How schools deal with lagging students

Thomas Buckley 4/1/93
Iberia Bureau Editor D. Col. A.

Schools do not like to promote children from one grade level to the next simply because they're older than other students in their class. But, sometimes, it's the only option, educators said.

Now, as schools aim at keeping class sizes appropriate, they're looking more closely at how to keep students from falling so far behind in the first place and how to catch up to their peers when they do.

In Iberia Parish, the schools work hard to prevent children from falling behind but do not promote children based solely on age, Assistant Superintendent Dale Henderson said.

Once a student falls two years of school, the situation is referred to a school district committee that investigates each student on a case-by-case basis, he said. Factors such as poor attendance (misses 20 lessons unexcused means automatic failure), home or health problems or a learning disability are considered in those cases, Henderson said.

The student may be shifted to special education classes, taken off summer school courses, catch up on attend remedial programs try to keep pace with his or her age group, Henderson said.

As for having older children in the younger grades, Henderson admits it can be difficult, but it is for the better of the students in the third grade that have 13-year-old children worked into a setting that is more age-appropriate, Henderson said.

I don't know if there is a direct correlation with disabilities, but it's probably not a really a good idea (to leave them there)," Henderson said.

In St. Mary Parish, Superintendent Roland Chevaller said the process for dealing with students who are falling behind is similar. He stressed that "every child is different, but they must perform at a certain level or not pass."

Night school for those over age 16, GED programs, summer school courses and education classes are among the options available to help students catch up with their peers, Chevaller said.

And, Chevaller said, as the school district has placed a heavy emphasis on good grades at schools at the elementary level, the failure rate has dropped during the past four years.

The major cause of failure in later grades is a lack of reading skills," Chevaller said.

"It is better for the children in the third grade to have that 13-year-old moved into a setting that is more age appropriate."

Dale Henderson
Iberia Parish schools assistant superintendent

Macguyers, said older children in younger grades is "sometimes necessary, sometimes it's depending on the student."

Also, both Henderson and Macguyars said the higher failure rates are grades in sixth through 10 is to be expected. "The number of students is a high rate that would like them, but bottlenecking is traditionally seen in the transition years," Henderson said.

Chevaller agreed.

"With everything that is going on, from puberty to growth, that's high rates," Chevaller said. "It's just tough being that age."

In St. Mary Parish, Superintendent Chuck Bauthier said a new reading program has been extremely effective and expects to see failure rates drop sharply as the students now in the program in grades K-3 grow older.

Last year in those grades, only about half of the students at that grade level had a proper reading level at the end of the year. Gauthier said the "Success For All" program has pushed students in grades K-3 above the year level. For example, the same number of students who could read at the second grade level at the end of the second grade are now able to read at a third grade level midway through the first-grade.

In the middle grades, a new program mandates that any student who begins to fall approximately behind and may fall a year behind is immediately placed in a one-on-one tutoring program in that subject.

And during summer school, a student who may be two years behind can buckle down and take classes that allow the student to test at that level, straight to an age-appropriate grade. That, however, is not the same issue as social promotion. Gauthier said.

The vast majority of students do pass the tests that catches them up to the rest, Gauthier said.

But he admits that is some cases, a form of social promotion is called for. "We don't have social promotion, but we use common sense."