

Equity for All Students: The New York City Promotional Gates Program

New York's decision to set firm standards for promotion and provide special programming for retained students has led to improved performance.

CHARLOTTE FRANK

The Promotional Gates Program, instituted in September, 1981, has attracted much attention and has been the focus of considerable discussion since its inception. This brief report will provide educational planners and administrators with an objective account of our experiences with student retention policies. It will explain why the Promotional Gates Program was implemented, present the results of the program's evaluation, and describe attempts to modify and improve the program in each of the three years of its existence.

Rationale

In June 1980, the New York City Board of Education promulgated a K-9 promotional policy for ensuring that all students acquire the basic skills of reading, writing, and mathematics. This represented a new dimension of commitment to New York City's public school students and their parents. The mandate of our public school system to meet the

Charlotte Frank is Executive Director, Division of Curriculum and Instruction, New York City Board of Education, Brooklyn, New York.

educational needs of all our children made the promotional policy essential. As part of this policy the school system initiated the Promotional Gates Program for students in grades four and seven who failed to meet promotional criteria and were being retained in grade.

The new policy and program were a response to what was perceived as an intolerable situation in the city school system. In 1978 only 43 percent of the elementary and junior high school students in New York City were reading on or above grade level. In 7th grade, 35 percent of the students were scoring more than two years below grade level in reading. Despite these alarming test scores, 93 percent of all students were being promoted from one grade to the next. This situation had fostered serious concern and widespread dissatisfaction in the school community.

It was against this backdrop that the Board of Education and the mayor gave the Schools Chancellor a mandate to improve educational services provided to all children. This new effort was based on the research of Ronald Edmonds, which identified five factors associated with school effectiveness. One of these factors was the identification of performance standards for students with an expectation that they will achieve. It was understood, however, that standards could not be imposed without a plan for addressing the needs of students who failed to meet them. Thus began a year-long effort, involving parents, professional groups, and others in the educational community, to define standards and develop plans for helping such students.

The promotional policy, a regulation of the Chancellor, approved by the Board of Education, conveyed the message throughout the school system that

teachers and principals were to affirm a commitment that all students must be able to meet minimal performance standards before moving on to the next grade. By 1983, this message had been translated into improved student performance. In five years, the percentage of students reading on or above grade level had increased from 43 to 54 percent. The percentage of students reading more than two years below grade level in the 7th grade had dropped from 35 percent to 13 percent. This includes test data for limited English proficient students who had been in an English language school system for at least one year.

Program Implementation

The Promotional Gates Program identified the most educationally needy students in the school system and made the education of those students the priority of the entire system, from the central offices to the local schools. This program was a clear statement that all children could learn and were expected to learn. Therefore, necessary funding and organizational support was provided to the city's 32 community school districts.

The plan was implemented by providing smaller classes, identifying exemplary curricula in New York City public schools and utilizing trained teachers for students who failed to meet the minimal performance standard at the two Gates checkpoints, grades four and seven. Specially designed six-week summer school programs were offered to all students in danger of being retained. The program included a central monitoring function to make sure that students who were retained were given the full complement of Gates services. Gates classes of no more than 15 students employed exemplary curricula found to be the

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most effective in use in the school system. Intensive staff development workshops, conducted by New York City classroom teachers or supervisors who had implemented these programs, were provided as an integral part of the Gates program and reflected the networking of success efforts. In each of the three years of the program, more than 1,000 teachers attended two-week summer training sessions as well as district and citywide training programs during the school year. Ongoing assessment provided the basis for all subsequent staff development sessions.

Implementation of the Gates program has involved continuous improvement. It was modified, for instance, in response to the findings of a formative evaluation. After the first year, the appeals procedures for students being retained in grade were changed to include a second reading test, a review of the data from a citywide mathematics test with a special problem-solving component, and statements from teachers. In addition, staff development programs became even more personalized. At the end of the second year, it was decided that multiple retention was placing an undue burden on the 1 percent of the original target population. Therefore, this extension of the Gates program was moved to the 5th and 8th grades to provide a student-teacher ratio of ten to one, as well as special health and guidance support services in a more appropriate educational setting for their age and maturity level.

The Impact of the Promotional Gates Program

The Gates program has proven to be an effective vehicle for improving teaching and learning. By the second year of the program, 73 percent of the students in the 7th grade—where change has historically been more difficult to

achieve—were all able to meet the reading promotional criteria. This is in contrast to 63 percent in the previous year. Reading achievement gains were up to three months greater than in the first year of the Gates program and two months greater than those achieved by a comparison group. Attendance also climbed from 75 to 81 percent. Further, data from the 1982–83 year indicated that 42 percent of the students who began the school year more than two years below the promotional criterion

were able to close the gap after one year in the program. For these students, the Gates program made a tremendous difference.

Students who had failed to meet the promotional criteria in 1982, after one year in the Gates program, were assigned to the Gates extension program. The number of students who failed to meet the promotional criteria after participating in the extension program represented only 1 percent of the original 4th and 7th grade population. The

ASCD Task Force Questions New York Promotion Policy

Members of an ASCD task force who visited New York City to analyze effects of the Promotional Gates policy observed that school officials there had been "caught in the crosscurrents of political, educational, and fiscal pressures and had to respond quickly." Nevertheless, the task force, which was chaired by Joseph Halliwell of St. John's University, Jamaica, New York, concluded that the policy had been "less well designed and executed than it might have been."

Pointing to research findings that effects of grade retention are inconclusive at best (see Johnson, this issue, p. 66) and that class size has less impact on achievement than other factors under the control of schools (see Walberg, this issue, p. 19), the task force estimated that in the first year of the program New York City spent \$58.7 million that could have been used for other educational purposes.

Among the task force's recommendations:

- Retention programs in general are not a promising tool for addressing the problems of students who lag behind their peers.
- Policy development at the local district level should include thorough review of relevant research.
- A single criterion (test scores) should not be used to make retention/promotion decisions.
- Any policy leading to a concentration of student and teacher time on basic skills needs to take account of the long-term impact on students' future learning. Remedial programs that offer a balanced curriculum are probably more beneficial.

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Gates program has not caused large numbers of students to become perpetual 4th and 7th graders.

Students who had been promoted in 1982 after one year in the Gates program were able to maintain their progress after promotion. In 1981, before they participated in Gates, none of these students had been able to meet promotional criteria. In 1983, a year after promotion from Gates, 55 percent of these students were able to meet the promotional criteria for their grade (five, six, eight, or nine).

An examination of the data has identified classroom practices that lead to success in the Gates program. Success is associated not with any single factor, but with all the factors identified by the effective schools research of Ronald Edmonds, which are stressed in the Gates training sessions: principals who provide instructional leadership; teachers who emphasize the basics with effective teaching strategies and ongoing assessment activities; and teachers and principals with high expectations who create a welcoming and supportive climate in the school and classroom.

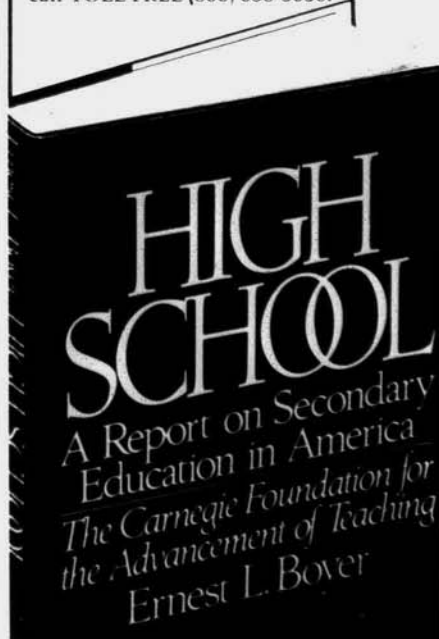
The Gates program has presented a tremendous challenge to the school system—a challenge that has, in most ways, been met. Yet planners and decision makers continue to seek ways to improve the performance of students in the Gates program, which is perceived as an agent for change and improvement. The school system is committed to ongoing assessment of the Promotional Gates Program and to making the modifications necessary to ensure its continued success. In the words of Chancellor Anthony Alvarado, "We must create a balance between social promotion and the reality of meeting standards. The Gates program ensures a standardized approach to high quality." □

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