

FairTest

National Center for Fair & Open Testing

The Dangerous Consequences of High-Stakes Standardized Testing

Tests are called “high-stakes” when they are used to make major decisions about a student, such as high school graduation or grade promotion. To be high stakes, a test has to be very important in the decision process or be able to override other information (for example, a student does not graduate if s/he does not pass the test regardless of how well s/he did in school). Currently, 17 states require students to pass a test to graduate, and 7 more are planning such tests.

Tests are called “standardized” when all students answer the same questions under similar conditions and their responses are scored in the same way. This includes commercial norm-referenced tests as well as state criterion-referenced or standards-based exams. They can include multiple-choice or open-ended (constructed) responses.

Research has shown that high-stakes testing causes damage to individual students and education. It is not a reasonable method for improving schools. Here are a few of the many reasons why:

1) High-stakes tests are unfair to many students.

Some students simply do not test well. Many students are affected by test anxiety or do not show their learning well on a standardized test, resulting in inaccurately lower scores.

Many students do not have a fair opportunity to learn the material on the test because they attend poorly-funded schools with large class sizes, too many teachers without subject area certification, and inadequate books, libraries, laboratories, computers and other facilities. These students are usually from low-income families, and many also suffer problems with housing, nutrition or health care. High-stakes tests punish them for things they cannot control.

Students with learning disabilities, whose first language is not English, or who attend vocational schools fail high-stakes tests far more frequently than do mainstream students.

Some people say that it is unfair to students to graduate them if they have not been adequately educated. But if students do not have access to an adequate and equitable education, they end up being held accountable while the system is not. States must take responsibility and be held accountable for providing a strong educational opportunity for all.

2) High-stakes testing leads to increased grade retention and dropping out.

Grade retention has repeatedly been proven to be counterproductive: students who are retained do not improve academically, are emotionally damaged by retention, suffer a loss of interest in school and self-esteem, and are more likely to drop out of school.

The most comprehensive national study finds that graduation tests lead to a higher dropout rate for students who are relatively low-achievers in school, while they do not produce improved learning for those who stay in school.

P.O. Box 300204, Jamaica Plain, MA 02108
fairtest@fairtest.org 617-477-9792 <http://fairtest.org>

3) *High-stakes testing produces teaching to the test.*

The higher the stakes, the more schools focus instruction on the tests. As a result, what is not tested often is not taught. Whole subjects may be dropped; e.g., science, social studies, art or physical education may be eliminated if only language arts and math are tested. Important topics or skills that cannot be tested with paper-and-pencil tests – such as writing research papers or conducting laboratory experiments – are not taught.

Instruction starts to look like the tests. For example, reading is reduced to short passages followed by multiple-choice questions, a kind of “reading” that does not exist in the real world. Writing becomes the “five-paragraph essay” that is useless except on standardized tests.

Narrowing of curriculum and instruction happens most to low-income students. In schools serving wealthier areas, teachers and parents make sure most students gain the skills and knowledge they need to succeed in college and life. Too often, poor kids get little more than test coaching that does not adequately prepare them for further learning. In some schools, the library budget is spent on test prep materials, and professional development is reduced to training teachers to be test coaches. All this further limits learning opportunities for low-income children.

Some people say that teaching to the test is fine if test content is important. However:

- Most tests include many topics that are not important, while many important areas are not included on standardized tests because they cannot be measured by such tests.

- Teaching to the test produces a classroom climate and style of teaching that is ineffective and turns many students off to learning.

- Teaching to the test does not produce real and sustained gains on independent learning measures. Teaching to the test does not work if the goal is high-quality learning.

4) *High-stakes testing drives out good teachers.*

As learning largely depends on teacher quality, real improvements in schools can only come through teachers. Good teachers are often discouraged, even disgusted, by the overemphasis on testing. Many excellent teachers leave, often from low-scoring schools which especially need strong teachers. It is absurd to believe that the “best and brightest” will want to become teachers when teaching is reduced to test prep and when schools are continually attacked by many politicians, business leaders and the media.

5) *High-stakes testing misinforms the public.*

People have a right to know how well schools are doing. However, tests fail to provide sufficient information. The new federal requirement that only assessment scores be used to determine whether schools are improving could make the situation worse.

Teaching to the test causes score inflation, which misleads the public into thinking schools are improving, when they may not be better – and due to teaching to the test, may even be worse.

Most tests are secret, so the public cannot know what students are expected to learn. State academic content standards typically are too long and often too obscure. Much of what is in them is not tested.

Conclusion: High-stakes testing does not improve education.

The standards of the testing profession and reports from major research groups such as the National Academy of Sciences clearly state that major educational decisions should not be based solely on a test score. High-stakes testing punishes students, and often teachers, for things they cannot control. It drives students and teachers away from learning, and at times from school. It narrows, distorts, weakens and impoverishes the curriculum while fostering forms of instruction that fail to engage students or support high-quality learning. In a high-stakes testing environment, the limit to educational improvement is largely dictated by the tests – but the tests are a poor measure of high-quality curriculum and learning. In particular, the emphasis on testing hurts low-income students and students from minority groups. Testing cannot provide adequate information about school quality or progress. The result of all these harmful consequences is that high-stakes testing actively hurts, rather than helps, genuine educational improvement.