

PREFIRST PLACEMENT:
PARENT ATTITUDE SURVEY

THESIS

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CHAPTER I

In an early intervention attempt to reduce school failure many school districts across the country have instituted transitional classes for low-achieving students. One type of transitional class which exists in the Rochester City School District is a Prefirst Grade, which is designed for those students who have completed a year of kindergarten but who are not considered by school personnel to be ready to successfully move to first grade. Students enrolled in the prefirst grade generally are placed in a regular first grade at the end of the prefirst year.

As a prefirst grade teacher in the Rochester City Schools for the past three years I have witnessed many of the benefits of the program for those students enrolled in terms of language development, readiness skill mastery, growth in self confidence, and academic performance. As a review of the literature in Chapter II will show, there is disagreement between practitioners of prefirst transitional programs and research statistics concerning the academic growth that occurs in the prefirst year. This is an area which certainly requires additional study.

My concern in this paper, however, is the attitudes of the parents of prefirst students concerning placement in the program. It has been my experience that parents of students chosen for prefirst enrollment are generally

Parent Attitudes

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unhappy about the placement despite teachers' explanations of early intervention, developmental learning, and meeting individual needs. By the end of the pre-first year parents' attitudes seem to have changed in a positive way as parents see growth in their children's skills and self confidence. This study was undertaken to determine if, in fact, my observations about this parental attitude change are valid across the district, what reasons parents attribute the prefirst placement to, and what comments parents would make about their children being behind age-level peers because of the placement.

CHAPTER II

Review of the Literature

Although prefirst grade placement is an alternative to retention, because it generally involves an additional year of school, and in light of the demand for increased academic achievement, prefirst placement is viewed by many educators, parents, and students as a retention placement. Since this perception may affect the attitudes of parents surveyed, I will review literature in three areas: that which concerns the positive and negative effects of retention, that which concerns prefirst transitional classes, and that which concerns parent attitudes about placement.

Effects of Retention

What do we do with the student who has not satisfactorily mastered the essential skills taught in a particular subject area and who will most likely be unable to cope with the learning tasks at a higher level without frustration and failure? Ideally, each student would progress at his or her individual pace and be accepted at whatever level of achievement he or she is performing at; accepted and taken further by each teacher. In the one-room schoolhouse this was the case. But beginning in the mid-nineteenth century with the

increase in public-supported elementary education for all, graded schools began to replace the one-room schoolhouse. And with this graded system which could efficiently serve the increasing number of enrollees, the practice of grade retention had its beginning (Chafe, 1984). Students were promoted to the next grade when they had mastered the curriculum at that level and retained in grade if they had not.

The practice of retention continued until the 1930's when research began to question its value. In its place social promotion became the accepted norm; students were generally placed and promoted on the basis of their age rather than their level of academic achievement (Chafe, 1984).

With the recent movements for educational accountability, tighter academic standards, and increased academic achievement, renewed interest in grade retention has occurred. In his review of grade retention policies and practices, Chafe states: "The movement toward competency based education has been accompanied by skyrocketing retention rates" (1984, p.12).

The controversy over the negative effects of retention over the benefits of such practices has generated numerous studies over the years. In 1975 Jackson reviewed forty-four such research studies. He cate-

gorized these studies on the effects of retention under three headings:

- 1) those that compared retained students' progress with promoted students' progress,
- 2) those that compared the progress of retained students before and after retention, and
- 3) those that compared the progress of potential candidates for retention versus the progress of students actually retained.

Chafe (1984) concurs with Jackson that the conclusions of these studies are contradictory and in the case of those of headings 1 and 2 above are flawed in that the results are dependent on the research design used. Only three of the 44 studies reviewed by Jackson used the experimental research design (heading 3 above), and each of those three studies had additional problems including not being representative enough, studying only short-term effects, and relevance due to age of the study.

Chafe (1984) questions whether any study can objectively determine to what extent any growth in maturity is a result of being retained and to what extent that growth is a result of aging another year.

Overman (1986) reports on a variation of Jackson's

experimental design (heading 3) conducted in 1983 by Schuyler and Matter. Retained students were matched with promoted retention candidates and the academic progress of both groups was assessed over a three-year period. They found that while some students benefited from retention, most did not show as great a gain in either reading or math scores as promoted retention candidates. Reporting on these results, Overman (1986) comments that once a child had been retained, he or she never seemed to catch up with classmates -- "unless the retention occurred in first grade" (p. 609).

In their study "Success in Non-promoted First Grade Children. Final Report" Sandoval and Hughes (1981) point out that the effects of retention on academic achievement have not been clearly established. Research studies that point to a lack of academic achievement during the retained year do not target the cause of this negative influence. Is it a slower rate of growth, no growth, or continued deterioration? Studies that point to academic gains in achievement during the retained year do not consistently indicate the number of children who do benefit or the characteristics of those children.

To that end, Sandoval and Hughes sought in their 1981 study to provide empirical information about the

children for whom retention in first grade was likely to be effective; to provide a list of factors that predict success (defined in terms of academic gains, level of emotional development, amount of improvement in social skills, and assessment of overall progress by teachers and parents). They found five factors which predict success of retention:

- 1) possesses normal or near-normal intelligence,
- 2) made some academic progress during first year in first grade,
- 3) not performing at extremely low levels,
- 4) appears emotionally well-adjusted, and
- 5) demonstrates or is developing appropriate social skills.

Sandoval and Hughes (1981) caution that retention is not a successful experience for those students whose severe academic needs or serious social/emotional problems may be better served by Special Education.

In one of the only pieces of published research concerning the effects of retention on kindergarten students, Troidl (1984) studied students in the Mesa, Arizona, schools. This district has a written retention policy which states that students should be retained if

they are not successful 70 to 90 percent of the time. Kindergarten is the earliest students can be retained, but Troidl comments that kindergarten teachers have less testing information to guide them and little, if any, research statistics in making retention decisions at that level. Troidl compared test scores on a district criterion referenced test of retained kindergarteners and promoted potential retainees. He discovered that the low-achieving kindergarten students who were retained did better on the first grade test than did low achieving students who were not retained; and he concludes that low-achieving kindergarten students should be retained if at all possible. He cautions that since this is one of only two studies concerning kindergarten retention, the study should be replicated to see if the conclusions can be generalized.

Aside from the issue of academic growth is the important issue of the effects of retention on students' self esteem. While studies by Bock (1977), Morrison and Perry (1956), and Godfrey (1972) show that students who have failed a grade level lack confidence and self esteem, a two year study by Finlayson (1975) offers data which conflicts with these findings for early primary students.

Finlayson administered a self-concept scale on four occasions to groups of non-promoted students, promoted students, and "borderline" pupils. He concluded that non-promotion appears to have no effect on the self-concept of first grade students, the self-concept of non-promoted students continued to increase during the repeated school year while the self-concept of promoted and borderline students tended to decrease, and self-concept scores of the three groups do not significantly differ at the beginning and end of the study. Finlayson notes, however, that it is difficult to assess self-concept especially in young children.

In another study Sandoval and Fitzgerald (1985) interviewed three groups of high school students: former participants in a junior first grade program, students who had been retained in a grade, and matched controls. These researchers also collected data on the students past academic functioning. Results reveal no significant differences among the three groups in attitudes toward junior first grade placement and non promotion; the attitudes were positive for all three groups. There was a difference in academic functioning among the groups. Former junior first graders were at a par academically with peers;

grade repeaters showed less progress in high school than peers and had lower math grades.

In summary, while research is conflicting, Chafe (1984) concludes: 1) grade retention may be helpful for a small number of students, but it does not seem to be beneficial for most students, and 2) primary grade students, especially those in first grade, with good social/emotional adjustment can benefit most from retention.

Prefirst Transitional Classes

To return to our original question and modify it to reflect the students of this study: what do we do with the kindergarten student who has not successfully mastered kindergarten level skills and who will most likely be unable to cope with the learning tasks (primarily reading) in first grade without frustration and failure? And, additionally, how do we identify those students?

Bjorklund and Bjorklund (1988) report that according to Louise Ames of the Gesell Institute "early schooling is getting infinitely more difficult for children. In many cases, kindergarten today is taught the way first grade was 20 years ago. A curriculum that is too difficult for a five or six-year old is bound to produce failure" (p. 110). Fishman (1987) points out that one result of children starting nursery school and day care schooling programs as young as two is a more sophisticated curriculum in the early grades to prevent boredom.

While the reality of the modern kindergarten may be something we can't change, Uphoff (1987) suggests we can "change" the children to fit the curriculum. In defense of a developmentally appropriate early education,

Uphoff points to observable trends and positive changes which have begun:

- 1) assessing children for school readiness and using more than just academic ability criteria in determining promotion to first grade;
- 2) creating developmental kindergartens and transitional prefirst grades for children who are, by law, age ready but not developmentally ready for the next level of functioning;
- 3) "replacing" overplaced children for reasons other than academic failure;
- 4) changes in state school entrance age. Since 1975, twenty-three states have moved the entrance date to make all children older when they enter school.

The prefirst or transitional program is an alternative to retention in kindergarten for those students with academic difficulties. It is designed for those students who have not successfully mastered the skills considered prerequisites for successful performance in a first grade curriculum.

The rationale for transitional classes relies on

the developmental theory of Arnold Gesell who proposed that all humans progress through developmental stages that are not governed by chronological age. Gesell proposed that an individual's readiness to successfully deal with certain tasks is dictated by the developmental stage he or she is functioning in, and it is futile to introduce a child to tasks that are above his or her developmental level (Zinski, 1983).

In a study of the transition class programs which exist in the state of Rhode Island, Ostrowski (1988) reports that while no transition programs existed in the state in 1977, in 1987 60 percent of the state's districts have some type of transition program, the most common (83%) occurring at the prefirst level. These statistics, Ostrowski states, "imply that the transition between kindergarten and first grade is presenting significant problems to a multitude of elementary students" (p. 13). Overall 17% of Rhode Island's kindergarten students are placed into a prefirst transition class.

Zinski (1983) comments that a major problem with grade retention is that it is an intervention strategy implemented after failure. Proponents of developmental readiness, she comments, propose that intervention needs to occur before failure takes place. In her study

of the effects of a prefirst class placement compared to a first grade retention on reading achievement, Zinski (1983) reports that the curriculum in the transitional and first grade programs were different so that a student placed in a prefirst grade would move into first grade with his prefirst grade peers to experience a new teacher, new setting, and new curriculum. Meanwhile, first grade repeaters returned to the same grade level, same curriculum, and were aware that their peers were moving onward. The message of failure was much more evident to the repeater than to the transitional student who was maintaining an upward progression.

In terms of reading achievement, the transitional students studied attained the same level of academic functioning as the first grade repeaters with only one year's exposure to the first grade curriculum. Zinski emphasizes that since the prefirst students were those who would most probably have failed first grade had the intervention not taken place, the prefirst placement allowed them time to grow without wasting a year in a curriculum in which they could not succeed. She cautions, however, that the reading achievement results are based on group test performance and many extraneous

variables such as motivation, attention, and physical/emotional well being can affect test performance to a significant degree especially for young students who have shorter attention spans and less awareness of the test's importance.

Bjorklund and Bjorklund (1988) report on the success of prefirst transitional programs across the country. In Broward County, Florida, for example, there has been significant academic and social success in the prefirst program through six years of follow-up study.

In his review of research concerning prefirst placement, Gredler (1984) shows conflicting evidence to Zinski and Bjorklund and Bjorklund's view of the value of such transition placements. He reports on a 1972 study by Bell which compared the academic progress of 64 Detroit transition room students with than of 12 at-risk students of similar educational and psychological characteristics who were placed in a regular first grade. At the end of one year, the students in the regular first grade made greater gains in achievement than did the transition students in developing reading competence. At the end of the second school year, the differences in achievement level were not statistically significant, although those students promoted to regular first grade

did score higher on the comparison test. Bell concluded that these results indicate that the at-risk students "fared relatively well" in the regular first grade and reached this level of competence in only one year.

Gredler (1984) reports that the main reason given by administrators and teachers for introducing a prefirst program is that it reduces school failure. While proponents of the prefirst program point to enhancing the child's self concept, Gredler comments that Bell's research indicated that the prefirst students scored lower on a self-concept test than the at-risk students in the regular first grade.

Gredler discusses another study conducted in 1981 by Talmadge which showed that reading achievement scores on the Metropolitan Reading Test for children in a transition class (and therefore had two years in school) were no better than those for children who had one year in school.

Reporting on Raygor's 1972 study which compared test scores of 62 students recommended for kindergarten retention, Gredler (1984) reports that of these 62, 37 were placed in a prefirst program, 25 were retained in kindergarten, and 30 (whose parents refused either placement) were promoted to regular first grade. Raygor

discovered that those identified retainees who were promoted to first grade scored significantly lower on the Stanford Achievement Test at the end of first grade than did either the prefirst students or retainees who showed no significant test score differences (and who were also tested at the end of first grade). However, Gredler points out that when tests were conducted again at the end of fourth grade, initial reading test differences between the groups were not sustained.

Reviewing Matthews 1977 study, Gredler reports that a large number of transition room students were compared over a three-year period with several control groups: one group of those who qualified for transition room but were not placed there because of parental objection or lack of space, another group of children progressing at a normal rate in a regular class, another group of students retained in first grade, and a fourth group of regular class students who had entered kindergarten one year later than those in any other group. In second and third grade the transition room students did not perform significantly better than any group except those students who had been retained at the third grade level. The transition placement did not help those students catch up and perform at the same level in the third grade as

the average students.

In a study conducted in 1980 by Leinhardt, Gredler (1984) discusses the results obtained when predominately black Pittsburgh students who were eligible for transition class were divided into three groups; one group was taught with a specially devised individualized reading program in a regular first grade class, a second group was taught with a regular basal program in the first grade class; and a third group was taught using an individualized reading program in a prefirst class. The students who were taught using the individualized program in the first grade classroom outperformed the two other groups. While using this study to point to the ineffectiveness and "watered down" nature of transition programs, Gredler does point out that because of the small number of transition room eligible students using individualized reading materials in the first grade (N=9), the study should be replicated.

Gredler (1984) concludes: "the overall impression obtained from these studies is that the transition room, as currently operated in the American school system, does not result in adequate progress in reading skills for the children so placed" (p. 469). He suggests other alternatives to help at-risk students including a full-day

kindergarten and using a diagnostic-prescriptive program of reading readiness activities to improve basic pre-reading skills.

In an extensive study of transitional classes in the Austin, Texas, schools, where students can be promoted to second grade from the transitional class, Baenen and Hopkins (1988) point out that of those students in the 1983-84 transitional class who were "retained" (placed) in the regular first grade at the end of the transitional year, none has been retained in any grade in subsequent years. They do make the following suggestions based on their findings to make transition classes more effective:

- 1) they should be designed as a two-year program
- 2) they are designed to lead to promotion
- 3) a higher percentage of students are promoted
- 4) students are provided with supplemental help throughout their school years.

Baenen and Hopkins (1988) comment that evidence shows most transitional students to be "high maintenance" students (p. 17).

In 1981 Solem studied prefirst participants in the Sioux Falls, South Dakota, schools where the prefirst program has been in operation since 1970. Candidates

for the program, participation in which is optional and ultimately decided upon by parents, are identified by kindergarten teachers using their observations and judgment. Also taken into account are children's scores on the Yellow Brick Road Screening Test, Metropolitan Readiness Test, and Pupil Behavior Rating Scale.

Solem (1981) reports that children selected for prefirst usually display one or more of the following characteristics: hyperactivity, perceptual/motor deficiencies, daydreaming, short attention span, impulsiveness, memory/thinking disorders, perseveration, speech/language/hearing disorders, generally poor attitude toward self or school, and learning deficits in reading, math, writing, and spelling.

To answer the question of whether this transitional program helps youngsters succeed in first grade, Solem surveyed first grade teachers about achievement levels of former prefirst participants. In 1978, 25% of these youngsters ranked in the top quartile of the first grade class, 50% ranked in the second and third quartiles, and 25% in the lowest quartile. In 1980, 28% of former prefirst students ranked in the top quartile of their first grade class, 70% in the second and third quartiles, and

2% in the lowest quartile.

Having reviewed the retention practices in the Boulder, Colorado, School District, Smith and Shepard (1987) reject the prefirst placement alternative as no more successful than retention and recommend as an alternative to retention or transition class a decrease in grade isolation through more flexible structuring and providing services that prevent failure such as tutoring and summer school.

In response to our question of how do we identify those students who are not ready to meet the demands of a rigorous first grade program and who would benefit from a transition class placement, some districts reacting to demands for competency-based instruction and academic accountability have resorted to testing kindergarten students. Can students flunk kindergarten is a question asked and answered in the affirmative by Bowen (1988) who reports on 102,000 Georgia public school kindergarteners who took a state-mandated standardized written exam as part of a "readiness assessment" to determine whether they would be promoted to first grade. The results of the exam which is a pared-down version of the California Achievement

Test are given equal consideration with teacher's recommendation. Bowen reports of Yale Psychology Professor Edward Zizler's concern about the lasting impact of failing formalized test on these young students and the possibility of perpetuating a self-fulfilling prophecy for them,

Foglia (Sigmon and Foglia, 1988) is opposed to any mass standardized testing of kindergarten students on the grounds that for young children test scores don't accurately reflect the level of learning, there is the danger of misdiagnosis when placement is made on the basis of test scores for children who grow and learn so rapidly, and the tests are culture biased.

Sigmon (Sigmon and Foglia, 1988) suggests that testing prior to entering first grade would put some order to early intervention efforts which have been shown can provide a foundation of necessary skills. She proposes tests that would evaluate children's oral language, conceptual understanding, and gross and fine motor skills rather than formal standardized written tests. To remediate any developmental delays, Sigmon proposes that the child should have an opportunity to participate in a relaxed, growth-oriented classroom such as a repeat of kindergarten or prefirst class.

In summary, a review of research offers conflicting evidence concerning the benefits of prefirst placement over non-promotion or promotion to a regular first grade in terms of reading achievement and self-concept. A variety of testing instruments as well as teacher recommendation are used to determine prefirst placement. There is no uniformity of criteria at this time.

Literature Concerning Parent Attitudes

To some parents "holding a child back" is still seen as a stigma which implies there is something wrong with the child or that the parent has failed in some way (Bjorklund & Bjorklund, 1988). And yet with greater parent awareness of psychological research on child development (thanks to contributions from Piaget, Gesell, and recently author David Elkind) parents are more accepting of decisions to hold back children from kindergarten and first grade or have them repeat these grades than ever before (Fishman, 1987). The issue in staying back, according to Fishman, "is not intellect but what psychologists call 'developmental readiness'" (p. 69). These readiness qualities include attention span, ability to follow directions, visual perception, coordination, and small motor skills.

In 1980 Ames reported that a child's reaction to retention is largely dependent on how his parents and teachers react. She points out that parents and teachers should move quickly to correct mistakes in grade level placement, which should be based on behavioral age and not chronological age.

In their study of nonpromoted first graders, Sandoval

and Hughes (1981) found that children whose parents accepted and supported the placement were generally more successful than children whose parents did not.

In addition to a self-concept scale to assess the effects of retention, Finlayson (1975) conducted a parent survey near the end of his two-year study. He found that nearly half (45.9%) of parents were strongly in favor of their child being non-promoted. (He notes that this figure may reflect the fact that of the 48 children recommended for non-promotion only 25 were actually retained after parent conferences.) He also reported that 58.3% of parents of retainees stated that their child liked school more than the previous school year; 79.2% thought their nonpromoted child was more successful in school in the repeated year; 62.5% of parents perceived their child to be happier in the repeated year, while 37.5% of parents perceived their child to be as happy in the repeated year; and 100% of parents described their non-promoted child's self-concept as being positive.

Bjorklund and Bjorklund (1988) surveyed parents of prefirst students in Broward County, Florida, and report that 90% of those interviewed believe the program

positively affects achievement. They cite prefirst teacher Nancy Wengren's comment that parents are generally hesitant about the program at the beginning of the year, but by the end of the year most are certain they made the right choice.

Overman (1986) reports that parents and teachers tend to perceive the outcomes of retention more favorably than test results do. She reports that Schuyler and Matter suggest that this more favorable perception may reflect the parent's and teacher's need to justify their decision to retain or "they may actually see real differences in a child after retention, even though these differences cannot be measured by a standardized test" (p. 611).

CHAPTER III

Methodology

In January of 1989 I developed a questionnaire to survey attitudes of parents in the Rochester City School District concerning their children's placement and progress in prefirst grade. I trial-tested the questionnaire with five parents and used their suggestions to modify ambiguous wording of questions.

On February 22, 1989, questionnaires (copies of which are found at the end of the reference list for this paper) were mailed to the parents of 100 students currently enrolled in prefirst grade and 100 students who were enrolled in prefirst during the 1987-88 school year. These 200 students were chosen at random by the computer and represent students at the district's 26 schools which house prefirst programs. A self-addressed, stamped envelope was enclosed with the questionnaire for returning it to the Student Data Office.

By March 5, 1989, 43 of the 200 surveys had been completed by parents and returned. Another mailing was made to the 157 non-respondents. By March 18, 1989, 77 responses had been received. Over a period of the next four weeks, I made 238 survey-related phone calls,

attempting to obtain current phone numbers of students and conduct the survey over the phone for any of the 123 non-respondents whom I was able to contact. In this manner 37 additional surveys were completed, bringing the total number of completed responses to 114 for a 57% response rate. The total of 114 responses represents 59 responses from parents of current prefirst students and 55 responses from parents of former pre-first students. This telephone follow-up methodology minimized the probability of systematic bias among non-respondents in that I attempted to contact all non-respondents. No one contacted by telephone refused to respond to the survey.

Genny Morris tabulated the incoming data on the computer, and on April 25, 1989, the survey period officially ended.

CHAPTER IV

Survey Results

The tables that follow indicate the responses received for each of the questions asked. Responses are given in actual number of respondents and percent of total responses for the particular groups comprised of parents of current students (1988-89), parents of former students (1987-88), and the current and former parents combined (cumulative). Comments elaborate on responses where appropriate.

TABLE 1

Question 1: How did you feel when you were told your child would be placed in prefirst?

	Pleased	Satisfied	Dissatisfied	Very Displeased
Current:	17 (29%)	21 (36%)	12 (12%)	8 (14%)
Former:	9 (16%)	17 (31%)	15 (27%)	13 (24%)
Cumulative:	26 (23%)	38 (33%)	27 (24%)	21 (18%)

Comment: 56% of parents indicated a positive response (pleased or satisfied) to initial news of the placement. A greater number of parents of current students (64%) responded positively to initial news of the placement than did parents of former students (47%).

TABLE 2

Question 2: How well were the reasons for your child's placement explained to you?

	Very Well	Fairly Well	Not Well	Not At All
Current:	30 (51%)	21 (36%)	6 (10%)	1 (2%)
Former:	26 (47%)	18 (33%)	5 (9%)	6 (11%)
Cumulative:	56 (49%)	39 (34%)	11 (10%)	7 (6%)

Comment: Responses indicate that 83% of parents believe the reasons for placement were explained very well or fairly well.

TABLE 3

Question 3: How much do you think your child's age was a reason for placement in prefirst?

	Very Important	Some Importance	Little Importance	Not At All
Current:	11 (19%)	14 (24%)	9 (15%)	25 (42%)
Former:	2 (4%)	10 (18%)	16 (29%)	27 (49%)
Cumulative:	13 (11%)	24 (21%)	23 (20%)	52 (46%)

Comment: While more parents of present students (42%) than former (21%) perceive age to be a very important or of some importance reason for placement, most parents of both groups see this as of little or no importance (66%).

TABLE 4

Question 4: How much do you think your child's kindergarten class work was a reason for placement?

	Very Important	Some Importance	Little Importance	Not At All
Current:	30 (51%)	22 (37%)	3 (5%)	4 (7%)
Former:	27 (49%)	16 (29%)	7 (13%)	4 (7%)
Cumulative:	57 (50%)	38 (33%)	10 (9%)	8 (7%)

Comment: Cumulatively 83% of parents surveyed believe kindergarten class work to be very important or of some importance as a reason for prefirst placement.

TABLE 5

Question 5: How much do you think your child's behavior was a reason for placement?

	Very Important	Fairly Importance	Little Importance	Not At All
Current:	14 (24%)	11 (19%)	7 (12%)	27 (46%)
Former:	11 (20%)	13 (24%)	14 (25%)	17 (31%)
Cumulative:	25 (22%)	24 (21%)	21 (18%)	44 (39%)

Comment: Cumulatively 43% of those surveyed indicated that behavior was very important or of some importance as a reason for placement.

TABLE 6

Question 6: How well do you think the goals and activities of the prefirst program were explained to you?

	Very Well	Fairly Well	Not Well	Not At All
Current:	27 (46%)	17 (29%)	9 (15%)	4 (7%)
Former:	27 (49%)	19 (35%)	6 (11%)	3 (5%)
Cumulative:	54 (47%)	36 (32%)	16 (14%)	7 (6%)

Comment: Cumulatively 79% of parents felt the goals and activities of the prefirst program were explained very well or fairly well.

TABLE 7

Question 7: How well do you think your child is doing (did) in his reading/
math school work? Other school work?

	Very Well	Okay	Needs Improvement	Very Poorly
Current:	31 (53%)	13 (22%)	12 (20%)	1 (2%)
Former:	23 (42%)	17 (31%)	12 (22%)	2 (4%)
Cumulatively:	54 (47%)	30 (26%)	24 (21%)	3 (3%)

Comment: Cumulatively 74% of parents felt their child is doing or did very well or okay in reading/math and other school work in prefirst.

TABLE 8a

Question 8a: When you talk to your child, do you think s/he understands what you say better because of the work s/he does (did) in the prefirst program?

	Yes because of Prefirst work	Yes, nothing to do with prefirst	No
Current:	38 (64%)	19 (32%)	1 (2%)
Former:	30 (55%)	17 (31%)	6 (11%)
Cumulative:	68 (60%)	36 (32%)	7 (6%)

Comment: None

TABLE 8b

Question 8b: When you talk to your child do you think s/he answers more clearly because of the work s/he does (did) in prefirst?

	Yes because of Prefirst work	Yes, nothing to do with prefirst	No
Current:	37 (63%)	18 (31%)	2 (3%)
Former:	32 (58%)	17 (31%)	3 (5%)
Cumulative:	69 (61%)	35 (31%)	5 (4%)

Comment: None

TABLE 9

Question 9: Is (was) your child happier in school this year (last year) than s/he was in kindergarten?

	Much Happier	Somewhat Happy	Less Happy	Very Unhappy
Current:	31 (53%)	22 (37%)	3 (5%)	0 (0%)
Former:	25 (45%)	18 (33%)	5 (9%)	4 (7%)
Cumulative:	56 (49%)	40 (35%)	8 (7%)	4 (4%)

Comment: Cumulatively 84% of parents felt their children are (were) much happier or somewhat happier in prefirst than in kindergarten.

TABLE 10

Question 10: Does (did) your child believe she/he is (was) doing better in her/his school work in prefirst than in kindergarten?

	Yes In All	Yes In Most	No Not In All	No In None
Current:	38 (64%)	19 (32%)	2 (3%)	0 (0%)
Former:	30 (55%)	18 (33%)	2 (4%)	1 (2%)
Cumulative:	68 (60%)	37 (32%)	4 (4%)	1 (1%)

Comment: Cumulatively 92% of parents felt their children believed they were more successful in all or most of school work in prefirst than in kindergarten.

TABLE 11

Question 11: Does your child think s/he can do well in school in the future?

	Yes In All	Yes In Most	No Not In All	No In None
Current:	33 (56%)	25 (42%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Former:	37 (67%)	12 (22%)	5 (9%)	0 (0%)
Cumulative:	70 (61%)	37 (32%)	5 (4%)	0 (0%)

Comment: Cumulatively 94% of parents felt that their children believe they can do well in all or most of their school work in the future.

TABLE 12

Question 12: Do you think your child will do (did) better in school next year (this year) because s/he was in prefirst?

	Yes	No	Don't Know
Current:	40 (68%)	3 (5%)	15 (25%)
Former:	31 (56%)	7 (13%)	15 (27%)
Cumulative:	71 (61%)	10 (9%)	30 (26%)

Comment: A larger percentage of present students parents' (68%) than former students' parents (56%) see first grade success as a result of prefirst.

TABLE 13

Question 13: Do you think your child will do better in upper grades because s/he was in a prefirst program?

	Yes	No	Don't Know
Current:	36 (61%)	4 (7%)	18 (31%)
Former:	37 (67%)	5 (9%)	12 (22%)
Cumulative:	70 (61%)	9 (8%)	30 (26%)

Comment: There is no significant difference in the expectations of either group of parents for future upper-grade success as a result of the prefirst placement.

TABLE 14

Question 14: Do you think your child would have been successful in first grade if s/he had not been in prefirst?

	Yes	No	Don't Know
Current:	14 (24%)	31 (53%)	14 (24%)
Former:	16 (29%)	27 (49%)	9 (16%)
Cumulative:	30 (26%)	58 (51%)	23 (20%)

Comment: There is no significant difference in the responses of either group of parents for this question although the parents of former students have had the opportunity to observe their children's actual first grade performance.

TABLE 15

Question 15: Some parents believe their child will always be "behind" because of being in prefirst. What do you believe?

	Yes	No
Current:	7 (12%)	42 (71%)
Former:	9 (16%)	32 (58%)
Cumulative:	16 (14%)	74 (65%)

Comment: This was an open-ended response question which some parents chose not to answer while others shared their positive or negative feelings about the prefirst program. Positive comments concerning parents' beliefs that their children would not be behind included: (Table continued, next page)

...I think prefirst is an advantage
...he would be behind in his skills if not for prefirst
...it's a boost to him and to me
...it's better to be set back for one year than set back for life
...I did think so, but as I see his progress I know he's ahead
...my child will do better because of the attention given and size of class
...they will enter first grade with a feeling of self-worth and confidence
...it gives extra preparation
...most of his friends are ahead of him in grade but not in what they know
...they will do better because of learning more
...parents need to think of their child and not compare to others
...he would have been more behind if he didn't get help in prefirst
...it does them good to get a right start
...we need to let them take their time to do their best (Table continued)

...they would have been overwhelmed with frustration

...this kept him out of special ed

...it made him feel that he hadn't failed

...this is just where he should be

Comments of parents who believed their children would be behind included:

...kindergarten expectations are too high and should be changed

...the problems should have been noticed and the child worked with
in kindergarten

...the program should be cut and go back to the old system

...they'll never go to first grade; they'll be in a special class

...it's the same as kindergarten

TABLE 16

Question 16: Based on your child's experience in prefirst would you recommend it to other parents?

	Yes	No
Current:	49 (83%)	4 (7%)
Former:	45 (82%)	6 (11%)
Cumulative:	94 (82%)	10 (9%)

Comment: None

TABLE 17

Question 17: How did your feelings about your child's placement in prefirst change over the year?

	Happy Most Of Time	Unhappy Most Of Time	Unhappy at Start, Happy at End	Happy at Start	Displeased at End
Current:	24 (41%)	4 (7%)	22 (37%)	3 (5%)	0 (0%)
Former:	17 (31%)	8 (15%)	22 (40%)	5 (9%)	1 (1%)
Cumulative:	41 (36%)	12 (11%)	44 (39%)	8 (7%)	1 (1%)

Comment: Cumulatively 75% of parents' feelings about the placement were either happy most of the time or unhappy at the start but happy at the end.

CHAPTER V

Reflections and Recommendations

This survey was undertaken to determine 1) if my direct observation of parents' attitude change (from negative when told of prefirst placement to positive as the prefirst experience is completed) is generalizable across the district, 2) what reasons parents attributed the prefirst placement to, and 3) what comments parents would make about their child being behind age-level peers because of the placement.

In looking at the methodology used, it appears that the telephone follow-up to all non-respondents of the mailed survey minimized the probability of systematic bias among the non-respondents. In an urban setting with high rates of student mobility, the inability to obtain current addresses and telephone numbers for students negatively affects total response rates.

In terms of the construction of the survey, no question was included to provide a check for the reliability of the questionnaire. I recommend that a question of this type be included in the future.

Analysis of responses to the questions provide some interesting and valuable information about parent attitudes

concerning this early intervention effort and generate recommendations to improve it.

In analyzing responses to Question 2, although 83% of parents indicated that we are doing a good job of explaining reasons for placement in prefirst, for the 16% of respondents who did not feel that reasons were explained well or at all, we need to address greater effort. Research has shown that a child's reaction is largely dependent on how parents and teachers react (Ames, 1980). We need to do whatever is possible to cultivate positive attitudes about the placement in parents' minds.

In comparing results of Questions 1 and 2 concerning reactions to the initial news of placement and explanation of reasons for placement, it does not appear that the greater number of former students' parents who were displeased with the placement news is related to a significant failure to explain the reasons for placement to those parents.

In analyzing responses to Questions 3, 4, and 5, concerning parents' perceptions of reasons for placement, it appears that the greatest number of parents of both groups attribute placement in prefirst to inability to do the kindergarten work (83%). A

lesser number perceive behavior to be the reason for placement (43% responded that this was very important or of some importance). The reason for placement cited by the fewest number of respondents was age (32%). It would be interesting to survey the prefirst teachers concerning reasons for placement to see how teachers' perceptions compare with those of parents.

While 79% of parents felt that the goals and activities of the prefirst program were explained well or fairly well, this number should be increased if we are to get parent support and cooperation in our early intervention efforts.

Analysis of the results of Questions 8a and 8b concerning parents' perception of both oral comprehension and oral language production indicate that parents are seeing student progress in one of the primary prefirst program goals -- language development.

Analysis of responses to Questions 9, 10, 11, 12, and 13 indicate that in the eyes of parents the prefirst program is meeting another of its goals -- developing self-esteem and confidence in students and cultivating positive expectations for future success.

Analysis of Question 14 indicates that cumulatively

51% of parents do not believe their child would be (have been) successful in first grade if they had not been in prefirst. This figure could bear a significant relationship to the 56% of parents in Question 1 who were pleased or satisfied with the initial news of placement. Several respondents (13) indicated that although they were satisfied or pleased with the placement and although they believe their children were happier in prefirst and will do better in the future because of being in the program, they believe their child would have been successful in first grade if they had not been in prefirst. The responses to this question show the need for additional study concerning academic growth in the prefirst program compared with growth in a regular first grade.

The 82% of parents of either group who would recommend prefirst to other parents (Question 16) seems to indicate that despite parents' reactions to the placement and despite the number who feel their children would have been successful in first grade without the prefirst program, parents do see the program as being of value.

While analysis of change in attitude over time (Question 17) indicates only a cumulative 39% of responses of "unhappy at start, happy at end," the

combined 75% of parents who were either happy most of the time or unhappy at the start and happy at the end indicates a positive pattern of change from the cumulative 56% of parents who indicated being pleased or satisfied with initial news of the placement in Question 1. The responses to Question 17 indicate that my perceptions about parent attitude change concerning the prefirst program from negative to positive are not generalizable across the district.

In summary, I believe the prefirst parent attitude survey reflects, in the opinion of parents, the success of this early-intervention effort in meeting the needs of children and offering hope and encouragement for continued academic success. There is, however, a considerable difference in the view of the value of the prefirst program between practitioners and research findings (Gredler, 1984). In a 1987 study of retention practices, Ostrowski states "it is difficult to contradict the wisdom of so many teachers and parents, for these are the people most directly involved with children. Possibly researchers ask the wrong questions and thereby are missing something important about the practice of transition rooms, e.g., are transition classes a humane response to a rigid system?" (p. 24).

In light of conflicting research results concerning the benefits of a transition placement as an alternative to non-promotion or placement in first grade for at-risk students, I recommend further study by conducted, especially longitudinal, long-term study which compares actual prefirst students' academic progress with that of prefirst candidates who for lack of program are promoted to a regular first grade. I also recommend study of methods of determining prefirst candidates in an attempt to insure fairness and in the hope of eliminating standardized test results as an identifying criteria.

Despite the push to make kindergarten course work more sophisticated to prevent boredom for those children who have been enrolled in day-care "schooling" for several years, and despite Dr. Uphoff's (1987) fear that we can't change the curriculum, educators need to take a close look at the kindergarten curriculum in light of the capabilities and limitations of the children we teach. Without abandoning stimulating, challenging learning experiences and high expectations for growth, we need to ask if kindergarten is the place to begin the push for academic achievement, as measured by standardized tests. As Professor Edward Zigler of Yale points out, kindergarten should be

designed so that no child can fail (Bowen, 1988). We need to consider the statement of Bloom (1981), "Failure of children to succeed with learning tasks should be regarded as failure of curriculum and instruction rather than as a failure of the children," (p. 108) and be mindful of the effects of the message of failure that we place on children, especially young children.

While acknowledging statistics concerning drop-out rates for retained students (Baenen & Hopkins, 1988), and Chafe's (1984) question of whether we can ever objectively measure how much progress is the result of our instructional placement efforts and how much is the result of natural maturation and growth, we need to consider Elkind's comments about the "hurried child" and the stress experienced by the overplaced child which often results in a child who lacks joy and enthusiasm for learning (Bjorklund & Bjorklund, 1988).

In concluding support of all early intervention efforts I borrow from Solem (1981):

Plato, in The Republic, put it well: 'Don't you know that in every task the most important thing is the beginning, and especially when you have to deal with anything young and tender?' (p. 284).

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APPENDIX

- 8a) When you talk to your child, do you think s/he understands what you say better because of the work s/he did in the Prefirst Program?
 Yes, s/he understands because of his/her Prefirst work.
 Yes, s/he understands better, but it has nothing to do with Prefirst
 No, s/he doesn't understand any better.
- 8b) When you talk to your child do you think s/he answers more clearly because of the work s/he did in the Prefirst program?
 Yes, s/he answers more clearly because of the work in Prefirst.
 Yes, s/he understands better, but it has nothing to do with Prefirst.
 No, s/he doesn't understand any better.
- 9) Was your child happier in school last year than s/he was in Kindergarten?
 Yes, s/he was much happier. No, s/he was less happy.
 Yes, s/he was somewhat happy. No, s/he was very unhappy.
- 10) Did your child believe s/he was doing better in his/her school work in Prefirst than in Kindergarten?
 Yes, in all his/her work. No, not in all of his/her work.
 Yes, in some of his/her work. No, in none of his/her work.
- 11) Does your child think s/he can do well in school in the future?
 Yes, in all his/her work. No, not in all of his/her work.
 Yes, in most of his/her work. No, in none of his/her work.
- 12) Do you think that your child did better in school this year because s/he was in a Prefirst program?
 Yes No I don't know
- 13) Do you think that your child will do better in upper grades because s/he was in a Prefirst program?
 Yes No I don't know
- 14) Do you think your child would have been successful in First grade if s/he had not been in Prefirst?
 Yes No I don't know
- 15) Some parents believe their child will always be "behind" because of being in Prefirst. What do you believe?

USE THE SPACE ON THE BACK OF THIS PAGE.

- 16) Based on your child's experience in Prefirst would you recommend it to other parents?
 Yes No
- 17) How did your feelings about your child's placement in Prefirst change over the years?
 Happy about it most of the time Pleased in the beginning
 Unhappy about it most of the time Displeased at the end
 Unhappy at the start, but happy by the end

8a) When you talk to your child, do you think s/he understands what you say better because of the work s/he does in school?

Yes, s/he understands because of his/her school work.

Yes, s/he understands better, but it has nothing to do with school.

No, s/he doesn't understand any better.

8b) When you talk to your child do you think s/he answers more clearly because of the work s/he does in school?

Yes, s/he answers more clearly because of the work in school.

Yes, s/he understands better, but it has nothing to do with school.

No, s/he doesn't understand any better.

9) Is your child happier in school this year than s/he was last year?

Yes, s/he is very much happier.

No, s/he is less happy.

Yes, s/he is somewhat happy.

No, s/he is very unhappy.

10) Does your child believe she/he is doing better in his school work this year than last year?

Yes, in all his/her work.

No, not in all of his/her work.

Yes, in some of his/her work.

No, in none of his/her work.

11) Does your child think s/he can do well in school in the future?

Yes, in all his/her work.

No, not in all of his/her work.

Yes, in most of his/her work.

No, in none of his/her work.

12) Do you think that your child will do better in school next year because s/he was in a Prefirst program?

Yes

No

I don't know

13) Do you think that your child will do better in upper grades because s/he was in a Prefirst program?

Yes

No

I don't know

14) Do you think your child would have been successful in First grade if s/he had not been in Prefirst?

Yes

No

I don't know

15) Some parents believe their child will always be "behind" because of being in Prefirst. What do you believe?

USE THE SPACE ON THE BACK OF THIS PAGE.

16) Based on your child's experience in Prefirst would you recommend it to other parents?

Yes

No

17) How did your feelings about your child's placement in Prefirst change over the years?

Happy about it most of the time

Pleased in the beginning

Unhappy about it most of the time

Displeased at the end

Unhappy at the start, but happy by the end