The Negative Impact of High-Stakes Testing on Students: A Literature Review

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- In this paper the author takes a look at the literature on high-stakes testing and concludes that the trend toward high-stakes testing in public schools has swept the country in a catastrophic way.

Introduction

Public education has come under close scrutiny for many years, but never as much as at the present. Public schools in the 21st century have seen so much turmoil. Too many mandates have hampered the educational system and it consumers, the students. Nowhere is this more evident than the bombardment of High-Stakes Testing. What is “High Stakes?” Madaus & Clark (2001) defines a test as high stakes if the results of the test have perceived or real consequences for students, staff, or schools. Increasingly, states, cities, and school boards are using test scores in order to evaluate schools and allocate funds. For schools with chronically low-performing students, such as those with learning problems, these schools could be forced to replace three-fourths of their staff (Manza, 1997).

Before his untimely death, Senator Paul D. Wellstone (2002), well known for his untiring struggle to provide all students with quality education, spoke out vigorously against high-stakes testing for all children, especially those with learning problems.

In an attempt to make schools better, to make them "accountable", many states have adopted policies that make use of test scores to determine graduation from high school, grade promotion, distribution of rewards, and state intervention (Goldberg, 2004). But noted researchers increasingly warn that relying on standardized test scores to make educational decisions related to students’ futures is unwise (Dorn, 1998; Heubet & Hauser, 1999, and Linn, 2000).

Research Studies on the Testing Phenomenon

With a view to understanding the problem of high-stakes testing, many researchers have surveyed and interviewed students to determine what impact this high-stakes testing has had on their psychic. A study done on 201,747 students in the Massachusetts’ school districts found that as a result of high-stakes testing: 1) students’ absences increased, 2) students were sweating and commenting on the tests as “nerve wracking”, 3) they felt they would fail, 4) they felt anger concerning the testing, and 5) they felt that the tests were designed to reveal “what they didn’t know.” These results also suggested that the connection of high-stakes testing to students’ motivation is not so simplistic as policymakers often assume (Allen, 1999 and National Center for Fair and Open Testing, 2000).

Another study was done in Oregon (Blue Ribbon Panel, 2001) where approximately 95 percent of disabled students in the surrounding schools failed a recent round of testing. Often tests are devised with insufficient attention given to groundwork and questionable validity for students with disabilities and in most cases these students are ill prepared and have no accommodations. Federal civil rights statues such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and the American with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) are supposed to protect students with learning problems in the educational arena. These laws prohibit schools from discriminating against students with learning problems. These laws and the regulations under them contain specific language relevant to the high-stakes standardized testing and its impact on students with learning problems. Because of this, many courts have already found assessments unconstitutional when students were held accountable under high-stakes assessments (Disability Rights Advocates, 2002).

In a study done by Berad & Pearlman (1999) on the psychological impact of high-stakes testing revealed that after days of testing on content that was confusing, ambiguous, or unfamiliar, students
and particularly those with disabilities felt anxious, angry, and test weary. In fact the data revealed that the participating students "just put any old answer down", stopped answering questions, and put their heads down on their desks. Another research study done by A. L. Amrein and D. C. Berliner (2000), on High-Stakes Testing, stated that this is an era of strong support for public policies that use high-stakes tests to change the behavior of teachers and students in desirable ways. But the effects of high-stakes tests are not always desirable.

Families now make important decisions, such as where to live, based on the scores from these tests. This occurs because real estate agents use school test scores to rate neighborhood quality and this affects property values (Haladyna, Nolan & Haas, 1991). Test scores have been shown to affect housing process, resulting in a difference of about $9,000 between homes in grade "A" or grade "B" neighborhoods (Figlio & Lucas, 2000). At the national and state levels, test scores are now commonly used to evaluate programs and allocate educational resources. Millions of dollars now hinge on the tested performance of students in educational and social programs. Our current state of faith in and reliance on tests has roots in the launch of Sputnik in 1957. Our (then) economic and political rival, the Soviet Union, beat the United States to space, causing our journalists and politicians to question American education with extra vigor. At that time, state and federal politicians became more actively engaged in the conduct of education, including advocacy for the increased use of tests to assess school learning (Kreitzer, Madeus, & Haney, 1989).

**The Effects of A Nation At Risk on Testing**

In 1983, the National Commission on Education released "A Nation At Risk" (U. S. Department of Education, 1983), the most influential report on education of the past few decades. This report called for the ending of minimum competency testing movement and the beginning of a high-stakes testing movement that would raise the nation’s standards of achievement drastically. Although history has not found this report to be accurate, Berliner & Biddle (1995) argued persuasively that schools in the United States were performing poorly in comparison to other countries and that the United States was in jeopardy of losing its global standing.

Despite its lack of scholarly credibility, *A Nation At Risk* produced massive effects. State policymakers in every state but Iowa developed educational standards and every state but Nebraska implemented assessment policies to check those standards. Quality Counts (2001), an online report, states that in many states high-stakes, or serious consequences were attached to tests in order to hold schools, administrators, teachers, and students accountable for meeting the newly imposed high standards. In fixing high-stakes to assessments, policymakers borrowed principles from the business sector and attached incentives to learning and sanctions to poor performance on tests. High performing schools would be rewarded. Under-performing schools would be penalized, and to avoid further penalties, would improve themselves. Accordingly, students would be motivated to learn, school personnel would be forced to do their jobs, and the condition of education would inevitably improve, without much effort and without too great a cost per state. What made sense, in theory, gained widespread attention and eventually increased in popularity as a method of school reform.

More important for understanding high-stakes testing policy is that high school graduation exams are more likely found in states with higher percentage of African Americans and Hispanics and lower percentages of Caucasians as compared to the nation. Seventy-five percent of states with a higher percentage of African Americans than the nation have high school graduation exams. By 2008, eighty-one percent of states with a higher percentage of Hispanics than the nation have high school graduation exams. By 2008, eighty-one percent of states will have implemented high school graduation exams. Sixty-seven percent of the states with a higher percentage of Caucasians as compared to the nation have high school graduation exams. By 2008, eighty-one percent of states will have implemented high school graduation exams. Conversely, 13% of the states with a higher percentage of Caucasians than the nation will have implemented high school graduation exams. By 2008, twenty-nine percent of such states will have implemented high school graduation exams. High school graduation exams affect students from racial minority backgrounds in greater proportions than they do white students. The consequences are drastic for America’s children of color. Similarly, high school graduation exams disproportionately affect students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (National Research Council, 1999).

Economically disadvantaged students are most often found in the South and Southwest and least often found in the Northeast and Midwest, therefore, states in the South and the Southwest are most likely to have high-stakes testing policies. Further, 69% of the states with child poverty levels greater than the nation have or have plans to implement high school graduation exams. Seventy percent of the states with...
the greatest 1990-1998 increases in the number of children living in poverty have or have plans to implement such exams. That is, high school graduation exams are more likely to be implemented in states that have lower levels of achievement, and the always present correlate of low achievement, poorer students. Again, if these high-stakes tests are discovered not to have their intended effects, that is, if they fail to promote transfer of learning and education in its broadest sense, as the nation desires, the mistake will have greater consequences for America’s poorest children (Quality Count Report, 2001).

At the national level, President Bush has been unquestionably successful in passing his "No Child Left Behind" plan that calls for even more testing – annual high-stakes of every child in the United States in grades 3 through 8 in math and reading. Republicans and Democrats alike have endorsed high-stakes testing policies for the nation making this President Bush’s only educational proposal that has claimed bipartisan support. According to the President and other proponents, annual testing of every child and the attachment of penalties and rewards to their performance on those tests, will unequivocally reform education. Despite the optimism, many researchers, teachers, and social critics contend that high-stakes testing policies have worsened the quality of our schools and have created negative effects that severely outweigh the few, if any, positive benefits associated with high-stakes testing policies (Amrein, A.L. & Berliner, D.C., 2002).

Conclusion
The trend toward high-stakes testing in public schools has swept the country in a catastrophic way. The reality of this is that many of these tests are not properly developed or implemented, leading to high failure rate, increased numbers of students dropping out of school and loss of self-esteem and educational advancement (Disability Rights Advocates, 2000).

References


