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## Guest Commentary

### Students should advance from grade to grade only if they're ready

by [Mark Stegeman](#)

"Social promotion," in education, refers to passing students from grade to grade with little regard for their academic performance. President Bill Clinton wrote in 1998, "If we are going to go strong into the 21st century, we must continue to expand opportunity for all of our people. ... That is why I have fought for an ... end to social promotion. We cannot afford to let our children down when they need us the most."

Fourteen years later, the Tucson Unified School District has still not accepted that responsibility. After relaxing its promotion standards in the mid-1990s, TUSD relaxed them again in 2006.

As a result, almost all TUSD students past the second-grade advance to the next level, even if their achievement is below grade level. This practice leads to gross underperformance at higher grades: In 2011, 40 percent of TUSD's eighth-graders fell below the AIMS reading standard, and 48 percent fell far below the math standard. Both percentages are much higher than the statewide averages.

Arizona law expects more. ARS 15-701.C requires: "Pursuant to the guidelines that the state board of education distributes, the governing board of a school district shall ... prescribe criteria for the promotion of pupils from grade to grade. ... These criteria shall include accomplishment of the academic standards in at least reading, writing, mathematics, science and social studies, as determined by district assessment." Those standards and assessments hardly exist in TUSD.

The Arizona Daily Star, in a 2008 series, documented the gravity of the problem. Then-Superintendent Roger Pfeuffer admitted the inadequacy of TUSD's policy: "The state board gives the local education agency the authority to set the standards, and yet in our case, (TUSD's policy) basically ... goes back to the state standard; that's a no-win situation."

I have pressed this issue within TUSD, but the status quo is well-rooted. One respected local educator wrote: "Making eighth-grade promotion more significant than simple promotion to ninth-grade elevates the status of eighth-grade (and) works against our efforts to encourage students to understand that high school graduation is critical."

Yet common sense says that social promotion through middle school contributes directly to TUSD's 24 percent high school dropout rate. Students who arrive unprepared for high school are more likely to drop out. As the Star observed in 2008: "Many Tucson business leaders and experts say social promotion and grade inflation ultimately lead to a work force that's unprepared and has a scant grasp of skills, which bodes poorly for the region's economy and future."

Even among students who graduate from high school with strong grades, a large number of them are unprepared for college. We see this at the UA every year. Is this the best we can do, after a student spends 10,000-plus hours in our K-12 schools?

Our current practice not only leaves students unprepared for life, but also reduces their expectations for themselves. Setting a low bar sends the message, "Sorry, but we think that this is the best you can do." We do not even enforce our own standards, and routinely promote students even if they fail their courses. Why should they take standards seriously if TUSD does not take them seriously?

Some people claim that current practice is rooted in an out-of-date educational philosophy that emphasizes—but also misunderstands—students' self-esteem. Lasting self-esteem comes from achieving something that is genuinely difficult. Working hard to pass one demanding course does more for self-confidence than five pats on the back.

Of course, no one wants to hurt students who have already spent years in a system that has reduced their expectations and their performance. The purpose of setting a high bar is to do everything possible to help students get over it.

This will require radical changes. We should rethink the school day and calendar. Other options include alternative schools, where students can go to catch up; relaxing the concept of assigning middle and high school students to a single "grade"; and contracts with students and their families to ensure that they do all that they can to succeed.

The problem is urgent. It will take years to solve, but that only underscores the need to start now.

Mark Stegeman is a member of the TUSD governing board.

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