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A Study of Retention Intervention Programs Used in Rural Michigan Schools

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A STUDY OF RETENTION INTERVENTION PROGRAMS
USED IN RURAL MICHIGAN SCHOOLS

by

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A STUDY OF RETENTION INTERVENTION PROGRAMS USED IN RURAL MICHIGAN SCHOOLS

Randall E Busscher, Ed.D.

Western Michigan University, 1994

The purposes of this study were the investigation of the current status of information on retention policies and to determine what kinds of retention intervention programs were being used to improve academic achievement in rural Michigan junior high and middle schools. A survey questionnaire was sent to 235 rural Michigan junior high and middle school principals. This was a descriptive study. Data collected from the survey included both close-ended and open-ended items. A content analysis was conducted to identify emerging characteristics or patterns from the open-ended comments. The findings of this study indicated that most rural junior high and middle schools in Michigan that responded to the survey did have a grade retention policy. The most common characteristics of these retention policies were that principals were most often the person who was responsible for recommending retention and students with low academic achievement were most commonly dealt with individually by the schools, considered for retention if they have failed two or more core classes, or used a summer school program. Most rural junior high and middle schools that responded also had intervention programs that were used to help students improve their low academic achievement. The most common characteristics of these intervention programs were that most schools used them at the first

indication of academic difficulty, that grades were an indicator for a successful intervention, contacting the parents and getting them involved, and tutoring. Most rural Michigan junior high and middle schools that responded communicate to parents when a student's academic achievement is below the minimum levels of academic competencies expected by letter on a weekly basis or by the grading period.

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Randall E Busscher

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

By the early 19th century, grade retention was the preferred method for handling learning deficiencies. By the end of the 19th century, the fact was that nearly every other child was retained at least once during his or her school career (Johnston & Markle, 1986). During this time, retention in grade was a major issue in education. The failure rate was actually as high as 50% and adolescents were frequently retained in primary grades (Balow & Schwager, 1990). After 1900 there was a gradual shift in schools towards the policy of social promotion (Labaree, 1983).

Since the beginning of the practice of retention it has rollercoasted in and out of popularity. It was favored by the "competency movement," which viewed the practice of retention as a way of setting and enforcing standards for academic achievement (Schwager & Balow, 1990).

By the early 1930s, many schools started to give much more thought to the individual needs of the child, thus more flexible guidelines caused a reduction in the retention rate. It dropped to between 4% and 5% by 1940 (Medway, 1985). Social promotion, passing students to the next grade even though they have not mastered the curriculum, began to be widely used in this country (National Institute of Education, 1981).

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In the 1960s social promotion continued to be widely used. Instead of repeating grades they had failed, the students were promoted to the next grade. They were then often grouped according to their ability and given individualized remedial instruction (Medway, 1985); however, in 1971 more than one million elementary school children had failed at least one year (Bocks, 1977).

Among educators and parents there was a strong belief that the practice of retention was necessary and valuable. A survey of elementary school teachers who attended graduate school at an American university discovered that 97% agreed that retention can be a positive step in a student's education (Faerber, 1984).

The practice of retention was commonly believed to improve education by allowing slower students "time to develop" and to increase accountability by requiring specific grade level criteria. Principals, teachers, and parents who were surveyed by Byrnes and Yamamoto (1986) stated that lack of basic skills was the number one reason for retention and showed that 74% of principals, 65% of teachers, and 59% of parents agreed that students should usually or always be retained. In 1978 in the Gallop Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward Public Schools, 72% of Americans favored making promotion to the next grade more strict (Gallup, 1978).

Retention was an annual occurrence in American educational history until social scientists and educators began to notice special emotional problems of young children caused by retention. The general decline of standardized test scores has caused many educators to reconsider the practice of retention (Bocks, 1977).

Retention is a concern for many educators, particularly since it involves such large numbers of students and resources. Yet, there are researchers still arguing for (Ascher, 1988; Banerji, 1988; Marion, 1989) and against (Baenen & Hopkins, 1988; Cuddy, 1987; Eads, 1990; Niklason, 1987; Smith & Shepard, 1987; Towner, 1988) retention. From opinions of retention as "an unjustifiable discriminatory and noxious educational policy" (Abidin, Golladay, & Howerton, 1971, p. 410) at one end of the scale to opinions such as, "Are you promoting failure?" (Crowell & Crowell, 1960, p. 402) at the opposite end, it is possible to find a variety of research findings that both support and refute any particular position.

Many studies (Baenen & Hopkins, 1988, 1989; M. Dawson, Rafoth, & Carey, 1988; Schuyler & Turner, 1987) have examined the relationship between the influence of grade retention and student achievement. Most of these studies focused on children who were retained in nonremedial classes in the early elementary grades. The studies generally used standardized, norm-referenced achievement tests to measure these relationships.

Comprehensive retention intervention programs are designed to reduce the number of students who must be retained because they lack the necessary academic skills to be promoted to the next grade (J. Dawson, 1987). Typically, these programs begin with parent contact meetings. These usually include the student, his or her parents, teachers, and school counselors. The purpose of these meetings is to help the students avoid the possibility of academic retention (J. Dawson, 1987). Retention intervention programs aim solely at providing

assistance to students who are identified as possible retainees (J. Dawson, 1987). These preventative measures to retention are intended to have some relationship to student achievement.

The Rural Small Schools Initiative Project (Slavin & Madden, 1989) has established general principles and features that characterize the comprehensive plans for addressing the needs of these at-risk students. Four of them are outlined below:

1. Effective at-risk programs are comprehensive. One of the most important elements common to all effective programs is that they are comprehensive programs. In other words, they are well-planned, comprehensive approaches to instruction. Generally, they include detailed teacher's manuals and usually include curriculum materials, lesson guides, and other supportive material. Effective programs are not simply a series of workshops to give teachers strategies to add to their repertoire; rather, they are complete, systematic, carefully designed alternatives to traditional methods.

2. Effective preventive and remedial programs for at-risk students are intensive. Generally, programs designed to deal with special populations, including at-risk students, are successful only when they are intensive. That is, programs may use one-to-one tutoring or individually-adapted, computer-assisted instruction to effectively meet the school needs of at-risk students.

3. Effective programs for at-risk students frequently assess student progress and adapt instruction to individual student needs. Virtually all programs found to be instructionally effective for at-risk students assess student progress frequently and use the results to modify

groupings or instructional content to meet students' individual needs.

4. Effective programs for at-risk students emphasize prevention. The cornerstone of a school plan to ensure success for all at-risk students is to make certain that all students learn to read the first time they are taught, so that they never become remedial readers.

A grade retention policy is used to motivate students to achieve higher academically. One assumption made by many educators is that students are best motivated to learn by being held to high expectations with both rewards and penalties used for incentives (Medway, 1985). The ultimate penalty is grade retention.

<h3 style="text-align:center">The Purposes of the Study</h3>

This project had as one of its purposes the investigation of the current status of information on retention policies in rural Michigan junior high and middle schools. Another purpose of this study was to determine what kinds of retention intervention programs and techniques are being used to improve academic achievement in rural Michigan junior high and middle schools. The study also reports data that will prove helpful in demonstrating the preventive approaches. These preventive approaches can be beneficial to students by helping them reduce the number of failing grades that they receive, rather than allowing them to continue to fail and encounter the consequences that follow that practice.

Answers to the following questions were sought in this study:

1. What is the status of junior high and middle school grade retention policies?

2. Do most rural junior high and middle schools in Michigan have a grade retention policy?

3. What are the characteristics of these retention policies?

4. Do most rural junior high and middle schools have intervention programs that are used to help students improve their low academic achievement?

5. What are the characteristics of intervention programs?

6. How do rural Michigan junior high and middle schools communicate to parents when a student's academic achievement is below the minimum levels of academic competencies expected?

Since there is not one successful model or approach for intervention that can be applied to all situations and problems in student failures, importance is placed on identifying the approaches that are currently used. By publicizing what is done by some, many others will be able to benefit. Currently there is an insufficient amount of information on retention intervention programs in rural Michigan junior high and middle schools. This study attempted to find out what rural Michigan junior high and middle schools are doing about students who fail. The study also determined how these schools communicate to parents when a student's academic achievement is below the levels of academic competencies expected.

The reason students go to school is for learning. There is a good possibility that if students are not learning the skills and gaining the knowledge that they need, they may not be successful later in life. This is one of the reasons that make it so important that educators and parents work to help students achieve academically. When the students

don't succeed academically, effective intervention methods and programs must be employed to assist these students, so that they can have a better opportunity for success.

Rationale for Study

Findings from the study can provide strategies for future monitoring and could be helpful in the future administration of these programs. Results of the study will be used to inform other school districts on what effective practices to apply to their curriculum. Schools could find components of this study to be a very valuable tool for their at-risk population. These data could help schools avoid grade retention of students and, hopefully, avoid the negative effects that grade retention has on students.

Definition of Terms

The following definitions were used in the study:

Absenteeism: When students are nonattenders at school. There are four basic reasons why students may not be in school on any given day: weather and transportation, poor health, family choice, and personal choice (Rood, 1989).

Academic failure: An E for a grade on a report card (school policy).

Academic success: Passing grades (A, B, C, or D) on report cards (school policy).

Nonremedial: Instruction where work being performed is at current grade speed and level (Hutto, 1988).

Remedial: Remedial instruction is provided outside of, and usually in addition to, regular classroom instruction. Often referred to as pull-out programs, they are used most often with students who trail their age-mates in basic skills (Slavin & Madden, 1989).

Retention: The practice of requiring some students to repeat a grade when they have not achieved the minimum levels of academic competencies expected at a particular stage in schooling (Leddick, 1988).

Retention intervention: A program designed to reduce the number of students who must be retained in a grade by giving them early assistance. This program can involve parental contact; meetings with students, parents, and all teachers; and counseling designed to help students remove themselves from retention consideration (J. Dawson, 1987).

Rural school district: A school district defined as rural by the U.S. Bureau of Census which the National Data Resource Center codes for location of the school relative to populous areas: Large central city, mid-size central city, urban fringe of large city, urban fringe of mid-size city, large town, small town, or rural. A rural school district is defined as having a population less than 2,500 (National Data Resource Center, 1991).

Social promotion: Passing students to the next grade level even though they have not mastered the curriculum or minimum criteria for a grade level (National Institute of Education, 1981).

Overview of Methodology

One instrument was developed for this study. It was a 16-item survey for rural junior high and middle school principals. The following items were identified: district size, upper or lower peninsula, if they retained students, if they had an intervention program, their annual retention rate, a description of their intervention program and retention policy, how they communicate with parents, and why the intervention program has or has not been effective.

Summary

The background of the problem was presented in this chapter. It explained how the practice of retention has gone in and out of popularity. There is evidence that poor academic achievement can lead to grade retention. Retention intervention programs are designed to reduce the number of students who must be retained because they lack the necessary academic skills to be promoted to the next grade. Retention intervention programs are usually comprehensive and intensive. They emphasize prevention, frequently assess student progress, and adapt instruction to individual student needs.

The purposes of the study were to investigate the current status of information on retention policies and retention intervention programs being used to improve academic achievement in rural Michigan junior high and middle schools. These data are presented in a factual and systematic manner. Findings from the study can provide strategies for future monitoring and could be helpful in the future administration of

these programs.

A set of definitions for pertinent terms was provided. An explanation of the survey instrument and the items it identified were also given.

Chapter II is a review of literature on academic achievement, grade retention policies, and retention intervention programs in schools. Chapter III addresses the methodology, Chapter IV the data analysis, and Chapter V the summary, conclusions, and recommendations.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to determine what kinds of reten-
tion policies and retention intervention programs are being used in rural
Michigan junior high and middle schools. The study examined what
techniques and programs these rural schools are using to prevent stu-
dents from failing. Another purpose of the study was to determine how
these schools communicate to parents when a student's academic
achievement is below the levels of academic competencies expected.
These data could then be shared with educators around the state so that
they could then put into their curriculums the components of the pro-
grams which would help to reduce the number of failing grades. This
reduction would lessen the number of students who would be retained in
a grade, resulting in the reduction in the negative effects of grade reten-
tion. The following body of literature will support the purpose and need
for this study by reviewing the background of retention, guidelines for
retention, retention policies, and intervention programs.

Historical Background of Retention

Failing academic grades are a source of problems for students,
educators, and parents. These failing grades can and do, in some cases,
lead to grade retention, which is why retention is a major concern of

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educators, particularly since it involves such large numbers of students and use of funds (J. Dawson, 1987).

The earliest American schools were not organized by grade level. The teacher taught each student whatever he could while the student attended. Then around 1848, because of public and governmental concern for a more standardized approach and the introduction of grade level textbooks, distinct grade levels were developed. The mastery of each grade's skill was considered a prerequisite to success in the next grade. Students who showed academic achievement were promoted. Those who did not would repeat the grade or drop out (Harness, 1985).

By the end of the Civil War, schools in most communities had organized their students into grades with goals set for each level. During the next 70 years rural schools followed this trend. This graded system allowed teachers to concentrate their talents and training on students of similar age, experience, and maturity levels (Knezevich, 1975). The issue of retention became popular with organization of the school into grade levels.

Retention was designed to help students' academic performances. It was believed that repeating a grade would expose students to information and skills that were missed on the first attempt, giving students time to develop more mature study skills and allowing them the opportunity to succeed at tasks more appropriate to their skills (Johnston & Markle, 1986).

Retention was so common during the turn of the century that almost one out of every two students was retained at least once during his or her schooling years. In the 1930s, more educators began to

question the practice of retention. They believed that such actions had a negative effect on the social and emotional development of students. Instead of retention, educators then promoted most students, who were then grouped by ability and given special help as needed. Social promotion, the practice of promoting students to the next grade when they have not achieved the minimum academic requirements, became popular in the public schools (Johnston & Markle, 1986).

In 1909 Ayres (cited in Holmes & Matthews, 1984) reported the first comprehensive study of students' progress in his book, Laggards in Our Schools. Since then, many articles have been written presenting cases for and against retention. Many studies have been conducted in attempts to clarify this issue (M. Dawson et al., 1988; Smith & Shepard, 1987; Towner, 1988). These studies reported inconsistent results.

Jackson (1975) wrote that research comparing groups of promoted students with those retained were biased in favor of promotion. He assumed that the fact that promoted students were passed on to the next grade indicated that they were doing better academically than those who were not promoted.

There are many ways that rural children are placed at risk for learning. Rural areas typically have disproportionate percentages of students from poor families, and many rural communities are composed of Hispanic migrants and other non-English-speaking populations (Helge, 1989).

The prevalence of at-risk students in rural areas is quite high. For example, the Department of Education in the rural state of Wyoming stated that at least half of the state's children could be classified as

at-risk (Wyoming Department of Education, 1987).

The serious nature of this problem is shown by the fact that two-thirds of all schools in the United States are in rural areas, and the majority of unserved and underserved students are located in rural America. Problems associated with implementing comprehensive education programs in urban areas are compounded in rural areas (Helge, 1984).

The aim of educators is to facilitate academic success of students. One of the strongest correlates of dropping out of school is the lack of academic success in school. Students who receive failing grades, fail subjects, and are not promoted to the next grade have a much greater chance of leaving school before high school graduation (DeBlois, 1989). Unfortunately, many students who have trouble meeting the academic demands of school leave rather than persist in the face of the strain and frustration they experience while trying to pass their courses.

Student difficulties with school work comes from three sources: (1) different aspects of the academic criteria set by the school, (2) the students' own abilities in each subject area, and (3) the students' willingness to direct efforts toward learning and performance of academic tasks. Studies of the sequence of events that contribute to student academic achievement indicate that a mismatch between school demands and student behaviors could develop over time; thus chances for success become more remote (Pink & Wallace, 1984).

Research also shows that family and neighborhood circumstances are significant correlates of poor performance at school. Students from homes that provide weak resources for schooling because of parents

being poorly educated or unable to help with school work are more likely to fail courses and to be retained one or more times (Purkerson & Whitfield, 1981).

A national stratified random sample of superintendents responded to a questionnaire listing the probable causes of students dropping out of school. Rural superintendents noted that being too old for a peer group because of being retained in a grade is a significant cause for dropping out of school (Hyle, Bull, Salyer, & Montgomery, 1991).

One of the most noted reasons for dropouts in American schools is the lack of an appropriate match between the academic program of the school and the skills and interests of students. The failure of the educational program of the school to meet the needs of students has been found to be a major cause of poor academic performance (Wehlage & Rutter, 1987).

The curriculum of the school is perceived by many students to be irrelevant or not useful. Other students, specifically students who are not members of the white middle class, see the school program as alien to the culture in which they are growing up (Fine, 1987).

The problem with the academic program for many students who eventually drop out of school is that the curriculum is too difficult for them to earn respectable grades. In a nationally representative high school study (Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack, & Rock, 1987), 30% of the students who dropped out of high school between the 10th and 12th grades cited poor grades as a reason for leaving. These students couldn't achieve success within their school program. Because of the problem with lack of success in school, students whose every effort fail

to get a positive response from the school come to view the school organization as nonresponsive to them and beyond their control (Wehlage & Rutter, 1987).

Guidelines for Retention

To aid in making retention decisions in individual cases, many people have developed guidelines or instruments. Lindvig (1983) emphasized that an attempt should be made to observe the whole child, to trace their history in school, and to exhaust alternatives. Considerations for retention involve a late birth date, emotional as well as developmental immaturity, an unstable environment at home, physiological factors, and specific learning disabilities. The age, maturity, and social adjustment of the student should have serious attention.

Rose, Medway, Cantrell, and Marcus (1983) stated that educators must first establish whether a child has a severe learning deficit in the basic skills and, if so, whether the curriculum material was taught and alternative instructional methods were used. The variables which should be considered are chronological age, social-emotional development, intellectual abilities, attendance, family background, and attitudes of other family members. A determination must be made on how to change the curriculum so that the same inappropriate methods aren't used.

To help educators make these critical decisions, assessment tools such as Light's Retention Scale (Light, 1977) were developed and used to help make decisions on promotion and retention. The criteria that were used included school attendance, current grade placement, intelligence, academic achievement, motivation to complete school tasks,

and knowledge of the English language. Other criteria included were physical size, age, sex, siblings, and maturity, in addition to historical information related to previous retention, learning disabilities, students' attitudes about possible retention, parent's school participation, delinquency, transiency, emotional problems, and experiences background. This type of device was an excellent counseling tool and often clarified the educational and psychological justification for retention.

Lieberman (1980) developed a model for retention decisions. He referred to his model as one of rational problem solving. Twenty-seven factors are divided into three categories: school factors, child factors, and family factors. There are four possible responses for each factor: for retention, against retention, undecided, and not applicable. The following factors are considered: school factors--school system attitude towards retention, teacher attitude toward retention, principal's attitude, availability of special education services, availability of personnel, and availability of other programmatic options; child factors--physical disabilities, physical size, academic potential, neurological maturity, psychosocial maturity, child's ability to function independently, child's self-concept, grade placement, chronological age, nature of the problem, previous retention, absenteeism, sex, child's attitude toward retention, peer pressure, and basic skills competencies; family factors--foreign language emigrants, attitude toward retention, geographical moves, sibling pressure and age of siblings, and family doctor involvement.

The factors associated most often for retention consideration are: age, grade level, attitudes of the student and parent toward retention, maturity, sex, intellectual ability, physical size, social and emotional

adjustment, attendance, present level of academic achievement, and previous retentions. They all consider the child's ability to benefit from the retention.

Retention Policies

The retention policies of schools vary from very lenient guidelines which emphasize the benefits of social promotion to strict achievement-based guidelines for promotion. Hubbell (1980/1981) surveyed policies in 124 elementary schools in Ventura County, California. He found that the decision to retain a student was basically subjective and that the primary criterion was immaturity. If a child was retained, they recommended placing the child with a different teacher and using individual work for the child.

Schwager and Balow (1990) examined retention policies in 71 Southern California school districts and found two common characteristics: (1) a statement of the expected normal progression of students from grade to grade with their cohort group, and (2) a knowledge of the need to sometimes ignore this expectation in individual situations. They found that retention policies all have an affirmation of social promotion for the majority of the pupils, and a provision for exceptions.

Rose et al. (1983) surveyed 25 school districts in South Carolina. The results of their study showed that the districts with written policies usually had flexible standards which took into account individual differences. The majority of the policies referred to the following guidelines: personal and home factors such as age, physical development, social maturity, and parental attitudes; previous retentions; the child's

present academic achievement level; and the best interest of the student.

Young (1980/1981) surveyed retention policies in Colorado elementary schools to find the criteria and procedures that were used. The reasons for retention that she found were: student and parent support for retention, small physical size, low academic achievement, young chronological age, frequent absences, social immaturity, slow intellectual ability, deprived homelife, placement in primary grades, transiency, lack of effort, poor language skills, and the school's ability to provide for students who deviate from the norm. The rationale against retention were: child or parent opposition, prior retentions, older chronological age, age-appropriate social skills, high intellectual ability, larger physical size, and effort. Teams which consisted of students, teachers, parents, principals, support personnel, and the superintendent in small districts made the decisions for retention.

Duval County, Florida, used a pupil progression plan based mainly on test scores (Duval County Public Schools, 1979). Three factors were used: minimum achievement test scores in mathematics and reading, minimum skills test scores in mathematics and reading, and teacher recommendation of the student's ability to perform at the next grade level. Students who do not meet at least two of these factors are retained in the same grade level or are entered into a special program. These students are also given the opportunity to attend summer school to improve their academic achievement or their skills test score. They are promoted to the next grade if they meet the minimum requirements at the end of summer school.

An achievement-based promotion policy was adopted in Greensville County, Virginia (Cates & Ash, 1983). This policy based promotion totally on standardized achievement test scores. If a pupil could not perform at grade level, he or she was retained. Half-step promotions were used to avoid having pupils who had mastered some of the subjects to repeat the entire grade. The Greensville policy did not put the retained pupils in the classrooms with the promoted students. They were placed in classes made up of all retainees so that the curriculum could be altered to meet their academic needs.

Pinellas County, Florida, adopted a retention policy that based student promotion on a minimum standardized achievement test score (Elligett & Tocco, 1983). This policy gave administrators the flexibility to place students when information indicated that the score was not reliable by being too high or low. The criteria for first graders was different than other grades due to the unreliability of the standardized test scores for these young students. In the middle school, promotion was determined by the number of courses a student passed. A second, summative criterion was implemented at the eighth-grade level: demonstrated mastery of at least 70% of the standards on the eighth-grade state assessment test. The pupils who failed to meet this criterion were placed in a compensatory class and retested later in the year.

New Orleans Public Schools adopted a retention policy in which the test scores were the primary criterion in retention decisions (Pechman, 1982). Pechman stated that these tests merely confirm what the teacher already knows about the student's reading and mathematics ability. He argued that the benefits were not worth the cost of the

system.

The Eugene, Oregon, school district believed that social promotion was the most effective policy (Thompson, 1980). Their policy was considerably different from others. They opposed retention for merely academic reasons. Retention was only considered in the cases of developmental immaturity or excessive absences. They believed that early retention was the most effective. The principal, with the help of all interested individuals made the final decision; however, parents had the right to appeal the decision, as was the case in other districts.

Retention policies differ greatly from school district to school district. The same is true of the intervention programs that school districts utilize to help their students when the student's academic achievement is below the levels of academic competencies expected.

Intervention Programs

If students become uninterested in school because they find the standards too difficult or too easy, then standards that meet the needs of students need to be developed. Such strategies need to be both challenging and attainable (Kehayan, 1983).

In the late 1960s, Werner (cited in Mattera, 1987) visited many rural classrooms and observed students who were not developmentally ready to learn. She established the Early Prevention of School Failure Program in 1971 in southern Will County, Illinois. This program prevented school failure by identifying developmental levels and learning styles of 4-to 6-year-old rural students and providing individualized instruction based on prior learning results.

Historically, many at-risk prevention programs were not started until the 9th or 10th grade. That is probably too late. The Redlands Christian Migrant Association (cited in Clouser, 1989) suggested that programs need to be started as early as second grade. This group started a pilot program for rural minority children in Florida. Indications are that early intervention for this minority student population is an important aspect of improving grades.

Success for All (Madden, Slavin, Karweit, Dolan, & Wasik, 1991) is a compensatory education program based on prevention and early intervention that has proven helpful in increasing the reading performance of at-risk primary grade students as well as reducing retentions. The program directed its aspects of school and classroom organization toward preventing academic deficits from happening, recognizes and intervenes when any deficits do appear, and provides a rich and full curriculum. The program included: (a) reading tutors, (b) regrouping for reading instruction, (c) 8-week student progress assessments, (d) family support teams, (e) program facilitators, (f) teachers and teacher training, and (g) advisory committees.

A common strategy is that of individualizing the curriculum so that it is tailored to each pupil's ability. Such an individualized curriculum and instructional strategy is designed to present each student with attainable standards for academic success. Hence, students experience both academic success with its benefits to their self-esteem and a more responsive school organization in reaction to their efforts (Enger & Vaupel, 1978).

The matching of the level of difficulty of the school curriculum to the ability levels of students requires improved diagnostic strategies. If adequate diagnostic information is not present, it is impossible to tailor the curriculum to the students' abilities. These diagnostic techniques need to be used to determine when students are ready to move on to a new grade level. Such a program is in operation in Minneapolis, where criterion-referenced tests are given each year to students in kindergarten through the ninth grade to track students' academic progress and to judge whether they have mastered the knowledge required for the next grade (OERI Urban Superintendents Network, 1987).

A key strategy for addressing the lack of school responsiveness to the academic performance of students that have records of consistent below average performance is an alteration in the process for evaluating student work. Natriello and McPartland (1987) demonstrated that different teachers use four different evaluation or grading techniques in their classrooms: (1) evaluation based on set external standards, (2) evaluation based on the relative performance of the class, (3) evaluation based on student effort, and (4) evaluation based on the change in student performance level. Only the last two provide low performing students with a chance to obtain anything other than poor evaluations. Hence, the evaluation of student performance in terms of effort or progress is seen to have a possible effect on keeping students in school.

Another strategy which provides opportunities for students who otherwise experience consistent failure in the classroom involves a re-structuring of the classroom objectives so that they draw on a broader range of ability dimensions. These multiple-ability classrooms (Cohen,

1986) attempt to move beyond the slim range of academic tasks, all of which rely on reading skill, so that every student can experience some success. In these multi-ability classrooms, the intention is for all students to find some task at which they can experience a sense of competence.

The Cotopaxi/Westcliffe Project (Blackadar & Nachtigal, 1986) was nationally funded to test the theory that increased efficiency in the use of student and teacher time would result in higher student achievement. Two small rural Colorado school districts were involved in the project. Content from effective schools' research and conventional wisdom about educational practice was also used to improve student achievement. Achievement scores did show a small degree of increase.

A project conducted by the National Rural and Small Schools Consortium (Helge, 1989) examined the academic improvement of at-risk students who experienced a project to enhance their self-esteem. The program included problem recognition, interdisciplinary approaches for assessment and intervention, vocational education, and comprehensive transition and counseling programs.

Fleming Middle School, in Grants Pass, Oregon, adopted a comprehensive retention intervention program designed to reduce the number of pupils who must be retained or who may quit school because they were retained in the present grade (J. Dawson, 1987). Their retention intervention program was aimed solely at providing assistance to pupils who were identified as possible retainees. The program began at the end of the first quarter, when grades, attendance, and behavior problems were considered in making a list of possible retainees. Using this

list, parents and students were contacted personally by the counselors and programs were initiated so that the students could work to remove themselves from the possible retention list. This intervention has proven to be very successful, they have reduced the number of retainees dramatically since it began. They still retain pupils when necessary, but they work with the parents and pupils for three-fourths of the school year to allow them every chance to avoid retention.

In rural Arizona, an elementary school intervention program, the Reading Recovery Program (RRP) (Filby & Lambert, 1990) demonstrated ways to succeed with students in primary grades. The RRP targeted the poorest readers in a first grade class. They were given supplemental, one-to-one planned lessons for 30 minutes each day by a trained teacher. The program showed that most participating children were able to keep up with their class after 15-20 weeks in the program.

Remedial instruction is often used in an attempt to bring students' skills up to the level expected by the school curriculum. These remedial services take many forms, from special classes such as those offered under the provision of the U.S. Department of Education's Chapter I, to programs which involve a total change of the whole school program with the provision of additional resources throughout the program (Kennedy, Birman, & Demaline, 1986). This approach is envisioned as part of Levin's (1987) proposed acceleration school where the goal is to accelerate students' academic growth.

Remediation also takes place in special programs in addition to the regular school program. The Comprehensive Competency Program (CCP) of Washington, DC, is a self-paced, competency-based,

individualized program which packages the best available educational technologies developed in Job Corps and other programs and makes them available to public schools. Students in CCP attend learning centers where they work at their own rates on academic and life skill competencies such as reading the newspaper and calculating overtime and job-seeking skills (Hahn & Danzberger, 1987).

Peer tutoring is an effective approach to providing students experiencing difficulty with additional assistance. Both the tutors and the students being tutored have better attitudes toward school as a result of participating in peer tutoring programs (Ashley, Jones, Zahniser, & Inks, 1986). Bloom (1984) found that students in peer tutoring programs achieve at higher levels than students in mastery learning situations or in standard classroom environments.

Some programs include some form of career education to show how the school curriculum is connected to future careers for successful students. Using facilities and counselors provided by the New York State Department of Labor, the Job and Career Center sponsor visual displays, field trips, exhibits, and discussions. The services of the center are available to students in both the private and public schools, to those unemployed, and to dropouts (Commission on Work, Family, and Citizenship, 1988).

Another approach to making the school program more meaningful to students consists of providing incentives for school performance. Some Ohio public schools adopted a program which relies on money as an incentive. With funding from corporations and local foundations, the school program pays students in the 7th grade through the 12th grade

$40 for each A, $20 for each B, and $10 for each C. This money is usable for postsecondary education (Commission on Work, Family, and Citizenship, 1988).

Bernal and Villarreal (1990) suggested that using one-to-one tutoring or individually-adapted computer-assisted instruction for rural at-risk students can be successful. They also recommended using student progress assessments to modify groupings or instructional content.

In a national study (Helge, 1990), a total of 1,200 surveys were mailed to school administrators in rural districts in all states. In almost all cases, estimates of the number of rural at-risk youth exceeded non-rural estimates. The findings suggest that the social and economic stresses on rural students are at least as difficult as those of urban students. This study also discussed the importance of self-esteem in lowering student risk and early intervention.

A study conducted in 15 rural Tennessee high schools (Reddick & Peach, 1990) identified characteristics of at-risk students and the circumstances that affected their decisions to leave or stay in school. At-risk students frequently have been shown to be older males who possess low basic academic skills. Effective at-risk prevention programs use a combination of mentorships, counseling, remediation, and other incentives. Early intervention and personalized intervention appear to be most successful (Reddick & Peach, 1990).

Sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students from a rural county in Tennessee completed both the Rural School Success Inventory (RSSI) and the Learning Styles Inventory. The RSSI provided information on previous school experiences, school success, and educational

aspirations. Conclusions of the study showed poor students make lower grades and are more likely to be retained in a grade (Phelps, 1990).

The school program that united many strategies is the alternative school. Alternative schools are typically designed as nontraditional educational programs which have more flexibility in educational activities than is found in traditional school settings (Driscoll, 1985). Alternative schools usually are smaller than traditional schools, with lower student-adult ratios (Hahn, 1987).

In small schools with lower ratios of teachers to students, students have more direct social contact with both school staff and other students. Such environments are thought to be less anonymous than bigger schools. The social interaction may promote an attachment to the school by making the student feel valued and wanted. As Gottfredson and Gottfredson (1985) said, "School size is very likely related to the availability of opportunities for students to engage in a variety of roles that provide a stake in conformity" (p. 171).

Many at-risk student intervention programs are not affordable for small rural schools. However, the Cooperative Alternative Program (CAP), a cooperative intervention program administered by six western Texas rural school districts, is a program that is affordable. The program is designed to meet graduation requirements and teach vocational skills (Casey & McSwain, 1989).

The academic curriculum in CAP is a competency-based program that allows students to experience success by working at their own level and pace. Elective courses are vocational. The philosophy behind the curriculum arrangement is to provide the basic academic requirements

for graduation and a real vocational skill that can be used for employment. For small, rural schools, this can be a very affordable prevention program (Casey & McSwain, 1989).

Given the backgrounds and problems students bring to school, many are unable to function in traditional settings. Research has shown that school climate contributes to poor grades and dropping out of school for students when there is traditional emphasis on rules, policies, and regulations. Students with other pressures may not be able to cope with such structure (McDill, Natriello, & Pallas, 1985). Research findings indicate that many teachers treat high and low achieving students differently; areas of different treatment include where they are assigned to sit in the classroom, amount of attention, questioning and participation patterns, amount of quality feedback, and expectations for the amount and quality of student work (Good, 1981).

Some alternative programs work as a component within a larger environment, such as a school-within-a-school. Others are physically separate from the traditional school environment. Physical separation tends to highlight the distinctive features of the prevention program, and students may be more accepting toward an educational setting that does not remind them of their old school, often a site of failure and frustration (Youngberg & Lampron, 1988).

Because teachers frequently need assistance in meeting the needs of rural students with learning problems, the Building Support System (BSS) model was established in some North Dakota schools. The BSS model provides prompt, accessible support to teachers through peer problem solving. Teachers who have students with problems refer

themselves to the building support team. The team and the referring teacher jointly work in a structured process of conceptualizing the problem, brainstorming solutions, and planning interventions. Follow-up meetings determine intervention effectiveness (Miller & Bonsness, 1987).

Some of the external conditions that cause poor academic performance by students are often out-of-school liabilities. These liabilities include a number of personal, familial, and community problems such as teenage pregnancy, alcohol and drug abuse, delinquent gang membership, single-parent families, family violence including child abuse, family financial need, and socially disorganized communities. Such communities are characterized by a low level of social control which is linked to a variety of forms of social deviance such as delinquent gangs, high rates of personal and property crime, and widespread distribution and consumption of drugs (Empey, 1978; Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 1985).

In an attempt to deal with disadvantaged youth, schools have come to recognize that the reasons for poor academic performance are multiple and interrelated and that students often manifest a variety of nonconforming behaviors (Neill, 1979; Quay & Allen, 1982). Such behaviors are consistent from early in their school careers to well into adulthood (Gottfredson, 1987). However, early intervention can be successful for improving grades of these youth (Clouser, 1989).

Schools' participation in cooperative efforts with community agencies to soften the effects of out-of-school liabilities range from minimal involvement to participation as full community partners. They work with a variety of human services agencies to provide several

services such as recreation, health, and counseling to at-risk students. An example of minimal participation is the school's role of functioning mainly as a referral agency to direct students to alternative schools which allow them to continue their schooling (Cahill, White, Lowe, & Jacobs, 1987).

Prevention and corrective actions may start any time. Even if children got off to a good start, situations change and influence each person differently. An accident, the loss of a loved one, divorce, alcohol-related circumstances, and financial hardships are factors that could start the need for help for rural students. The quality and quantity of variables affecting the life of children appear to be always increasing. Therefore, educators must be prepared to apply remedial and corrective action, as well as prevention at all ages (Kalinke, 1989).

Summary

A review of the literature reveals a paucity of information in the area of retention intervention programs to prevent academic failure specifically of rural junior high and middle school students. The literature was also lacking in information concerning characteristics of retention policies for rural junior high and middle schools. Unfortunately, there was very little in the literature on how rural junior high and middle schools communicated to parents specifically when the student's academic achievement was low. The literature was also lacking information in the area of prevention programs dealing with coordinated efforts among school administrators, teaching staff, parents, and counselors, who when working successfully together could have had an

enormous impact on academic achievement of junior high and middle school students and, as a result, could have avoided grade retention.

Finally, a review of literature provided evidence that poor achievement, grade retention, and dropping out of school are problems for educators and that students in rural districts probably have higher needs for intervention than other students and that their needs are different. The literature showed that the practice of retaining students in a grade for nonachievement of specific performance requirements has its supporters and opponents. The literature also showed that poor academic performance contributes to grade retention and students' dropping out of school. Many sources for poor academic achievement were given. The literature search also indicated many strategies that were used to increase the students' academic achievement.

Chapter III addresses the methodology, Chapter IV the data analysis, and Chapter V the summary, conclusions, and recommendations.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to determine what kinds of retention policies and retention intervention programs are being used to improve academic achievement in rural Michigan junior high and middle schools. The study also reports data that will prove helpful in demonstrating the preventive approaches used in Michigan schools. Another purpose of the study was to determine how these schools communicate to parents when a student's academic achievement is below the levels of academic competencies expected. Rural schools are defined by the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (1991), as having a population less than 2,500 by the U.S. Bureau of Census.

This chapter presents the methodology of the study, including the design, the sample selected, explanation of the pilot study conducted, the instrument used to collect pertinent data, and procedures used in the administration of the study.

Research Design

This was a descriptive study of retention policies and intervention programs in the state of Michigan with respect to rural junior high and middle schools. The areas studied included: demographic factors,

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retention policies, intervention programs, and communication to parents.

The demographic data included district size, which indicated if the school had a Class A, B, C, or D classification. School location was provided to indicate if the school was in the upper or lower peninsula. Data also indicated what grade levels of students were in the school buildings and which grade levels were included in the retention policy, as well as the annual retention rate of the school. Data were also collected on the procedure for communication to parents when student's academic achievement was low. The demographic data were provided to give a clearer picture of the schools involved in the study.

The following questions were compiled for the study to form the basis for the data collection to determine characteristics of retention policies and retention intervention programs in rural Michigan junior high and middle schools. Data collected from this study were used to answer the following questions:

1. What is the status of junior high and middle school grade retention policies?

2. Do most rural junior high and middle schools in Michigan have a grade retention policy?

3. What are the characteristics of these retention policies?

4. Do most rural junior high and middle schools have intervention programs that are used to help students improve their low academic achievement?

5. What are the characteristics of intervention programs?

6. How do rural Michigan junior high and middle schools

communicate to parents when a student's academic achievement is below the minimum levels of academic competencies expected?

Sample Population of the Study

The sample for this study consisted of 235 rural junior high or middle school administrators in the state of Michigan. The administrator in this study represents an individual who is involved with the academic performances of fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth, and/or ninth grade students. A list of current members of the Michigan Rural Education Association was made available by its president, Kenneth Drenth (1992). A list of additional rural schools was provided by the National Data Resource Center (1993). The names of the principals and addresses of their schools were taken from the Michigan High School Athletic Association (1992-93) School Directory.

Instrumentation

A researcher-designed instrument consisting of 16 items was used in this study to collect data. The time required to complete it was approximately 10 minutes. The instrument was designed to collect data concerning retention policies and intervention programs. Before developing this instrument, the researcher identified the type of information that would be required from study participants: district class size, if they were located in the upper or lower peninsula, if they retain students, if they had an intervention program, their annual retention rate, a description of their retention policy, a description of their intervention program, how they communicate with parents, and why the intervention program

has or has not been effective.

Items 1, 2, and 3 on the questionnaire provided demographic data to assist in providing more background about the schools involved in the study. Item 1 stated: "Please indicate your district's class size." They could indicate Class A, B, C, or D. Item 2 on the survey stated: "Please indicate the student population by grade level for students in your school building." They could check the boxes for Grades 5, 6, 7, 8, and/or 9. Item 3 stated: "Please indicate whether you are located in the upper peninsula or lower peninsula." The respondents could check the appropriate peninsula so that the data could add to the demographic profile of schools participating in the study.

The following questions were addressed in Item 4 of the questionnaire: What is the status of junior high and middle school retention policies? Do most rural junior high and middle schools in Michigan have a grade retention policy? What are the characteristics of these retention policies? The data were organized in comparison tables by frequency and percentages.

Item 5 of the questionnaire addressed the following questions: Do most rural junior high and middle schools have intervention programs that are used to help students improve their low academic achievement? What are the characteristics of these programs? Data identifying these questions were reported in frequencies and percentages. The data were also organized in comparison tables.

The following question was dealt with in Item 6 of the questionnaire: How do rural Michigan junior high and middle schools communicate to the parents when student's academic achievement is below the

minimum levels of academic competencies expected? Data identifying the communication to parents were reported in frequencies and percentages. The data were also organized in comparison tables.

To validate the questionnaire, a pilot study was conducted using a random sample of 15 rural school administrators in the state of Michigan. Each of the 15 administrators received the following: a questionnaire (see Appendix A), a cover letter (see Appendix B), and a self-addressed, stamped envelope.

The pilot questionnaire had an additional sheet which inquired about the length of time the pilot questionnaire took to fill out, if any parts of the questionnaire were unclear, and suggestions for improving the questionnaire.

An evaluation of responses and/or comments provided by participants in the pilot study resulted in identifying elements of the instrument requiring modification. Following the modifications the instrument was administered to the sample population.

<div align="center">Administration</div>

Following the approval by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board (see Appendix G), the questionnaire (see Appendix C) was mailed to 235 rural school administrators. The administrators of these rural junior high and middle schools were identified as rural by the Michigan Rural Schools Association and the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics (1991) . Accompanying this instrument was a cover letter from the researcher (see Appendix D), a stamped, self-addressed envelope, and a postage-paid postcard (see

Appendix E).

The cover letter explained to the respondents who the researcher was and the purpose for gathering the data. It indicated how long the questionnaire would take to fill out and that their responses would be confidential. It also explained that they should return the self-addressed stamped postcard. The purpose of the postcard was to help identify those principals who did not return the questionnaire. If a self-addressed stamped postcard was returned, a follow-up letter and second question-naire was not sent to the principal.

To ensure the confidentiality of the respondents, there were no identifying marks on the questionnaires or the envelopes. Respondents were asked to mail the instrument in the self-addressed envelope pro-vided and then to mail the postcard separately. The postcard identified respondents and allowed for follow-up. After a period of 2 weeks, a follow-up letter, questionnaire, and self-addressed envelope were sent to administrators who had not responded (see Appendix F).

Analysis of Data

Data collected from survey items included both close-ended and open-ended items. Data also included photocopies of school retention policies and retention intervention programs.

Descriptive Statistics

Data collected for the study were analyzed using descriptive sta-tistics. Descriptive statistics are an effective method to describe and summarize data, and present it in the most usable form (Klugh, 1986).

Descriptive statistics were used for the following: district class size, location in the upper or lower peninsula, status on whether or not the school had a retention policy, which grade levels were included in this policy, annual retention rate, those responsible for recommending retention, status on whether or not the school had an intervention program, when the intervention was used, the school's indicators for a successful intervention, status on whether or not there was a policy or procedure for communicating to parents when a student's academic achievement was low, process by which the communication was done, and frequency of this communication.

Content Analysis

A content analysis was used to examine the retention policies and intervention programs because it is a method of studying and analyzing communication in a systematic, objective, and quantitative manner to measure variables (Kerlinger, 1986). Content analysis method was also used because of the large quantities of data and the need to establish categories. The content analysis also was used to enable the researcher to identify emerging characteristics or patterns from the open-ended comments. The following survey questions provided the focus for the administrators' open-ended comments:

1. "Please briefly describe your retention policy or send in a photocopy of it."

2. "Please briefly describe your intervention program, policy, or strategy or send in a photocopy of it."

3. "Please describe why your intervention program has or has not been effective."

Summary

This chapter presented an overview of the design and methodology of this study, including population, instruments, administrative procedures, and data analysis. Chapter IV addresses the data analysis and Chapter V the summary, conclusions, and recommendations.

CHAPTER IV

DATA ANALYSIS

The purpose of this study was to determine what kinds of retention policies and retention intervention programs are being used to improve academic achievement in rural Michigan junior high and middle schools. The study also reports data that will be helpful in demonstrating preventative approaches to address student retention. Another purpose of the study was to determine how these schools communicate to parents when a student's academic achievement is below the levels of academic competencies expected.

This chapter contains a review of the design and methodology of the study, which includes background data about the schools included in the study. The chapter provides analysis of data concerning retention policies and intervention programs. An analysis of the open-ended comments and a summary of the data analysis are also provided.

Review of Design and Methodology

This study used a researcher-designed instrument consisting of 16 survey items addressed to junior high and middle school principals. Items included: district size, upper or lower peninsula, if they retained students, if they had an intervention program, their annual retention rate, a description of their intervention program and retention policy, how they communicate with parents, and why the intervention program has or has not been effective.

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The subjects of this study were rural junior high and middle school principals in the state of Michigan. The principals of 235 rural junior high and middle schools in Michigan were mailed the survey. The schools were identified as rural by the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, and the Michigan Rural Schools Association.

A pilot survey was mailed to a random sample of 15 rural junior high and middle school principals from the state of Michigan. They were asked to be returned within 10 days in the stamped, self-addressed envelopes. Stamped, self-addressed postcards were sent to identify the pilot nonrespondents. Eleven principals responded to the pilot survey. Some modifications were made to the survey.

The modified survey was mailed to 220 rural junior high and middle school principals in March of 1993, and asked to be returned within 10 days in stamped, self-addressed envelopes. Stamped, self-addressed postcards were also sent to identify nonrespondents. One hundred and forty-five principals responded by the due date. All nonrespondents were mailed a follow-up letter, another survey, and a stamped, self-addressed envelope. Twenty-three additional principals responded to the follow-up letter. The response rate was 76%. The distribution and returns are summarized in Table 1.

Analysis of Responses

The following is an analysis of the responses that were collected from the survey that was sent out to the rural Michigan junior high and middle school principals. The survey contained four general sections.

Table 1

Summary of Survey Form Distribution and Return

Principals	$\underline{n}$	%
Survey forms mailed	235	100
Survey forms returned	179	76

The first was to gather background information about the districts that responded. The second gathered data pertaining to retention policies in the schools. The third section provided data about intervention programs, while the fourth section focused on the communication to parents when a student's academic achievement was low.

Descriptive data were collected from the survey. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the close-ended items of the survey. The intent was to describe and analyze systematically the responses from the survey of the rural Michigan junior high and middle school principals. A content analysis method was used to analyze the open-ended comments provided by administrators.

Analysis of Close-Ended Items

Background Data About Schools

The first three questions of the survey administered to the principals asked respondents (1) to indicate their district's class size, (2) to indicate the student population by grade level for students in their school building, and (3) to indicate whether they were located in the upper or lower peninsula of Michigan.

Districts' Class Size

This study used the Michigan High School Athletic Association's (1992-93) classification for district size because it was the most familiar to the respondents. This classification is based on the fourth Friday student enrollment count in Grades 9 through 12. In the 1992-93 school year, schools with a student enrollment of 943 or more were classified as A. The schools with an enrollment between 942 and 497 were classified as B. The schools classified as C had enrollments between 496 and 256. Schools with enrollments of 255 and fewer students were classified as D schools.

Of the 179 respondents, 4 (2%) identified their districts as size A, 10 (6%) identified their districts as size B, 81 (45%) identified their districts as size C, and 84 (47%) identified their districts as size D. Data are reported in Table 2.

Table 2

Districts' Class Size

Class size	n	%
A	4	2
B	10	6
C	81	45
D	84	47
Totals	179	100

School Population by Grade Level

Of the 179 responses sent, 173 (96%) were usable and four respondents did not respond to this item. Responses indicated that of the schools represented, 27 (16%) were buildings with Grade Levels 5-9 for the junior high or middle school, 30 (17%) were buildings with Grade Levels 5-8, 2 (1%) were buildings with Grade Levels 5-7, 2 (1%) were buildings with Grade Levels 6-9, 47 (27%) were buildings with Grade Levels 7-9, 35 (20%) were buildings with Grade Levels 6-8, 28 (16%) were buildings with Grade Levels 7-8, 1 (1%) was a building with Grade Levels 6-7, and 1 (1%) was a building with Grade Levels 8-9. Data are reported in Table 3.

Table 3

Number and Percent of Schools by Grade Level

Grade level	$\underline{n}$	%
5-9	27	16
5-8	30	17
5-7	2	1
6-9	2	1
7-9	47	27
6-8	35	20
7-8	28	16
6-7	1	1
8-9	1	1
Totals	173	100

Upper or Lower Peninsula Schools

All 179 (100%) participants responded to this item. Responses indicated 34 (19%) of the schools were located in the upper peninsula of Michigan and 145 (81%) were located in the lower peninsula of Michigan. Data are reported in Table 4.

Table 4

Upper or Lower Peninsula

Location	n	%
Upper peninsula	34	19
Lower peninsula	145	81
Totals	179	100

Facts and Characteristics of Retention Policies

In this section each of the six research questions is addressed. Tables are used to present data. The first three research questions inquired:

1. "What is the status of junior high and middle school grade retention policies?"

2. "Do most rural junior high and middle schools in Michigan have a grade retention policy?"

3. "What are the characteristics of these retention policies?"

These three questions were addressed in Item 4 of the survey.

The first part of Item 4 of the survey inquired: "Do you have a retention policy in your school?" Data are reported in Table 5.

Table 5

Retention Policy Status

Response	n	%
Yes	142	79
No	37	21
Totals	179	100

Thirty-seven (21%) principals reported that their schools did not have a retention policy. One hundred and forty-two (79%) principals reported that they did have a retention policy in their building.

The second part of Item 4 on the survey requested: "If yes, please indicate the grade levels included in this policy." The three most common responses in descending order are: (1) Grade Levels 7-8, 55 (31%) schools; (2) Grade Levels 6-8, 29 (17%) schools; and (3) Grade Levels 5-8, 26 (15%) schools. Data are reported in Table 6.

The third question concerning the retention policy was: "What is the annual retention rate of your school in percentage?" Of the 142 (79%) principals who responded that they did have a retention policy, 138 (97%) responded to this question, responses indicated a mean retention rate of 2.03%. The range for the retention rate was from 0% to 13%.

Table 6

Grade Levels Included in the Retention Policy

Grade levels	n	%
7-8	55	31
6-8	29	17
5-8	26	15
Totals	110	63

The fourth part of Item 4 inquired: "If your school has a retention policy, who is responsible for recommending retention?" Data are reported in Table 7. The options that were made available for them to choose from were as follows: principal, teacher, counselor, school team, parent, and other. One hundred and eight (79%) identified the principal as one of the people responsible for recommending retention. The data collected indicated 87 (64%) respondents identified a teacher as one of the people responsible for recommending retention. Counselors were identified 62 (46%) times. A school team was identified 61 (45%) times. Parents were identified 51 (38%) times. There were 7 (5%) identified as other; they included the superintendent, student, school social worker, or school psychologist.

The last question pertaining to the retention policy stated: "Please briefly describe your retention policy or send in a photocopy of it." The eight most common characteristics of all the respondents were: (1) no specific retention criteria, each student with low academic

Table 7

Those Responsible for Recommending Retention

Individual	n	%
Principal	108	79
Teacher	87	64
Counselor	62	46
School team	61	45
Parent	51	38
Other	7	5

achievement was examined and dealt with individually, 39 (30%); (2) retaining a student if two or more core or academic classes were failed, 35 (27%); (3) using a summer school program for those students not meeting achievement levels, 24 (19%); (4) retaining students if three or more of any classes were failed, 23 (18%); (5) repeating only the classes that they had failed while being promoted to the next grade level in the classes in which they had met the achievement levels, 20 (16%); (6) retaining a student if three or more core or academic classes were failed, 13 (10%); (7) retaining students if two or more of any classes were failed, 11 (9%); and (8) the parents of the students who have failed to achieve sufficient academic achievement have the final say on whether or not their child will be retained in a grade, 11 (9%). Data are reported in Table 8.

Table 8

Characteristics of Retention Policies

Characteristics	n	%
Each student dealt with individually	39	30
Two or more core classes	35	27
Summer school program	24	19
Three or more of any classes	23	18
Repeat only classes failed	20	16
Three or more core classes	13	10
Two or more of any classes	11	9
Parents have the final say on retention	11	9

Intervention Programs

The fourth research question asked: "Do most rural junior high and middle schools have intervention programs that are used to help students improve their low academic achievement?" This question was addressed in Item 5 of the survey, since intervention programs are designed to reduce the number of students who must be retained.

The first part of Item 5 asked: "Do you have an intervention program, policy, or strategy that you use to help students improve their low academic achievement?" Of the 179 respondents, 154 (86%) indicated that they did have an intervention program, policy, or strategy that they used to help students improve their low academic

achievement. There were 25 (14%) respondents who indicated that they did not have an intervention program. Data are reported in Table 9.

Table 9

Schools With Intervention Programs

Schools	n	%
Yes	154	86
No	25	14
Totals	179	100

The fifth research question inquired: "What are the characteristics of intervention programs?" This question was addressed in Items 5 and 7 of the survey.

The second part of Item 5 of the survey stated: "If yes, please indicate when this intervention is used." The respondents were given four options. Of the 154 respondents who indicated that they had an intervention program 124 (81%) used intervention at the first indication of academic difficulty. There were 50 (32%) respondents who used an intervention program when retention in grade was considered. Twenty-seven (18%) respondents used intervention when retention had occurred. Eighteen (12%) of the respondents indicated that intervention was used at a time other than these. Some of these other descriptions included: recommendation of staff member, with Chapter I program, with Student Assistance Program, and during summer school. Data are reported in Table 10.

Table 10

When Intervention Is Used

Used	n	%
At first indication of difficulty	124	81
When retention is considered	50	32
When retention occurred	27	18
Other	18	12

The third part of Item 5 asked: "What is/are your school's indicator(s) for a successful intervention?" Of the 154 respondents who had an intervention program 147 (95%) indicated that grades were an indicator for a successful intervention. Fifty-nine (38%) used achievement tests as an indicator. Under the choice of "other," 23 (15%) used teacher input or recommendation and 25 (16%) used a change in the student's behavior or attitude as an indicator. Nineteen (12%) used other tests as an indicator. Data are reported in Table 11.

The last part of Item 5 was an open-ended comment which was answered in narrative form. It stated: "Please briefly describe your intervention program, policy, or strategy or send in a photocopy of it." This question elicited open-ended responses which were organized into six of the most frequently mentioned categories. Examples of each of these six categories are given from the surveys that were returned by the respondents. Of the 154 respondents who indicated that they had an intervention program, data showed that 68 (44%) identified contacting the parent(s) and getting them involved as a characteristic of the

Table 11

Indicators for Successful Intervention

Indicators	n	%
Grades	147	95
Achievement tests	59	38
Change in behavior/attitude	25	16
Teacher input/recommendation	23	15
Other tests	19	12

intervention program; 57 (37%) indicated that teacher support/program modification; 55 (36%) identified tutoring as an intervention; 47 (31%) indicated the use of progress reports; 44 (29%) identified the use of a building team meeting to assist in the student's academic needs (this team can consist of teachers, principal, counselors, parents, school social worker, or school psychologist); and 21 (14%) indicated direct contact with the school counselor as a part of the intervention program. Data are reported in Table 12.

Item 7 was an open-ended comment which was answered in narrative form. It stated: "Please describe why your intervention program has or has not been effective." This question provided open-ended responses which were organized into three of the most frequently mentioned categories. Of the 154 principals who indicated that they had an intervention program, 127 principals responded to this question. Data collected indicated: 53 (42%) identified communication with parent/parent support as to whether or not the intervention was

Table 12

Intervention Program Characteristics

Characteristics	$\underline{n}$	%
Parent contact/involvement	68	44
Teacher support/program modification	57	37
Tutoring	55	36
Progress reports	47	31
Building team	44	29
Counselor	21	14

effective; 29 (23%) identified the school's team/individual teacher effort; 23 (18%) indicated the student's motivation for the effectiveness of the intervention; and 41 (32%) indicated a variety of other reasons. Data are reported in Table 13.

Table 13

Reasons for Effectiveness or Noneffectiveness
of Intervention Program

Reasons	$\underline{n}$	%
Communication/parental support	53	42
Team or teacher effort	29	23
Student motivation	23	18
Other	41	32

<u>Communication to Parents</u>

Research Question 6 asked: "How do rural Michigan junior high and middle schools communicate to parents when a student's academic achievement is below the minimum levels of academic competencies expected?" This question was addressed in Item 6 of the survey.

Item 6 on the survey dealt with the communication from the school to the parent(s) of the students with low academic achievement. The first portion of Item 6 asked: "Is there a policy or procedure for communication to parents when a student's academic achievement is low?" Of the 179 respondents, 175 (98%) indicated that they did have a policy or procedure for communication to parents. Data are reported in Table 14.

Table 14

Policy on Communicating With Parents

Policy	<u>n</u>	%
Yes	175	98
No	4	2
Totals	179	100

The second part of Item 6 asked: "If yes, is it done by . . .?" They were given the following choices: letter, phone, principal, teacher, and/or other. Of the 175 respondents who indicated that they had a policy or procedure for communicating to parents, the data indicated:

164 (94%) communicated to parents by letter, 118 (67%) indicated that the teacher communicated to the parents, 113 (65%) communicated by phone, 92 (53%) indicated that the principal communicated to the parents, and 31 (18%) indicated that they used some other type of communication; the most common of these were communication by the school counselor and orally at parent/teacher conferences or with parents because they all knew each other well because of the small size of the district. Data are reported in Table 15.

Table 15

How Communication Is Done

Communication	n	%
Letter	164	94
Teacher	118	67
Phone	113	65
Principal	92	53
Other	31	18

The third and last inquiry in Item 6 asked: "What is the frequency of this communication?" and gave the choices: daily, weekly, by grading period, and other. Communication at mid-grading period and upon request/as necessary were the most frequently given responses to the "other" category. Of the 175 respondents who indicated that they had a policy or procedure for communication to parents, the data collected showed: 105 (60%) communicated by the grading period, 78

(45%) communicated weekly to parents, 45 (26%) communicated at the mid-grading period, 30 (17%) communicated as necessary/upon request, and 23 (13%) communicated on a daily basis. Data are reported in Table 16.

Table 16

Frequency of Communication to Parents

Frequency	n	%
Grading period	105	60
Weekly	78	45
Mid-grading period	45	26
As necessary/upon request	30	17
Daily	23	13

Comparisons were made by the district's size. Class B, C, and D size school districts were used. Class A schools were not used because there were only four in the sample. There were 10 Class B schools, 81 Class C schools, and 84 Class D schools that responded to the survey. The first comparison was for those having a retention policy. Eight (80%) Class B, 67 (83%) Class C, and 63 (75%) Class D schools had a retention policy. Data are reported in Table 17.

The comparison of districts that had intervention programs indicated that 7 (70%) of the Class B schools, 71 (88%) of the Class C schools, and 73 (87%) of the Class D schools had intervention programs. Data are reported in Table 18.

Table 17

Number and Percent of Schools (by District Size)
Having a Retention Policy

District type	n	%
B	8	80
C	67	83
D	63	75

Table 18

Number and Percent of Schools (by District Size)
Having an Intervention Program

District	n	%
B	7	70
C	71	88
D	73	87

The comparison of schools with policies on communicating with parents indicated 10 (100%) of the Class B schools, 81 (100%) of the Class C schools, and 80 (95%) of the Class D schools had a policy. Data are reported in Table 19.

Comparisons on the mean retention rate of those schools which had a retention policy was completed. There were 138 respondents from the Class B, C, and D schools. The eight Class B districts had a mean retention rate of 1.19%. The 67 Class C districts had a 2.13%

Table 19

Policies on Communicating With Parents by District Size

District	n	%
B	10	100
C	81	100
D	80	95

retention rate, while the Class D districts had a 2.03% retention rate for their students. Data are reported in Table 20.

Table 20

Retention Rate by District Size

District	Mean	n
B	1.19	8
C	2.13	67
D	2.03	63

Comparisons were also made by peninsulas. The upper peninsula had 34 districts respond. The lower peninsula had 145 respondents. The first comparison was for those districts that had a retention policy. Twenty-eight (82%) of the upper peninsula schools had a retention policy, while 114 (79%) of the lower peninsula principals indicated that they had a retention policy. Data are reported in Table 21.

Table 21

Number and Percent of Schools Having
a Retention Policy by Peninsula

Peninsula	n	%
Upper	28	82
Lower	114	79

A comparison was done on the schools which had an intervention program. Twenty-six (77%) upper peninsula schools had intervention programs. One hundred and twenty-eight (88%) lower peninsula school principals indicated that they had an intervention program. Data are reported in Table 22.

Table 22

Number and Percent of Schools Having
Intervention Programs by Peninsula

Peninsula	n	%
Upper	26	77
Lower	128	88

A comparison was done with policies on communicating with parents of students with low academic achievement. One hundred seventy-five principals indicated that they had a policy for communicating to parents. Thirty-three (97%) upper peninsula and 142 (98%) lower peninsula schools had these policies. Data are reported in Table 23.

Table 23

Policy on Communication by Peninsula

Peninsula	n	%
Upper	33	97
Lower	142	98

One hundred and forty-two principals indicated that they had retention policies. Twenty-eight of these schools were in the upper peninsula; they had a retention rate of 1.65%. One hundred and four-teen of these schools were in the lower peninsula. These schools had a retention rate of 2.06%. Data are reported in Table 24.

Table 24

Mean Retention Rate Across Schools by Peninsula

Peninsula	Mean	n
Upper	1.65	28
Lower	2.06	114

A comparison was also made using the retention rate and the schools which did or did not have an intervention program. Of the 142 schools that indicated that they had a retention policy, 18 did not have an intervention program. Their retention rate was 2.22%. One hundred and twenty-four did have an intervention program for their students. Their retention rate was 1.95%. Data are reported in Table 25.

Table 25

Retention Rate by Schools With or Without
Intervention Programs

Intervention program	Mean	n
No	2.22	18
Yes	1.95	124

Analysis of Open-Ended Comments

An analysis of the open-ended comments from the survey instrument for Items 4, 5, and 7 was conducted. A content analysis was conducted looking for emerging patterns and characteristics for each of the open-ended comment responses. In each of these instances a number of emerging characteristics were found. The comments describing these characteristics were analyzed and categorized.

The last element of Item 4 asked: "Please briefly describe your retention policy or send in a photocopy of it." Eight emerging characteristics were identified: (1) 39 identified no specific retention criteria, each student with low academic achievement was dealt with individually; (2) 35 identified retaining a student if two or more core or academic classes were failed; (3) 24 identified using a summer school program for those students not meeting achievement levels; (4) 23 identified retaining students if three or more of any classes were failed; (5) 20 identified repeating only the classes that they had failed while being promoted to the next grade level in classes in which they had met the achievement

levels; (6) 13 identified retaining a student if three or more core or academic classes were failed; (7) 11 identified retaining students if two or more of any classes were failed; and (8) 11 identified the parents of the students who have failed to achieve sufficient academic achievement have the final say on whether or not their child will be retained in a grade. Examples from the open-ended comments which led to the emergence of the eight characteristics were recorded:

1. "No set standard, done on an individual basis."

2. "An individual evaluation of each student who fails two or more academic classes for the year."

3. "We do have a summer school program that is helpful so we don't have too many retentions."

4. "If a student fails three out of seven classes, they have an opportunity to retake the failed classes in summer school or repeat the grade."

5. "If a student fails a class in the seventh or eighth grade, he has to retake the class."

6. "Seventh and eighth grade--retained if three academic classes failed."

7. "Students with two failures (seven possible classes) for a year are retained."

8. "Parent has final say."

The last element of Item 5 asked: "Please briefly describe your intervention program, policy, or strategy or send in a photocopy of it." Six emerging characteristics were identified: (1) 68 identified contacting the parent(s) and getting them involved, (2) 57 identified teacher

support/program modification, (3) 55 identified tutoring, (4) 47 identified the use of progress reports, (5) 44 identified the use of a building team, and (6) 21 identified involvement with the school counselor. Examples from the open-ended comments which led to the emergence of the six characteristics were recorded:

1. "Principal meets with the student, notifies parent, recommends from weekly progress reports, daily assignment sheets, and/or tutoring."

2. "At-risk students work with a teacher each day one hour to work on assignments, check for homework, and build self-esteem."

3. "Eventually tutoring is offered several times per week if needed."

4. "At first indication we try to determine the cause for this low achievement. A counselor is usually responsible for this and then suggests next step which may involve daily progress reports, weekly reports, a tutor, or a last step might be consideration for special ed. testing."

5. "Extra tutoring, team meeting to include parent."

6. "Interventions are counseling, progress reports, tutorial classes for math and reading, one-on-one mentoring, team meetings, academic probation, parent shadowing, warning letters, and any other creative intervention necessary to succeed."

Item 7 asked: "Please describe why your intervention program has or has not been effective." For both the effective and noneffective programs, three emerging characteristics were identified: (1) 53 identified communication with parent/parent support, (2) 29 identified the

school's team/individual teacher effort, and (3) 23 identified the student's motivation. Examples from the open-ended comments which led to the emergence of the three characteristics were recorded:

1. "When it doesn't work, it is due to a breakdown in the communication between home and school or failure to follow through at home and school."

2. "Low retention rate--team effort."

3. "Intervention strategies success is in large part due to the student's desire to improve and parental support."

The analysis indicates that parental support and communication are an integral part of intervention programs. Parental involvement was a key ingredient to many of the respondents.

Summary

There were six emerging characteristics from the analysis. These six items were related to the six research questions on which the study was based: (1) the status of present retention policies, (2) how many schools had retention policies, (3) the characteristics of these retention policies, (4) how many schools had intervention programs, (5) the characteristics of these intervention programs, and (6) how these schools communicated to parents when the student's academic achievement was low.

Rural Michigan junior high and middle schools have a variety of retention policies that are used in their districts when students have poor academic achievement. Some are very elaborate and complicated, while others are short and simple. Data indicated that grade Levels 7 and 8

were the most commonly included in retention policies and that the mean retention rate for these schools was 2.03%.

By analyzing the data from the surveys, it was found that of the schools participating most rural junior high and middle schools in Michigan do have a retention policy. These data were consistent for all class sizes of schools and both peninsulas.

Choosing from a checklist of characteristics, the respondents indicated that the principal of the building most frequently was the person responsible for recommending retention. This was followed by teachers, counselors, a school team, and the parent making the recommendation.

The data collected in the study also indicated that preventive approaches can be beneficial to students by helping them reduce the number of failing grades that they receive. Strategies for future administration of intervention programs were provided. Schools could find components of this study to be a very valuable tool for their at-risk population. Schools could benefit from implementing some of the intervention characteristics listed in Table 12. These data could help schools avoid grade retention of students, and thereby avoid the negative effects that grade retention has on students.

The study reported data that are helpful in demonstrating the preventive approaches that are currently being employed. It also indicated how many rural junior high and middle schools in Michigan have a grade retention policy and what the characteristics of these retention policies are. The study also indicated how many rural junior high and middle schools have intervention programs and what the characteristics

of these intervention programs are.

The data analysis of the study was presented in this chapter. The analysis was related to the six research questions developed as a result of the literature review. A descriptive analysis was done of the survey, while a content analysis was done of the open-ended comments pertaining to the retention policies and intervention programs.

Chapter V includes a discussion of the findings of this study, recommendations for school personnel use of retention policies and intervention programs, and suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

The purpose of this study was to determine what kinds of retention policies and retention intervention programs are being used to improve academic achievement in rural Michigan junior high and middle schools. The study also reports data in Table 12 that will prove helpful in demonstrating the preventive approaches. Another purpose of the study was to determine how these schools communicate to parents when a student's academic achievement is below the levels of academic competencies expected.

This was a descriptive study of the retention policies and intervention programs in the state of Michigan with respect to rural junior high and middle schools. The focus of the study included: district size, location based on upper or lower peninsula, grade levels, retention policies, intervention programs, and communication to parents.

This chapter presents the following sections: summary, major findings, discussion, conclusions, and recommendations.

This study addressed the following research questions:

1. What is the status of junior high and middle school grade retention policies?

2. Do most rural junior high and middle schools in Michigan have a grade retention policy?

3. What are the characteristics of these retention policies?

4. Do most rural junior high and middle schools have intervention programs that are used to help students improve their low academic achievement?

5. What are the characteristics of these intervention programs?

6. How do rural Michigan junior high and middle schools communicate to parents when a student's academic achievement is below the minimum levels of academic competencies expected?

The sample of this study consisted of 235 rural Michigan junior high and/or middle school principals. A questionnaire was developed to gather data from these principals. These principals were identified as members of the Michigan Rural Education Association and by the National Center for Education Statistics as rural schools. The names of the principals and addresses of their schools were provided by the Michigan High School Athletic Association School Directory. Seventy-six percent of the principals responded.

A review of literature was conducted related to the six research questions designed to study the retention policies, retention intervention programs, and communication to parents. The review also focused on the background of retention and the guidelines for retention that many districts use.

Major Findings

The major findings of this study indicated that most rural Michigan junior high and middle schools surveyed have retention policies (79%), intervention programs (86%), and do communicate to parents when a

student's academic achievement is below the minimum levels of academic competencies expected (98%). The respondents indicated the following:

1. Most rural junior high and middle schools surveyed do have a grade retention policy. Seventy-nine percent of the principals who responded reported that they did have a retention policy in their building.

2. The status of junior high and middle school grade retention policies is that all class sizes of schools responding to the survey have a retention policy in both the upper and lower peninsula of Michigan and most often use it at the seventh and eighth grade level. Thirty-one percent of the schools that had retention policies used it for Grade Levels 7-8. Eighty percent of Class B, 83% of Class C, and 75% of Class D schools had a retention policy. Eighty-two percent of the upper peninsula schools and 79% of the lower peninsula schools who responded indicated that they had a retention policy.

3. Of the schools responding the most common characteristics of these retention policies are: The principals are most often (79%) the person who is responsible for recommending retention, students with low academic achievement are most commonly dealt with individually by the schools (30%), students are considered for retention if they have failed two or more core classes (27%), students are considered for retention if they have failed three or more of any classes (18%), and some schools use a summer school program (19%).

4. Most rural junior high and middle schools among the respondents have intervention programs that are used to help students improve their low academic achievement. Eighty-six percent of the principals

reported that they use an intervention program in their building.

5. The most common characteristics of these intervention pro-
grams are: Most schools use them at the first indication of academic
difficulty (81%), grades were an indicator for a successful intervention
(95%), schools engage in contacting the parents and getting them in-
volved (44%), many schools have teacher support/program modification
(37%), and/or many schools use tutoring (36%).

6. Most rural Michigan junior high and middle schools among the
respondents communicate to parents (98%) when a student's academic
achievement is below the minimum levels of academic competencies
expected by letter (94%) on a weekly basis (45%) or by the grading
period (60%).

Additional findings of the study were that the annual mean reten-
tion rate for schools with a retention policy among the respondents was
2.03% and communication with parents/parent support (42%) was
indicated as the most important factor in the effectiveness or noneffec-
tiveness of the intervention program. Data indicated that the rural junior
high and middle schools which had intervention programs had a lower
retention rate (1.95%) than those which did not have an intervention
program (2.22%).

<p style="text-align:center;">Discussion</p>

Retention policies of schools vary from very lenient guidelines
which emphasize the positive aspects of social promotion to strict
achievement guidelines for promotion (Hubbell, 1980/1981). Retention
policies have their supporters (Ascher, 1988; Banerji, 1988; Marion,

1989) and opponents (Baenen & Hopkins, 1988; Cuddy, 1987; Eads, 1990; Niklason, 1987; Smith & Shepard, 1987; Towner, 1988). Some are very elaborate and complicated, while others are short and simple (Rose et al., 1983).

Data from the surveys indicated that most rural junior high and middle schools do have a retention policy. Data indicated that grade Levels 7 and 8 were the most commonly included in retention policies and that the mean retention rate for these schools was 2.03%. These data were consistent for all class sizes of schools and both peninsulas.

Retention policies have many different characteristics. The respondents indicated that principals most frequently were the person responsible for recommending retention. This was followed by teachers, counselors, a school team, and the parent making the recommendation (Young, 1980/1981).

The respondents indicated that in rural Michigan schools the retention policies commonly reviewed and dealt with each student individually, retained students if two or more core or academic classes were failed, and/or used a summer school program; however, some principals associated summer school with their intervention program. These conclusions are consistent with other studies on retention policies (Duval County Public Schools, 1979; Slavin & Madden, 1989).

Data indicated that most rural Michigan junior high and middle schools have intervention programs that are used to help students improve their low academic achievement. These data were consistent for all class sizes of schools and both peninsulas. The principals most frequently listed that the intervention was used at the first indication of

academic difficulty and that grades were the most common indicator for a successful intervention. Again, data are consistent with earlier studies (Helge, 1990; Natriello & McPartland, 1987).

The principals most frequently listed the following characteristics for their intervention programs which are consistent with other studies: contacting the parents and getting them involved (Madden et al., 1991), teacher support/program modifications (Bernal & Villarreal, 1990), tutoring (Bloom, 1984), progress reports (Madden et al., 1991), building teams (Miller & Bonsness, 1987), and counselor assistance (Helge, 1989; Reddick & Peach, 1990). The principals also most frequently listed communication and/or parent support (Rose et al., 1983) as a characteristic of success or failure in the program.

Most rural Michigan junior high and middle schools do have a policy or procedure for communicating to parents when a student's academic achievement is low. This was very encouraging since 98% of the respondents indicated that they had a policy or procedure. This communication to the parents was most frequently accomplished by letter, by the grading period, and/or on a weekly basis.

The data collected from the study correlated with data found from the research of literature. Retention policies and intervention programs vary greatly; however, the characteristics of parents having the final say, dealing with each student individually, and the use of summer school were common among retention policies. Using intervention at the first indication of academic difficulty, contacting parents, modifying programs, tutoring, and using grades as an indicator for a successful intervention were common among the intervention programs.

Conclusions

Based on the review of related literature and findings, many conclusions were drawn. Principals who participated appeared to be interested in this study. Seventy-six percent of the sampled school districts returned survey responses and 24 requested the results of the survey. There were some principals who were opposed to grade retention and some who were in favor of it. This is consistent with the literature review which demonstrated that grade retention has both many supporters and opponents.

Retention intervention programs vary from school to school. There are a number of methods that are being used to help students who are low academic achievers. Most rural Michigan junior high and middle schools see a need to communicate to parents when a student's academic achievement is low. An overwhelming majority of the respondents indicated that they did communicate to parents when a student's academic achievement was low.

In rural Michigan junior high and middle schools communication/ parental support is one of the main reasons cited for effectiveness or noneffectiveness of intervention programs. Data from Item 7 on the questionnaire supported this. A majority of the survey respondents indicated that the lack of or presence of communication/parental support was the most important indicator of the effectiveness or noneffectiveness of an intervention program.

The upper peninsula or lower peninsula location was not a factor as to whether or not the school had a retention policy, intervention

program, or policy for communicating to parents. The percentages of upper and lower peninsula schools that had retention policies and intervention programs were similar.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, the following recommendations are suggested:

1. Future studies should be conducted at the junior high and middle school level to examine the benefits of having intervention programs that help students who are having academic difficulty. It would assist others in seeing the positive results of intervention programs.

2. Future studies on intervention programs should be conducted to determine when intervention is used with students. This would help to determine at what point during students' poor academic achievement the intervention program should start and at what point it should be discontinued.

3. Future studies on intervention programs should be conducted to determine the characteristics of these programs. This would help to determine the most common and effective characteristics of intervention programs used to assist in the students' academic needs.

4. Future studies should be conducted on retention policies, intervention programs, and communication to parents, to improve academic achievement for rural junior high and middle school students. The academic achievement of students can be a factor for their success in the future.

5. Future studies on retention policies and intervention programs should include teachers, counselors, parents, and students. It would be very helpful to receive the insight of these individuals with respect to the issues of retention policies and intervention programs.

6. Future studies on retention policies and intervention programs should be conducted with other schools (urban, large city, suburban, etc.) and/or other grade levels. It would assist in clarifying and determining similarities and/or differences among other schools and/or grade levels with respect to retention policies and intervention programs.

This chapter included a summary, review of the major findings, discussion, conclusions, and recommendations. The focus of the study was on retention policies and intervention programs used in rural Michigan junior high and middle schools.

The overwhelming response to the survey questionnaire indicates a strong interest and concern about retention policies and intervention programs. The findings of the study indicate that intervention programs can be beneficial and effective for students' success. Intervention should be implemented at the first indication of academic difficulty, with systematic implementation of parent contact/cooperation for successful intervention.

Educators must stop and remind themselves that the fundamental reason students are in school is to learn. If learning is not taking place, something must be done to allow this to happen. Evidence clearly shows that poor academic achievement can lead to grade retention which can then lead to substance abuse and/or consequently to dropping out of school. Chances for potential dropouts to be successful are

minimal. Educators must use all resources available to ensure that students are successful. It is imperative that schools intervene early to ensure academic success for these students. Educators must understand that intervention programs are the key to prevention of retention and its consequences. The negative consequences of poor academic achievement must be prevented from ever reaching their final stage. This is probably best stated in the saying "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure."

APPENDICES

Appendix A

Pilot Questionnaire

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QUESTIONNAIRE

Please complete the short questionnaire by placing an "X" in the appropriate space. All information will be kept confidential.

For the purpose of the study, "retention policy" is defined as the policy or practice of holding a student in a grade because of low academic achievement.

1. Please indicate your district's class size.

   ☐ A   ☐ B   ☐ C   ☐ D

2. Please indicate the student population by grade level for students in your school building.

   _____ 5   _____ 6   _____ 7   _____ 8   _____ 9

3. Please indicate whether you are located in the Upper Peninsula or Lower Peninsula.

   ☐ Upper Peninsula   ☐ Lower Peninsula

4. Do you have a retention policy in your school?

   ☐ Yes   ☐ No

   If yes, please indicate the grade levels included in this policy.

   ☐ 5   ☐ 6   ☐ 7   ☐ 8   ☐ 9

   What is the annual retention rate of your school in percentage? _____ %

   If your school has a retention policy, who is responsible for recommending retention?
   (Check all that apply.)
   _____ Principal
   _____ Teacher
   _____ Counselor
   _____ School Team
   _____ Parent
   _____ Other (Please describe.) _____

   Please briefly describe your retention policy.

   _____

   _____

   _____

5. Do you have an intervention program, policy or strategy that you use to help students improve their low academic achievement?

   ☐ Yes   ☐ No

If yes, please indicate when this intervention is used. (Check all that apply.)
_____ At first indication of academic difficulty
_____ When retention in grade is considered
_____ When retention has occurred
_____ Other (Please describe.) _____

What is/are your school's indicator(s) for a successful intervention?
_____ Grades
_____ Achievement tests
_____ Other tests (Please describe.) _____
_____ Other (Please describe.) _____

Please briefly describe your intervention program, policy or strategy.

_____

_____

_____

6.   Is there a policy or procedure for communication to parents when a student's academic achievement is low?

☐ Yes   ☐ No

If yes, is it done by
_____ Letter
_____ Phone
_____ Principal
_____ Teacher
_____ Other (Please describe.) _____

What is the frequency of this communication?
_____ Daily
_____ Weekly
_____ By grading period
_____ Other (Please describe.) _____

7.   Please rate your intervention program, policy or strategy on how effective it is for improving academic performance.

1_____2_____3_____4_____5_____6_____7
Not   Average   Very
Effective   Effective

8.   Please describe why your intervention program has or has not been effective.

_____

_____

_____

As one of the 15 piloted administrators, please give your input here.

How long did it take for you to fill out the questionnaire? _____ minutes

Were there any parts of the questionnaire that were unclear or confusing?
_____ Yes _____ No

Which parts were unclear or confusing? _____

_____

_____

_____

Suggestions for improving the questionnaire _____

_____

_____

_____

Appendix B

Pilot Cover Letter

83

16955 Riley Street
Holland, MI. 49424
(616) 399-2113
Date, 1993

Mr. Jon Doe
School
Address
City, MI Zip code

Dear Mr. Doe:

My name is Randal Busscher, and I am a Doctoral candidate at Western Michigan University. I am an assistant junior-senior high principal in the Hamilton Community School District. As part of my dissertation, I need to gather some basic information about retention intervention programs in rural Michigan schools. The title of my dissertation/study is "A Study of Retention Intervention Programs Used In Rural Michigan Schools."

You are one of 15 junior high principals who have been selected to pilot this questionnaire. I would greatly appreciate it if in addition to filling out the questionnaire you could tell me how long it took you to fill it out and if there were any parts of the questionnaire that were unclear or confusing.

Would you please take the necessary time to fill out the questionnaire and return it within the next week in the enclosed postage-paid, self-addressed envelope. There are no identifying marks on the questionnaire in order to maintain the confidentiality of all responses. Also enclosed is a self-addressed stamped postcard which I ask that you return also. This is to identify nonrespondents only. Your participation in this survey is very important and is greatly appreciated.

I must emphasize that your responses will be confidential. Your participation is very important and appreciated. If you have any questions, please feel free to drop me a note or call me collect at home in the evening. If you would like an executive copy of the results of the study, just let me know.

Thank you in advance,

Randal E. Busscher

Enclosures

Appendix C

Questionnaire

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QUESTIONNAIRE

Please complete the short questionnaire by placing an "X" in the appropriate space. All information will be kept confidential.

For the purpose of the study, "retention policy" is defined as the policy or practice of holding a student in a grade because of low academic achievement.

1. Please indicate your district's class size.

    ☐ A   ☐ B   ☐ C   ☐ D

2. Please indicate the student population by grade level for students in your school building. (Check all that apply.)

    ☐ 5   ☐ 6   ☐ 7   ☐ 8   ☐ 9

3. Please indicate whether you are located in the Upper Peninsula or Lower Peninsula.

    ☐ Upper Peninsula   ☐ Lower Peninsula

4. Do you have a retention policy in your school?

    ☐ Yes   ☐ No

    If yes, please indicate the grade levels included in this policy.

    ☐ 5   ☐ 6   ☐ 7   ☐ 8   ☐ 9

    What is the annual retention rate of your school in percentage?   _____%

    If your school has a retention policy, who is responsible for recommending retention? (Check all that apply.)

    ___ Principal
    ___ Teacher
    ___ Counselor
    ___ School Team
    ___ Parent
    ___ Other (Please describe.) _____

    Please briefly describe your retention policy or send in a photocopy of it.

    _____

    _____

    _____

(over)

5. **Do you have an intervention program, policy or strategy that you use to help students improve their low academic achievement?**

☐ Yes   ☐ No

If yes, please indicate when this intervention is used. (Check all that apply.)
___ At first indication of academic difficulty
___ When retention in grade is considered
___ When retention has occurred
___ Other (Please describe.)_____

What is/are your school's indicator(s) for a successful intervention?
___ Grades
___ Achievement tests
___ Other tests (Please describe.)_____
___ Other (Please describe.)_____

Please briefly describe your intervention program, policy or strategy or send in a photocopy of it. _____

_____

_____

6. Is there a policy or procedure for communication to parents when a student's academic achievement is low?

☐ Yes   ☐ No

If yes, is it done by
___ Letter
___ Phone
___ Principal
___ Teacher
___ Other (Please describe.) _____

What is the frequency of this communication?
___ Daily
___ Weekly
___ By grading period
___ Other (Please describe.) _____

7. Please describe why your intervention program has or has not been effective.

_____

_____

_____

Appendix D

Cover Letter

88

16955 Riley Street
Holland, MI. 49424
(616) 399-2113
August 30, 1992

Mr. Jon Doe
School
City, MI. Zip code

Dear Mr. Doe:

My name is Randal Busscher, and I am a Doctoral candidate at Western Michigan University.
I am an assistant junior-senior high principal in the Hamilton Community School District.
As part of my dissertation, I need to gather some basic information about retention interven-
tion programs in rural Michigan schools. The title of my dissertation/study is "A Study of
Retention Intervention Programs Used In Rural Michigan Schools."

The results of this study will help to provide information to educators with better procedures
for improving the academic achievement of students. I am very anxious to obtain your
responses because your experience in this area will contribute significantly toward solving
some of the problems we face in this critical area of education.

Would you please take approximately 15 minutes to fill out the questionnaire and return it
prior to September 25 in the enclosed postage-paid, self-addressed envelope. There are no .
identifying marks on the questionnaire in order to maintain the confidentiality of all responses.
Also enclosed is a self-addressed stamped postcard which I ask that you return also. This is to
identify nonrespondents only. Your participation in this survey is very important and is
greatly appreciated.

I must emphasize that your responses will be confidential. Your participation is very impor-
tant and appreciated. If you have any questions, please feel free to drop me a note or call me
collect at home in the evening. If you would like an executive summary of the study, just let me
know.

Thank you in advance,

Randal E Busscher

Enclosures

Appendix E

Postcard

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Mr. Doe:

Please return this postcard separately from the questionnaire.

This postcard will be used to identify the non-respondents.

Since the questionnaire has no identification marks, you will be totally anonymous when we analyze the data.

Randal E Busscher

Appendix F

Follow-up Letter

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16955 Riley Street
Holland, MI. 49424
April 12, 1993

Dear Mr. Doe:

About three weeks ago, you received a packet of information that included a questionnaire. If, by the time you receive this note, you have already mailed back the questionnaire, please accept my sincere thanks.

If, by chance, you have not yet mailed in the questionnaire, I would just like to remind you that your participation in this study is very important. Would you please take a few moments to complete and return the questionnaire by Tuesday, April 20 in the self-addressed, stamped envelope which you received.

Thank you once again for your time.

Very truly yours,

Randal E Busscher

Appendix G

Approval Letter From the Human Subjects
Institutional Review Board

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WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY

Date: March 19, 1993

To: Randal Busscher

From: M. Michele Burnette, Chair *M M Bpk*

Re: HSIRB Project Number 93-03-18

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project entitled "A study of retention intervention programs used in rural Michigan schools" has been approved under the exempt category of review by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board. The conditions and duration of this approval are specified in the Policies of Western Michigan University. You may now begin to implement the research as described in the approval application.

You must seek reapproval for any changes in this design. You must also seek reapproval if the project extends beyond the termination date.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

Approval Termination: March 19, 1994

xc: Jenlink, EL

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