
Why Has High-Stakes Testing So Easily Slipped into Contemporary American Life?

Ms. Nichols and Mr. Berliner suggest five reasons that high-stakes testing has become such a popular approach to “fixing” schools. What is interesting is that none of the reasons has to do with evidence that this approach will actually work in its intended ways.

BY SHARON L. NICHOLS AND DAVID C. BERLINER

HIGH-STAKES testing is the practice of attaching important consequences to standardized test scores, and it is the engine that drives the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act. The rationale for high-stakes testing is that the promise of rewards and the threat of punishments will cause teachers to work more effectively, students to be more motivated, and schools to run more smoothly — all of which will result in greater academic achievement for all students, but especially those from poverty and minority backgrounds. Although it is certainly arguable, we believe that, to date, there is no convincing evidence that high-stakes testing has the intended effect of increasing learning.¹ By contrast, there is a growing literature suggesting that the unintended consequences are damaging to the education of students.²

COLLATERAL DAMAGE OF HIGH-STAKES TESTING

In our recent book, we use Donald Campbell’s law to illustrate how the high-stakes testing provision of NCLB has wreaked havoc with our education system, causing irreversible harm to many of our nation’s youths and educators. Campbell’s law states: “The more any

■ SHARON L. NICHOLS is an assistant professor in the Department of Counseling, Educational Psychology, and Adult and Higher Education at the University of Texas, San Antonio. DAVID C. BERLINER is a Regents’ Professor of Education in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at Arizona State University, Tempe. They are the authors of *Collateral Damage: How High-Stakes Testing Corrupts America’s Schools* (Harvard Education Press, 2007). ©2008, Sharon L. Nichols.

quantitative social indicator is used for social decision-making, the more subject it will be to corruption pressures, and the more apt it will be to distort and corrupt the social processes it is intended to monitor.”³ Under the current system of high-stakes testing, this is exactly what is happening. The pressure to score well on a single test is so intense that it leads to nefarious practices (cheating on the test, data manipulation), distorts education (narrowing the curriculum, teaching to the test), and ends up demoralizing our educators.

Perhaps the most visible and noticeable of the areas in which Campbell’s law operates is the business world, where economists have long recognized the possibility for corruption when stakes are high. Despite the research, some businesses are structured such that incentives are especially weighty and salient. Such incentives as big bonuses for increased sales or for spending less time with patients increase the likelihood of corruption. Salespeople or physicians in such situations often take short cuts to obtain the incentives available. Of course, it is not surprising that many examples exist of how incentives in business can corrupt individuals. The pursuit of money, prestige, and power, as we all know, often leads to behavior that is unseemly, if not immoral or even illegal. Enron, sadly, is not an anomaly.

But it isn’t only the business world where Campbell’s law plays out so predictably. Corruption, cheating, gaming the system, taking short cuts, and so forth — all exist in the fields of medicine, athletics, academe, politics, government agencies, and the military. Given the widespread applicability of this social science law regarding corruption in the presence of a single highly valued indicator, we asked ourselves, Why has high-stakes testing so easily become a part of contemporary

American life? We offer five reasons — and our thoughts on each — for why high-stakes testing has been so easily embraced by a culture looking for a way to judge and monitor the progress of the public schools.

THE 'BUSINESS' OF EDUCATION

First, and the most popular explanation, is one that notes the co-evolution of the prominence of business and accountability in our daily lives. In recent decades business has come to dominate a great deal of American cultural life through its influence on the media and on a broad range of policy at all levels of government. Tax policy, government spending, health care, employment training, and education policy have all been strongly influenced by business through the efforts of lobbyists and highly visible CEOs. As the influence of business on government has risen over the last few decades, so have business' interest in the skill set possessed by graduates of our schools and its concern for how tax dollars are used to support education. So basic business 101 models were applied to our schools: namely, ways were found first to monitor productivity, then to increase it, and finally to do so without spending any more money.

Tests were chosen as the means of measuring productivity. It was believed by the business community that productivity could be increased without spending more money simply by holding schools and educators accountable through the practice of high-stakes testing. Lazy teachers and students would be discovered and made to work harder. The models of accountability used in business could be applied to the inefficient school systems of America and, voilà, the schools would improve. Or they could be closed down or turned over to private entrepreneurs. For many Americans, these policies seemed sensible and worth pursuing, so it was easy to buy into the high-stakes accountability movement.

But the analogy doesn't really fit, because it is easier to judge the number and quality of widgets coming off an assembly line than to determine the knowledge and skill possessed by students. A widget is a widget, but a well-educated student is both a good citizen and a caring person, as well as someone with aesthetic sensibilities, good habits of health, and so forth. These are outcomes our citizens demand that we produce through our schools, but they are never assessed by tests.

Thus productivity for our teachers and our schools has a vastly different meaning than does productivity in a manufacturing plant or in the delivery of routine services. Furthermore, when inputs cannot be controlled, it is hard to assess a process by its outputs. Measuring

the production of widgets assumes control over the quality of the raw materials needed to produce widgets. But in education we have little control over the input side. A class that contains two emotionally disturbed children or two English-language learners or many more boys than girls will inevitably affect its teacher's productivity, as measured by test scores. In addition, mobility rates of 40% or 50% at the school level, and much higher rates in particular classrooms, mean we are holding schools and teachers accountable for students they never had much chance to teach. So while ordinary ways of measuring productivity appear to be sensible, they do not work as well in educational settings. The high-stakes tests, with their threats and incentives to boost productivity, are not well matched to the ways our schools operate. Thus scores on tests will mislead us about genuine productivity. But it all sounds quite sensible and so appeals to many citizens who end up supporting the use of high-stakes testing programs for our schools.

THE WORLD IS FLAT . . . ISN'T IT?

A second and related reason high-stakes testing has slipped into the routines of our culture is the emerging belief on the part of both business and government that the future economy depends on a highly educated work force. This belief took on new urgency after Thomas Friedman's book *The World Is Flat* became a best seller.⁴ Large numbers of Americans now believe that we need to push all our children to the highest levels of education, moving most students to high school graduation with a degree that guarantees mastery of a rigorous curriculum. After that, the story goes, most graduates need to move into degree-granting two- and four-year colleges. Obviously, the demand for a rigorous curriculum and college-level preparation means a seriousness about testing in our public schools never before required. High-stakes testing is compatible with these national ambitions. High-stakes testing fits neatly into the American mindset that to be competitive in the global economy we need high rates of college graduation, especially in the STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) fields.

In fact, this whole theory may be wrongheaded. As Dennis Redovich has reported in article after article, the employment profile of the future does not support the need for a big increase in the mathematical and scientific knowledge of our youths.⁵ We may well be demanding more than we will need in these areas and already producing enough scientists and enough college graduates for the needs of the economy. Certainly a scientifically sophisticated citizenry is in our national

interest, but making advanced mathematics and science a major goal of U.S. education may be counterproductive. Creating a rigorous, high-quality science and math curriculum for those who will not be majoring in one of the STEM fields may be a better goal than putting all high school students through courses designed for the future college majors in these fields. The current system contributes to both student anomie and the already too high dropout rate.

But earnings are also an issue. Decades ago, those who failed to graduate from high school experienced a drop in real wages. That drop was followed only a short time later by a drop in real wages for those who had only a high school education. Now, even those with college degrees are suffering the same fate. Earnings for workers with four-year degrees fell 5.2% from 2000 to 2004, when adjusted for inflation, according to White House economists.⁶ Apparently, large percentages of recent college graduates are taking jobs for which no college degrees are necessary, and the trend may be accelerating. Nevertheless, we continue to demand that the education system produce ever-increasing numbers of high school and college graduates, though we may actually now be near record levels of high school graduation rates.⁷

Despite the fact that our national productivity is much more dependent on our tax structures, relative lack of corruption, and remarkable entrepreneurship, the citizenry believes that we need better schools to be competitive in the world economy. And although the goal of better schools should be a national priority, bringing them into conformity with what our colleges and universities demand should not. Yet high-stakes testing virtually ensures that schools will force students into submitting to these uniform goals. Unknowingly, high-

stakes testing has easily slipped into our everyday life as the solution for the misguided goals of advanced achievement for all students in a narrowed curriculum.

OLD, WHITE, AND SELF-SERVING

The third reason for the ease with which high-stakes tests have become commonplace in our culture is changing demographics. We can now see clearly the shape of an emerging gerontocracy. An older citizenry, much whiter than the youths of the nation and relatively well off financially, is now likely to outlive its resources and is beginning to act politically in its own best interests.⁸ As a powerful political and economic force, these folks will want income and services. They will demand medical, pharmaceutical, and social services; full payment of social security; and some form of housing support as their income stays relatively fixed. They will not want to spend much on youths — especially youths of color — whom they perceive as lazy and unappreciative. For many people in this category, high-stakes testing separates the deserving poor from the undeserving poor. It becomes, in effect, a policy mechanism to preserve social status more than to improve our schools. High-stakes testing subtly fits the mindset of this growing demographic group and thus makes it easier for this policy to gain purchase in our contemporary society.

POWER ELITE

A fourth reason is related to a new and larger power elite among the citizenry, along with the vast middle and upper-middle class whose children now attend good public schools and who see high-stakes testing working to their own children's advantage. While they bristle that their own children must suffer through these tests (e.g., the Scarsdale, Westchester County, mothers' rebellion⁹), the schools their children attend are not much bothered by the tests, and the pass rates for their children are very high. Thus on a day-to-day basis, many of these citizens are largely unconcerned about the impact of high-stakes tests.

But we think that the unnoticed slipping of high-stakes testing into our culture has taken place partly because it hits our poorest and most racially diverse student body hardest and thereby forces the kind of education on the children of the poor that ensures that they cannot compete successfully with the children of the wealthy. The drill-and-test-prep education we see in schools for the poor does not prepare them for knowledge workers' jobs or for the best universities in the nation. This makes room for the children of the more

privileged. Since the status of children from advantaged families is preserved through high-stakes testing, it is easy for these folks to defend their use.

Middle- and upper-class Americans largely saw no reason to oppose high-stakes testing for accountability when it was first proposed because they knew that their children would do well. But even if their children were in danger of not succeeding on such tests, middle-class families always had the intellectual and financial resources needed to ensure their children's success. Thus high-stakes tests slipped easily into the culture because, by and large, the power elite didn't foresee a problem for themselves.

Five years later, many middle-class parents and students are speaking out against high-stakes tests. Some do it because of how it affects them, but, thankfully, others argue that the system is unfair and unjust for others. For example, high school student John Wood refused to take his high school exit exam on grounds that the test is biased and unjust. Even though he would certainly pass, the decision cost him his diploma. In spite of these impassioned voices, relatively wealthy, higher-social-status politicians on both sides of the aisle continue to defend high-stakes tests as the solution to all our educational problems.

SPORTS ENTHUSIASTS

Fifth — and least noted by any commentators we have read on the subject — is the fit between high-stakes testing and other spectacles that the public enjoys, such as baseball, football, basketball, or hockey. We are a game-playing, competition-seeking nation, and high-stakes testing fits easily into such a culture.

As is true of many sports, high-stakes testing has a tournament-like quality to it, bringing seasonal excitement to fans who now can follow the heavily publicized “winning” and “losing” streaks of their local schools, as they have often followed their local teams. Every summer when spring test results are released, there is a flood of publicity and great fanfare about how well (or poorly) our nation's teachers and students performed in the previous year. And like rabid fans who delight in watching rivals have a losing season, the American media feed on whatever bad news exists.¹⁰ Those who follow the news ponder endlessly about why certain schools/teams fail. How many times has this school/team failed in the past? What is its track record? What schools/teams might need to be reconstituted or even closed down or moved? What will we do to get rid of the bad teachers/

players, and precisely which ones are they? Is it the science teacher or the first baseman, the English teachers or the defensive line, the coach or the principal? Exactly whom can we pin this failure on?

Numerous similarities between sports and testing explain the country's fascination with testing. After all,

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a match in the sport of cricket is called a test. Professional athletes in cricket and in most other sports practice hours and hours, repeating the same activities endlessly so that their responses at “test” time will be automatic. In the high-stakes-testing game, teachers also engage their students in endless repetitive activities to better ensure that students' responses are accurate and automatic come test time. In professional sports, teams with the highest-paid athletes are more likely to have winning seasons. Similarly, schools with more resources and those that serve the most affluent students tend to perform better academically.¹¹ In professional sports, fans are immersed in statistics that highlight the successes and failures of their favorite teams and players; in the testing game, parents, politicians, and other community members are immersed in media coverage of academic data showing who is winning and who is losing.

Of course, we know stats say little about a player's many other contributions to the team, such as level of dedication, commitment, morale, and leadership. Similarly, when teachers and administrators are judged by their students' scores, we don't take any account of teachers' many other contributions, such as their nurturance

of a love for learning, individual counseling of students in times of need, extra time spent meeting with students' families, provision of money from their own pockets for classroom items, and so forth.

HIGH-STAKES TESTING: WE ARE AGAINST IT

High-stakes testing is now a part of our culture, and we are against it. It has come to prominence, we think, because it fits easily into contemporary ways of thinking about our nation and ourselves. We are a political and an economic system dominated by the interests of big business, and so business models of accountability for our schools naturally follow. High-stakes testing seems to be a hard-headed business practice brought to bear on the schools, despite the fact that no one uses such a system in knowledge-oriented businesses. And unless we are greatly mistaken, schools still fall into that category.

High-stakes testing also seems to help with preparing us for the vicissitudes of a competitive world economy, and so it is easily embraced. The argument that the new American economy may be vastly more service oriented than previously believed and that it may not require nearly as many college graduates as is now thought necessary is a point of view that is ignored.

The needs of the emerging gerontocracy and those who already have some status in society are also served by high-stakes testing. And high-stakes testing fits neatly into the gaming and spectacle seeking that so permeate the U.S. cultural scene.

For all these reasons high-stakes testing has grown to be an acceptable part of the culture. Those who oppose the spread of high-stakes testing are seen as status-quo oriented, against quality in education, against school improvement, obstructionist, anti-efficiency, anti-George W. Bush, and so forth.

But we are actually against high-stakes testing for none of these reasons. We oppose it for the same reason we are against forcing everyone to participate in extreme sports. If any person voluntarily chooses to jump the Grand Canyon on a motorcycle, scale Everest, or BASE jump, we wish them luck. We just don't think everyone should be required to engage in the same high-stakes sports because, if everyone did, lots of people would be hurt. We are against high-stakes testing for the same reason. If a person volunteers to take exams for the medical boards, the bar, or a pilot's license, that individual should be encouraged to follow a dream. But not all of us should be forced to take and fail such exams. In the current high-stakes environment, teachers, students, parents, and American education are be-

ing hurt by required high-stakes testing. This policy is corrupting our education system and needs to be stopped.

1. See, for example, Sharon L. Nichols, Gene V Glass, and David C. Berliner, "High-Stakes Testing and Student Achievement: Does Accountability Pressure Increase Student Learning?," *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, vol. 14, 2006, <http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v14n1>; and Sharon L. Nichols, "High-Stakes Testing: Does It Increase Achievement?," *Journal of Applied School Psychology* (in press). By contrast, a more recent study suggests that high-stakes testing under NCLB is associated with increases in student achievement. See *Answering the Question That Matters Most: Has Student Achievement Increased Since No Child Left Behind?* (Washington, D.C.: Center on Education Policy, June 2007). Available at www.cep.org, or readers may google the title.

2. Monty Neill et al., *Failing Our Children: How No Child Left Behind Undermines Quality and Equity in Education and an Accountability Model That Supports School Improvement* (Cambridge, Mass.: FairTest, 2004); Gary Orfield et al., *Losing Our Future: How Minority Youth Are Being Left Behind by the Graduation Rate Crisis* (Cambridge, Mass.: Civil Rights Project at Harvard University, 2004); Jaekyung Lee, *Tracking Achievement Gaps and Assessing the Impact of NCLB on the Gaps: An In-Depth Look into National and State Reading and Math Outcome Trends* (Cambridge, Mass.: Civil Rights Project at Harvard University, 2006); and M. Gail Jones, Brett Jones, and Tracy Hargrove, *The Unintended Consequences of High-Stakes Testing* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003).

3. Donald Campbell, "Assessing the Impact of Planned Social Change," in Gene Lyons, ed., *Social Research and Public Policies: The Dartmouth/OECD Conference* (Hanover, N.H.: Public Affairs Center, Dartmouth College, 1975).

4. Thomas L. Friedman, *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2006).

5. Dennis W. Redovich, *The Big Con in Education: Why Must "All" High School Graduates Be Prepared for College?* (New York: Universe, 2005).

6. Molly Hennessy-Fiske, "That Raise Might Take 4 Years to Earn as Well: Those with Bachelor's Degrees Are Finding Their Incomes Stagnate Despite a Growing Economy," *Los Angeles Times*, 24 July 2006.

7. Lawrence Mishel and Joydeep Roy, *Rethinking Graduation Rates and Trends* (Washington, D.C.: Economic Policy Institute, 2006); and idem, "Accurately Assessing High School Graduation Rates," *Phi Delta Kappan*, December 2006, pp. 287-92.

8. Gene V Glass, "Fertilizers, Pills, and Robots: The Fate of Public Education in America," lecture presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, 2006.

9. "Scarsdale Parents Call Test Boycott a Success," *New York Times*, 4 May 2001, p. B-1; and Michael Powell, "In NY, Putting Down Their Pencils: Parent Rebellion Against Standardized Testing Strikes at Heart of Bush Plan," *Washington Post*, 18 May 2001, A-1.

10. See Sharon Nichols and Tom Good, *American Teenagers — Myths and Realities: Media Images, Schooling, and the Social Costs of Careless Indifference* (Mahwah, N.J.: Erlbaum, 2004), for a discussion on how the media exaggerate, distort, and overrepresent the bad news about American youths. See also Michael Males, *Kids and Guns: How Politicians, Experts, and the Press Fabricate Fear of Youth* (Philadelphia: Common Courage Press, 2000); and idem, *The Scapegoat Generation: America's War on Adolescents* (Philadelphia: Common Courage Press, 1996). See also David C. Berliner and Bruce J. Biddle, "The Lamentable Alliance Between the Media and School Critics," in Gene Maeroff, ed., *Imaging Education: The Media and Schools in America* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1998).

11. David C. Berliner, "Our Impoverished View of Educational Research," *Teachers College Record*, vol. 108, 2006, pp. 949-95; and Bruce J. Biddle, ed., *Social Class, Poverty, and Education* (New York: Routledge Falmer, 2001).

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For further information, contact:

Phi Delta Kappa International, Inc.
408 N. Union St.
P.O. Box 789
Bloomington, Indiana 47402-0789
812/339-1156 Phone
800/766-1156 Tollfree
812/339-0018 Fax

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