At-Risk Indicators Research: Grade Retention

Overview
A thorough review of 17 research studies examining dropping out of high school prior to graduation shows that grade retention is one of the most powerful predictors of dropout status. This information is important no matter what grade level since retention impacts students in early grades as well as older grades.

If you are designing a risk profile system, grade retention is an important indicator to review as part of the overall data.

Resources
Article: Winning the Battle and Losing the War: Examining the Relation Between Grade Retention and Dropping Out of High School (Shane R. Jimerson, Gabrielle E. Anderson, and Angela D. Whipple, 2002, Wiley Periodicals, Inc.)

Key Considerations
- Children who are retained are more likely to drop out and less likely to attend post-high school educational programs (pg 441).
- Being retained has a greater impact than solely dropping out of high school; the experience also influences a student’s self-esteem, socio-emotional adjustment, peer relations, and school engagement (pg 442).
- All studies including grade retention as a potential dropout predictor showed an association between grade retention and dropout predictors.
  - Retained students were two times more likely than non-retained students to drop out of high school (pg 450).
  - Students retained were more likely to drop out, independent of all other significant variables, which included math achievement, grades, and nuclear family responsibilities.
  - Students retained in one grade are 40% to 50% more likely to drop out than promoted students and students who are retained in two grades are 90% more likely to drop out (pg 452).
- Several studies reported that grade retention was found to be the strongest predictor of later dropout status.
- 58% dropout rate for the youths who were over-age for grade (but not retained) due to starting school late or entering the school system as immigrants.
- Retention in early grades increases likelihood of dropping out in high school.
- Research shows that it’s better to retain a student in kindergarten or first grade rather than upper grades is unfounded (pg 453).
- “Elementary grade retention may result in temporary achievement gains, but often these effects taper off and the students eventually fall behind or show no gains relative to their socially promoted peers” (pg 453).
- Early grade retention increased the risk of dropping out by 30% to 50%
- Studies that found grade retention as the most powerful predictor also found:
  - Excessive absences and frequent school changes as other strong predictors (pg 443);
  - Dropout likelihood in grade 7 predicted by retention, aggressiveness, low achievement, SES, affiliation with dropouts, and early parenthood (pg 443)
- Studies looked at Latinos compared to white and black youth; the Latinos as a group were more likely to be retained than whites and blacks and had the highest dropout rate.
- Brooks-Gunn, Guo, and Furstenberg (1993) conducted a 20-year longitudinal study and suggested that retention was perhaps the “. . . strongest harbinger of school disengagement later on” (pg. 450).

Putting it to Practice

For districts who are creating their own locally-developed risk profile, consider using prior retention as a strong predictor, even as far back as primary grades.