

**TESTIMONY**  
**On The Department of Education's Proposed**  
**3<sup>rd</sup> Grade Retention Policy**

**Held before Panel on Education Policies**  
**New York City Department of Education**

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Ladies and Gentlemen:

I most strongly urge you to reject this false solution to social promotion. While social promotion is not a good policy and I oppose it, grade retention is more harmful to children. Over 100 years of research finds unequivocally that holding over students increases school dropout. The Harvard Civil Rights Project just reported that New York State now has the highest dropout rate in the nation. The mayor's 3<sup>rd</sup> grade promotion policy will further contribute to that nefarious statistic.

The remedy to social promotion is not social stigma and it is not humiliation, both of which will be visited on the eight year olds who are retained in third grade. If more panel members were school practitioners, I would not have to tell you this. The answer to social promotion is early intervention and flexible school organization.

Before you decide your position on the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade promotion policy, I ask you to answer the following questions:

1. What was the decision making process that led the mayor to his 3<sup>rd</sup> grade retention policy? What educators, psychometricians, test –makers, and researchers did he consult with? What studies did he review? How rigorous was the process he used to make this high stakes decision about the lives of thousands of eight year olds? Whatever tonight's vote, the validity and responsibility of the mayor's judgment and his process of decision making need to be questioned. Without transparency there is no accountability.
2. What evidence is there of the equity of this policy? Or are children being punished for the mistakes of adults? I ask you:
  - What compelling evidence has the Department of Education brought to bear that the 3rd grade retention policy will be an effective strategy to promote learning? It has been tried widely but where has it been effective? There has been a lot of rhetoric, but where is the evidence???

- Can the mayor assure us that all children affected by this policy have had eye examinations so that eye and perception problems are not being confused with reading problems?
- What evidence has the Department of Education provided to demonstrate that its own mandated literacy and math curriculum and instructional approaches are not responsible for the failing test scores of the children in question? How does the DOE know that the poor reading scores are not the result of teachers and principals' inexperience with the new instructional approach and curriculum? Or the inexperience or incompetence of literacy and math coaches, some of whom have never taught in a school? If you visit schools and examine student work, you know that these are serious questions.
- Have you, the panel members, examined the test manual to assure the validity and reliability of the test? How can you assure parents whose 8 year olds will be retained that the test actually measures what it claims to measure and that it measures it reliably?
- Now that we know that 31,000 third graders are in danger of being held over for failure in literacy and math, have the curriculum and instructional approaches producing this failure been changed? What interventions are being applied now? What interventions were applied in response to the Princeton Review data? What have the results of those interventions been? Or is it true, as one superintendent recently told me, that the Princeton Review data were so dirty as to be unusable. Where is the evidence, what is the track record of the DOE's interventions, that we should have any confidence in these new ones?

3. Lastly, in the late 1960's and early 1970's I taught English and reading in the south Bronx. The majority of the students in my school had been held over at least once, in some instances twice (so much for the myth of social promotion in NYC). They had at least 9 periods of literacy a week (45 minutes less than the current literacy initiative). They'd also had extra literacy in elementary school. Retention did not make them better readers. It wounded them, as children should not be wounded, and it undermined their self-confidence as no human being should experience. As a result, my colleagues and I not only had to help they become stronger readers, we had to help them heal themselves from policies that saw them as abstractions rather than human beings. Despite our best efforts, there were many losses. Let's not make this mistake again.