

FairTest

National Center for Fair & Open Testing

How Testing Feeds the School-to-Prison Pipeline

Zero tolerance discipline and high-stakes testing policies have similar philosophical underpinnings and similar destructive results. Both stem from a 1980s movement to impose more punitive policies in both criminal justice and public education. Together, they have helped turn schools into hostile environments for many students. The end result is a “school-to-prison pipeline,” in which large numbers of students are pushed out of school and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems. Too many young people end up in prison, at a cost many times greater than that of a good education. It’s a senseless waste of resources and human potential, damaging to both individuals and society.

How does high-stakes testing contribute to the pipeline?

High-stakes testing turns many classrooms and schools into test prep centers rather than offering rich, engaging, well-rounded instruction. Rote and narrow instruction bores and alienates students, making them tune out and feel they are little more than their scores (FairTest, 2004). High school exit exams (FairTest, 2008) push many thousands of students out of school. As a result of these factors, urban graduation rates decreased. Some students see no realistic option other than dropping out; some are deliberately pushed out or fail the tests. Either way, these young people are much more likely to end up in trouble or in prison. One study found that high school exit exams increase incarceration rates by 12.5 percent (Baker & Lang, 2013).

Tests and zero tolerance work hand in glove

NCLB has raised the stakes attached to test results, especially in urban, low-income districts, which face severe sanctions for failure to boost test scores. Zero tolerance imposes harsh penalties for nonviolent infractions, some as harmless as drawing on desks with erasable markers (Herbert, 2010). It provides a pretext for removing low-scoring students and improving a school’s test score bottom line. In Florida, for example, researchers found schools gave low-scoring students longer suspensions than high scoring students who committed similar infractions (Figlio, 2003). Moreover, the test-prep culture pits teachers against kids, damages school climate and reduces students’ engagement with school. This in turn fosters problem behaviors, which are then countered with zero tolerance. Zero tolerance and high-stakes testing reinforce each other, creating a downward spiral.

Punitive culture promotes strategies to weed out ‘troublemakers’/low scorers

Since NCLB, there’s been an increasing use of strategies such as withdrawing students from school rolls or sending them to alternative schools or GED programs. Out of school suspensions and expulsions are also on the rise nationally, with startling increases in many states (Advancement Project, 2010).

Positive urban graduation trends have reversed since NCLB

From 1996 until 2002 (when NCLB became law), 68 of the 100 largest urban districts had rising graduation rates. Twenty-four of them achieved double-digit increases in their graduation rates, while only four had double-digit drops during that period. From 2002 until 2006, however, 73 of the 100 largest districts experienced declining graduation rates. Seventeen experienced at least a double-digit drop in their graduation rates. Only two districts experienced a double-digit increase (Advancement Project, 2010).

Students of color and the disabled increasingly bear the brunt

Racial disparities in student expulsions are increasing. For example, between 2002-03 and 2006-07, expulsions decreased by 2% for white students, but increased 33% for blacks and 6% for Latinos. Similar disparities exist for students with disabilities (SWD). In Ohio, for example, SWDs were twice as likely to be suspended out-of-school as their peers in 2007-08. And in Texas, in 2005-06, students enrolled in special education accounted for 11% of the student population but 26% of all out-of-school suspensions. Vastly disproportionate numbers of low-income, racial minority, SWDs and English language learners fail state exit tests and do not obtain diplomas (FairTest, 2009).

Prison populations reflect disparate impact of zero tolerance, testing

The student groups affected by these policies are more likely to drop out and get involved in the juvenile justice system, making them more likely to land in prison. People of color and those with disabilities are overrepresented in U.S. prisons. Approximately 8.8% of public school children have been identified as having disabilities that impact their ability to learn, but students with disabilities are represented in jail at a rate nearly four times that (Quinn, 2005). One in nine black males between the ages of 20 and 34 is behind bars, compared to one in 30 for men in that age group in general (Pew, 2008).

To undo the damage: reform assessment, reverse zero tolerance

Zero tolerance is not working, but there are alternative prevention and intervention strategies being implemented around the country that have been proven successful. For example, a community push for new discipline policies in Denver Public Schools have led to a 63% reduction in referrals to law enforcement and a 43% reduction in the use of out-of-school suspensions (Advancement Project, 2010). Recommendations for assessment reform have gained widespread support but have not been implemented. Citizens must push for positive change in these very damaging interrelated policies. For more on effective alternatives, go to advancementproject.org and fairtest.org.

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