

Test Results Untrustworthy

Point of View Essay

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America's public schools are making harmful, irreversible decisions based on test results that - in an increasing number of cases - can't be trusted, Arizona State University's Education Policy Research Laboratory has found.

The pressure of high-stakes tests is forcing school districts and state Departments of Education to take inappropriate and at times unsavory actions to avoid being labeled as failing for not meeting certain benchmarks, says the independent study, funded in part by the Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice.

Unremitting pressure to reach unrealistic goals, whether in the boardroom of our leading businesses (ENRON), on the playing field (steroid use) or in our government (suppressing the costs of Medicare), inevitably lead people to disreputable acts, note Sharon Nichols and David Berliner, co-authors of "The Inevitable Corruption of Indicators and Educators Through High-Stakes Testing."

"Now we see this kind of 'beat the system' mentality seeping into our schools, where future generations of teachers and students are training merely to pass the tests," Berliner said. "Learning subject matter in depth is no longer the goal of schools in high-stakes states."

"We are witnessing proof of a well-known social science law, which says the greater the pressure to perform at a certain level, the more likely people will find a way to distort and corrupt the system to achieve favorable results."

In this study, Nichols and Berliner looked at thousands of news articles about high-stakes testing. "Because it would be impossible to comprehensively learn about every incident where high-stakes testing led to serious problems, our survey seems only to have uncovered just the tip of the iceberg," Berliner said.

Among the more distressing findings:

- In North Carolina, 80 percent of elementary school teachers report they spent more than 20 percent of their total teaching time practicing for high-stakes tests.
- In New York, city school officials were accused of pushing thousands of students out of high school and into high school equivalency programs. Those students did not count as dropouts and didn't have to pass the Regents' exams necessary for high school diplomas.
- The Houston school district lied about its dropout rates and the number of students who go on to college. In addition, its achievement test scores were inaccurate, as administrators and teachers changed student answers to achieve higher scores.

Under pressure to achieve higher scores, teachers concentrate more on the "cusp" kids, those who need a few points more on state tests, thus abandoning the gifted and the slowest students in their classes.

Massachusetts reported rates of passing state tests for special education students that were entirely misleading.

In many schools, art, music, social studies, history and anything else not tested is dropped from the curriculum, and more time is added to the study of what is tested - mathematics and reading.

"Teachers are desperate to help their students and schools succeed," Berliner said. "We found example after example where teachers worked very hard to help students from challenged schools raise their scores, but in the end they were still labeled as failing.

"In fact, 80 percent to 90 percent of all schools will be labeled as failing in the next decade because the accountability system is purposefully designed to do that. So schools and teachers try desperately, and sometimes inappropriately, to avoid that failure label. "

We have created a system that puts so many of America's most trusted professionals in situations that too often corrupt them, that lessen their passion to teach and that drive them and many of their students out of our public schools.

These researchers recommend scrapping high-stakes tests and building an accountability system that is less inviting to cheating and distortions and that better measures student and school achievements.

"We can abandon high-stakes tests and all its negative side-effects," says Berliner. "Hammering people and making them anxious never works real well."

In a better system, teachers meet to discuss state standards, design test items to assess student's knowledge of those standards, then score the tests themselves and discuss areas where students are not doing well, finally recommending to the state the professional development they need to improve their teaching.

"In this way, you appeal to teachers' professionalism, not their fear," Berliner says. "You help them to grow, and you get them a bit more money for their work, which can be found from the savings achieved by not needing test publishers."

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EDUCATION POLICY STUDIES LABORATORY AT ASU

The Education Policy Studies Laboratory at Arizona State University offers high-quality analyses of national education policy issues and provides an analytical resource for educators, journalists, and citizens.

It includes the Arizona Education Policy Initiative and the Commercialism in Education, the Education Policy and the Language Policy research units.

The Education Policy Studies Laboratory (edpolicylab.org) is directed by professor Alex Molnar

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