

## Education In A Test Taking Era

**Taiwana D. Anthony**

**PhD Student in Educational Leadership**

Prairie View A & M University

**Technology Applications Teacher**

Robert T. Hill Middle School

Dallas Independent School District

Dallas, Texas

**William A. Kritsonis**

**Professor**

PhD Program in Educational Leadership

Prairie View A & M University

**Distinguished Alumnus (2004)**

Central Washington University

College of Education and Professional Studies

**Visiting Lecturer (2005)**

Oxford Round Table

University of Oxford, Oxford, England

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### ABSTRACT

**Highly qualified teachers and administrators are in high demand. Too often the challenge is not simply preparing more teachers and administrators, but preparing the teachers and administrators we have. The overall quality of teachers and administrators is misunderstood and misdirected. Do states have a sufficient surplus of teachers and administrators who are prepared and willing to teach and/or lead in particular geographic locations in the most challenging classrooms? People in schools (Elmore, 2002; 2004) primarily learn values and expectations through practice; they do not learn new practices as a consequence of learning new values and expectations.**

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**A**ccountable leadership must focus on modeling common values through engagement in the work of instructional practice. Leadership in public schools has changed drastically over the past 20-years. How the practice of leadership will change to meet those demands is inadvertently an open question. The change in demands is largely a consequence of the introduction of performance-based accountability--policies that evaluate, reward, and sanction schools on the basis of measured student performance. While the merits of these policies are debatable, the fact

that they have changed--probably fundamentally, controls the demands placed on school leaders (Elmore, 2005).

The purpose of this article is to discuss the challenges highly qualified administrators and teachers are faced with in public education. How teachers' perception of their students affect them in the classroom. How low socio-economic students' education has been neglected, how teachers are the center of attention with little or no support from the administrative staff, and recommendations on how to improve the educational environment in order to decrease the educational gap in a test tasking era.

### **According to the NCLB Act:**

- **Highly Qualified Teachers:**  
To be deemed highly qualified, teachers must have: 1) a bachelor's degree, 2) full state certification or licensure, and 3) prove that they know each subject they teach.
- **State Requirements:**  
*NCLB* requires states to 1) measure the extent to which all students have highly qualified teachers, particularly minority and disadvantaged students, 2) adopt goals and plans to ensure all teachers are highly qualified and, 3) publicly report plans and progress in meeting teacher quality goals.
- **Demonstration of Competency:**  
Teachers (in middle and high school) must prove that they know the subject they teach with: 1) a major in the subject they teach, 2) credits equivalent to a major in the subject, 3) passage of a state-developed test, 4) HOUSSE (for current teachers only, see below), 5) an advanced certification from the state, or 6) a graduate degree.
- **High, Objective, Uniform State Standard of Evaluation (HOUSSE):**  
*NCLB* allows states to develop an additional way for current teachers to demonstrate subject-matter competency and meet highly qualified teacher requirements. Proof may consist of a combination of teaching experience, professional development, and knowledge in the subject garnered over time in the profession.

## Highly Qualified Administrators

Teachers are required to be highly qualified to teach and administer tests, what about the administrators? Are they required to be highly qualified? Administrators' roles as well as teachers' roles are important. Administrators are expected to provide vision for their school. Why is the emphasis being placed on teachers being highly qualified, when in many cases we do not have highly qualified administrators?

Many administrators are focused on the accountability of the state mandated test, which causes some teachers and student to slip through the cracks. Historical evidence (Cuban 1984, 1988; Tyack and Hansot, 1982) suggested that the practice of school leaders--characterized primarily by a focus on managerial duties--has remained consistent despite dramatic changes in the social, economic, and cultural conditions surrounding public schools. Administrators tend to blame external pressures as the determinants of their actions, rather than their own beliefs, knowledge, and skills (Elmore, 2005). CPRE found that the most common response to external pressure for accountability was to make the existing atomized structure work better rather than make the organization work more effectively-- (Abelmann, Elmore, Even, Kenyon, Marshall, 1998).

Principals' impact on their schools is often influenced greatly by their predecessors and successors. Whether or not they are aware of it, principals stand on the shoulders of those who went before them and lay the foundation for those who will follow. Sustainable, significant improvement depends on understanding and managing this process over time (Hargreaves and Fink, 2003). Leaders are not all the same. When a good leader leaves an organization, it should wobble a bit and there should and will be a sense of loss. Temporary unsteadiness should not turn into widespread feelings of despair or institutional states of collapse. Schools need to cushion the departure of key leaders and develop leadership capacities to provide a pool of growing talent from which future successors may be selected (Hargreaves, 2005).

Many administrators do not possess the necessary skills in order to keep their personal and their professional thoughts separate. If an administrator has a personal conflict with a teacher it should not have anything to do with the teachers' professionalism. Incompetent administrators inadvertently will have a negative affect on the overall school itself, causing the school to go to a low performing or unacceptable status. Low-performing or unacceptable schools are not only a trademark of low socioeconomic communities but also a harbinger of failure for students who attend them (Sanchez, 2004). Positive change has to prevail if the school culture is going to change from negative to positive. The administrators should know every aspect of the school culture on a daily basis. When incompetence flourishes and it's at the forefront what does the teachers and students have left? How can they maintain a positive outlook when the administrators are the one who's causing a war on terror in the school?

A part of being an administrator is hiring experienced teachers. There are students who are trying to learn. Some teachers are not qualified. They often are teaching with temporary permits because no qualified teachers are willing to take jobs in inner-city schools or low socio-economics areas. Help isn't available from higher-ranking administrators because they can't deal with their own problems of understaffing and lack

of financing (Horton et al., 1994). As Horton et al. (1994, 1992) pointed out, "Most inner-city schools are 'bleak fortresses with rooting classrooms and few amenities on inspire or motivate the young' whereas wealthy suburbs have the finest schools and the best-paid teachers."

### **Challenges that Teachers Face**

Teachers are faced with dilemmas in education. Too much emphasis has been placed on accountability and teachers as far as tests are concerned. Many students have failed in this test-taking era. Many teachers are not teaching necessary skills that can be applied to current educational settings. Teachers have geared their teaching and strategies towards the state mandated tests. This has caused a drop off in general education. Improvement, or increases in the quality of instructional practice and student performance over time, is a practice as well as a process. Successful teachers and principals recognize that they now know how to do things they did not know previously and that their knowledge and skills are transferable from one domain of instructional practice to another (Elmore, 2005). Improvement also requires the use of distributed cognition (Spillane, Reiser, and Reimer, 2002).

Studies have shown that many students perform well on the state mandated tests but in terms perform poorly on college entrance exams, basic level classes, and therefore, they are placed in a remedial setting when they enter college. The preparation is not there. These students have not been adequately prepared for the road ahead. Not only are teachers faced with testing accountability, but they are also faced with administrators who are incompetent in their positions. Inadequately trained administrators are not aware of their roles and responsibilities as an administrator, and they are placed in the position based off of the old saying "who they know and not what they know".

In 1988, R. G. Owens and C.R. Steinhoff identified four school cultures:

- **Family culture**  
Described as a school that is a family or a team. The most important element is concern for each other, and staff commitment to students and their culture is common.
- **Machine culture**  
The school runs like a well-oiled machine. The focus is on precision rather than on nurturing learners.
- **Cabaret culture.**  
A circus-type culture. The relationships and status in the organization come from theatrical practices. These schools are "all show and no go."

- **Little Shop of Horrors.**

The school culture is viewed as unpredictable. Tension and stress abound. People view it as a prison. They have no choice but to function or try to escape.

School culture is the key in how successful a school will operate. Many educators have strayed away from the ultimate goal, which is educating the children entrusted in their care. General education is not the primary focus. Teachers and administrators are pushing the test taking due to the accountability that is associated with education. Administrators are focused primarily on wrong attributes of a teacher, causing them to maintain low morale, not wanting to teach, and not wanting to work for the person in charge. Teachers have feelings. They need recognition to let them know that they are doing a good job. They need to feel as if they are important. According to (Briggs and Richardson, 1992), low morale is associated with an individual's attitude, self-esteem, and self-concept. When administrators alienate their staff, it causes many disruptions, the school culture is in disarray, the climate is not welcoming and no one is happy.

The wrong people are taking the beating, the students. When administrators and teachers are at war the students suffers significantly. Teachers cannot adequately teach when their mindset is not concentrating on what it is that they are teaching. Administrators must take in account how important their roles are to a local campus. It goes back to their preparation as an administrator, knowing how to maintain a professional outlook. Knowing how to keep personal feelings about someone out of the loop is very important. Knowing when enough is enough are simple but major factors in the success rate of a local campus. The factors at play according to Stark (1998) included raising expectations, a focus on improving teaching, new or enhanced leadership by principals, and external intervention. While Mintrop (2003) says that policy makers do not explicitly spell out why the labeling of schools as low performers along with threats of further penalties would be effective motivators; plausible assumptions could be:

- High-stakes accountability improves teacher motivation. When a school is publicly labeled as deficient, teachers, after going through a whole range of emotions, accept the urgency of improvement.
- High-stakes accountability positively affects organizational development. Most accountability systems hold whole schools, rather than individuals, accountable for higher performance. Through school-wide improvement; therefore, individuals overcome the label of probation.
- The eventual result is instructional change in classrooms. When teachers have the will to change and faculties begin to evaluate their schools' shortcomings, they raise their own expectations to the high demands of the system and agree on formal procedures of internal accountability, making the conditions ripe for teaching content and methods restructuring.
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That's the theory though the fact was many schools improved only on the surface. (Mintrop, 2003, 148)

### **Teachers' Affect on Students**

Teachers tend to identify the personal characteristics of their students as the causal factors that influence student learning, rather than weaknesses in their teaching (Elmore, 2005). Teachers are driven to points of no return on a daily basis. They somehow managed to bounce back. According to (Ingersoll, 2002), teacher turnover has been an ongoing concern for years. Teachers are faced with high amounts of stress, low salaries, student discipline problems, extremely lower than low levels of morale, and little or no support from the administrators. According to (Briggs and Richardson, 1992), morale is a concern in the industrial world where salaries, working conditions, employee input, and management-labor relationships are areas of concern due to their impact on productivity and attitude. According to (Lumsden, 1998), by treating teachers in ways that empower them, such as involving them in decisions about policies and practices and acknowledge their expertise, administrators can help sustain teacher morale. Administrators can also improve their teacher morale by backing their teachers and showing them support.

Addressing the issues at hand will help with teacher morale, teacher retention, and the outlook a teacher will have about their job. When teachers are faced with problems, removing them or transferring them is not the answer. The problem will persist and the teacher is not happy and the issue is still there. School districts will not address the problem. Instead, they will move the administrator to a different position or move the teacher to a new school without addressing the predicament. The problem is still unsolved. At this point what options does a teacher have left? School districts encourage teachers to retire early, without looking into any problems or trying to solve them. According to Hunter-Boykin and Evans (1995), state that high morale doesn't always contribute to high productivity. It does not always follow that happy teachers are necessarily the most productive. They also state that high morale includes low turnover, less absenteeism, and a better academic environment for instruction. According to (Hunter-Boykin and Evans, 1995), principals are the ones who are primarily responsible for motivating teachers toward achieving their organizational goals.

During all of this turmoil students are the ones who are being neglected. Teachers cannot possibly provide students with a quality education while the administrators are constantly causing a hostile work environment. New teachers to the profession are set up for failure, when they encompass an administrator who is incompetent. "New teachers thrown into school with high turnover and limited opportunities for mentoring by accomplished teachers feel 'lost at sea'" (Kauffmann, Johnson, Kardos, Lui, & Peske, 2002). If teachers feel lost at sea with no means of life support, imagine the damage that will cause on student's education. In a Study conducted in 1996, "children who had the least effective teachers three years in a row posted academic achievement gains that were 54 percent lower than the gains of children who had the most effective teachers three

years in a row” (Rivers, J. & Sanders, W., 1996). Administrators played an important role, in keeping veteran teachers, as well as securing the educational future of the students. If the notions of experienced teachers are more effective than inexperienced teachers, it is painfully clear that the students are paying the price.

### **Low Socio-Economic Student Education**

If we can't keep highly qualified teachers in the classroom, how can we possible educate our students? The National Academy of Science summarized decades of research and identified four fundamental elements that need to be in place to support learning: a learner-centered focus, a strong knowledge base, emphasis on assessment, and a sense of community. If administration is not fostering a school community of this sort the students will suffer and continue to suffer.

Education acts in this country have been created with the express purpose of preventing students from slipping through the cracks. Unfortunately, legislation has not been successful (Sanchez, 2004). Schools attended by lower socioeconomic children do not prepare them for success. Rather, they serve as a metaphor of the seemingly insurmountable odds they must scale to reach success (Sanchez, 2004). Who is affected most by poor educational systems? According to Glazer (1992, 58), "Urban schools are for the most part segregated, with Blacks and Hispanics making up most of the students in many such schools, and these schools have less money to spend than many of the suburban schools around them." Cobb (1995, 239) reaffirmed Glazer's findings: "By the 21st century, one-third of all those in school will be Asian, Black, Hispanic, Native American, or a member of some other minority.... They'll experience more poverty, poorer living conditions, inferior education, more unemployment, and higher dropout rates than age-mates from the dominant culture."

A demographic breakdown of Texas's school-age population (Texas Education Agency, 2001) revealed that Texas already is a minority-majority state with European-American students comprising only 42 percent of all students attending school in the 2000-01 school years. Students from a Hispanic background comprise 40.6 percent, and students from an African-American background comprise 14.4 percent. The remaining 3 percent is comprised of students from Native American backgrounds or Asian backgrounds. Only 1.4 percent separates Texas's two largest school-age populations (European-American students and Hispanic students). Based on trends, this number soon will equalize and possibly reverse within the next five years (Texas Education Agency, 2001). The implications for Texas and the nation as a whole are powerful: an underclass of uneducated or poorly educated individuals is being created, this underclass is composed primarily of individuals from minority groups, America will become a minority-majority society, possibly even in this century, and when this occurs, the largest segment of society either will be poorly educated or uneducated, and the economic and societal ramifications are dire.

Sheley stated (1995, 307): Lower-class families do not provide the adolescents with the instruction and support necessary to do well in school. Lower-class individuals often

encounter discrimination in the school system and other middle-class environments. Lower-class families lack the money to finance an advanced education for their children, and lower-class families lack the finances and connections to set up their children in business or a profession.

### **Recommendations**

The first option is to increase exposure to technology within and beyond the curriculum. All teachers must be properly and continuously trained to meaningfully integrate technology into instruction by showing its true applications in the workplace. Because many underprivileged families do not have computers at home to reinforce such skills, students and parents should have access to school computer labs after school. A computer lab monitored by a teacher or university education major is a better environment for students than the association with a deviant peer group (Sanchez, 2004).

The second option involves the placement of experienced educators. Before NCLB, cities such as New York were establishing policies to ensure that low-performing schools had experienced, certified teachers because of their powerful, positive impact on student performance. These educators were to be placed in schools that showed the greatest need. To increase the number of experienced teachers, Texas, allows teachers and principals to return to the profession after retiring with a full salary while collecting retirement benefits. Several other states allow teachers and principals to do the same thing (Sanchez, 2004).

The third option involves accessibility to teachers and administrators. Many parents never enter the school building or know the face of their child's teacher or principal. One solution is for school faculties to "set up shop" in an empty apartment, community center, or church hall on established days in areas that have large groups of underprivileged families without transportation to come to the school. This option not only helps inform parents, but also informs educators by allowing them to witness firsthand what life is like for students from low socioeconomic areas. After such an excursion, educators are better able to educate with empathy and mutual understanding. (Sanchez, 2004).

The fourth option is to ensure that language does not stand as a barrier. As stated previously, the Hispanic population is the fastest growing student population group. Parents from this population often do not speak English or are not comfortable with their level of fluency. This should not be a barrier to meaningful parent-teacher interaction and collaboration. In his research on effective schools, Lezotte (1991, 6) stressed the importance of "an authentic partnership between the school and home" to promote and secure student success. Parents from non-English speaking homes must be invited to participate in all school activities, from serving as chaperones on field trips to taking part in cultural, instructional presentations. Such interactions help to get the parents involved and elevate the importance of education in the eyes of these parents (Sanchez 2004).

The fifth option requires the collaborative establishment of a parent curriculum. This takes many hours of research, development, and organization by a community task force,



and begins with a multilingual community-wide needs assessment that gauges parental knowledge in such areas as college entrance requirements, financial aid for post-secondary education, the importance of education in securing employment, future employment trends, and avenues parents can take to enrich the education of their children. Because different segments of the community have unique needs, the curriculum must be all-inclusive. Experts such as judges, doctors, lawyers, businesspeople, university officials, financial planners, and educators must be involved in the development and presentation. Furthermore, this should not be a one-time effort. It must evolve continuously and become a standard within the community (Sanchez 2004).

### Conclusion

In conclusion, the purpose of this article was to discuss highly qualified administrators, the challenges teachers are faced with in public education, how teachers' perception of their students affect them in the classroom. How low socio-economic students' education has been neglected, and how teachers are the center of attention with little or no support from the administration staff and recommendations on how to improve the educational environment. Administrators play critical parts in the direction and the vision of the school. Inadequately trained administrators are not aware of their roles and responsibilities as an administrator, and they are placed in the position based off of the old saying "*Who they know and not what they know*". In reality, "*Who's educating your child?*" Fullan (2003, 2004) agreed with this perspective: Improving the overall system will not happen just by endorsing the vision of a strong public school system; principals in particular must be cognizant that changing their schools and the system is a simultaneous proposition.

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