

SUPERINTENDENT'S ADVISORY: STUDENT RETENTION (SA-7)

February 4, 2020

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Introduction

This **Superintendent's Advisory on Student Retention** provides guidance regarding the district's student retention policy and related procedures. The document outlines school-level responsibilities and procedures for identifying potential students who may be retained, communicating with families, and determining whether or not a particular student should be retained in their grade level.

District Policy on Student Retention

The Salem School Committee Policy on Promotion/Retention/Level Change (See SC Policy #5206) declares that the district's educational program acknowledges that while in general students' progress from grade to grade each year, there are times, "when a student may benefit from taking more time in the

same grade.” The policy specifies that the decision to retain a student is based on a combination of factors, including academic performance, developmental growth, and the determination of a school team consisting of the classroom teacher, an instructional specialist, and the school principal. The policy requires that parents be notified about the possibility of a grade-level retention and be “engaged in a collaborative dialogue concerning advantages and disadvantages of retention.” School principals have the final decision on whether or not to retain a student, after consultation with the parents and instructional support team. A copy of the districts retention policy can be found in Appendix A.

Student Retention: What the Research Says

The preponderance of evidence on this topic shows that the practice of retaining students, in the vast majority of cases, does not usually lead to improved outcomes. In fact, most students never “catch up” when they are retained. Although some retained students do better at first, these children often fall behind again in later grades. Further, students who are retained tend to get into trouble, dislike school, and experience lower self-esteem than children who are promoted. Students who were retained are more than 5 times more likely to drop out of school – this probability is even higher for students who are retained more than once. The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) calls retention ineffective, citing “no evidence of a positive effect on either long-term school achievement or adjustment” and asserts that it is too liberally misapplied as an intervention among poor urban minorities and students with behavior or maturity problems (“Student Grade Retention and Social Promotion,” p. 2. National Association of School Psychologists, <https://apps.nasponline.org/search-results.aspx?q=Student+Grade+Retention>).

Indeed, “dozens of studies have found that retaining students actually contributes to greater academic failure, higher levels of dropping out and greater behavioral difficulties rather than leading to success in school. Students who are held back actually do worse in the long run than comparable students who are promoted, in part perhaps because they do not receive better or more appropriate teaching when they are retained, and in part because they give up on themselves as learners” (Darling-Hammond, School Superintendent’s Association, p. 1).

While there are some individual studies showing some benefit to grade-level retention by certain of children in the early grades, especially in the one or two years following those grades, “cumulative research on the effects of retention shows that the negative effects usually outweigh the positive effects” (Robertson, When Retention is Recommended, What Should Parents Do, Child and Adolescent Development, p. 1). These studies also fail to take the longer-term effects of retention on student learning into account.

Policies and educational reform agendas that rely on grade-level retention as the solution for poor academic performance are based on the premise that the problem lies within the student rather than with how schools are organized to meet and serve students’ educational needs. If a student is retained only to receive or repeat the same instructional approach or experience that did not work in the first place, there is little likelihood of success.

At the same time, social promotion—the practice of moving students through the system without ensuring they acquire the skills they need—is not the answer, in all cases, either. Instead, schools should do more to realign its structures, provide targeted intervention and supports, offer summer and vacation learning academies, and continue building teacher capacity for differentiated learning as alternatives to this binary dilemma. Effective implementation of these type of strategies within the school year may not only prevent the need for student retention but lead to greater success for the student in the long-run. Given this research, grade-level retention of a student should only be

considered as a last resort and after careful consideration and implementation of a retention intervention plan.

Preventing the Need for Retention

Schools should be proactive in developing intervention and support strategies that help prevent the need to retain students in a grade level. Such strategies include:

- Assessing, diagnosing, and deeply understanding the specific areas in which individual students are behind
- Addressing barriers to student attendance
- Creating opportunities for targeted intervention during the school day
- Implementing expanded learning opportunities such as after school supports, Saturday school, acceleration academies during school vacations, and/or summer learning opportunities
- Individualized instruction and/or tutoring
- Support for families to provide additional learning opportunities at home
- Counseling support for students and/or families
- Creating new opportunities for personalized learning including ways for students to develop positive relationships with teachers who will then better understand how their students learn best
- Frequent progress monitoring and evaluation of interventions

The Decision to Retain a Child

Despite efforts to apply intervention strategies, school leaders, together with teachers and parents, may, in the end, determine that certain students would benefit from being retained in their grade level for an additional year. According to district policy, school principals have the authority to make this determination after following the process that is aligned to the policy and outlined below. In all cases, the decision to retain a child should only be used as a last resort and should never occur more than once in a child's educational career.

The National Association of School Psychologists claim that retention is not as likely to be harmful when the student:

- Lacks serious deficits in the year prior to retention
- Has positive self-esteem and good social skills
- Shows signs of difficulty in school due to lack of opportunity for instruction rather than lack of ability
- Does not have serious social, emotional, or behavioral deficits (Robertson, p.2).

According to the Salem School Committee policy on retention, principals should consider a combination of student performance, developmental growth, and input from educators through the school's Student Support Team process when making retention decisions.

In the rare circumstances when a principal together with a child's teachers and parents believe that retention is the best option, it is critical to ensure that the child has a significantly different instructional experience than what they had in the previous year. If a student is retained, then a repetition of the previous year should be avoided at all costs. Instruction for the retained student

should be carefully planned in ways that will offer a new approach that is tailored to meet the student's individual needs with a strong set of supports to ensure success.

Procedures to Retain a Student in a Grade Level

The procedures outlined below should be followed whenever a Salem Public Schools student has been identified as one who may be retained in their grade for another year.

1. At Risk for Retention -- Initial Teacher Recommendation (December-January)

Before a student retention is pursued, teachers (or other educators) should prepare documentation that makes the case for why retention is the recommended option. A written summary of the primary challenges a student has faced during the current year along with the steps already taken to address these challenges should be included. This documentation should be forwarded to the school principal.

- **Initial At-Risk for Retention Recommendation Form (Appendix B)**

Teachers may use this form to document the challenges and rationale for recommending a student for potential retention in the following year. Teachers should include a summary of the primary challenges as well as how they have thus far been addressed. The completed form should be sent to the principal.

2. Principal Review of Initial Teacher Recommendation (December-January)

Principals, after receiving and reviewing the initial recommendation form, should do the following:

- a. **Meet with the teacher to discuss the situation.** Taking time to assess whether or not an adequate level of current-year solutions such as adjustments to the instructional approach, targeted interventions, etc. have been applied is a critical next step. Doing classroom observations focused on the student is recommended.
- b. **Assess whether or not the recommendation to potentially pursue a retention should go forward.** Based on a combination of factors, including classroom observations, documentation, and other information, the principal should determine whether or not the teacher's recommendation has merit. If so, the below steps should be followed. If the recommendation should not go forward, principals should

11 Steps to Retain a Student

1. Initial teacher recommendation (December-January)
2. Principal review of recommendation (Dec-Jan)
3. Initial notification to the parent or guardian (end of January)
4. Parent/teacher conference (early Feb)
5. Implementation and documentation of current year strategies (Feb-June)
6. Current year progress monitoring of intervention plan (ongoing)
7. Instructional team review and recommendation (March-April)
8. Principal review and notice of final retention recommendation (May-June)
9. Parent meeting with principal (June)
10. Student retention action plan (June)
11. Student retention notification to district (by June 30)

work with the teacher to ensure that the student receives the support needed to successfully progress in the current grade in order to be promoted the following year.

3. At Risk for Retention - Initial Notification to the Parent/Guardian (end of January)

If the principal approves, the teacher should send an initial notification to the parents/guardians along with an invitation to a parent/teacher conference. The written notice should summarize the challenges faced by the student and state that their child may be at risk for grade-level retention. The notice should also include an invitation to a parent/teacher conference to discuss the matter and potential strategies that can be implemented during the current school year. A sample notification letter is included in Appendix C.

4. At Risk for Retention - Parent/Teacher Conference (early February)

A parent/teacher conference should be held to discuss the concerns and outline next steps that include implementation of instructional strategies that may improve the situation during the current school year. Parents should be informed of the school's process for making a final determination on student retention at this time, as well as any opportunities they have, as parents, to provide their perspectives on the matter. Finally, the mutual goal of successfully addressing the challenge within the current school year should be shared. The emphasis should be placed on preventing grade-level retention by working together as a team, within the school, and with the parents/guardians to increase the child's success. Teachers should share their action plan for attempting to do this within the remaining time of the school year with the hope that the need for retention could be avoided. Documentation of these steps for the teacher and for the parent is important.

- **At Risk for Retention Conference Acknowledgement and Current Year Intervention Plan**
During the initial parent/teacher conference, parents should be asked to sign the form acknowledging the discussion related to the potential for their child to be retained. An outline of the agreed to next steps in terms of what strategies will be implemented in the classroom during the current school year should also be included on the form. A copy of a sample acknowledgement form can be found in Appendix D.

5. Implementation & Documentation of Current Year Strategies (February – June)

As teachers within the school work to implement the instructional strategies within their action plan, documentation of their success and/or challenges should be completed. The documentation should include how the student responded to the instructional strategies used as well as what has worked or not worked. worked well and did not work well, and why the teacher recommends retention. Should the recommendation to continue with a possible student retention continue, this updated documentation should be sent to the principal and IST.

6. Current Year Progress Monitoring of Intervention Plan (Ongoing)

Throughout the remainder of the year, principals should continuously monitor the progress of the instructional action plans to determine the extent to which key elements are being implemented as well as they success they may or may not be having.

7. Instructional Team Review and Recommendation (March-April)

Before making a final decision regarding student retention, principals may want to engage members of their Instructional Leadership Team (or Student Support Team) in the process. To do so, IST/SST

members should review the documentation regarding the case, hold conversations with the teacher, and conduct observations in the classroom. Once these steps are completed, the team can be asked to meet and share their recommendation regarding student retention.

8. Principal Review and Notice of Final Retention Recommendation (May-June)

In Salem, principals have the authority to make the final decision on student retention. In doing so, they should consider all sources of information available including the teacher's recommendation, documentation regarding the action plan implementation, their own observations of the classroom, parent feedback, and the recommendation of the instructional team. Once the decision is made, a letter to the parents must be sent informing them of the final decision as well as the basis for the decision. A Notice of Final Recommendation that summarizes the principal's final recommendation on the matter (whether to retain the student or not) should be sent to the parents/guardians. This notice should also include an invitation to meet with the principal to discuss the matter. A sample Notice of Final Recommendation is included in Appendix E below.

9. Parent Meeting with Principal (June)

Parents/guardians should be given the opportunity to meet with the principal to discuss the principal's final recommendation. If the principal's decision was to promote the student in the following year, the rationale for that decision should be shared and parents/guardians should be asked to acknowledge receipt of this information and indicate their level of agreement with the decision. Similarly, if the decision was to retain the student, the rationale should be shared and parents or guardians should both acknowledge receipt of the information and indicate their level of agreement with it. From there, the conversation should then focus on outlining a plan to ensure the child's success in the coming year. A copy of the Parent Acknowledgement Form is included in Appendix F.

10. Student Retention Action Plan (June)

To ensure that the student has the best chance of success, the teacher, together with colleagues and the principal should outline an action plan that details the learning gaps that need to be addressed as well as the instructional approaches that will most likely lead to success. Given the strong research on this subject, great care should be taken to ensure that the repeated year will not simply involve a repeat of the same curriculum, instructional approach, or teacher. A sample Student Retention Action Plan can be found in Appendix F.

11. Student Retention Notification to District (by June 30)

Once a final decision regarding student retention is made, it is critical to ensure that key departments within the district are notified of these students. The Parent Information Center (PIC) needs the information to be able to effectively manage student assignments, including knowledge of the number of spaces available at each grade level, each year. The IT team needs the information to be able to effectively account for these students within the Aspen SIS system for state reporting as well as the annual "rollover" that takes place during the summer. To notify the district of these students, please forward a list of all students being retained in your building to Jill Conrad at jconrad@salemk12.org before the end of the school year.

Appendix A: Student Retention Policy

STUDENTS AND INSTRUCTION	5000
INSTRUCTIONAL PROGRAM	5200
PROMOTION/RETENTION/LEVEL CHANGE	5206

It is the policy of the Salem School Committee that in general, students shall be placed at the grade level to which they are best adjusted academically, socially, and emotionally. The educational program shall provide for the continuous progress from grade to grade, with students generally spending one year in each grade. There are times, however, when a student may benefit from taking more time in the same grade.

Parents will be notified about the possibility of retention through the parent/teacher conference. Before any final recommendation is made, parents will be engaged in a collaborative dialogue concerning advantages and disadvantages of the retention through the Student Support Team process. After this consultation, the Principal will make the final decision.

The decision to retain is based on a combination of the student's daily performance, assessment data, and developmental growth as determined by the school team which will include at minimum the classroom teacher, instructional specialists (e.g. School Adjustment Counselor, Special Education Teacher, ESL Teacher, etc.), and the principal.

For any student who is retained, careful consideration will be given to what will change in the upcoming school year and what supports will be in place to address and monitor particular areas of concern.

Approved: January 21, 2020

Appendix B: Initial Retention Recommendation Form

Date:	Student Name:
Current Grade Level:	Teacher Name:
Primary Learning Challenges:	
Steps Taken to Address Challenges:	
Rationale for Recommending Potential Retention:	
Teacher Signature	

Appendix C: At Risk for Retention - Initial Notification to the Parent/Guardian

Date

Re: NAME OF STUDENT

Dear NAME OF PARENT/GUARDIAN,

I am writing to share my concerns regarding your child's ability to meet the standards for the current grade level by the end of this school year. Unless substantial progress is made between now and the end of the school year, your child may be at risk for repeating the grade next year (grade-level retention).

The primary challenges have involved.... [INSERT A SUMMARY OF THE CHALLENGES]

To address these challenges I have... [INSERT A SUMMARY OF STRATEGIES EMPLOYED TO ADDRESS CHALLENGES]

Despite these efforts, an adequate level of improvement has not yet been reached.

I would like to discuss these concerns with you, consider your views, and determine whether or not your child should be recommended for potential grade-level retention next year. For the remainder of the year, our emphasis will be placed on preventing a grade retention by working together as a team to help [INSERT STUDENT NAME] be successful.

I am available to meet with you during the following times:

[INSERT DATE, TIMES, AND LOCATION FOR THE MEETING]

Please let me know which of these times work for you. You can reach me at [INSERT CONTACT EMAIL AND PHONE NUMBER]. I look forward to discussing this matter with you further.

Sincerely,

[TEACHER'S NAME]

Cc: Principal
Student's cumulative file

Appendix D: At Risk for Retention Conference Acknowledgement and Current Year Intervention Plan

Date:	Student Name:
Current Grade Level:	Teacher Name:
Summary of Teacher Initial Recommendation:	
Summary of Action Plan for Current School Year:	
<p>Parent/Guardian Acknowledgement:</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Initial teacher recommendation was discussed with parent/guardian</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Action plan for current school year was reviewed with parent/guardian</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> The process for finalizing a recommendation for retention was discussed with parent/guardian</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Opportunities for parent/guardian to ask questions, provide feedback and/or voice concerns were identified and shared with parent/guardian</p>	
<p>Parent/Guardian Signature:</p> <p>Teacher Signature:</p>	

Appendix E: Notice of Final Retention Recommendation

Date

Re: NAME OF STUDENT

Dear NAME OF PARENT/GUARDIAN,

This year, your child was referred to me by the teacher as a student who is At Risk of Retention. After considerable professional deliberation including implementation of the teacher's action plan, classroom observations, and conversations with my instructional team, I have determined that retaining your child in the current grade level is the best course of action for next year.

I would like to discuss this decision with you and have an opportunity to hear your views and to review the plans for next year with you. Below are some times when I am available to meet:

[INSERT DATE, TIMES, AND LOCATION FOR THE MEETING]

Please let me know which of these times work for you. You can reach me at [INSERT CONTACT EMAIL AND PHONE NUMBER]. I look forward to discussing this matter with you further.

Sincerely,

[PRINCIPAL'S NAME]

Cc: Teacher's name
Student's cumulative file

Appendix F: Student Retention Action Plan

INDIVIDUAL RETENTION PLAN

To be prepared by the current teacher to assist the teacher during the year of retention.

Student: _____ Teacher: _____

SID #: _____ Grade: _____ Primary Language: _____

Information: # of Schools attended since Kindergarten _____ # of Days absent this year _____

District Chapter/Unit Test Scores (BCSD data collection system reports):

Reading	Math	Writing	Fluency
Unit:	Unit:	Prompt #:	Date:

BCST Test Scores (BCSD data collection system reports, if applicable):

Benchmark	Reading	Math
Fall		
Winter		
Spring		

Student Strengths
1.
2.
3.

Modifications Made:

Mark the items as follows: **S** = Successful **M** = Moderately Successful **I** = Ineffective **N/A** = Not Attempted

<input type="checkbox"/>	Shorten Assignments	<input type="checkbox"/>	Remove Privileges	<input type="checkbox"/>	Modify Assignments	<input type="checkbox"/>	1:1 w/Adult
<input type="checkbox"/>	Vary style of instruction	<input type="checkbox"/>	Sit near teacher	<input type="checkbox"/>	Work w/ Buddy	<input type="checkbox"/>	After School Tutor
<input type="checkbox"/>	Chart Progress	<input type="checkbox"/>	Ignore behavior	<input type="checkbox"/>	Use of Manipulatives	<input type="checkbox"/>	Cross-Age Tutor
<input type="checkbox"/>	Cooperative Groups	<input type="checkbox"/>	Detention	<input type="checkbox"/>	Behavior Contract	<input type="checkbox"/>	Special Study Area
<input type="checkbox"/>	Extra Practice	<input type="checkbox"/>	Token System	<input type="checkbox"/>	Immediate Praise	<input type="checkbox"/>	List Assignments
<input type="checkbox"/>	Model correct behavior	<input type="checkbox"/>	Preferential Seating	<input type="checkbox"/>	Home/School Notes	<input type="checkbox"/>	Class Peer Tutoring
<input type="checkbox"/>	More Time	<input type="checkbox"/>	Other:	<input type="checkbox"/>		<input type="checkbox"/>	

Recommended Instructional Strategies for Year of Retention: _____

Reading: _____

Writing: _____

Math: _____

Homework: _____

Other: _____

Please attach appropriate and relevant BCSD data collection system reports.

Student Services 2014-2015