Bermuda Union of Teachers
Response to the Throne Speech, 2016

This is the first of a series of briefs produced by the Bermuda Union of Teachers in response to the Government's Throne Speech 2016.

The BUT agrees with the statement "Allowing a child to move through the system without demonstrating the understanding of concepts or developing skills to acceptable levels ensures continuing academic struggle and more." The Throne Speech states that "The Ministry will therefore end the practice of social promotion to ensure adequate development takes place before children are moved to another grade." However, the Government's proposal for addressing the challenge of student underachievement via the elimination of social promotion is poorly informed as their statement indicates an intention to implement a policy of retention in Bermuda's Public Schools.

Extensive research has been done on the impact of retention and social promotion on student achievement. The research is both consistent and clear: **neither social promotion nor retention has a positive impact on student achievement**. In particular, retention consistently results in a negative impact on the academic and socio-emotional development of students, when compared to students with similar challenges who were promoted.

The Impact of Retention

Myth	Fact
The "gift of time" will help students catch up.	Research reveals that students who are struggling academically do not typically catch up to comparable promoted peers.
Repeating the grade will promote student achievement and adjustment.	Research illustrates that retention is associated with negative outcomes in all academic areas (reading, math, science, and language arts) as well as in social and emotional adjustment (peer relationships, self-esteem, and problem behaviors).
Retention does no harm.	Research reveals that retention is predictive of emotional distress, low self-esteem, poor peer relations, cigarette use, alcohol and drug abuse, early onset of sexual activity, suicidal intentions, and violent behaviors during adolescence.
Retention prevents further school failure.	Retention is one of the most powerful predictors that a student will drop out of high school. Retained students are 5-10 times more likely to fail to complete high school than nonretained students.
Early retention is okay.	Comparisons of students who experienced retention in early grades versus those who were retained later fail to reveal benefits of early retention.

Reproduced from:
Jimerson, S. and Renshaw, T. 2012. *Retention and Social Promotion.* Principal Leadership. Retrieved from the World Wide Wed November 10, 2016 <
https://www.nasponline.org/Documents/Resources%20and%20Publications/Handouts/Families%20and%20Educators/NASSP_Grade_Retention_Sept_2012.pdf

Solutions to promote student achievement:

In the modern era, we must rely on sound research to inform our education policies. There are many factors that contribute to student performance, and the reality is that there is no magic wand for reversing low achievement. The American Federation of Teachers suggests three focus areas with the potential for significant impact; these are discussed below (Zimmerman, 2016). Rather than move backwards with a retention policy, the BUT urges the government to increase its support for current initiatives that can directly address the needs of learners who struggle.

Strategy 1: Early detection and intervention for students who are underperforming. In September 2015, just one academic cycle ago, the DOE rolled out training in the Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS). This program seeks to undergird quality instruction and support for all students while ensuring that any student with an area of challenge is quickly identified and provided with targeted and effective interventions. As part of this work, some students are now receiving reading interventions with the Leveled Literacy Intervention program. This program is referenced in the Throne Speech and should be supported and enhanced. A policy of retention would work against the guidelines of MTSS, not with them. A policy of retention would work against student success, not promote it.

Strategy 2: Teacher training to promote highly effective instruction. The Throne Speech suggests that work is ongoing to implement the Danielson Framework for Effective Teaching. The BUT supports and in fact spearheaded this training, but the statements in the Throne Speech are misleading to the public. Early work to introduce the Danielson's Framework has stalled and no recent discussions indicate a return to this work in the near future. The BUT calls on the Ministry to not only commit meaningful resources and attention to this, but we ask for consistency in pushing this work forward. A policy of retention shifts focus to determining student failure rather than emphasizing what a teacher can do to address their needs.

Strategy 3: Establishment of grade-level standards. Starting September, 2016, the Department of Education began a series of training initiatives to prepare teachers for the implementation of a Standards Based Grading approach to instruction and assessment. This initiative, also referenced in the Throne Speech, could serve to further strengthen instruction and assessment practices across the BPSS. In addition, the increased focus on effective assessment could facilitate swift identification of student weaknesses and targeted interventions. While the move to Standards Based Grading is very new, it is a step in the right direction. A policy of retention punishes our students with the most needs. Emphasis on clear standards and accurate assessment of student progress will drive achievement.

Research on Retention

There exists a wide body of rigorous research on the matters of retention and social promotion and their impact on student achievement. We encourage the public to educate themselves on the matter and advocate for policies that serve Bermuda's students well. A well-used reference for factors influencing student achievement is John Hattie's work in *Visible Learning*. After reviewing over 800 studies, Hattie studied six areas that contribute to learning: the student, the home, the school, the curricula, the teacher, and teaching and learning approaches. He went on to rank 138 influences on student achievement. Retention was listed almost to the bottom of the rankings as 1 of 7 factors that contributes negatively to student achievement.

Inherent in such a policy, is the mindset that the supports and structures offered to students that struggle are robust and responsive. This is not the case. Our students who come to school with a myriad of social, emotional and academic challenges have limited access to meaningful and sustained support due to limited resources both human and financial. Additionally, the constant changing of priorities without ensuring that initiatives are carried out with fidelity; but rather switching focus to something else has not bode our system well. The BUT will not support a policy of retention for Bermuda's students as it is detrimental to the well-being of our students. Rather, we recommend that instead of lip-service and piece meal implementations, the government invest in the sustained training and support of educators. What is needed is the early identification, and meaningful intervention and support for all learners.

References and Further Readings

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