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## Hold Back This Plan

by Norm Fruchter

Tonight, the school system's Panel on Education Policy, PEP, will vote on whether to add an eighth-grade holdover policy to current retention programs in third, fifth, and seventh grades. A holdover policy forces students to repeat a grade if they don't achieve a defined benchmark such as a cut-off score on a standardized reading or math tests. A retention program — which includes summer school, tutoring, and assigned work at home for students — is designed to help students, who have been held back due to their poor academic performance, improve in school.

While the Department of Education indicates it is currently developing a improvement plan for the middle schools, it will not be ready in time for the vote.

Wouldn't it make more sense to postpone the PEP vote until the improvement plan has been developed and implemented? Otherwise, holding more students back without offering such a plan is punishing eighth-graders for the instructional failures of their middle school years.

In 2004, when Mayor Bloomberg and Chancellor Klein introduced their initial retention effort, a third-grade holdover policy, they dismissed a century of research demonstrating that keeping students back does not improve their performance.

In his 2008 State of the City speech, Mr. Bloomberg argued that students in the third-, fifth-, and seventh-grade programs "rose to the challenge." But the mayor cited no evidence for this claim; indeed, no independent evidence exists. The school system contracted a national evaluation firm in 2004 to assess the effectiveness of its retention efforts, but findings are yet to be issued. Therefore this regime's latest effort to punish students before reforming their schools is based on no independent evidence that its previous retention programs have been successful.

There is, however, some powerful evidence that the scale of poor performance in the city's middle schools is reaching crisis proportions. The recent report, *Our Children Can't Wait*, published by the NYC Coalition for Education Justice, demonstrates that New York City's eighth-grade reading and math scores on our national assessment program have not improved between 2003 and 2007. Worse, the racial achievement gap in reading among eighth-grade students has not closed during the Children First years; almost 70% of black and latino eighth-graders are not reading at the New York State standard. According to the Department's own research, more than 60% of these students are likely to drop out in high school.

Moreover, holding back poorly performing eighth-graders could have an unintended consequence; it could actually reduce the high school dropout rate by increasing the number of eighth-graders who never even enter high school. We don't know how many eighth-graders don't continue their education because

the Department of Education doesn't calculate a middle school dropout rate. But that rate may be considerable, and this new retention program may well increase it.

This regime did not create the middle school crisis, though. Across the country, middle schools have been urban school systems' most damaging stage of failure. New York City's middle schools have long denied hundreds of thousands of students an effective high school education, and a shot at college.

One example: CEJ's 2007 report, *New York City's Middle-Grade Schools: Platforms for Success or Pathways to Failure?* found that the city's poorly performing middle schools failed to offer critical gate-keeping courses in math and science. While a small number of middle schools in New York, with the support of the Office of Middle Grade Initiatives, are experimenting with offering Regents courses, thousands of middle school graduates continue to enter high school already behind in the academic coursework necessary for effective matriculation and graduation.

This new retention policy will not improve the skills of these poorly performing eighth-graders, or keep them from dropping out of high school. The chancellor estimates that some 18,000 eighth-graders currently are vulnerable to the proposed retention policy. Retaining and attempting to remediate those 18,000 students will not change pervasive and inadequate instructional practice in our system's middle schools. Another grade-level retention policy will not improve teacher and principal quality, or provide the range of personal supports that vulnerable middle school students need.

The scale of systemic reform that is necessary recently has been defined by the City Council's Middle School Task Force report, and by CEJ's Middle Grade Action Plan. Both reports advocate more time for learning, so that students get the rigorous courses and engaging and challenging activities they need. Both reports call for improving instructional quality, so that students get the experienced and qualified teachers and principals they need. Both reports call for more counseling, college advising, and academic interventions, so that students get the supports and advice they need.

If the Department of Education is indeed developing a plan to improve the city's middle schools, then why rush to implement a retention policy, especially one that is not backed up by research? The Department should postpone the PEP's vote on the eighth-grade retention program until the new reform plan has been introduced and implemented. Better yet, why not abandon eighth-grade retention and instead concentrate on reforming education in the city's middle schools?

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