## Grade Retention Guidelines For Students With Disabilities

According to the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP, 2016), approximately 2% of all students were retained in 2016. The highest retention rates are among minority and low-income students. A century of research, however, has failed to establish grade retention as an effective intervention for increasing academic performance or social competency. The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) generally advises against grade retention, citing a lack of evidence supporting its effectiveness and highlighting potential negative consequences. While some short-term academic gains may be observed after retention, research indicates these effects tend to diminish over time. Students who are retained are at greater risk for dropping out of school or developing behavior problems, are less likely to enroll in post-secondary education, and experience decreased ability to gain high-level employment. (NASP, 2003).

Careful consideration of the research is essential before making the decision to retain any student. Retaining students with disabilities, however, should be approached with even more deliberation and caution, since legal procedural safeguards could also be implicated if the decision impacts the student’s right to a free appropriate public education.

In general, setting standards for promoting any student, including a student with disabilities, is a general education function to be conducted in accordance with state or local standards. There are no state level standards or procedures in Colorado, so this process is governed by local board policy, typically identified as IKE, or practice. Under most public agencies’ policies and practice, including CSI’s, issues about a student’s grade level are general education issues determined by a team comprised of the student’s teachers, parents, and building principal, with the final decision to be made by the building principal.

Criteria for retention decisions for students with disabilities must take into account student attendance, whether the student has been retained before, and progress towards/completion of curriculum/IEP goals. Factors specific to students with disabilities, including transition planning, and the use of an alternate assessment, may also be weighed. For example, for each year that a student is retained, he or she forfeits a year of valuable transition services following high school, to which they are entitled under the Individual Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

In addition, the following must be considered and documented before retaining a student with a disability:

1. Evidence exists that retention is a viable intervention that will accelerate the student’s academic performance and allow them to catch up to and maintain skills with their grade-level peers.
2. All special education and related services documented on the student’s IEP (504) have been fully implemented and progress data documented.
3. Appropriate accommodations and modifications that enabled the student to access the curriculum successfully in spite of his or her disability were fully implemented in the general education classroom.
4. Adequate behavior interventions were implemented and monitored to improve student performance (i.e., organizational support, Functional Behavior Assessment).

The essential point is to make clear the distinctions between general education and special education decisions.  Most of the time, it will be appropriate to treat these decisions as general education matters. If a promotion or retention decision implicates the student’s right to FAPE, then the IEP team must, as with any other decision, examine all relevant documents, evaluations, teacher and parent reports, and other information in arriving at an appropriate promotion or retention decision for a student with a disability, consistent with that student’s individual needs and abilities.