

Evaluation & Research Department

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Wake County Public School System Promotion and Retention in Grades K-12, 2007-08

Within the Wake County Public School System (WCPSS), nearly all (96%) students in grades K-12 were promoted, with 4% retained at the end of the 2007-08 school year. The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction requires that students be identified by schools as promoted, graduated, or retained at the end of each school year (students promoted during the summer are not reflected in these data). Graduates are considered promoted. Although the percentage of students retained is low, it represents 5,699 students who will require added instruction. For elementary and middle school students, retention requires a full year of additional instruction at an annual cost of \$7,821 per student; for high school students it requires repeating courses at a somewhat lower cost.

As shown in Table 1, promotion rates varied by grade, ranging from 81% at grade 9 to 99.5% at grade 5. There were distinct differences among grade levels and grade spans in retention rates for 2007-08.

- The high school level had the highest retention rates. In 2006-07, there was a notable increase in the percentage of students retained in grade 9; this increase was maintained in 2007-08 (Baenen, 2008).
- By grade, results were similar to 2006-07; students in grade 9 had the highest rate of retention (19%), followed by grade 10 (11%) and grade 11 (7%). All three percentages were approximately the same as in 2006-07. Nearly 20% of students (or 1 in 5) in grade 9 were retained and not promoted to 10th grade this past spring.
- The retention rate at the middle school level was especially low, with only about 1% of middle school students retained at each grade.
- At the elementary level, kindergarten and grade 1 continued to have the highest rate of retention (3% and 4%, respectively); however, there has been a downward trend in the percentage of students retained at these grade levels from 2005-06 to 2007-08. Fewer than 1% of students in grades 4 and 5 were retained.

For each of the past three years more than 90% of students in all No Child Left Behind subgroups (ethnicity, free or reduced-price lunch [FRL], limited English proficient [LEP] students, and students with disabilities [SWD]) in WCPSS were promoted, but retention rates varied by subgroup. Although the overall retention rate in WCPSS was 4.3%, the percentage of students in each subgroup retained varied from 2% to more than 9% in 2007-08.

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Table 1
Promotion/Retention, 2005-06, 2006-07, and 2007-08 Grades K-12

Grade	School Year	Number Promoted	Percent Promoted	Number Retained	Percent Retained	Total
KI	2005-06	10,206	95.2%	513	4.8%	10,719
	2006-07	10,838	95.8%	480	4.2%	11,318
	2007-08	11,117	96.7%	376	3.3%	11,493
1	2005-06	9,881	95.2%	495	4.8%	10,376
	2006-07	10,662	95.3%	527	4.7%	11,189
	2007-08	11,266	96.0%	474	4.0%	11,740
2	2005-06	9,780	97.2%	278	2.8%	10,058
	2006-07	10,302	97.4%	278	2.6%	10,580
	2007-08	11,009	97.7%	255	2.3%	11,264
3	2005-06	9,636	98.6%	134	1.4%	9,770
	2006-07	10,196	98.3%	175	1.7%	10,371
	2007-08	10,651	98.8%	134	1.2%	10,785
4	2005-06	9,215	99.1%	80	0.9%	9,295
	2006-07	10,094	99.2%	82	0.8%	10,176
	2007-08	10,575	99.5%	57	0.5%	10,632
5	2005-06	9,286	99.5%	49	0.5%	9,335
	2006-07	9,656	99.5%	52	0.5%	9,708
	2007-08	10,415	99.5%	51	0.5%	10,466
6	2005-06	9,223	98.7%	125	1.3%	9,348
	2006-07	9,620	99.1%	84	0.9%	9,704
	2007-08	9,902	98.9%	106	1.1%	10,008
7	2005-06	9,303	98.7%	127	1.4%	9,430
	2006-07	9,578	98.9%	106	1.1%	9,684
	2007-08	9,859	98.8%	120	1.2%	9,979
8	2005-06	9,093	98.5%	135	1.5%	9,228
	2006-07	9,576	98.8%	119	1.2%	9,695
	2007-08	9,840	98.6%	138	1.4%	9,978
9	2005-06	8,473	85.1%	1,489	15.0%	9,962
	2006-07	8,324	80.5%	2,013	19.5%	10,337
	2007-08	8,924	81.0%	2,091	19.0%	11,015
10	2005-06	7,733	91.1%	756	8.9%	8,489
	2006-07	8,064	89.3%	968	10.7%	9,032
	2007-08	8,110	89.5%	953	10.5%	9,063
11	2005-06	7,240	94.7%	402	5.3%	7,642
	2006-07	7,554	92.7%	598	7.3%	8,152
	2007-08	7,908	93.3%	564	6.7%	8,472
12	2005-06	6,790	95.9%	293	4.1%	7,083
	2006-07	7,248	95.1%	374	4.9%	7,622
	2007-08	7,656	95.3%	380	4.7%	8,036
Total	2005-06	115,859	96.0%	4,876	4.0%	120,735
	2006-07	121,712	95.4%	5,856	4.6%	127,568
	2007-08	127,232	95.7%	5,699	4.3%	132,931

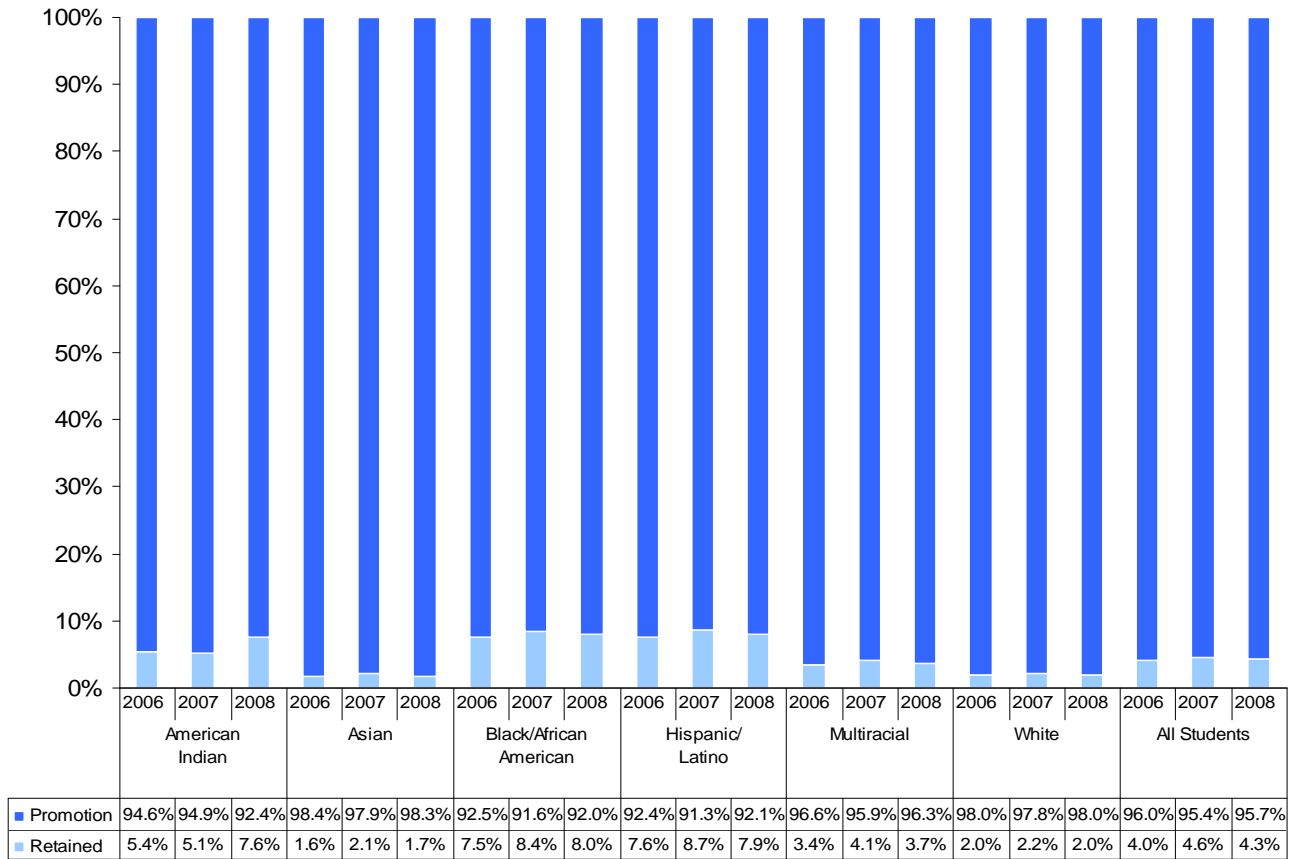
Data Source: WCPSS Student Information Systems data file of K-12 students flagged as promoted, graduated, or retained as of the end of the 2005-06, 2006-07, and 2007-08 school years.

ETHNIC GROUPS

As shown in Figure 1, all subgroups except American Indian students had slightly lower retention rates in 2007-08 than in 2006-07. Overall, all ethnic groups had a high rate of promotion (92% to 98%) in 2007-08; however, there were some notable differences.

- Among racial groups, Black/African American and Hispanic/Latino students had the highest rates of retention.
- Although Black/African American and Hispanic/Latino students had a promotion rate of approximately 92%, the 8% retention rate for these student groups was nearly double the rate for all students and four times the rate for White and Asian students.
- Nearly all (98%) Asian and White students were promoted; thus, approximately 2% were retained (half the overall retention rate of 4%, or 5,699 students).

Figure 1
Percentage of Students Promoted/Retained for Each Ethnic Group
2005-06, 2006-07, and 2007-08, Grades K-12



2006 N= 120,014
 2007 N= 127,555
 2008 N= 132,931

Note: In 2006 & 2007, the number of student in this figure is lower than the total number due to missing data.
 Data Source: WCPSS Student Information Systems data file of K-12 students flagged as promoted, graduated, or retained as of the end of the 2005-06, 2006-07, and 2007-08 school years.

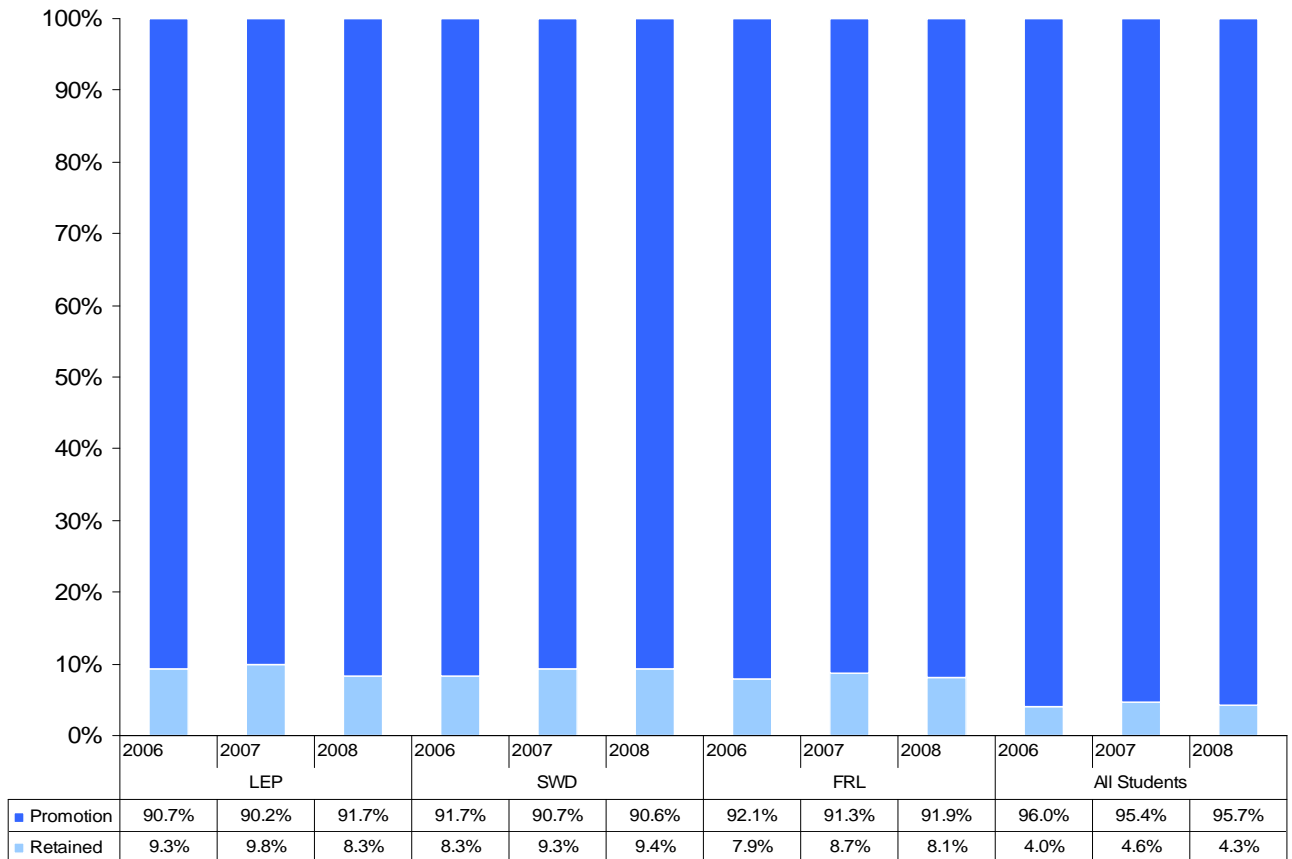
Interpretation Example: The percentage of Black/African American students retained decreased from 8.4% in 2007 to 8.0% in 2008.

SUBGROUPS BY ACADEMIC RISK FACTOR

Similar to prior years, in 2007-08 the promotion rate for FRL, SWD, and LEP students was high (>90%); however, students within these subgroups had retention rates nearly double the overall WCPSS retention rate of 4% (see Figure 2).

- SWD students had the highest rate of retention (9%).
- Although SWD students had a promotion rate of approximately 91%; the 9% retention rate for these students was more than double the rate for all students.
- LEP and FRL students also had higher retention rates (about 8%) than other subgroups.
- Among FRL and LEP students, about 8% were retained (nearly double that of the overall retention rate of 4%, or 5,699 students).

Figure 2
Promotion/Retention Status for FRL, SWD, and LEP Students
2005-06, 2006-07, and 2007-08, Grades K-12



2006 N= 120,014

2007 N= 127,555

2008 N= 132,931

- Note:
1. LEP, SWD, and FRL percentages reflect students within these groups and not the percentage of all students.
 2. In 2006 & 2007, the number of student in this figure is lower than the total number due to missing data.

Data Source: WCPSS Student Information Systems data file of K-12 students flagged as promoted, graduated, or retained as of the end of the 2005-06, 2006-07, and 2007-08 school years.

Interpretation Example: The percentage of LEP students retained decreased from 9.8% in 2007 to 8.3% in 2008.

DISCUSSION

Adopted in 2000, the WCPSS Board of Education's Promotion and Intervention policy requires students to be proficient on grade-level competencies in English/language arts and mathematics in order to be promoted. Students can demonstrate this proficiency on state tests or based on evidence presented to review committees at each school. This policy recognizes the statutory authority of the principal to make all final promotion decisions. The decision can be to promote a student with intervention or retain them with intervention. Either way, the expectation is that students' instructional experiences will be enhanced the following year. In order to facilitate this enhancement a personalized education plan is prepared.

The percentage of students actually retained is considerably lower than the percentage of students who do not show proficiency on state tests.

- At grades 3-8, two-thirds (66%) of students were proficient on the reading EOG and three-fourths (76%) were proficient on the mathematics EOG, the vast majority (>98%) of students in grades 3-8 were promoted. It should be noted that reading scores were not available until October 2008, due to the introduction of new reading exams; thus, they were not used in retention decisions at the end of 2007-08. The percentage of students proficient in reading fell following the introduction of the new and more difficult reading exams in 2007-08, for additional information on EOG results see the End-of-Grade Multiple-Choice Test Results, 2007-08 at <http://www.wcpss.net/evaluation-research/reports/index-date.html>.
- At the high school level, retention decisions are based on successful completion of required courses. Within the five required courses (Algebra, Biology, Civics and Economics, English I, and US History) the EOC score constitutes at least 25% of a student's final grade. Test scores within one standard error of measurement are considered proficient for purposes of student promotion decisions. Students who do not pass their EOC have the opportunity for retests and committee review of portfolio and other documentation of subject mastery. About three fourths of the students passed each EOC exam. Thus, even though retention rates were higher than at the elementary and middle school level, the percentage of students retained (5% to 19% depending on the grade) was still lower than the percentage not passing exams in the required courses. Additional information on the courses required for promotion can be found on the WCPSS Web site (http://www.wcpss.net/curriculum-instruction/docs_downloads/planning-guides).

National research has generally not found that retention leads to better outcomes for most students (Jimerson, 2001; Jimerson & Ferguson, 2007; Silbergliitt, Appleton, Burns, & Jimerson, 2006). In fact, students who are retained more than once have a very high chance of dropping out of school (Jimerson & Ferguson, 2007). While some students may benefit from an additional year of instruction, it is critical that such decisions are well thought out and that students have an enhanced experience in their retention year.

Students in grade 9 are retained at a rate more than four times greater than the overall retention rate. Nearly one in five high school students had to repeat one or more courses and therefore remained 9th graders. Students in grade 10 represent the group with the next highest retention rate--nearly half that of grade 9, but still more than double the overall retention rate. Thus, with the elevated retention rates at these grade levels special consideration should be given to how best to serve retained students or those at risk of retention.

In addition to identifying the best practices for serving these students, the cost of retention should be examined. Although the overall percentage of students retained is low, it represents 5,699 students who will require added instruction. In the general sense, retention is a program, a systematic effort to change educational outcomes for students. It is also an expensive proposition. In 2007-08, the average annual cost of educating a student was \$7,821 (of that amount, \$2,269 were local funds). At the elementary and middle school grades 1,711 students were retained, which means \$13,381,731 for WCPSS last year. At the high school level, students repeat courses, not a full year, so we can estimate the cost as about 25% of the annual cost of educating a student¹. In 2007-08, 3,988 students were retained in grade 9-12, which amounts to \$7,797,537 per year. Thus, overall, WCPSS spent about \$21,179,268 on retention this past year.

Retention is an area that deserves further study. Questions to be addressed might include:

- Of those students considered for retention, why do students tend to be promoted or retained?
- What can be done to reduce retention rates—especially at grades 9 and 10?
- What is the quality of the plans prepared for students who are promoted and retained?
- Are the plans well implemented during the retention year?
- How is student progress monitored?
- Of those considered for retention, how do those retained or promoted with intervention, fare in future years? Are those who are retained more or less successful over time than those who are promoted?
- Is the cost of retention generally worth the benefits? Can we predict when retention is most likely to be beneficial?
- Why is there a difference in the retention rate by ethnicity and student subgroup?

E&R hopes to be able to study some of these issues in the coming year.

REFERENCES

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¹ At the high school level, students may be retained based on a single course and promoted to the next grade when the course has been successfully completed. Thus, the cost of educating retained high school students is less than at the elementary and middle school levels.