

POSTOPINION

... But Business As Usual in New York

Board of Education officials were heartily congratulating themselves last week for what they hailed as the success of their summer-school program. But it was hard not to wonder if the nefarious concept of social promotion wasn't the real winner.

Only about 40 percent of the students who took the end-of-summer proficiency tests in math and reading passed them. But 63 percent of the students in grades 3 through 8 are being promoted.

You don't have to pass a summer-school math test — even a dumbed-down one — to figure out that something doesn't add up here.

In their defense, the folks at 110 Livingston St. insist that these results were far better than expected.

After all, the tests were much tougher this year and the minimum score for passing had been raised to something finally approaching reasonable expectations. (Although, significantly, even that doesn't meet the statewide standards established by the state Education Department.)

Indeed, Chancellor Harold Levy predicted before the summer that only half of the students would do well enough to be promoted. "This was rigorous, this was tough," says Board President Bill Thompson.

Well, yes — isn't that the idea?

Students who fail to handle material during the course of the school year shouldn't automatically be moved along to the next grade unless they prove they can compete.

But under the Board's promotion policy, the ultimate decision was left to the teachers — if they felt a student could perform at grade level, regardless of test scores, and had a satisfactory attendance record, that student was moved ahead.

Moreover, any student who had already been left back more than twice was automatically promoted, regardless of test scores — as was any eighth-grader older than 15.

As Jerry Cammerata, the Board member from Staten Island, noted, that creates the real possibility that rather than putting an end to social promotion, the board is in effect just "camouflaging it."

That social promotion is a pernicious practice that irreparably hurts the very students it's supposed to help is now widely acknowledged, especially by the new chancellor.

And this year's summer-school program was clearly an improvement over last year's chaotic mess.

But parents who want to ensure that their kids are really learning can't help but be disturbed by the ultimate results:

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