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Public Education and Social Promotion Policy

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Your article, "City 'Social Promotion' Policy Comes to a Vote Tonight" [Dina Temple-Raston, page one, March 15, 2004], along with the other coverage of this week's stormy vote by the Panel for Educational Policy, punctuates an especially important issue. The issue is not whether to promote or retain. It is how to make sure that this is the exception, not the rule.

Research has shown that learning to read before third grade is essential to reading to learn after grade three. Reading must be the first skill and must be learned. If a child leaves kindergarten unable to decode the English language, a potential problem has just been promoted.

Intervention at the third-grade level is often too little, too late. While New York's school system struggles with providing before and after-school tutoring for the huge number of students already in the system who have fallen behind, I suggest Schools Chancellor Klein and Mayor Bloomberg take a hard look at existing programs that currently are working to ensure that children will be successful readers by third grade.

Many of these programs either go unnoticed or are ignored by City Hall. Some of these, such as the Reading Excellence and Discovery program, founded in 1999, although privately supported, are addressing one of the core problems K-3 students face in our city schools, the inability to read.

READ, with tight supervision, pairs successful high school students from the neighborhood in a one-to-one relationship with K-2 students who cannot read at grade level. It employs researchbased instructional strategies to help very young children reach grade-level reading proficiency while being influenced by positive role models.

Importantly, READ works. It has been proven many times over that the most important mental and learning patterns children build start well before they begin school and significantly evolve during the kindergarten through third grade-years.

Early intervention is optimal. Without it in place, America's undereducated will accumulate in dead-end jobs, on unemployment rolls, and in the nation's prisons. Unfortunately, a single loss of life in Iraq is a front-page story while at home, on a personal level, those we leave behind only make news if they commit a crime.

There is great potential for public education, if a culture of excellence and meritocracy can become its core. But instead of applying Band Aids to the problem after the patient has lost a great deal of blood, New York's public school leaders should both incorporate a philosophy of very early intervention and work closely with private organizations whose early-intervention results are proven. Success is possible, failure is not inevitable.