A Return to the Little Red Schoolhouse
Michelle Abraham

Today's schools have standardized promotion requirements in the hopes that all students will be promoted in fairness. Like most states, Ohio's criteria for promotion in grade school include a passing grade in English composition, mathematics, science and reading. There are state-mandated benchmarks that must be met in all of these areas. The four levels of grading are: Advanced - student performs at a superior level; Proficient - student has a solid performance; Deficient - student's performance is lacking; Failing - student's performance is unsatisfactory. A student must be proficient or better in all areas to qualify for promotion. Also, if a student is not performing in the C-range or better in a majority of areas for the final four weeks of school, the school has the option of retaining that student. This sounds like a good plan, but how effective is it?

Alarmingaly, forty percent of Ohio students in K - 12 do not qualify for promotion. These are shocking numbers, yet proponents of the existing system consider this as evidence that this type of traditional evaluation is necessary to ensure the quality of our children's education. But, we must also consider that this same program has been used to evaluate students for decades. It was found that each year between 30-50% of students in elementary and middle schools would not have qualified for promotion (Ohio Fourth 81); however, the failure rate fell to 5% by the time these same students were ready for graduation (Ohio Twelfth 154). This drop in failure rates indicates the tests were not a reliable or valid representation of a student's ability to do well in school or of their right to be promoted. In addition, consider that many of the students were struggling in only one area. Each of these students would be denied promotion to higher levels of learning in many areas in which they are proficient because of a deficiency in only one area.

Additionally, the state of Ohio uses these proficiency tests to evaluate the schools themselves. The schools must pass all areas to retain accreditation. Approximately 93% of schools evaluated are failing in at least one area (1998-99). This creates problems, as teachers, under pressure to perform well, tend to teach toward the tests. Instead of having fun with their students and exploring areas related to the topic, the teacher focuses on the areas the students will be tested over. That is, their curriculum loses its wide range and tunnels towards the information covered on the tests. This tunneling tends to narrow our children's education.

The percentages of failures indicate change is needed. A new form of educating our children, which is really a return to the schoolhouse-type of education, is Mixed Age Education. MAE is an educational program built on the premise that different children learn different things at different rates. This program allows children to be organized not by age, but by skill level. The groups are generally divided into K-2 and 3-5. A child may be in Kindergarten level math and first level reading or fourth grade science and fifth grade English. The child's progress is frequently assessed for trouble areas and to determine when he or she is ready to advance to the next level in each individual area of teaching. A child's progress is directed toward third-grade and sixth-grade proficiency testing, which is designed to meet state standards.

MAE has many benefits for children. Children are allowed to advance at an individual pace. For example, a child who has mastered math can move into the next skill level in math even though that student still needs work on reading. The child who can read well above her peers is able to continue to read more advanced books and does not become bored or frustrated with
reading. A child would not be retained in all areas due to a weakness in one area. The child who has surpassed “first-grade” reading would go on the “second-grade” level, even though he/she is still in the “first-grade” math.

With MAE’s flexible-age grouping, children do not solely identify with same-aged peers and then feel a sense of frustration and lack of self-confidence when that entire group is advanced to the next educational level and they are not. With flexible-age grouping, each child moves through the different instructional groups independently and advancement does not occur for all but one or two. Instead, a number of students would be advanced each year, and a number would remain. Frequent assessment allows for teachers to follow more closely their students’ progress, and the teachers are able to give more support in the trouble areas. The children would be promoted at their own rate rather than at a subjective, age-based rate determined by state legislators who do not know the children and their personal weaknesses or strengths. No longer would a teacher feel obligated to promote a child based on age. The use of flexible-age grouping would also take care of the problem of social promotion. The child would remain in the appropriate skill level, receiving the needed attention in trouble areas, until he/she is completely ready to advance.

Another area of benefit for children would be interaction with children of other ages. During the course of the day they would be dealing with children as much as four years older or younger than themselves. Younger children learn skills and obtain information they would not normally receive from their peers. Older children are given an opportunity to test the skills they have learned and pass these skills on to younger children. By teaching these skills to younger children, older children have the opportunity to create a deeper understanding for themselves. Older children also learn leadership skills, which they pass onto the younger children who will need them in a few years. The children play off one another to learn and develop skills.

There are some difficulties to Mixed Age Education. It would be costly to implement, but the tens of millions of dollars spent each year on state-mandated testing, which would no longer be needed, would defray this cost. There would be additional education requirements for the teachers, but these additional courses would only make for better teachers. There would also be a need to retrain existing teachers. Teachers already possess most needed skills, so they would basically need only additional courses, which could be given during the implementation period. The expense of implementing the MAE program is negligible considering the benefits.

My eight-year-old daughter, who is in the third grade, would have benefitted greatly from this program. She excels in math and science, but has trouble reading. Each year they discuss holding her back because of her reading skills, and she is very upset and embarrassed by this (“only dumb kids have to repeat”). She is frustrated and lacks confidence in her abilities. With MAE she would have received the extra help she needed with reading, while continuing on with her math and science and developing a positive feeling about school. Yes, there would be difficulties in changing the existing system to Mixed Age Education; nevertheless, I feel that the benefits for the children far outweigh these difficulties. There are costs, but what price can we put on a well-educated, self-confident individual?

Works Cited

