

# Third of Oakland Students Must Go to Summer School

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Almost a third of Oakland's students will begin mandatory summer school today, a troubling forecast of what other districts across California may soon face because of new laws ending the widespread "social promotion" of failing students.

An estimated 17,000 of Oakland's 51,000 students — a student population equal to the combined enrollments of the Palo Alto and Berkeley school districts — will miss the lazy days of summer vacation because of their poor academic performance during the past school year. They will not be taking enrichment courses but will be struggling to grasp basics. A re-

cord number of those youngsters also may be held back a grade this fall, depending on how well they do in summer school.

"It's very alarming," said Oakland school board President Noel Gallo. "Clearly, we didn't do a good job teaching them during the traditional school year. But unless the students and their parents bring a different attitude to school, we will be throwing money down the drain. Parents have to take responsibility for their children."

The dramatic numbers in Oakland are seen by educators as a precursor to what districts across the state may face in the next few years as they struggle with new California laws that require a get-

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# A Third of Students In Oakland Schools Face Summer Class

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tough attitude on social promotion — the practice of advancing students to the next grade level before they have mastered the skills of their existing grade.

More than half of California's students perform below grade level, according to a state education committee.

Mandatory summer school is a ripple effect of tougher promotion standards, since it is often framed as a child's last chance at remediation before they are flunked — or "retained" in the parlance of today's educators.

Oakland, criticized in the past for its lack of standards, is at least a year ahead of much of California on social promotion and summer school due to policies passed by the Oakland school board two years ago, well before the new state laws were passed last year.

Elementary school students in Oakland who do not achieve at least a C in reading and math must go to summer school, along with middle or high school students who do not earn Cs in core courses or who fail to earn the required credits for their grade level.

The Oakland policies, which are still being fine-tuned, also say elementary school students "should be retained" if they fail to meet certain grade and testing criteria.

Oakland, one of the few districts with a new retention policy, emphasizes giving students extra help through summer school, tutoring and other tactics before they take the punitive step of holding a student back. However, remediation is expensive, and it is unclear if the state is willing to foot what will be a substantial bill to educate children twice.

Despite a year's notice, the new, tougher promotion standards surprised some Oakland students, such as Montera Middle School eighth-grader D'Arte Boyd. He expected to go on to high school even though he failed all but one of his seven eighth-grade classes. Instead, he has been told that he will be an eighth-grader again next fall, not joining

his friends at Skyline or McClymonds high schools.

"In seventh grade, everybody got passed even if they failed everything," said D'Arte, who will be one of the students trying to recover a year of school during a month of summer school. "I thought it would be the same this year. If I'd known, I guess I would have done my homework. This was kind of a wake-up call for me."

A key to success is to try to offer a different program during the 19 to 29 days Oakland students will be in summer school than the one they received in the traditional school year, according to Shirley McDonald, summer school coordinator.

"It doesn't make sense to just make students repeat the same program they already failed," McDonald said. "And we're asking parents not to look at it as a free baby-sitting or child care service. The kids really are going to have to work."

Even President Clinton has jumped on the anti-social-promotion bandwagon, calling for an end to the practice in this year's State of the Union address. At least six states have passed laws calling for tougher promotion policies based on academics rather than social or emotional reasons. Chicago has received nationwide attention for sending tens of thousands of children to summer school and retaining thousands of eighth-graders.

Los Angeles is preparing to send 150,000 children to voluntary summer programs this year, with an eye toward mandatory summer school and an end to social promotion next year. The Long Beach and Compton schools also are in the limelight for developing innovative schools for children who are held back.

Due to new California laws, all districts are being required to draft new promotion standards in the course of the next school year and to require summer classes for struggling students.

"Summer is no longer a time when the pressure's off," said Oakland assistant superintendent Yolanda Peeks. "We're asking for a major shift in attitude. We have a very short time to try to make an academic difference."

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