

The Significance of High-Stakes Testing

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Abstract

This research paper outlines the mission and vision of the Blended Academy at San Felipe Del Rio CISD, the mandate of standard-based reform by No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, discusses the significance of high-stakes, the impact and effects of minority students, and the future of closing the gaps in Texas. Citing research, pro and cons, case studies, and other studies from experts on the issue of high-stakes testing, I conclude that the standard-based reform in the U.S. has created a dual system of education only for the success of certain not all students in local school districts; thus leaving children behind. In addition, I highlight organizational theories within the paper, and give policy recommendations for the State of Texas and Texas Education Agency (TEA) to ensure all students receive a high school diploma and a pathway to a future through education.

Keywords: accountability, testing, minorities, education

Introduction

In the mission and vision of San Felipe Del Rio Consolidated Independent School District's Blended Academy is to provide a holistic approach in meeting the needs of the district's at-risk students, who are at-risk of dropping out, not fulfilling graduation requirements and failure of the state's standardized test. One of the most controversial issues in education today is the use of "high-stakes testing." Is the usage of 'high-stakes testing' necessary in education today or is this just another barrier in the pathway of education?

High-stakes testing is using testing to determine or "make important decisions about students, educators, schools, or school districts, most commonly for accountability—i.e., the attempt by federal, state, or local government agencies and school administrators to ensure that students are enrolled in effective schools and being taught by effective teachers." Further, high-stakes means "that test scores are used to determine punishments (such as sanctions, penalties, funding reductions, negative publicity), accolade (awards, public celebration, positive publicity), advancement (grade promotion or graduation for students), or compensation (salary increases or bonuses for administrators and teachers) (The Glossary of Education Reform)."

National efforts of the standard-based reform in the U.S. under the federal law known as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 is a top-down command and control educational policy and is one of the most far-reaching efforts to use high-stakes testing to drive the improvement of schools, teacher performance, and student achievement. However, under Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015 signed into law by President Obama, the U.S. Department of Education recently granted states flexibility and the option of submitting proposals designed to close achievement gaps, increase equity, improve instruction, and increase outcomes for all students, and that, if approved, would waive certain provisions of the NCLB law.

In Texas today, the high-stakes testing used has become a critical issue for both students and teachers. The State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness test, commonly referred to as its acronym STAAR, has become a decision-making factor in high school graduation. Without passing scores, students are not allowed to graduate. The current accountability system is at the focus of education, public policy, and legal scrutiny. More specifically, that the exit testing is a critical part of Texas' commitment to insure uniform standards in educational policies, standards that did not vary school by school or race by race, and that it does in fact measure the skills and knowledge that Texas has deemed critical for high school graduation.

At San Felipe Del Rio CISD's Blended Academy in Del Rio, Texas, the academy was created to target Del Rio's at-risk middle and high school students by implementing a customized and personalized standards-based instructional environment using multiple models of blended learning. To help decrease the failure rate of standard-based testing, teachers transform their traditional teaching styles to innovative 21st century and personalized blended instructional models of learning with the use of technology that has been customized, individualized and innovated pathways to successful learning. The main goal is to increase the graduation rate among Del Rio's at-risk students. With the support by the school district's leadership, school board, and community, the District has initiated the first steps in a reformed approach to provide a personalized blended learning system for their students; and creating a pathway to the competition of all high school graduation requirements and a post-secondary preparation.

The use of "high-stakes testing" has become one of the most crucial issues in education in the U.S., the State of Texas, and at San Felipe Del Rio CISD, and the significance is defined by the adverse impact and effects of the usage of standard-based reform on minority students, the economic backbone of the State of Texas, and furthermore, closing the gaps of the educational

pipeline. The problem in Texas is like the problem being confronted across the nation in regions with high percentages of minority and low-income students. This problem relates to the need to remold the educational system so that it adequately addresses the cultural characteristics that make these minorities less likely to perform well on standardized tests or to drop out of school before they even take their senior level exit exam. Many of these students are limited in their English proficiency and many more face cultural elements that make the standard teaching regime inadequate. In effect, these students are predestined to an inferior education simply because of their race and because of the inability of the educational system to make the changes that are needed to address the needs of minority students (Valenzuela, 1999).

Pros

In a study by Jacob (2005) on the impact of high-stakes testing in the Chicago Public Schools from the *Journal of Public Economics* found following when the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) went into effect that math and reading achievement increased sharply. Jacob demonstrates that these gains were driven largely by increases in test-specific skills and student efforts. Also, he found that teachers responded strategically to the incentives by increasing special education placements, preemptively retaining low-ability students and substituting away from low-stakes subjects like science and social studies. In addition, Jacob's study found that test-based accountability raises student motivation, increases parent involvement, and improves curriculum or pedagogy; however, he stated that one would expect a correlation of improvement in student performance, but without pre-existing data on student performance, it is difficult to attribute this as well (Jacob, 2005). Proponents of high-stakes testing like Jacob argue that its use can positively impact schools and motivate students to work harder towards raising the levels of student achievement, and this connects to John Atkinson's achievement motivation theory of the

desire to achieve success (Owens & Valesky, 2007). The students at the Blended Academy in Del Rio exhibit the direct opposite of what this study asserts.

Other research evidence presenting an in depth and balanced synthesis critically reviews the four interlocking cornerstones of reform's conceptual framework: assessment-driven reform, standards-based assessment, assessment-centered accountability, and high-stakes consequences, and for each are pro arguments in favor of the use of high-stakes testing assessments (Wang, Beckett & Brown, 2006).

Using standardized tests many may view this as a source and a "major force for school improvement." Standardized tests have "powerful influences (Wang, Beckett & Brown, p.309)" on school curriculum and instruction and the use of measurement-driven instruction (MDI) by Popham and his colleagues in 1985 (Popham, Cruse, Rankin, Sandifer, & Williams, 1985). For positive impacts to occur on curriculum and instruction, test must be carefully designed to be consistent with the desired learning in the classroom. The link of classroom learning and standardized assessment bridges authentic assessment, and this by many is the key to assessment-driven reform.

Standards-based reform and NCLB Act of 2001 involved the adoption of more rigorous and measurable standards and higher expectations for student performance. Proponents of standards-based assessment contend that a common core of valued knowledge and common standards that teachers can teach, and students can learn in reaching common goals (Ravitch, 1995). One of the controversial issues of standards-based assessment is "whether the same set of standards should be expected of all students, regardless of their socioeconomic status, race, or disability (Wang, Beckett & Brown, p. 311)." NCLB asserts that all students should be expected and challenged to meet the same common standards and are skills needed to succeed. This is a

philosophy that “all-children-can-learn” and at the very core value of the NCLB Act of 2001 is that *no child should be left behind* (Wang, Beckett & Brown, p. 312). A survey by Harvard University found a majority of teachers agreeing that the standards are “challenging, attainable and measurable (Sunderman, Tracey, Kim, & Orfield, 2004, pp.20-22).” Looking at Americans and public polls, the endorsement of standardized testing and higher standards “uncover problems that need to be solved (Wang, Beckett & Brown p.312).”

Proponents of assessment-centered accountability, claim the purpose of accountability is to hold a school accountable for their performance. Reform and accountability movements promote “the idea that those involved in teaching and learning must answer ... to the legislative bodies that allocate tax revenues to education and to the government agencies that provide funding (Ravitch, 2002).” From an international study, the effects of dropping and reintroducing standardized test in 29 industrialized countries was looked at and what was concluded after standardized tests were dropped, academic standards declined, students studied less, curricula became incoherent, and selection and promotion became subjective and arbitrary (Phelps, 2000). There is evidence of positive impact of assessment-centered accountability and standardized tests provide objective evidence of student performance than classroom teacher-made tests.

Those in favor of high-stakes testing assert that assessment-based accountability is possible only when high-stakes either sanctions or rewards are tied to the assessment results. Also, teachers are “more reflective, deliberate, and critical in terms of their own classroom instruction and assessment (Cizek, p. 24)” and longitudinal changes in high-stakes state assessment were found to be positively correlated with instructionally sound school and classroom practices (Stone & Lane, 2003). High-stakes testing improve professional development such as the knowledge about classroom assessment and testing practices. When

high-stakes are attached, teachers follow the curriculum. There is a strong positive relation between standardized assessment and the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) improvement (Carnoy & Leob, 2002). In an international study comparing countries that use high-stakes testing and those that used no-stakes, found that countries that used high-stakes testing “outperformed no-stake countries on the TIMMS and International Assessment of Student Progress test scores (Wang, Beckett & Brown, p. 318).”

Cons

Opponents of high-stakes testing are concerned with attaching rewards and sanctions to the test results and say this affects behaviorist motivational theory (Owens & Valesky, 2007). Giving extrinsic rewards with stickers, stars, trophies and grades take away the enjoyment of “learning in its own right (Wang, Beckett & Brown, p. 319).” Consequences demoralize teachers and students. The fundamental flaw of high-stakes testing system lies in the overreliance on extrinsic motivation at the expense of intrinsic motivation, and therefore teaching and learning become less intrinsically motivating.

Another argument against high-stakes testing is that it is “counterproductive.” In numerous studies report negative consequences such as higher dropout rates, holding children back grade levels, lower motivation, unethical test preparation, teaching to the test, and dumbing down the curriculum. The issue of fairness and social equity, Leonardo (2003) “questioned whether the reform process is “democratic in nature” by holding schools accountable without hearing voices from disadvantaged groups or addressing larger structural issues (p. 40).” An example is “the graduation rate gap between different racial groups has been found to correlate with segregation in schools (Wang, Beckett & Brown, p. 319).” Other studies show the negative

effects on students of color, and this in turn brings manipulation and empowerment and the critical theory of oppressing cultural, ethnic, or racial groups (Owens & Valesky, 2007).

In a study of Brazos City School District high schools by Heilig and Darling-Hammond (2008), notes that the prevailing theory of action behind accountability ratings and testing is that schools and students who are held accountable will increase the educational output: “Educators will try harder; schools will adopt more effective methods; and students will learn more (p. 75).” However, the study found that high-stakes testing policies that reward and punish schools based on student test scores created incentives for schools to “game the system” by excluding students from testing and even, school. Further, this gamed the system reduces the educational opportunities for African American and Latino high school students in Texas. The major strategy for avoiding the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS), the high-stakes testing exam in 1997 was 9th-grade retention. More than 30% of 9th grade students were retained for 1 or more years and of those retained only 12% took the TAAS with only 8% passing the TAAS. Many of these retained students left school as dropouts or disappearances. Some of these students were kept in the 9th-grade for more than one year and then skipped to the 11th or 12th grade, and thereby never taking the exit-grade level test in the 10th-grade that are used in accountability ratings by the Texas Education Agency (TEA). This illustrated the gamed data and system of African Americans, Latinos, and limited English Proficient (LEP) students that were still left showed the lowest graduation rates (Heilig & Darling-Hammond, 2008). Similarly, looking at the Blended Academy, the TEA report card percentages showed a student achievement index at 13% with a target of 35%, student progress index was zero with a target score of 8%, and the closing performance gaps index was 7% with a target score by the TEA of

13%. The standard of “Improvement Required” was the accountability rating given by the TEA for the most recent performance ratings.

According to Valenzuela (2000), in a 3-year case study of the Juan Seguí—a Houston Independent School District (HISD), predominantly Latino high school— she demonstrated “how a subtractive cultural assimilation process, commonly referred to as “Americanization,” is consequential to youths’ academic achievement and schooling orientations, particularly for those located in the regular track (i.e., non-honors or non-college bound). (p. 525)” She goes on to state high-stakes testing is one among a number of alienating features of school, and the data shows that high-stakes testing discourages regular-track, Mexican American and Mexican immigrant students from completing high school or considering a college education. Valenzuela says since the exit level test is in English and its nature is a key reason why LEP students fail to meet the passing requirements. Further, this system negates their culture and their language. Valenzuela’s description of the Seguí High School parallels to the at-risk students at the Blended Academy of San Felipe Del Rio CISD, their demographics such as race and socio-economic status are similar and their future regarding the passage of high-stakes testing is discouraging as well as their future of going to college one day. Her research on high-stakes testing and its adverse effects on minorities is a form of critical race theory engaged in building a movement to eliminate racial oppression, and other forms of group-based oppression (Owens & Valesky, 2015).

Conclusion

The NCLB failed to fulfill its goal of proficiency of math and reading by the year 2014 and the failure of adequate yearly progress (AYP) toward proficiency and graduation goals at San Felipe Del Rio CISD, a Title I school, has led to the development and creation of an

enhanced alternative education at the Blended Academy. The Blended Academy serves mainly low-socioeconomic at-risk minority students, and will continue to provide a blended learning model of learning and preparing students for high-stakes testing, the STAAR, in Texas, until the standard-based reform mandated policy is remedied, altered, or done away. According to Dr. Walter Haney, the Texas system of education reform and accountability is really a Texas myth. In Texas, the problem lies within the Texas Statute. The state statute is a gate keeper of the awarding of high school diplomas and policy of high-stakes testing in Texas. This is subject to the Texas Legislature.

Public Policy Recommendations

Recommendations for the Texas State Legislature and the Texas Education Agency include the following standards:

Borderline Cases

➤ Consider individual development and borderline cases. Some students may miss a passing score in a single section of the by several points, but have also fulfilled all other graduation requirements. The TEA could review these individual cases and determine whether or not individuals like these have shown effort and progress in their secondary education. If some have shown significant change, then a high school diploma should be awarded.

Exit-level Exam

➤ An exit-level exam should reflect and test skills that correlate to the curriculum and instruction given in class. There are students who receive a “B” or above in Math and English at their own level, but do poorly on standardized tests because they are formatted in an unfamiliar way. The test should be reevaluated to fit these measures.

Sufficient Funds

➤ The State of Texas should provide sufficient funds and equal opportunity for all students. All school districts should have remedial programs and materials like the Blended Academy at San Felipe Del Rio CISD necessary to aid all students. Also, create a check system that assures school districts and teachers are doing their part in providing equal educational opportunities. All students need motivation and a positive atmosphere to encourage them to stay in school and pursue higher education.

The Future of Texas & Closing the Gaps

The future of Texas and its success lies in the access of higher education and the goals of closing the gaps (THECB, 2015). The prosperity and economic backbone of this state depends on an educated population. Public awareness for a campaign on the value of a college education is necessary for Texas students and parents. With the growing population numbers of Hispanics, African American, poor whites, and other minorities, education will lead this state into the future. According to Steve Murdock's, Former Chief Demographer of Texas, study, the Texas Challenge (1997), there will be a minority-majority population in Texas – a population of 63% non-Anglos by 2030 and a poorer, less well educated population. The State of Texas must have a vision for every Texan to achieve his or her dreams and pursue higher education – a path to excellence. Ultimately, this is crucial due to the fact that the prosperity and economic backbone of the State of Texas as a whole will be impacted as more and more young adults, who do not acquire their high school diploma due to high-stakes testing.

The significance of the use of high-stakes testing remains in the U.S. and Texas today, but has the political elite of our country created simply a power coercive strategy to advance only certain students, and thus creating a bureaucratic mechanism within our public school systems

that is dual system of education leaving behind our children. At the Blended Academy with the support of the school district's leadership, school board, and community, the San Felipe Del Rio CISD, will continue in its mission and vision to prepare its students for high-stakes testing and a pathway for graduation and post-secondary education, a pathway that holds the future.

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