

# Praise and Questions for Summer School Program

By ABBY GOODNOUGH

As New York City's ambitious summer school program got under way last month, Schools Chancellor Harold O. Levy predicted that about half of the 63,000 students required to attend would do well enough to be promoted to the next grade.

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So Mr. Levy must have been pleased this week with the news that in fact, nearly two-thirds of the students who showed up for summer school would be promoted. His aides said the high success rate proved that the five-week program was not only effective, but also essential to improving a school system that has long allowed its weakest students to slip through the cracks. In particular, they said, this year's program was a triumph compared with last year's, when 8,600 students were mistakenly assigned to summer school and another 8,800 never showed up.

In truth, though, the results released on Wednesday raised more questions about the summer program than they answered. Direct comparisons with last year were impossible, because this year's program used a different test and scoring system.

And while 63 percent of the children who enrolled in summer school will be promoted, only about 40 percent passed the end-of-summer tests that measured their improvement over the five weeks. The promotion policy allows students to proceed to the next grade even if they fail the tests, as long as their teacher thinks they are ready.

Interpreting the results boils down to a glass-half-full, glass-half-empty argument. The outcome can be viewed positively by those who think that getting even 40 percent of struggling students across the threshold is a significant accomplishment. And they can be viewed negatively by those who feel that pushing children who have not passed basic reading and math tests into the next grade amounts to a subversion of the board's new and supposedly tougher promotion policy.

While most Board of Education members said they were confident that teachers made sound decisions about who should be promoted, they acknowledged that it was impossible to know whether every student moving to the next grade was adequately prepared.

"That's the part that we as board members are not fully briefed on, and it concerns me," said Jerry Cammarata, the member from Staten Island. "The worry here is that we are not totally ending social promotion, but camouflaging it."

But Robert Berne, vice president for academic affairs at New York University, argued that it was "to-

tally appropriate" not to base promotion decisions solely on test scores. Some children might test poorly but be fully capable of performing at grade level, he said. Others might have failed the end-of-summer tests by only a few points, making it unfair for them to repeat a whole grade.

"Leaving a child back is a major change in their life," Mr. Berne said. "I wouldn't want to do it strictly based on a test."

Mr. Berne said he was encouraged by the summer school results, and gave Mr. Levy credit for organizing such a large program in a relatively short time.

"He had high expectations, and that certainly mobilized the forces," Mr. Berne said. "Everything was better organized than last year. The attendance push was stronger, the caliber of teachers was better and all the little pieces were in place. That led to a somewhat better, although not radically better, performance."

Harris Cooper, a University of Missouri professor who has studied summer school programs nationwide, said that New York City's 63 percent promotion rate was "not a startlingly high figure," but that it was "in the ballpark of most of the major urban programs." He said that it was too early to draw conclusions about New York's program, and that its success would depend largely on the amount of money invested in the coming years.

Data suggests that it is also important to keep the same teachers in charge of summer instruction from year to year, Professor Cooper said, so that they can become familiar with the curriculum and figure out the best techniques.

Two other problems with the sum-

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## A board member asks if social promotion is being camouflaged.

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mer program are harder to tackle: the refusal of thousands of parents to enroll their children despite the likelihood that the children will be held back, and the daily attendance rate, which this year was stuck around 77 percent. Mr. Levy has urged the State Legislature to pass a law compelling students to attend summer school, but passage is unlikely, given the potentially enormous cost and the likely resistance from teachers' unions and parents.

Without a mandatory attendance law, the school system will have to work hard to change the way parents think about summer school, a process that could take years but could

eventually prove fruitful.

"The message about the importance of this five-week session has not been received in enough households for parents to play the monitoring role they need to," Mr. Berne said.

Terri Thomson, the board member from Queens, said the board needed to figure out exactly why parents were not enrolling their children and to work much harder to communicate the importance of summer school.

"What kind of research are we doing to determine the reasons a parent wouldn't send their child to summer school?" Ms. Thomson said. "How can we break down the barriers so this doesn't happen next year? We absolutely need to do a better job of reaching out to parents."

Others said the most important goal should be to ensure that students who are held back get the extra support they need during the regular school year, and that students who are promoted are closely watched to make sure they can handle the work.

"There's been an enormous focus on summer school being the end-all and the be-all," said Jill Chaifetz, executive director of Advocates for Children, a nonprofit educational group that has been critical of the summer school program. "It can be a helpful tool, but it's not a panacea. Much more important are the intervention services that these kids get every day for the next nine months."

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