
SOCIAL PROMOTION

Student Customers Being Sold a Bad Product

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Ending social promotion has become one of the rallying cries of the movement to improve schools and hold students to standards of achievement.

Politicians campaign on the issue; legislatures across the country have begun passing laws demanding it. There's just one problem.

What happens when almost half the students can't meet the standards?

That is the situation confronting Los Angeles and that city will not be the only one to face it. Last year, the California Legislature passed a law giving local districts two years to retool their systems to promote students based on academic achievement and not age. In response, Los Angeles decided to begin applying standards for promotion in the second through fifth grades, and in the eighth.

The only problem was that by their own estimate, as many as half the students wouldn't pass the standardized test. The system isn't failing these kids in high school. We're failing them in first grade.

But wait. Maybe the tests are wrong. Maybe they're unfair as applied to those who have just come into a system or school, who don't

speak English as a native tongue, who may be disadvantaged in taking standardized tests.

So the school board decided to get a second opinion, what they considered a better one. Last week the bad news came in: Based on teacher evaluations, 40 percent or more of the students in the nation's largest school district don't deserve to be promoted to the next grade.

These results raise any number of very troubling questions. Kids who fall behind in first grade never catch up. Why does it take a state law for teachers and schools to focus on near-majority failure when they are, apparently, quite aware of it? Imagine that 40 percent of the kids in any suburban school district were failing in the teacher's own estimation, every year. Wouldn't someone be screaming bloody murder, pointing out that these children would be handicapped for life as a result of what was going on in that very room or what wasn't?

For much of the last year, the Los Angeles School Board has been occupied by the question of what to do with a \$200 million half-finished high school, where construction has been halted because of environmental concerns that should have been addressed before construction ever began. The monumental incompetence of the school district in handling the project is one reason for the replacement of the popular, but ineffectual superintendent of schools. Now, before the project can go forward again, it has to go back and comply with the various governmental mandates intended to protect students from even the remotest possibility of environmental hazards.

There are at least a dozen different laws protecting what goes into a student's lungs. But who is protecting what goes into their heads or doesn't? The damage being done right now far exceeds the threat posed by buried methane gas.