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COMMENTARY

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THE LESSON OF THE CUPCAKES: FIX SCHOOLS BY RESISTING GIMMICKS AND HEEDING EVIDENCE

This Commentary from NEPC Director Kevin Welner is a version of a piece that was published as part of series called “America the Fixable” at the Atlantic.com (<http://www.theatlantic.com/special-report/america-fixable/>). The edits at the Atlantic.com version change the framing (no cupcakes!) and remove the links to research.

An early episode of The Simpsons had Lisa carrying out a science fair experiment called *Is my brother dumber than a hamster?* She rigged up parallel enticements for each. The hamster reaches for a pellet, gets a shock, and learns to avoid the pellet. Bart grabs at a cupcake, is shocked, but does not learn: *grab* – “ouch!” – *grab* – “ouch!” – *grab* – “ouch!”

Welcome to the world of education policy. Once a lawmaker becomes fixated on a cupcake, no amount of evidence will dampen that pursuit. And recent years have provided no shortage of evidence-free fixations: [charter schools](#), [cyberschools](#), [private school vouchers](#), [teacher merit](#)

pay, evaluation of teachers based on students' test scores, and – most recently and most persistently – grade retention policies that require students to repeat a year in school.

Let's use grade retention to illustrate. States across the U.S. are adopting mandates requiring that third graders with low reading scores repeat the grade. The 'leave the student back' policy is being heavily marketed by the Foundation for Excellence in Education, an organization created by former Florida governor Jeb Bush. But retaining students is not a new idea. It's an experiment that's been tried on and off for generations, and it's been studied for almost that long.

The overarching message from research in this area is that retaining a low-scoring third grader will not help her do better than a similar classmate with similar scores who is moved along to fourth grade, but she will be more likely to eventually drop out.

Viewed from a taxpayer perspective, retaining a student will likely have one of two outcomes:

1. She may drop out, meaning she will pay about \$60,000 less in taxes over her lifetime, be more likely to commit crimes, and be more likely to depend on government assistance; or
2. She may complete high school, at a cost of an extra year of school – about \$10,000.

If retention had a substantial payoff, paying for an extra year of school would be worthwhile (although it nationally adds up to billions of dollars each year). But there's no benefit. With grade retention, we are paying more and getting a worse outcome.

That's the evidence. It's what we have learned (or should have learned) from decades of experience. Grade retention can be expected to have the same destructive results in 2012 as it did when it was tried ten or twenty or forty years ago – or any of the years in between. Yet our lawmakers do the same thing over and over again, each time expecting different results.

To be clear, “social promotion” – the movement of students from grade to grade with no meaningful intervention for those who fall behind – is also not supported by research evidence. Instead, as proven approaches to address the problem of early reading gaps, research supports high-quality early-childhood education, intensive early reading interventions, and smaller class sizes in early grades for at-risk students. These are all less costly and more effective than grade retention.

Evidence supports grade promotion combined with these sorts of interventions, and it clearly cautions against a systemic use of grade retention, even retention combined with additional academic support.

A reckless disregard of evidence is harmful. It leads to the waste of precious resources: our tax dollars and our children themselves. And grade retention is only one example of the larger problem.

The U.S. achievement gap, which is among the largest in the world, is the foreseeable and inevitable result of a corresponding gap in opportunities to learn provided to the nation's children. Disadvantaged children are confronted with obstacle after obstacle, from segregated housing and concentrated poverty to crumbling schools and inexperienced teachers; from hunger and inadequate health care to low-track, dead-end classes.

These opportunity gaps will not be closed by lawmakers who reach for cupcakes – policies like grade retention that are enticing and easily swallowed but that are ultimately malnourishing. Rather, progress will follow from policies that promote deep, systemic, long-term changes in a system that shortchanges children in so many ways.

Children learn when they are engaged. They learn when they are challenged and supported in safe, nurturing environments. They learn when their teachers are prepared and are also supported, so that they can provide an education that is engaging, stimulating and rigorous. None of these needs are met by today's gimmicky fads such as merit pay, vouchers, charter schools and cyberschools, or high-stakes evaluations of teachers, principals and schools based on student test scores.

So what makes Bart persist, in spite of the evidence? Has Lisa created a situation where Bart simply can't resist, where following his instincts and engrained way of thinking won't let him get what he wants and expects? Are there lessons here for lawmakers? Maybe Bart (and lawmakers) just can't imagine that something so attractive and obviously within reach can't be possible? Maybe they think they can outsmart past experience?

I'm reminded of a sign held up at Jon Stewart's 2010 Rally to Restore Sanity: "*What do we want? Evidence-based change. When do we want it? After peer review.*" While peer review is neither a precondition nor a guarantee of sound evidence, it does represent a process that forces attention to the quality of evidence. And that's the trick: to change the dynamics so that weak yet alluring policy choices become less attractive while evidence-supported policies become more attractive.

This can only be accomplished by changing the nature and content of our nation's policy discussions. Yet in writing this, I'm wondering if I'm also like Bart, in that I think – in spite of years of evidence – that it's reasonable to expect us as a nation to change the way we think and the way we make decisions.

Nonetheless, I do hold out hope, perhaps because the alternative is so unpalatable: continued diversion of effort and money to dead-end policies when so much evidence exists to point lawmakers toward best practices.

There are no miracle cures or magic beans. If we increase opportunities to learn, the result will be more learning; if we deny opportunities to learn, the result is equally predictable. Even a hamster can figure that out.
