

We have resources to help our children

The recently-released report of the Program for International Student Assessment has declared that, although New Brunswick's 15 year-olds are about average compared with their peer group in 32 other countries, when compared with the rest of Canada they come in dead last.

Since the report was published, there has been a public outcry in which the blame for this situation has been placed on the shoulders of everything, it seems, but the quality of the food in the schools' cafeterias. The favourite suspect which has emerged, however, appears to be "social promotion" – i.e. our reluctance to hold back underachieving students.

Regardless of what many may think, though, the insistence that students who do not achieve a passing grade should be held back until they do is at odds with its desired outcome. Numerous authoritative studies, whose credibility is beyond question, have concluded that being held back from the advancement of one's peer group gives a real sense of failure which actually impairs the underachiever's future ability to learn.

Many of us, in fact, have found ourselves in a class with someone who had been held back a year. In our experience, every one of those individuals remained at or near the bottom of the class. In hindsight, we realize that they also had trouble relating to the rest of us, although we were too young to understand why at the time.

The facts speak for themselves.

Brazil, which has a zero tolerance policy for failure, and where "social promotion" is not an option, also came in dead last – but last among the entire group of 32 countries which participated in the PISA study.

At the other end of the spectrum is Sweden. Its students ranked first in literacy, and sixth of 32 overall. Yet in Sweden, retention is not an option. Social promotion follows as night follows day. In the lower grades, schoolchildren have the same teacher – who teaches them every subject – for many years. They are encouraged to co-operate and to help each other to learn, working in groups.

There is no such thing as an "industrial" stream, and almost all Swedish students are able to make themselves understood in at least one other language than their own, despite – indeed, perhaps because of – the absence of segregated language immersion courses. Often left alone to work without supervision, the discipline students dread most is to hear the teacher say "you have disappointed me".

No, of course we can't all move to Sweden, even philosophically. The ingrained competitive culture in North America will always dictate that, here, there will be "first" and "last", and "winners" and "losers", in every endeavour in society, including education. We seem to prefer it that way.

Nevertheless, a solution to our problem of poor performance in the Canadian context may be found in early remedial intervention – very early. Surely the means now exist for us to be able to identify children who are having learning problems soon after they start to attend school. Having – hopefully - adopted a policy of "social promotion" in all but the most exceptional cases (and, admittedly, there always will be a few of those) we would owe it to these children to do our best to help them to keep abreast of their peers.

Of course, a successful early intervention program would be the absolute prerequisite of any policy of "social promotion". Too many of our children are already languishing at a level of education which, even though it is not, perhaps, beyond their intellectual means, is nevertheless outside the scope of their present academic capability.

It cannot be argued that we do not have the financial resources to make the necessary remedial facilities available. The costs of providing them at the time they are most needed will be more than offset by the savings in the overall costs to society which accrue in the long term.

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