

TESTIMONY
On The Department of Education's Proposed
3rd Grade Retention Policy

Hearing held by
Manhattan Borough President C. Virginia Fields

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Bank Street College of Education

Dr. Julie Zuckerman

Good evening Borough President Fields. I teach at P.S. 3 in the West Village. After 9/11 you visited our school because we were hosting two of the schools that were evacuated from lower Manhattan. You asked us then to get in touch with you if our school needed help. We're a self-reliant place, and we pulled together to weather that crisis, but now we're facing a crisis that we can't handle ourselves and we're asking you for your help in bringing our concerns to the Mayor and his chancellor of the Department of Education.

The Chancellor's new third grade hold over policy is bad for children, bad for teachers, and a cynical move to raise the fourth grade test scores next year by keeping the most needy students out of the catchment.

Let's do the math. The Chancellor projects that 15,000 third graders will fail the third grade test. In a system of 1 million children that means that roughly 20%, or 1 in 5, children will be deemed unworthy of moving on to 4th grade. How can the man who leads this system suggest that 20% of the 8 year olds in this City are failures? I suggest that it is the system, not the children or their over-burdened teachers, that is the failure. Asking 8 year olds and their teachers to somehow jump over such inappropriate hurdles without adequate tools and supports, blames and penalizes the victims, instead of placing the responsibility on a system, and political leadership, that has failed them.

Leaving a child back is not an action to be taken lightly. The one thing researchers have agreed upon over the past 20 years is that another year in a grade does not help a child become a more successful student. Children who repeat a grade are 50% more likely to drop out of school. These are reasons why repeating a grade should be a choice used only after careful consideration for the best interest of the child. A test cannot establish the best interest of a child. That has to be a decision determined by the people who know the child and the school's resources the best: the teacher, the principal and the parent. A test can give these concerned adults vital information in making that decision, but a test cannot substitute for the judgment of professionals and parents.

A test **can** tell us how well a child takes **that** test. A test **cannot** tell us how a child performs in class. It **cannot** tell us how much progress a child has made. It **cannot** tell us

what helps a child learn. To take the people out of the equation who care about and know the child the best is wrong and foolish.

I have taught for 20 years in the NYC public schools, my two children attend NYC public schools, and I wrote my doctoral dissertation about a NYC public school. I can tell you that the pressures that have been brought to bear on third grade teachers this year have never been heavier. They have lost a month of instructional time in October when they had to implement the new and cumbersome ECLAS 2 assessment. Class size hovers close to 30 students. These teachers were given class sizes that make it extremely difficult to assist the children who need the most help. They were required to implement an assessment which took away critical teaching time. And, as the public is now hearing thanks to Betsy Gottbaum, when teachers and parents have attempted to have their children evaluated for special education services, they found that those evaluations are not going through.

So I wonder what sort of cruel hoax is being perpetrated upon the children of this City when the Mayor and Chancellor talk to us of raising standards, holding schools accountable, and leaving no child behind. One cannot ask a child to jump higher when the preparation has not been improved, and only the bar has been raised. The plan is not to leave NO child behind, the plan is to leave 15,000 children behind, and **that** is a failure of scandalous proportions.

We know what works: small class size, well-educated teachers, and highly-qualified support teachers for children with special learning needs. All of these things cost money. The Chancellor thinks it's acceptable to leave 15,000 children behind. That will cost the city an additional 10,000 per student to have that child repeat 3rd grade, 150 million dollars. Why not take a quarter of that amount and buy that child the kind of services that will support that child in fourth grade, and not risk the social and emotional fall out that being left behind could cause that child?

No one-size-fits-all policy can work for a system charged with educating 1 million individual children. Teachers and principals want the option to hold-over children when it is deemed beneficial for the child. I am not arguing for a policy of social promotion, nor can a policy as inflexible as the Chancellor's hold-over policy based on one single test score be acceptable.

Borough President Fields I'm asking you tonight to call upon the Mayor and the Chancellor to reverse this ill-advised policy. Thank you.

Dr. Julie Zuckerman
Parent