Resolved: Our district will stop doing what doesn't work

New York State School Boards Association "*On Board*" March 10, 2014

GOAL: Improve student achievement
DON'T: Reduce class size
DO: Invest in improving quality of teaching

For close to the last four decades, reducing class size has been widely regarded as a silver bullet to improving student achievement. The idea was that having fewer students in the classroom would enable teachers to give more of their time and attention to everyone. Teachers' time could be better spent individualizing lessons in meeting the unique needs of students.

But it's expensive. Going from a moderate class size of 25 to a low of 16-18 (some studies indicate that it is at this level where differences can be found) would require the hiring of 50 percent more teachers.

That would be phenomenally costly, and lesser reductions appear ineffective. Since 1970, the pupil-teacher ratio in public schools has fallen by 30 percent. One would expect some degree of improvement if class size was important. Yet in a study conducted by Eric Hanushek, a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, there is little, if any, evidence that class size reduction has improved overall student performance. In a recent update on the effects of class size reduction published in *Education Week*, it was similarly reported that researchers agreed that shrinking class size does not automatically translate to better learning.

When it comes to improving student achievement it is more about the "person in front of the room" rather than the number of students in the class. An effective teacher in a class of 21 students is still an effective teacher in a class of 25. And an ineffective teacher in a class of 25 doesn't magically become an effective teacher by simply reducing the number of students in the classroom!

School board members should also know how this issue is supported by the public. In a 2011 Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll, three out of four Americans surveyed indicated that they would prefer larger classes with more effective teachers than smaller classes with less effective teachers.

However, ongoing investment in targeted professional development activities for teachers can assist them in better understanding the learning needs of all students, while identifying varied instructional strategies designed to improve both teaching and learning in any size classroom. From understanding and working with students from different cultures and backgrounds to evidence-based teaching strategies such as differentiated instruction, project-based learning, classroom flipping, cooperative learning, and student/peer teaching are but some of the issues and topics to be considered. And lastly, school boards must review current and costly policies and/or teacher-labor contracts which stipulate costly class size guidelines. Using acceptable and recognizable procedures, these outdated and now proven ineffective stipulations need to be removed.

Looking for a silver bullet to save money and improve instruction? There is one

By Philip Cicero

With so many decisions about public education being made at the state and federal level, school board members might get the idea that there are relatively few important decisions for them to make. When it comes to instructional strategies, nothing could be further from the truth. School boards have latitude in how they invest local, state and federal resources to meet instructional goals.

The problem is that ineffective practices often continue in education long after evidence has exposed their flaws. Board members should know that there are three Rs in education that are expensive and just don't work: Reducing class size, remediation and retention.

What does work: having an effective, well-trained teacher in every classroom. The evidence points so consistently to the importance of teaching that it's essential that boards abandon ineffective strategies in favor of facilitating – indeed, requiring – better teaching. That is as close as we can come to finding a "silver bullet" in public education.

It's especially appropriate to consider the evidence on what works in education as boards struggle to assemble budgets that meet instructional needs. Dollars saved from unwise investments in the 3Rs can be reallocated into professional development activities that link highly effective teaching practices supported by data and research. For details, see below.

GOAL: Challenge students appropriately
DON'T: Retain students
DO: Improve literacy instruction

In many school districts, reducing class size and remediation fail to help some students make progress. Then, districts often turn to a second ineffective strategy – retaining students by having them repeat their current grade. Perhaps of all the things we can do to a student this – retention – may arguably be the most destructive. Not only are the academic gains from repeating a grade negligible, but the cost to the student's social and emotional health may be damaged beyond repair. Retention "often communicates to a child that ... problematic school performance is entirely her own fault," according to Mel Levine, author of *All Kinds of Minds*. There is no rationale that can support this kind of humiliating intervention perpetrated on any student for any reason.

The research on retention is quite clear. Grade retention does not address the needs of students at risk of academic failure. In fact, of all the variables associated with students dropping out of high school, the one variable that appears time and time again is that those students have been retained at least once.

Also, there are racial and other disparities in retention. The most recent available national figures (2007) show that the percentage of black students being retained was twice the rate for white students. More males than females were retained and more poor students than non-poor students were retained. This leads to other educational and societal problems; retained students have lower levels of academic adjustment in 11th grade and those low levels become instrumental in students dropping out of high school.

Still not convinced? Consider the expense. If local districts reflect national trends, then 5 to 7 percent of school-aged students are retained in each district each year (more in urban areas than other areas). With a New York average per-pupil expenditure of nearly $20,000 (U.S. Census 2011), the yearly cost of retention would be estimated at a minimum of $2 million.

Eighteen states have specific promotion retention policies. New York State is not one of them, so decisions on retention are determined at the local level. To avoid retention, schools and school boards must be proactive in providing early intervention to all students.

Every school district needs to have a cohesive and articulated early literacy instructional program. This program should include literacy instruction which emphasizes the foundational reading skills of phonemic awareness (phonics), fluency, vocabulary, comprehension and word recognition. Boards may be surprised to discover the degree to which their early grade programs lack this kind of instruction.

Boards should be certain that their teachers are properly trained in delivering supplemental services, such as Response to Intervention (RTI), in their classrooms to those students in need of extra help. RTI has three tiers of intervention, with each one progressing to a more intense level of instruction. RTI allows the teacher to collect data and then use that data to make informed decisions about the necessary intervention within the classroom. Should any, or all, of these interventions fail to make a difference, the teacher then has the option of referring the student for special education services.

Boards of education must not only be sure that all current teachers – particularly in the early grades – are not only their most effective teachers but that they also have these multiple intervention skills, including an additional certification in reading. Boards should also be clear that new teachers hired in the district will have to meet similar requirements.

The decision not to retain a student should not be translated as an endorsement for social promotion. A struggling student moving to the next grade will continue to need the individual support of teachers and staff. This includes the appropriate level of academic intervention in the next grade driven by instructional data, along with any necessary social-emotional intervention the student may require to improve.

Investing in instruction, implementing evidence-based literacy programs, training teachers in delivering both effective reading instruction and Response to Intervention services, and supporting teachers in understanding how to use data to drive instructional decisions are but a few places boards can begin.

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GOAL: Help struggling students
DON'T: Remediate
DO: Differentiate instruction

The history of remediation as a strategy to help struggling students can be traced back to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA/Title I) of 1965, which provided federal money to help schools support and better educate disadvantaged students. In 1994, when Congress reauthorized ESEA, the purpose of the original legislation was expanded. It would now include an overall commitment to teaching and learning and raising standards for all students. In 2002, another revision of ESEA called the No Child Left Behind Act presented guidelines and criteria for offering academic services to students. States and school districts can voluntarily expand the eligibility criteria but at their own expense.

Following this model, some districts rushed to expand the intensity and frequency of mandated services to students who scored well below the designated levels of proficiency on state assessments. In addition, districts looked to get other students nonmandated "extra help" by voluntarily expanding services to any student struggling with material based on Common Core State Standards.

But do such measures improve student achievement? The evidence says no.

In 1998, the state of Minnesota evaluated its Title I remedial program and found that the progress of students receiving remedial services was similar to those not receiving the services. The study attributed the lack of progress made by students in remedial programs to:

- How the remedial services were delivered to students (the elementary principals reported that a "pull out program" was the model being used by more than half of their students).
- Lack of continuity and articulation between grades.
- The level of expertise of the teacher (75 percent of the elementary principals in the study reported that 50 percent of the students receiving remedial services were getting their help from an instructional aide).

While better implementation might improve results, it's obvious why districts rely on aides to help provide remedial services to struggling students; teachers are expensive. For this reason, boards of education should stop trying to accomplish remediation in stand-alone programs and instead support an inclusive philosophy of instruction.

Today's teachers are trained to provide differentiated instruction.

Related instructional strategies include Multiple Intelligences and Universal Design for Learning. These approaches help teachers individualize instruction by making decisions involving materials, mode of instruction and assessment.

Rather than invest in remediation programs, boards should invest in professional development activities to assist teachers in using differentiated strategies to teach and manage all students in their own classrooms.

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