

Apple Valley teachers seek student accountability

Apple Valley was once a sparsely populated ranching community that housed the museum of world-famous cowboy Roy Rogers and his wife, Dale Evans. Tourists came from far and near to see Trigger, the stuffed horse.

Today, Apple Valley is a burgeoning bedroom community with a diverse student pop-

ulation and 17 schools. While members of the Apple Valley Unified Teachers Association (AVUTA) haven't exactly declared "high noon" against the district's handling of social promotion, they have let it be known that it's high time to rethink the current policy of promoting failing students from grade to grade.

"Students who fail their classes in middle school are passed on to the next grade level," states a letter to the superintendent and school board from the association's representative council. "After three years of showing little effort in middle school, they continue to fail in high school. Usually, about the middle of their freshman year, many of these students realize they will not graduate if they do not pass their classes. It seems that this lesson should be taught much sooner to be more effective."

AVUTA members have asked to work

Continued on page 10



Unintended consequences

Social promotion teaches students not to try

Social promotion was banned in 1998 with great fanfare. Eight years later, things are pretty much like they were prior to the law's passage — all over the map.

While school boards are required to adopt a promotion/retention policy, it's up to each district to set its own criteria. In the absence of statewide guidelines, some districts focus on holding students back until they've mastered the required material, but others continue to move students to the next grade despite failing marks.

There are no consequences for schools that ignore the law, nor is there a timeline for schools to follow in enforcing the law.

In fact, about the only good thing to come out of the law is an emphasis on intervention. Over time some districts have determined that retention is not the only way to get students back on track and that it's better to intervene early rather than late.

The intervention component also forces a conversation between stakeholders, say educators. Parents now come together with support professionals — reading specialists, resource teachers and counselors, for example — and the teacher to address the specific needs of the child.

But intervention alone may not solve the problem, say educators. When district policy or practice prevents teachers from holding students back despite poor grades, students get the message that it's okay to fail, say teachers in Apple Valley [see story at left]. No amount of threatening will convince students

Continued on page 8

Part of the problem, says math teacher Rick Raponi at Vista Campana Middle School in Apple Valley, is that higher-level math has been pushed down to lower grades and not all students are developmentally ready, nor do they have the basics down pat.

**Stories by
Sherry Posnick-Goodwin
Photos by Scott Buschman**

Teachers are upset that middle school students cannot even be threatened with retention because they know it won't happen, says science and reading improvement teacher Diane Kennedy at Vista Campana Middle School. Students are being taught through experience that it's okay to fail.

Continued from page 7

to knuckle down if they don't want to, once they know the administration won't back up the teacher. Some middle schoolers consider it a badge of honor to fail and still get promoted to high school.

Teachers in Apple Valley have asked the district to work with them in finding solutions. "Right now we're in a 'lose-lose situation' because we're promoting students who are not ready to succeed at a higher level," says Stefanie VanderLaag, who teaches freshman English. It's the school that pays the price when it comes to its ranking on the Academic Performance Index.

Possible solutions teachers are suggesting range from reducing class size so teachers have more time to work with individual students, to denying students the privilege of eating lunch with their classmates as a way to give them a taste of what's to come.

Instead of seesawing between social promotion and retention, some educators suggest that the state ought to be developing a comprehensive system to address the fact that students learn at different rates and in different ways.



Controversy continues on both sides of the debate

While some educators and researchers consider retention to be "educational malpractice," others believe that simply promoting low-performing students because they are a year older does them no favor and causes them to fall further behind.

"Social promotion might be like moving a child to solid foods simply because he is at the 'proper age,' regardless of whether he has teeth yet," say Jay P. Greene and Marcus A. Winters in the *San Diego Union Tribune*. "Try as he might, the child will not be able to chew

the solid food well and will not thrive."

Retention is often a reaction to adult concern about a child who doesn't learn at the expected rate; while it might alleviate a parent's or teacher's anxiety, say some educators, it will probably not help the child in the long run.

Others believe retention gives students a chance to catch up and motivates them to try harder.

In areas like Live Oak in Sutter County, students are promoted to the next grade even when teachers and parents agree that the stu-

dent should be held back. In most cases, when a teacher recommends retention, the response is an automatic "no" from administrators, says Lynn Jackson, a third-grade teacher at Luther Elementary School.

Jackson, a member of the Live Oak Teachers Association, believes retention can be beneficial — especially in the early grades. "For a child who's already struggling in second or third grade, it won't get any easier."

But retaining a student only works if there is parental buy-in. "I've held back some children whose parents have said years later that it was the best thing for their child and made all the difference in the world. The only time I regretted it was when a parent did not have buy-in and presented it to the child in a negative way, as being more of a failure than a



Retention has its drawbacks

According to several studies, retained students display poorer social adjustment, more negative attitudes toward school, less frequent attention and more behavior problems. They're more likely to drop out of high school, and more likely to have problems with substance abuse, arrests and reckless behavior.

In a 1999 study of the long-term effects of grade retention, researcher Shane Jimerson concluded that retained students had more employment problems, were paid less per hour and were less likely to enroll in a postsecondary education program than low-achievers who are promoted.

The highest retention rates are found among poor, minority and inner-city youth. It's estimated that as many as 15 percent of U.S. students are held back each year, and 30 to 40 percent of those are retained at least once before ninth grade. Higher numbers of boys than girls are retained. The most common reason for retention is poor reading skills.

Researchers Shepard and Smith (1990) concluded that retention "does not help children to catch up. Retained children may appear to do better in the short term, but they are at much greater risk for future failure than their equally achieving, non-retained peers."

One study found that only the loss of a parent or going blind would be more traumatic for children.

Some studies deem early retention to be less traumatic and find no differences in adjustment between those students who were retained in early grades and those who were not. Others say it's traumatic at any age.

chance to catch up. That led to the child not feeling good about it."

Her husband, Jim Jackson, a teacher at Live Oak Middle School, agrees. "Retention doesn't have to be a negative thing. It depends how you look at it. You can call it a 'bonus year' and a 'gift of time' instead of flunking."



Lynn Jackson

The Jacksons speak from experience. Their twins were both retained in elementary school at their request — for different reasons — and both grew up to be successful. Their son is a firefighter and their daughter is

presently working on her master's degree.

A school can retain a student without parent or guardian approval as long as there is an appeal process for parents who disagree with a teacher's decision.



Jim Jackson

"If the parents don't want it, I don't do it," says Sue Abrams-Puz, a third-grade teacher at Cubberley School in Long Beach. "I feel parents should have the final word."

Since Long Beach has a policy that students cannot be held back more than once,

Continued on page 18

Apple Valley showdown

Continued from page 6

with the district to “create solutions” that will no longer allow students to pass from one year to the next without showing achievement. Administrators have agreed to the creation of a joint task force to study the problem and have scheduled the first meeting.

“I want to see some attention focused on this,” says Stefanie VanderLaag, who teaches freshman English at Apple Valley High School. “Right now, we are in a ‘lose-lose situation’ because we’re promoting students who are not ready to succeed at a higher level and the school is held accountable on the API [Academic Performance Index].”

“Social promotion is basically happening at the middle school,” says Pam Gallardo, a Spanish teacher at Apple Valley High. “No students were held back at the middle school. In the past, students had mandatory summer school where they would have to work on study skills, but they haven’t had that in a couple of years.” The reason is it couldn’t be enforced.

Even though summer school is no longer mandatory, Trenae Nelson, the district’s director of curriculum and instruction, says parents are told it is an “excellent opportunity” for their children to receive intervention. Since statistics on the number of students retained last year compared with previous years are not readily available, she could not say whether it has gone up or down. She did say, however, that most retention occurs in the early grades and that the criteria for retention have “multiple measures,” including test scores, report cards and the district’s own academic tests.

In accordance with the law, there are multiple intervention classes and programs for students at risk of failing. And the district has a high passage rate for the High School Exit Exam.

“Still, there’s a problem here,” says Gallardo. “Kids are less prepared than they used to be and less motivated. And teachers are very frustrated.”

“It seems to be more accepted now for kids not to do the work,” says Wes Bahney, a reading teacher at the high school. “And the kids know there will not be any consequences



Even summer school is no longer mandatory, says Spanish teacher Pam Gallardo.

for their action.”

What typically happens, says Bahney, is that seniors are told they won’t be graduating — even if they have passed the California High School Exit Exam — if they lack credits. “Parents call me up and try to see if I can change the grade. If that doesn’t work, they’ll call the administrators to see if they can get me to change the grade. I always tell the parents, ‘I called you several times during the year on this matter. Why didn’t you concern yourself with it then?’ They never have an answer, other than they are upset that I won’t change the grade.”

Some of his ninth-grade reading students agree that teens would work harder if there were consequences for sloughing off.

“Lots of teachers say that if you don’t do the work, you’ll be held back, but you won’t,” says Francisco Lechuga. He says he keeps his grades up for sports, but other students don’t have that incentive.

“It would be helpful for students if there were consequences, because otherwise it just gets harder in every grade to catch up,” says student Anthony Vargas. “It’s not going

to go away.”

At one time, students were held accountable for not doing the work, recalls Amy Bateman, an English teacher at Apple Valley High. In fact, her sister failed eighth-grade physical education and had to repeat an entire semester before she was allowed to come to high school. While Bateman thinks that may have been a bit harsh, “I think the district needs to be honest with students and hold them accountable. You can’t just tell kids that if they don’t pass, they won’t go to high school — and then they don’t pass and do go on to high school.”

There is practically no retention of middle school students unless it’s at the request of parents, confirms Diane Kennedy, a science and reading improvement teacher at Vista Campana Middle School.

“I haven’t seen an eighth-grader held back in seven years,” she says. “We can’t even threaten them because they know it’s not true.”

“Something major needs to happen with accountability,” she says. “Students are being taught through experience that it’s okay to fail. We need to change that. If we don’t, we’ll be left behind in the global economy.”

Rather than retaining middle school students en masse, Kennedy would prefer to see the middle school, like the high school, have credits in place, so that students would have something concrete to strive for in order to be promoted to high school.

“At least you would have to pass your core classes to go on,” she says. Maybe then students would figure out that if they’re in eighth grade and need five more credits, they’d better get themselves in gear.

Other suggestions made by AVUTA members include instituting:

- Class size reduction.
- Mandatory summer school for failing students.
- Mandatory parental involvement for students who are failing, habitually absent or causing classroom disruptions.
- Parenting classes for parents with “first-time” teens.
- Motivational talks for younger students presented by older students who came close to not graduating.
- A separate school site for seventh- and eighth-graders in danger of failing, staffed with motivating teachers.
- A stronger emphasis on teaching study skills and organizational skills.



■ Taking away the common lunch time for failing students, so they see what it's like to lose the privilege of socializing with friends.

Smaller class sizes could help students succeed, suggests Rick Raponi, an algebra and pre-algebra teacher at Vista Campana Middle School. At the beginning of the year, he had 40 students in most classes — 42 in one — but now his classes average 35 to 36 students.

"It's hard to work one-to-one with students with big classes," he says. "With 20-something kids in a class, you might have one or two behavior problems. With 40 kids, you might have five or six students with behavior problems, and that becomes a big problem."

Nearly 30 percent of Raponi's students presently are earning F's. As students make a

Apple Valley High School reading teacher Wes Bahney, shown here with Brandon Posey, thinks teens would work harder if there were consequences for sloughing off.

last-ditch effort to raise their grades at the end of the year, he expects the number to drop to 15 or 20 percent. But for some students, it won't be enough.

"I have eighth-graders who can barely add and subtract. I'm trying to teach them higher-level math and they don't have the basic foundation for addition, subtraction, multiplication or division. And fractions — oh my God." Part of the reason, he thinks, is that math has been pushed down to younger and younger students, and not all middle school students are developmentally ready for algebra.

Teaching middle school students who've been held back is not easy. He recalls one angry 16-year-old who "did a lot of passive-aggressive stuff."

"He said he wasn't going to do any work because, no matter what, he would be 'outta here' next year. And we can't keep 16-year-olds in eighth grade because they have a completely different physical structure than kids who are 12 and 13."

AVUTA members are pleased to see the district taking their concerns about social promotion seriously and look forward to exploring solutions.

"We have a good working relationship with our administration," says AVUTA President Ned Curtis. "We feel lucky to work in a district with a school board and an administration that listen. Hopefully, we can address this problem together."



Students who goof off know all the angles, says Kim Hassen in Long Beach (with Anthony Bergeron). Tenaya Middle School student body president Barton Perry (facing page) sees the value of at-risk resources.

Consequences are not obvious to many middle schoolers

Middle school students are extremely smart when it comes to figuring out the angles, says Kim Hassen, an eighth-grade English teacher at Cubberley School in Long Beach.

“When we had a multiple F policy, some of the kids figured out that the second semester counted and blew off the first semester,” says Hassen, a member of the Teachers Association of Long Beach. “Then they would squeak by in the second semester with a D or a D minus.”

Now, she says, the district is trying to get the jump on them. Students must pass “end-of-course” exams in order to be promoted.

Middle schoolers in Orange County have also figured out the system. Although nearly

half of the eighth-graders at one middle school are being “monitored” for possible retention, most will likely be promoted after summer school. “They know they’ll be promoted to eighth grade regardless of how many F’s they have. They have it all figured out,” says their teacher, who does not wish to be identified.

The problem is that they do little or no work in the seventh grade. “By the time they go to eighth grade, they have no study skills and are behind from doing nothing in seventh grade. It’s much harder for them to be successful.”

The state does not target seventh grade for retention, since it is not the last grade before high school. As a result, the district gets no

money for a seventh-grade intervention program.

After social promotion was banned in 1998, several school districts tried offering a separate retainee program for eighth-graders who were not promoted to high school.

“It was a disaster,” says Hassen. “It concentrated all the neediest kids in one area.” Long Beach joined Fresno, Palm Springs and other districts in abandoning the idea.

The idea wasn’t a disaster everywhere.

Shasta Lake’s Falcon Academy, a sheltered program for retainees, was created in response to a huge failure rate in ninth-grade classes. Most of the failing students had been socially promoted.

Located on the Central Valley High School campus, the program is self-contained and has a different bell schedule and lunchtime.

Students can earn credits for their freshman year, as well as make up eighth-grade work in remedial classes, and enter 10th grade the following year. To qualify for the transitional program, students must attend summer school.

“When the program first started four years ago, we were a little skeptical,” says Gateway Professional Association President Anita Brady. “But the teachers are really gung ho about it.”

The first year, 65 percent of the academy students moved on to 10th grade without a hitch. Last year, the number was 80 percent. The program is successful, says Brady, a teacher at the mainstream high school, because it provides students with a realistic hope of catching up, as well as rewards for good grades and behavior.

One such reward is getting to eat lunch with the regular high school students.

The San Diego Unified School District is proposing a similar plan that will likely go before the school board this month. As it stands now, eighth-graders with as many as four F’s in core classes are getting promoted. Under the proposal, students with F’s in two or more core classes would spend a year at an alternative school where they would make up lost course work and earn high school cred-

its. If they earn enough credits, they would have the opportunity to rejoin their class. Otherwise, they would move on to the ninth grade.

The district describes it as neither retention nor social promotion, rather an opportunity for students to catch up and graduate on time.

In Simi Valley, middle school students tried harder when the school mandated that they earn credits toward graduation, similar to high school students, says Bonnie Carolan, a teacher at Valley View Middle School. Several years ago, however, parents complained that the system was too strict and petitioned the school board to “lighten up” on its requirements for eighth-graders. When that happened, social promotion took over.

“It didn’t take the eighth-graders too long to figure out they had to do nothing,” says Carolan, a member of the Simi Educators Association.

After a few years of frustration — and complaints from high school teachers that middle school students were unprepared — a task force of teachers, counselors and administrators requested that the credit system be reinstated and that failing students be retained. Fearing that middle schools would retain students en masse, the school board has taken a “go slow” approach.

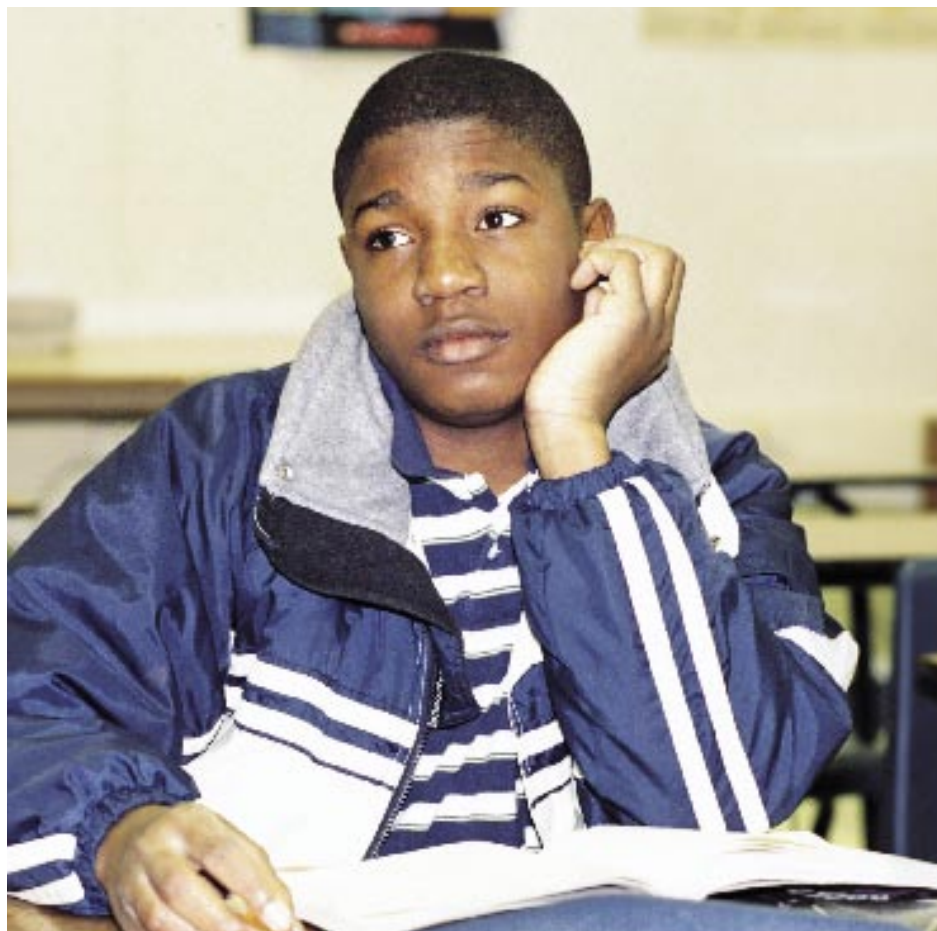
“We have told the kids that there are going to be consequences (retentions) and we are seeing kids working harder,” says Carolan. “They’re coming in for extra help. They’re pulling their friends in for extra help because they want their friends to go to high school with them.”

Parent communication is also much better, she says. “Parents are not just waiting for report cards to come home. They’re contacting teachers more often. Positive things have come out of this.”

Students used to brag about how many classes they had failed before going to high school. “But failing is no longer a badge of honor.”

Teachers say students are different today and maybe it’s time to try new tactics. Some students are turned off to school as a result of “drill and kill” standards-based instruction, a lack of electives, and courses like algebra being “pushed down” to grades where students may not be developmentally ready to tackle it.

“Not every student is algebra material,” says Jim Jackson, a math teacher at Live Oak



Middle School and a member of the Live Oak Teachers Association. “We need to teach them how to balance checkbooks and understand consumer credit.” Instead, they get algebra in middle school, fail it, get socially promoted to high school and wind up back in algebra again.

It may be time, suggests Jackson, for middle schools to offer vocational education or alternative programs.

In the Center Unified School District in Sacramento County, eighth-graders who have been retained can attend the continuation high school. “Our retained students who are not making it at the regular middle school are making it at the continuation school,” says Candie Ray, a science, social studies and drama teacher at Wilson C. Riles Middle School and a member of the Center Unified Teachers Association. A midyear intervention program has also been successful.

At Ray’s school, more seventh-grade students than eighth-graders are being retained. “The number of retentions has gone up fairly dramatically in recent years. Out of 500 seventh-graders, approximately 175 did not pass last year,” she says. Many attended summer

school and were then promoted to the next grade. Along with core curriculum, students learned organizational and time-management skills during the summer.

With retention as a definite possibility, Ray believes, most students at her school site are more motivated. “Most students try harder, but some give up.” And then there are the frustrations like the student who didn’t meet the requirements to pass seventh grade and is repeating it, but isn’t meeting the requirements again. “Should we send him to seventh grade for a third time? Fortunately this is the exception. Most of the ones who are retained usually succeed the second time around.”

“I think that we, as teachers, need to make a stand,” says Carolan in Simi Valley. “We have so many kids not doing the work. It isn’t that they can’t do the work — they won’t. It’s not just about academics. Kids need to see that there will be consequences — good or bad — depending upon what they do. They also need to understand that they have responsibilities as human beings and that they will be held accountable for what they do in their lives. As teachers, we need to make them understand that.”

Intervention gets results

The state specifically targets second, third and fourth grades, the year before middle school and the last year of middle school for retention. It does not prohibit retention in other grades, nor does it preclude retaining students more than once.

Intervention programs must be offered for students in grades 2-9 who have been recommended for retention and students in grades 7-12 who do not demonstrate adequate progress toward passing the California High School Exit Exam.

The state pays \$3.68 per student per hour for intervention, which must be offered during the summer or when students are “off-track,” as well as before and after school. Although the programs are mandatory for at-risk students, some students manage to get around the system.

If the ban on social promotion is having any impact statewide, it's difficult to tell. The state is not required to keep records, nor does it get funding for that purpose.

For some large urban districts, the retention rate has stayed fairly constant. In Los Angeles Unified the number of retained students hovered around 30,000 students between 2000 and 2005. In Fresno Unified, approximately 1,400 students were retained in 2000, compared with nearly 1,200 students in 2005. In San Diego, 4,400 students were retained in 2000 as opposed to 4,000 in 2002-03 (the latest figures available). Elk Grove had nearly 500 retentions in grades K-6 in 2003-04 versus fewer than 150 in 2004-05. Retentions have also decreased in the seventh grade.

Where there are significant reductions, effective intervention programs are given much of the credit.



Fresno's early intervention gets students back on track

Not a minute of the school day is wasted at the Fresno Year-Round Achievement Center.

While students stand in the lunch line, a teacher points out nouns and adjectives on the menu. Students recite aloud: “Hot dogs, beans, graham crackers, orange wedgies.”

“That’s orange wedges, not orange wedgies,” says Yia Ly, a member of the Fresno Teachers Association.

During the 20-minute lunch, talking is not allowed. Elementary school students

watch a video. Between bites, they identify the title (“Madeline”), the setting (Paris) and the main characters out loud.

During recess, students recite their times tables while they jump rope.

About the only time students don’t receive instruction is during bathroom breaks, jokes one instructor.

There’s a reason for their diligence. Students at the achievement center are those deemed most at risk of failure at the schools they normally attend. If they don’t make ev-



classes are now held at other campuses. Since there's always a waiting list, the center tries to take what the principal calls the "lowest of the low achievers" as first priority — usually accommodating up to 2,800 K-6 students per year.

Teachers use the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) to diagnose students when they arrive and to measure progress when they leave. In most cases there is significant improvement, says Carolyn Morishita, a resource teacher who works at the campus full-time. Students improve by an average of three levels after each session. For math, there's less growth, and staff is working to address that.

At least 23 percent of students move up a proficiency level on the California Standards Tests compared with 15 percent of similar students who choose not to attend. The district is collecting data to see how many of the center's students actually avoid retention altogether.

"We see a lot of progress not only academically but socially and emotionally," says Morishita. "Some of these students are seeing success for the first time. They are grouped with students who have similar needs, and they are not struggling to keep up. For the first time they can be line leaders who bring attendance slips to the office. When they go back to their school sites, we get comments that they are not getting in trouble like they used to."

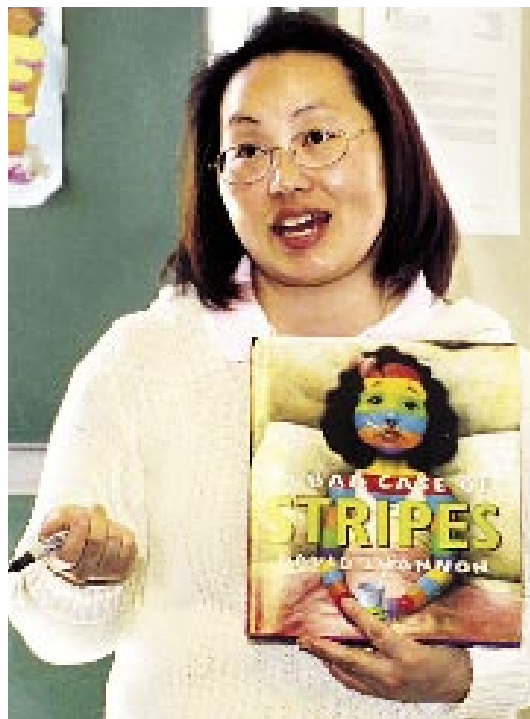
Some students are resentful when they first arrive. Staff explain to them that they are not being penalized; instead, they are being given a second chance to avoid being held back.

While many communities largely ignore the legislative ban on social promotion, Fresno has retained approximately 8,500 students in grades K-6 over the last six years. The fourth-largest school district in the state, it has more than 80,000 students, 75 percent of whom live in

every minute count, they might not get promoted to the next grade level come fall. It's a race against time, and a race everybody wants to win.

The Year-Round Achievement Center is a permanent campus for an ever-changing population of students and staff. Students most at risk of not being promoted to the next grade at their overcrowded, year-round schools are bused to the center during intersession breaks to "catch up" with their classmates. Teachers who are "off-track" and substitute teachers offer instruction. Class size is 20 to 1. Attendance runs at 460 students per four-week session.

Paid for by the state's intervention funding at the rate of \$3.68 per student per hour, the center has become so crowded that satellite



Yia Ly keeps students at Fresno's Year-Round Achievement Center on task, even during lunch and recess. If they want to catch up with their class, they have to take advantage of every opportunity. The hope is that they can avoid retention altogether.



At Norseman School in Fresno, fifth-grade teacher Kristin Karlsson works as a literacy clinic instructor when she's off-track. Getting extra help in learning to read at the clinic are first- and second-graders Amalia Madrid, Anahi Lopez and Jesus Millan.

poverty. More than 100 different languages are spoken. The district's transiency rate is high.

The number of retentions is not going down, say district officials, because 6,000 new students enter the system every year.

Most retentions occur in grades K-3. Only about 100 seventh- and eighth-graders in the district are held back each year. In the upper grades, students are often socially promoted if the parents do not agree to retention.

The Achievement Center is just one of many intervention programs for students at risk of retention in Fresno. There are also literacy clinics, Saturday classes, before- and after-school intervention classes and a traditional summer school. Most are packed with students.

At Norseman School, intercession literacy clinic instructor Kristin Karlsson asks first- and second-graders the meaning of the word

“gullible.”

“Is Chicken Little gullible — or not gullible?” asks Karlsson, an off-track fifth-grade teacher and FTA member. The students, who are mostly English language learners, shout “gullible” out loud.

The teacher asks for other examples of gullible people. Brian suggests telling a friend that his shoe is untied to see if he is gullible. Classmates laugh, and draw some pictures demonstrating the word “gullible.” Many of them are humorous.

Students see themselves as readers when they leave, says Cindy Schaefer, a resource teacher for the literacy clinics. Likewise, their parents see themselves as instrumental in their children's efforts to learn. Clinic workshops for parents include the services of translators.

While teachers try to make learning fun, students know it's important that they do well. “Some children are promoted or re-

tained depending upon our intervention,” says Schaefer. “This is serious.”

It's also successful: Nine months after the conclusion of one literacy clinic, tests showed that 81 percent of the students were continuing to improve.

At Tenaya Middle School, early-bird students arrive for extra help in Mike Thurston's classroom between 6:40 and 7:40 a.m. The intervention program is intended to help students at risk of retention, but is open to all. Afternoon intervention classes are also available.

“I see kids all the way from the lowest-level classes through those taking geometry and algebra,” says Thurston, a history and math teacher. The intervention program has become more popular now that there's an on-line system for parents to check their child's grades.

Student body president Barton Perry comes for early morning help in algebra. “If I didn't get it in class, Mr. Thurston explains it as if he were my teacher. That's why I'm getting A's. Sometimes when I get home and look at it, I'm lost.” He prefers help outside of regular school hours so that he can take three electives — drama, jazz band and regular band.

Shelby Rosenwinkel, on the other hand, has gone from having an F to a D in math in just a few weeks, thanks to early morning intervention. She expects that her grade will soon rise to a C.

Unfortunately, says Thurston, many failing students skip out on before- and after-school intervention because it's voluntary. They have the ability to do the work, but lack the motivation. They know they're probably going to be promoted to high school anyway.

“Voluntary interventions are helpful, but sometimes they just aren't enough — especially when they go on to high school and have to pass the High School Exit Exam,” he says. “There should be some type of accountability.”

“You have to make it hurt sometimes.”



Controversy

Continued from page 9

teachers are very judicious about recommending it. Abrams-Puz, a member of the Teachers Association of Long Beach, does everything she can to avoid the necessity for retention.

“Reading is usually the problem for my English language development students. I encourage their parents to send them to summer school.”

She’s also willing to stay after school and

Sue Abrams-Puz in Long Beach believes in helping her students avoid retention, even if it means a lot of repetition. Facing page: Cheryl Zenimura-Purdum teaches test-taking skills to high schoolers like Brett Williams at Sunnyside High in Fresno.

work with them, she adds. “I have the slowest children repeat and repeat and repeat it until they — hopefully — get it.

“Fortunately, with class size reduction, there are only 20 students in my class.”

CAHSEE: The threat that gets their attention

Lupita Zaragoza has failed the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE) six times. A senior at Sunnyside High School in Fresno, she passed the English portion of the test, but is struggling with the algebra and geometry sections. On one try, she missed passing by a single point.

Until October, she thought that the exit exam requirement would not affect her, and that the law would be postponed — which has been the case since it was first administered to students in 2002. However, when passage of the exam became mandatory for getting a high school diploma, Zaragoza went into shock.

“Suddenly, it hit home. I said, ‘Whoa, maybe I won’t graduate.’ Lots of students started taking it seriously.”

For a brief period, it appeared that a court injunction against using the exam to keep students from graduating this year would save her, but a high court decision has reinstated it.

While she was awaiting results from her latest attempt to pass the test, she enrolled in an exit exam intervention class at her school just in case.

“I’m trying not to be too negative, but I’m under a lot of pressure,” says Zaragoza. “My mom is depending on me to graduate and I’m above the number of credits that I need.”

“Many students were angry when they first came” to the intervention class for seniors at risk of not passing the exit exam, recalls instructor Cheryl Zenimura-Purdum, a member of the Fresno Teachers Association. The degree of frustration grew as some students passed the exam and dropped out of the course. Those who remained “thought they might as well give up. But we talked it through, decided it was something we didn’t have any control over and focused on passing.”

At last count, all but about 10 percent of



this year's seniors statewide had passed the test. Of those yet to pass, the *Los Angeles Times* estimates 44 percent have limited English skills and 61 percent live in poverty. California is one of only a handful of states requiring students to take the exit exam in English even if they're not yet up to speed in it. Only students with disabilities have been exempted from having to pass the test this year.

This past year, the state provided \$20 million for intervention programs geared to help

students pass the test. Some schools offered classes during the regular school day, while others provided support classes after school and on Saturdays.

In high school, where social promotion is not a possibility under normal circumstances, the exit exam may well be the first time students are held truly accountable for their academic performance.

Even students who consider the exam unfair admit that it made them put out effort like

never before. Brent Williams, a student in Zenimura-Purdum's class, isn't happy about being in the first class required to pass the test in order to get a diploma. "But, yeah, I'm definitely working harder."

Zenimura-Purdum empathizes with her students, but still thinks the test is a good idea. "They need to be held accountable. It's a basic test measuring basic skills. Some of them don't have test-taking skills, so we're working on that."

Many teachers do not believe a one-size-fits-all test is the only way to make students accountable. Kevin Colburn, a fifth-grade teacher who chairs the CTA Assessment and Testing Committee, and Curtis Washington, a high school teacher who chairs the High School Restructuring Task Force, testified before the California Department of Education in December that students have different learning styles and should be allowed to demonstrate their mastery of state standards through alternative means.

Testifying on behalf of CTA, they urged the state to investigate other appropriate criteria for graduation.

CTA recommends that the state provide parallel forms of assessment that use multiple measures to assess a student's progress (for example, a portfolio process guided by teachers, essays and personal communications).

If students were held accountable at a younger age — especially in middle school — the exit exam would be less of a shock in high school, say some teachers. They suggest requiring students to earn a set number of credits before being allowed to attend high school.

"A lot of kids in middle school are not thinking ahead and paying attention to the things they will need to know in order to graduate," says Kim Hassen, an eighth-grade teacher at Cubberley School in Long Beach. "When they get to high school, a lot of them will be wishing they had been listening in their middle school algebra class."

"If middle school students were held more accountable, they would find high school much easier," says Jim Jackson, a teacher at Live Oak Middle School. He estimates that 25 percent of his students put out zero effort.

"They hold teachers accountable and schools accountable, so why not kids?" he asks. "Sometimes by the time they get to high school, it can be too late."



There are no idle threats in Huntington Beach schools

When the state banned social promotion, some schools took the legislation more seriously than others. At Oak View Elementary School in Huntington Beach, retention was enforced so strongly that the school made national headlines. It held back nearly a third of its student population — 241 students out of 815 in the year 2,000. The district mandated that the law be enforced for all grades — not just those targeted by legislation.

Today, the retention rate at Oak View is much lower. One reason is there are so many prevention and intervention programs in place that fewer students are behind grade level. Another is that students know the

school isn't just making empty threats about retention, so they are more motivated to succeed.

Instruction has become much more “standards-based,” say the school’s instructors, members of the Ocean View Teachers Association. Through professional development, they’ve learned how to differentiate instruction according to the type of learner. There’s also intensive student assessment by teams of teachers, psychologists and special education teachers who decide what the most appropriate intervention might be. Before- and after-school intervention programs are staffed by certified teachers and monthly assemblies celebrate student achievement and build self-

esteem.

But what’s made a huge difference at this Title I campus of nearly all English language learners has been preschool, says kindergarten teacher Elizabeth Garcia. The district now offers “preschool for all” and is part of the First Five program.

“It has really made a difference,” says Garcia. “Preschool sets that foundation. You can tell which ones attended the Oak View preschool, because they know how to write their name, identify their letters and numbers, and have lots of other knowledge.”

The school also started a “Preppie K” kindergarten program, which offers a second year of kindergarten to youngsters who are not academically ready — or mature enough — for the rigors of regular kindergarten before going on to first grade. These children usually do quite well once they’ve been given “the gift of time” as well as a strong foundation for future academic success, say teachers.

“Technically the program is considered a form of retention,” says Preppie K teacher Linda Saez. However, because it happens so early and usually affects kindergartners on the young side, there is no stigma and children gain confidence. The school has eight academic kindergarten classes and three Preppie K classes on site.

“Not every kindergartner is ready to take the same step at the same time,” says Saez. “Our students do milestones on their own little timeline. It’s silly to think that once 4- and 5-year-olds get into school on some magic date, they’re all ready to do things right on schedule.”

Teachers find that by offering intervention — including retention — as early as possible, fewer students need to be retained in upper grades, where it can be much more traumatic. And earlier intervention has meant less remediation is needed.

In the past, when students were socially promoted, it became harder and harder for them to catch up, says fourth-grade teacher Denise Dworkin. And this made things much more difficult for teachers.

“Having that extra year of kindergarten has made a big difference for us,” says Dworkin. “In the past, they would start first-grade and still be struggling with language, reading

and writing skills. Each year they would fall behind a little bit more, and by the time they were in fourth grade, they were still struggling to write sentences. Our job was much harder, because we were always struggling to play catch-up. Now they have a much stronger foundation and come to us with so much more under their belt. Our teaching time is much less remedial.”

Teachers say that the intervention programs have also lessened behavior problems on the campus.

“There used to be fights, but things have changed,” says Pat Singer, who teaches an after-school math intervention program. “Because of the intervention programs offered at our school, students are learning and not taking their frustrations out on each other.”



Last year there were 76 retentions at the school, 57 in the Preppie K program and only 19 in other grades. Many were new arrivals to the school.

OVTA members are pleased with the course that the school has taken over the past six years — especially those teachers who remember the tumult that ensued when the school retained students en masse.

“The 2000 school year was tough,” recalls Garcia, who was teaching fourth grade at that time. “A lot of the students were in shock. For the most part, though, the kids didn’t take it half as bad as the teachers did. It caught us off guard.”

“I know it was a shock for the students to have so many retentions, but from that point on they have been trying much harder and have taken schooling much more seriously,”

The early focus on retention means students now take school more seriously, say teachers like Linda Saez (above), Michael Garcia (left) and Pat Singer (facing page, with Kelly Aguilar, Yesenia Rios and Jose Zamudio).

says Michael Garcia, a fifth-grade teacher who leads the after-school algebra club. “The parents also take school more seriously, because they know retention is possible.”

Oak View now offers parent education classes and strongly encourages parents to volunteer in the classroom, which has had a positive effect on student achievement.

“We also learned along the way, and are much more sophisticated about identifying kids that retention will work for — and which kids it won’t work for,” says Principal Karen Catabijan. “At first, when we enforced the law, it was cut-and-dry. But now, like everything else, it has become a learning experience. We know retention doesn’t work for every child, and we have learned at Oak View Elementary School that retention is not the only form of intervention.”