

The Impact of the Correlation Between The No Child Left Behind Act's High Stakes Testing and the High Drop-out Rates of Minority Students

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ABSTRACT

The author looks at critical dialogue surrounding the causes for the alarming high numbers of high school dropouts in states that use high stakes standardized testing mandated by the No Child Left Behind Act, and investigates the perceived correlations between high stakes testing and high numbers of high school dropouts of minority students.

Introduction

Her name was Lisa. She was 17 years old. Her ethnicity was African-American. She attended a large, culturally rich suburban high school. It was the spring of 2007, The Big Day, Exit level testing day for juniors. The energy in the hallways pulsated with excitement, tension and anxiety. A somber weight pressed down on the classroom. Lisa agonized over every item on the test. Her future was bubbled in the answer document of her Exit level test. Such is the predicament high stakes testing is having on many minority students.

Purpose of Article

The purpose of this article is to acknowledge consensus that there is a crisis in secondary education in the United States, and that the dropout rate is increasing yearly. This article asserts that mandatory high stakes testing drives some students to drop out of school for fear of not passing the test, or feeling that there is no other alternative because the students have failed the test. The consequences are adverse for students, teachers and the school, and the economy as a whole.

High School Dropout Rate

It is difficult, at best, to pin down exact data for high school dropout rates because each state with mandatory testing records student attendance in different ways and the outcome of the standardized tests in different ways. In 2006, the National Education Association (NEA) president Reg Weaver forecasted a 70 percent dropout rate for high school students in the United States (Congress Daily, 2006). The reported dropout rates for minority students, particularly African-American and Hispanic males in poor and urban school districts, is alarming. It is evidentially more than anecdotal that “rates of high school completion are lower in states with exit exams, than in states without such exams. In what may be a consequence, states with exit exams have higher rates of General Education Development test taking” (Glenn, 2006, p. A14). A study by the nonpartisan research organization Jobs for the Future (JFF), reported that “while minority students are more likely to drop out than their white counterparts, they are disproportionately represented in the nation’s dropout rates because they are more likely to be poor” (Shriberg, 2006, p. 77).

Since 1983, with the landmark report *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education), gaps in student achievement across the United States have been documented across almost all socioeconomic and demographic groups in the United States. Such data has lead interest groups such as:

Civic Enterprises, in Association with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, [to release] a report entitled “The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts” in March 2006. And in a joint release issued in March 2004, Harvard University’s Civil Rights Project, the Urban Institute, Advocates for Children of New York, and the Civil Society Institute urged the nation to focus on the graduation crisis – and particularly on the large numbers of minority students who never finish high school. (Shriberg, 2006, p. 77)

These calls to action led many to conclude that there is, indeed, a crisis in student dropouts.

Domestic Policy Equals Fuzzy Math

President George W. Bush made education reform a top domestic priority in his presidential campaign in 2000. He offered up the state of Texas' education reforms, the "Texas miracle," – the narrowing of the gap in test scores between white and nonwhite students on high stakes testing in the 1990s, as a model for excellence in educational achievement for the new No Child Left Behind Act. President Bush appointed Rod Paige, the Superintendent of Houston Public schools, as his Secretary of Education to champion this "miracle." President Bush signed the No Child Left Behind Act (Public Law 107-110) into law in January 2002.

The Houston Independent School District (HISD), the "Texas miracle," formerly led by Secretary of Education Rod Paige – "the man President Bush had boasted made the Texas school system a model of accountability" (NEA Today 2003), came under intense national scrutiny in 2003 for using fuzzy math when the *NEA Today* revealed the result of a state audit on dropouts. The audit found that thousands of students who should have been counted as dropouts were misplaced in other categories such as "moved" or "transferred," making a close to 40 percent dropout rate look like a 1.5% dropout rate. A New York Times editorial labeled these miscalculations the "educational equivalent of Enron's bookkeeping."

Partner, There's a New Test in Town

The stated objective of the NCLB is for all students to achieve 100 percent proficiency in language arts and math by 2014. Proficiency is objective. Every state sets its own standard of what "proficient" means. NCLB further requires that "every state set goals for high school completion and that graduation rates (defined as the percentage of students who finish high school on time) of all groups of students within a school must be made publicly available" (Shriberg, 2006, p. 78). That is wherein the conflict arises, creating the crisis in dropouts. Shriberg (2006) maligned the Bush administration for

ignoring rapidly declining graduation rates, inaccurate and inconsistent reporting, and a lack of accountability for states that report inaccurate figures or simply fail to report any graduation rates at all. While the national graduation rate appears to have begun its decline in 1984, there is growing evidence that the current emphasis on high-stakes testing as required by NCLB has exacerbated this pre-existing dropout crisis – and that this effect is particularly harmful for students from minority groups and lower socioeconomic status. (p. 78)

Graduation Projections

In 2006, the Editorial Projects in Education (EDE) Research Center projected that one in three high school students would not graduate. The projection was worse for urban school districts serving poor students. Graduation rates in the largest school districts ranged from 21.7 percent in Detroit to 38.5 percent in Maryland's Baltimore City Schools to 82.5 percent in Fairfax County, Commonwealth of Virginia. Christopher Swanson of the EDE Research Center announced "when 30 percent of our ninth graders [ultimately] fail to finish high school with a diploma, we are dealing with a crisis that has frightening implications for our future" (Chaddock, 2006, p. 3).

Differing from its predecessors, the 1966 Coleman Report and the *A Nation at Risk Report in 1983*, the NCLB "is not concerned with differences in average levels of [of achievement] but with percent of students who do not demonstrate an acceptable level of achievement" (Hoerandner, 2006, p. 2). Adequate yearly progress must be shown in student sub-populations: economically disadvantaged students, students from major racial and ethnic groups, and students with limited English proficiency. NCLB has been attacked for being under funded and punitive in nature. Students', who do not *pass*, are punished by being *left behind* to the detriment of the whole nation. "Although many politicians argue that standardized testing will guarantee that poor and minority students receive a quality education" (Assaf, 2006, p. 158), teachers and other professionals on the frontline of student education report otherwise. Minority and poor students are being unfairly singled out and "teachers are singled out to take the blame for student's failure" (Phillips, 2006, p. 53).

Testing By Whose Standard

NCLB changed testing forever. "Tests aren't just tests anymore. In some states they are used to determine which students get their diploma, and which teachers get bonuses" (Phillips, 2006, p. 52). Proponents fear that the standardized tests may be less a measurement of student intellect, rather they measure culture and language. The tests may be biased toward the culture mainstream white culture. Many non-English speakers and other minorities are failing standardized tests in disproportionate numbers. The most likely scenarios for this occurrence is:

a lack of understanding of the complex English language; culture and environment; a culture's attitude toward schooling along with the parent's ability and effort to foster student progress; some cultures hold testing and academic performance to a high esteem while others are more focused on family and personal values, and tracking – that is labeling students by their test scores. (Phillips, 2006, pp. 52-53)

When a child is labeled, it is nearly impossible to break the label. Some students drop out as early as eighth grade

for fear that they will soon be told by someone else that their scores weren't good enough to get into high school. Kids are denied diplomas in high school for failing the exit level test even if they have done well throughout the year in their classes. (Phillips, 2006, p. 53)

In September 2007, the USA Today Magazine reported a national report which revealed "that more 1,200,000 students will not graduate this year and that U.S. schools are failing students by not preparing them for work and life" (USA Today Magazine, 2007, p. 7). Only 70% of students will graduate from high school. 12,000,000 students will dropout over the next decade leaving the U.S. economy staggering under a three trillion dollar blow (USA Today Magazine, 2007). These figures represent a national crisis, and those especially in the education profession should be alarmed.

Consequences for Black Males

Supporters of high stakes testing say they improve teaching, learning, and future job employment, giving both school districts and students a reason to improve. However, it is a reality that high stakes standardized testing prevents some students who have otherwise completed all of their course work from graduating, just because they did not pass the exit exam. Thomas S. Dee, associate professor of economics at Swarthmore College, and Brian A. Jacob, assistant professor at Harvard University wrote papers that support this "more-harm-than-good thesis." The professors used data from the long form of the 2000 Census, looking at the experiences of close to three million people who turned 18 between 1980 and 1998. They found that black males are disproportionately affected.

In states with easy exit exams, black male students are 5.2 percent more likely to drop out of high school than their counterparts in states with no exit exams. In states with more-rigorous exit exams, they are 7.3 percent more likely to drop out than are their counterparts in states with no exit exams. (Glenn, 2006, p. A14)

It followed that in states which had no standardized exit exam, the completion rate was higher. High stakes standardized testing adversely effects poor and nonwhite students more so than their white classmates. The standardized tests may be biased as they are written on the norms of white and middle class America, and are graded by the same people the test is designed for.

The NEA Posse is on the Way

In an effort to alter the dropout rates, NEA President Reg Weaver offered a plan that included creating high school graduation centers, decreasing class sizes and boosting technical/workforce programs. The plan also called for teacher training that focused on dropout prevention and targeting at-risk students, and requested \$10 billion in federal funds over the next decade” to accomplish these goals the Congress Daily reported in 2006.

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, the consequences of high stakes testing should be a major concern by every citizen for the stability of our nation. Research shows a relationship between high dropout rates in states which conduct high stakes testing and those that do not. The initiation of the No Child Left Behind Act has had a downward spiraling effect on high school graduation rates, creating an underclass of young citizens who will not have an equal chance to compete in the workforce.

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