those who have not been retained? What types of instruction do you plan for these students?
6. How do you determine who you will retain? Probe- Are students retained because of age, attendance policy, suspension, or is it based solely on academic achievement?
7. In your experience, is a child's self-esteem hindered because of grade retention and do you consider a child's self-concept when recommending grade retention?
8. How many students were retained in your school last year?
9. How does a child's gender or race influence the decision to retain?
10. In your opinion, how is mandatory retention different than other retentions?
11. Do you agree with mandatory retention? If so, why? If not, why not?
12. What do you believe are the long-term effects of mandatory retention?
13. Are there benefits that will result from mandatory retention?
14. Do you see any perceived challenges that mandatory retention will cause for the school, parents, or children? If so can you elaborate?