

## Is Another Year Worth It?

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Isaac's parents looked around the room uncomfortably as his third grade teacher, Ms. Kim Davis continued, "I really think that Isaac should understand why this is happening. He made a lot of poor choices this year, and this is what happens." It was May 10<sup>th</sup> and Isaac, his teacher, and his parents were having a conference in his third grade classroom.

Isaac couldn't even look at his parents' faces, instead choosing to stare at his fingers that were covered in blue marker from art. Isaac was a tall third grader, and big for his age. He was wearing a giant T-shirt, which was probably his dad's, and some baggy jeans. His parents, first generation immigrants from Colombia, spoke very little English, and had to take off work from their jobs for this meeting. The art teacher had yelled at him for wasting the marker, and now here he was, in trouble for the second time today. Isaac knew that he wasn't the best student, or the best kid. They can't even understand half of this, he thought, as he listened vaguely to his mother ask about the math test, her accent thick. It was better than his father, who spoke only a few words of English.

"What about that test?" Ms. Diaz asked his teacher. "Math?" Isaac perked up. He knew that he hadn't done too bad on the math test. He tried really hard that day.

"Oh. Ms. Diaz, we're really not expecting Isaac to pass that test." Ms. Davis said. She sighed and looked at Isaac, "With the amount of work that Isaac did this year, I can't see how he would pass any math test. That's one of the reasons why another year in third grade is the only option. "

Isaac slumped back in his chair. "I don't care." he said. "Maybe it's your fault I'm bein' left back anyway," he continued, looking at Ms. Davis with a scowl. "Maybe I'll get a good teacher next year, one who teaches kids to pass tests."

His father sat with his arms crossed, not saying a word. His mother looked confused. Isaac could see that she wanted to ask questions, but didn't know what to say.

"Well," Ms. Davis said, visibly annoyed and starting to stand up, "Maybe Isaac will try a little harder to do his work and behave next year."

### P.S. 123

P.S. 123 is a Pre-K through 5 school in Manhattan. The school of about 400 children is 85% Hispanic, and 80% of the children are eligible for free lunch. The school is located in a neighborhood that is populated by many recent immigrants from South America and Central America, and many families speak only Spanish. The school has been working hard to increase parent involvement at school, and has been trying to have more consistent access to translators. Teachers often are not able to have translators for important meetings with parents, and worry about the accuracy of the information that parents are receiving about testing as well as other issues. Though Ms. Davis asked for a translator for this meeting, the translator was unavailable at the times that Isaac's parents could come in.

At P.S. 123, almost 20% of the children in grades 2 and 5 had been retained at least once. By New York City policy, a child cannot repeat a grade more than once, and after the second year in a grade, the student moves on even if he or she has still not met the standards, or continues to have a "behavior problem."

Children who are retained are not always tested to see if they should receive intervention services. Intervention usually means one period a day in a smaller room, with a teacher and a small group. Carol Phyllis, the intervention teacher at the school, complained about having a schedule so packed that she couldn't see all of the kids that she needed to see, and it was nearly impossible to add another kid to her list. She knew that adding a student to her schedule meant even less time and attention for the children with whom she already worked. But, she really worried that students taking practice New York State tests during third and fifth grade, were not receiving any support when failing practice tests—as this should be an indication that they would have trouble passing the actual test. Failing on the test meant repeating the grade. She had spoken to the principal, Mr. Smith, many times about her concerns. He knew that the school needed to hire another intervention teacher, but they didn't have the funds to do so.

### Class 402, Third Grade

“Kim! How are you?” Jessica called out across the main office to her third grade colleague. Jessica was sad that the summer was over, but was excited to get back to school—a fresh start. She would begin her third year of teaching this year and was excited to see what it would bring. She was 29 and became a teacher after five years of working in marketing. Jessica was very invested in the success of the school, serving on the School Leadership Team, sitting on the hiring committee, and encouraging collaboration.

“Well, summer is really over, so you know...” Kim Davis replied sounding a little tired on what was the first early day for her in two months. It was the first day for teachers back at school, and people walked in and out of the office saying their hellos.

“By the way,” Kim continued, “It looks like my Isaac from last year is now your problem! He probably got a 1 on the test, of course, but with the effort he put in last year, he should be in third grade again regardless.”

“They aren't sure if he got a 1 on the state math test, are they?” Jessica asked.

“Well, they can estimate, and besides, should he really go on to fourth grade anyway? That would basically show the rest of his class that you can do nothing all year, get in trouble everyday, and still make it to the next grade!”

“So, do you have any suggestions for me? I really want to make sure he feels good about this year—even if it's his second time here.”

Kim sighed. “Jessica, just try to keep him out of trouble, be very firm with him, and don't worry—he can't be held over for a third time so it's not like he needs to show a certain level of improvement. He is an interesting kid. You might really enjoy working with him, I feel really horrible, to be honest, that I couldn't help him. I just couldn't find a connection with him. I'd suggest giving him an important classroom job to really keep him busy.”

Back in her classroom, Jessica began to think about Isaac, and how she could make this year better for him. She felt that it was wrong for him to be held over for failing a test that he possibly didn't really fail. Could they really be holding kids over by using “estimated” scores? Looking through the files, Jessica found a child who had spent two years in the second grade, and now would spend his second year in the third grade. He was two years older than his classmates, and if this cycle continued, he would leave elementary school four years older than his classmates—at the age of 14! Jessica found no evidence that Isaac had been tested for any sort of learning disability, only evidence of his “unacceptable” behavior. She wondered how she could make third grade different for him this year, and possibly successful.

### Student Retention

Research on student retention is divided. A 2004 study by Chicago researchers Nagaoka and Roderick<sup>1</sup> looked at the effects of ending social promotion in the Chicago public schools. They found retaining sixth graders had a negative influence on their reading skills, while retaining third graders had no academic effect. In 1995, Roderick found that retention made kids more likely to later drop out of school.<sup>2</sup> This didn't surprise Jessica since Isaac could be graduating from high school at age 20. And, that's if he didn't fail another grade.

### Isaac's Second Try at Third Grade

Isaac had spent the last year in a cycle of misbehaving in the classroom, and being punished. He started to see Alice, the school guidance counselor, because of the amount of times that he was in trouble over the past three years. The counselor, with an overloaded schedule saw Isaac when she could. Alice had noticed more aggressive behavior and anger in Isaac over the past year. She thought that if he went ahead to fourth grade, he would have continued in the same way. The kids in that grade had made up their minds about him, and many parents didn't want their kids to play with him. Maybe he could make some new friends with this fresh start. But, she also worried a lot about his being a ten year old in a third grade classroom full of eight year olds. He was already a large kid for his age, and his previous classmates' view of him as a bully was not helped by his size. Isaac was a very mature kid who kept failing in school, and now, three weeks into the new school year, Alice knew that it would keep getting worse unless something was very different this year.

In room 402, Jessica had a November parent teacher conference with Isaac's parents. She wanted to let them know about her concerns, but also that she really cared about Isaac having a successful year. Luckily, a colleague had come to translate for this meeting, and Jessica wanted to take advantage of this time to communicate her concerns.

"Mr. and Ms. Diaz, I have been really trying to get to know Isaac, and he is really trying to get to know this new class. I'm really worried about some things. I really want to help Isaac this year, but he has done hardly any work so far this year, and spends most of his time getting himself into trouble. He is just such a smart kid, especially in math, and I want to figure out a way to help him make good choices. He can't have another year like last year."

Mr. and Ms. Diaz communicated through the translator that they had heard this sort of news before. They didn't know what to do either, and looked tired and sad at this meeting. Jessica didn't want to spend all year punishing this kid, she wanted to get him excited about something. Isaac often spent lunch with Jessica doing work that he didn't complete, or just missed recess as a punishment. Despite Jessica's efforts to get to know him, Isaac acted sneaky, and was often caught stealing and lying in the classroom. His classmates were already wary of him.

"I would really like to work on getting Isaac evaluated by the school intervention team." Jessica continued. "I know that he tested out of ESL, but I think that there may be some other things going on, and we need to know so that we can really help him."

"They want the school to do whatever it can. They don't know what to do, and they are really worried too, especially about his reading and math," the translator communicated to Jessica.

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<sup>1</sup> Nagaoka, J. & Roderick, M. (2004). *Ending Social Promotion: The effects of retention*. Chicago: Consortium on Chicago School Research.

<sup>2</sup> Roderick, M. (1995). Grade retention and school dropout: Policy debate and research questions. *The Research Bulletin*, 15, 88-92.

Academically, Isaac was struggling. He seemed interested in math games when the class played them, but became defensive and rude when he had to talk about work that he had done, even when he had the right answer. Isaac was also reading on a second grade level, and refused to read during reading time, saying that he didn't want to read "baby books." Jessica wanted to have Isaac tested for learning disabilities by the intervention teacher, but knew that with the scheduling overload, she would have to make a strong case for him in order to make it happen.

Jessica decided to have Isaac act as a peer tutor for another student in the class who was really struggling in math. Giving Isaac and the other child the privilege of working in the hall and playing math games for one period a week, Jessica asked Isaac to help the other child and meet with her at the end of the period briefly to let her know how it was going. After just two weeks, Jessica had to move them inside because Isaac was seen trying to trip a second grader who was walking by.

### March Parent Teacher Conferences

After seven months into third grade in Jessica's class, Isaac was evaluated by the intervention team. They found what Alice has known—that Isaac had very low self esteem, and also some language processing problems that were responsible for some of his trouble reading. Alice had been coming by more consistently, and Jessica made a point to talk to her often.

At the March parent teacher conference, Jessica shared some positive news with Isaac's parents, and Isaac, who she asked to sit in on the conference.

"Well, Mr. and Ms. Diaz, I don't know if Isaac has told you, but he's been helping one of his classmates with math."

Isaac's mom looked at Isaac and nodded, looking pleased, and a little surprised. "So, he has been good?" she asked Jessica.

"It was a hard start; I think we all know that," Jessica said, looking at Isaac. "Isaac has been helping Matt since October, while it's only the past month that has been good, I think it's going to continue now. Isaac knows that he can really help him, and he knows that he doesn't want to go back to some of the behaviors from the fall, like bullying kids in the hall. It feels good to be trusted about something, right Isaac?"

Isaac shrugged, embarrassed, but smiling. "I guess. I haven't missed recess in two weeks."

After months of trying, and many rough periods, the peer tutoring was working for Isaac. While it was still very hard for Isaac to have a positive working relationship with another child, Alice and Jessica agreed that the peer tutoring was increasing Isaac's self esteem about math. But they were still troubled by his inability to make friends in the class. He sometimes still bullied kids, and seemed to get in trouble every time he went to recess.

Isaac was doing better with his work. He felt good about his math abilities, and volunteered to explain his ideas during math lessons. He told kids that he was good in math, and turned in all of his math work.

### Discussion Questions

1. When should students be retained?
2. What is the role of the teacher with students who have been retained? Should we teach them differently?
3. What is our responsibility to parents who don't speak English?
4. How should standardized tests be used? How should practice tests be used?