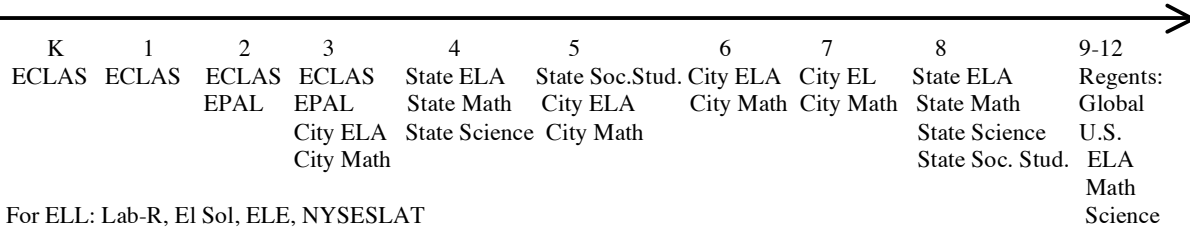




NYCoRE’s Position Statement Against High Stakes Testing

The struggle for justice does not end when the school bell rings

A NYC Student’s Testing Timeline



Using high-stakes standardized tests as tools for reforming public schools is a deeply flawed approach. Standardized testing has racist origins and has historically punished the poor and disenfranchised, already disadvantaged in a public school system that has been proven to reflect existing social and economic inequalities. High-stakes testing policies have increased drop-out and discharge rates, which dramatically varies among racial groups. The consequences of systematically failing low-income, African American, Latino/a students, immigrants and English Language Learners are devastating.

Presently, conservative forces have produced legislation and policy plans such as No Child Left Behind (national) and Children First (New York City) which place educational reforms in the context of testing and accountability instead of curriculum and instruction. Asa Hilliard once said, “If you want elephants to grow, you don’t weigh the elephant. You feed the elephants” (Hilliard, 1998). Mayor Bloomberg, Chancellor Klein and members of the Panel for Educational Policy think that testing the children will somehow make them grow, but the question remains- what are they doing to *feed* the children? No dedicated educator would argue against accountability, however accountability based on high-stakes testing cloaked as a legitimate form of educational reform must be exposed and criticized. We believe that true educational excellence has to recognize all aspects of human possibility, whether it be creative expression, scientific reasoning, or critical thinking, not filling in a bubble.

I. General Problems with Standardized Testing

Eugenics

There is documented evidence that standardized testing comes out of the Eugenics movement of the late 19th century. Eugenics was the ‘science’ that claimed that entire groups of people of distinct races can be placed on a hierarchical scale of inferiority and superiority based on genetics. In the Measurement of Man, a major teacher education textbook throughout the first half of the 20th century, it is written that “The fact that one meets (feeble minded individuals) with such frequency among Indians, Mexicans and Negroes suggest quite forcibly that the whole question of racial differences in mental traits will have to be taken up anew and by experimental methods. Children of this group should be segregated in special classes and given special instruction which is concrete and practical. They can not master, but they can often be made efficient workers, able to look out for themselves” (Stoskopf, p.76, 1999). The author of this statement, Lewis Terman, also developed a standardized test called the SAT-9, a test still required today in California (Erase, p.11).

Test Bias

NYCoRE supports the dissenting voices that claim that standardized tests are biased against students of color, low income, and English language learners. Norm-referenced tests, such as those given as citywide or statewide assessments, are constructed to produce predictable outcomes. In the process of choosing questions for a test, those that favor the majority of students are selected. "On some questions, white test takers consistently pick the right answer. On other pre-tested items, however, minority test takers perform consistently better than white test takers, but because of the test-construction rules used by the ETS, which do not take race into account but which are aimed at maximizing the test's reliability, the only questions that end up on the SAT are white-preference questions (Young, 2003)." While debates about the cultural-appropriateness of standardized tests continue, it is evident that bias exists in the overall formula used to develop any large-scale assessment which aims to produce a bell-curve scoring pattern.

Validity

Standardized testing is an inaccurate and incomplete assessment of learning. According to the testimony of Monty Neil, president of FairTest, at the hearings against the New York Regents, the tests themselves suffer from poor construction and errors. Because the tests are not reliable, graduation decisions should not be based on such criteria. Additionally, more than one form of assessment must be used when measuring the progress of children. According to the CTB-McGraw-Hill website itself, "No single test can ascertain whether all educational goals are being met. A variety of tests, or "multiple measures," is necessary to tell educators what students know and can do. And just as different tests provide different information, no one test can tell us all we need to know about one student's progress. This "multiple-measures approach" to assessment is the keystone to valid, reliable, fair information about student achievement. Any one type of test, whether norm-referenced, multiple-choice or performance assessment, is only one part of a balanced approach to assessment...Educators understand the real power and utility of creating testing programs that combine performance assessments, norm-referenced tests and other measures" (CTB/McGraw-Hill, 2003).

Increased Funding to Private Corporations

Bush's policy of dramatically increased testing redirects millions of federal dollars directly to the private testing industrial complex rather than direct funding to public schools. US Bancorp estimates that NCLB will triple the current \$300 million annual testing market, while the National Association of State Boards of Education estimates that his testing plan will cost as much as \$7billion (Erase, p11). While States will spend around \$400 million a year on testing, our urban public schools remain woefully under-funded. Instead of creating local authentic assessment, districts and states have little choice but to purchase out of the box testing packages with aligned curricula from private corporations. NYCoRE opposes this growing trend of government dollars flowing to the private sector instead of public institutions.

II. Standardized Testing and Unequal Contexts and Consequences

Reproduction of Inequity

One of the roles of schooling in capitalist America is to sort and separate students from different racial and class backgrounds in order to perpetuate the current system of stratification. Testing has joined the ranks of other tools used by systems of racial and economic oppression to prepare different students for unequal roles in society. Standardized tests, particularly norm-referenced tests that compare students to each other, foster our capitalist ‘ideals’ of individual competition and perpetuate the myth that success is based solely on individual merit and hard work while ignoring the nation’s unequal playing field.

Testing in a Time of Inequity

We live in a time of increased economic and racial oppression. Schools do not exist in a vacuum unaffected by the larger issues of poverty and racism. The financial resources and instructional quality of schools that serve low-income children, English language learners and students of color are grossly unequal to suburban and more privileged schools. The playing field is severely uneven, yet students are being held to the same high stakes standards for academic success and are being compared to each other without taking into account the economic and racial forces acting against some of them. When we look at the actual stakes of testing, future life outcomes such as graduation, job opportunities and chances of incarceration are more seriously affected for students of color, English language learners and low-income youth.

The Real Story

In New York City, the dismal drop-out, push-out and discharge rates are a testament to the failings of our public education system. These rates have always been disproportionately true for low-income, African American and Latino/a students. The policy of high-stakes testing has been associated with alarming increases in the rates of students discharged from New York schools, and again—the most drastic effects have been seen in low-income, African American and Latino/a communities. New York State began using the Regents exam as a high-stakes test for the Class of 2002. This meant that students could not graduate unless they passed four (now five) Regents exams. No other state bases graduation requirements on this many tests. Since this shift in testing policy:

- In NYC, the dropout rates increased over the past four years, from 17.5% to 20.3%, after having declined steadily during the previous seven (Department of Education, 2003).
- For each succeeding class, from the class of 1999 to the class of 2002, dropout rates in NYC have increased for every major racial subgroup of students, including Asian, Hispanic, black and white. The four year NYC graduation rate for all students as of 2002 averaged only 50.8%, with Hispanics at 41.1%, black students at 44.4%, whites at 70.5%, and Asians 66.9% (Department of Education, 2003).
- The dropout rate of recent immigrant students to New York City has nearly doubled since the Regents requirements were enacted. More than 31% of those students classified as English language learners scheduled to graduate in June 2001 dropped out along the way, while three years earlier, only 17 percent dropped out (Advocates for Children, 2002).

- More than 60% of the city's high school seniors were unable to graduate in June of 2002 because they failed or didn't take at least one of the four required Regents exams (Mayor's Management Report, 2002).
- At the same time that students are leaving high schools, GED programs had a 30%-40% increase in 16 to 17-year-olds applying for entrance.
- New York State ranks 45th in the nation in the percentage of students that graduate from high school (Fair Test, 2002)
- The projected percentage of Class of 2004 New York City seniors to have their diploma withheld for failing to pass the ELA regents exam is 22% (Time Out from Testing, 2003).

Retaining Students Doesn't Work

The scores of these tests are often used to determine promotion or graduation decisions. However, the consensus among researchers and experts shows overwhelmingly that retaining students, no matter what their actual level of achievement, is likely to damage rather than help their educational prospects (Haimson, 2004). Research has shown that when students are held back before the 8th grade, the likelihood of their dropping out by the 12th grade increased by more than 200%. Furthermore, "students who were held back before the 8th grade were more than four times as likely as students who were not held back to **not** complete high school or receive a GED" six years later. (Rumberger, 1998)

School to Prison Pipeline

As these statistics show, high stakes testing is linked to increased student drop-out, discharge, and push out rates. So what happens to these children when their educational career is cut short? What opportunities are they left with? The 2000 census data shows that 45.6% of African Americans ages 25-34 without high school diplomas live in poverty, compared with 28.1% of Whites and 31.6% of Latino's with the same education. Even more disturbing, US department of Justice data shows that while 27% of white prisoners have no high school diploma or GED, a full 44% of African American prisoners and 53% of Latinos have neither diploma or GED (Fine, 2003). High stakes testing accelerates the exiling of students into an economy and criminal justice system that is bad for everyone, but disproportionately worse for people of color.

Blaming the Victim

Another consequence of testing is that it puts the blame of educational failure on the students rather than on the system that has inadequately prepared them. It is the individual students scores that are held up for scrutiny rather than funding patterns, policies and unequal resources that produced those scores. "So educational professionals are relieved of the need to engage in social critique or individual inspection of how their work and the systems in which they work are inherently complicit in accepting racial stereotypes and reproducing the racial order. They do not have to challenge how testing, poverty, segregation, and tracking, for example, maintain inequitable educational opportunities for students of color" (ERASE, 2001).

III. Standardized Testing Undermines Quality Education

Teaching to the Test

The current emphasis on testing undermines quality education and progressive pedagogy. Experiential learning, projects, research, oral presentations and other valuable learning all help students to develop higher level thinking skills that are not measured by multiple choice exams. Because funding, hiring, and graduation decisions are based on test scores, the pressure to produce high test scores ties the hands of the classroom teachers and requires them to teach in ways that are less engaging and relevant to students (Neill, 2003). According to Senator Paul Wellstone (2000), “They (high stakes testing) have a deadening effect on learning. Studies indicate that public testing encourages teachers and administrators to focus instruction on test content, test format, and test preparation. Teachers tend to overemphasize the basic skills and underemphasize problem-solving and complex thinking that are not well assessed on standardized tests”.

Repeated Exposure to Failure

Instead of providing a nurturing, safe and empowering education to our students of all ages, the current testing culture repeatedly exposes children to pressure, competition and failure. We must listen to the stories of teachers, counselors, and parents who report increased anxiety, nausea and withdrawal of their children throughout the testing experience (Ohanian, 2002). The trend in testing is moving to younger and younger children. This year, more than half a million 4-year-olds in Head Start programs around the country are taking the same standardized test, which has been mandated by the Bush administration (Rimer, 2003). At no point in children’s educational career are they free from testing, and children who do not test well will be exposed to failure from 4 years old through high school, thanks to the No Child Left Behind mandate.

NYCoRE’s Position

While politicians decided to use standardized test scores to inform educational policy, research has demonstrated that widespread testing ignores the true nature of learning, fails to evaluate the higher-order thinking of students, and creates a culture of pressure and a pattern of failure that focuses on the one-time performance of students who are working and learning everyday in our schools. **NYCoRE opposes the current policy of high stakes standardized testing because it reflects the standards and norms of the privileged, it is an inaccurate and incomplete assessment of learning, and it stifles pedagogical innovation and active learning.**

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