

IMPROVING FLORIDA'S TEST-BASED ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEM: SUGGESTIONS FROM ELEMENTARY SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS

No policy has created more discussion among educators in recent history than the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001. NCLB was ostensibly designed to change the culture of schools and improve student achievement, especially the achievement of America's "neediest children" (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). Although NCLB is a relatively new policy, some states had similar policies in place prior to NCLB. For instance, Florida established its test-based accountability system in the late 1990s to hold students and educators accountable by measuring student achievement and school quality (Bush, 2003; Florida Department of Education, 2001, 2002a). Proponents of these types of test-based accountability systems report that such accountability is needed to raise student achievement (Evers & Walberg, 2002; Raymond & Hanushek, 2003).

Opponents, however, claim that testing hinders learning and that there are many negative consequences associated with testing (Amrein & Berliner, 2002; Jones, Jones, & Hargrove, 2003). In fact, educators have often been the most outspoken against the new state accountability systems. For instance, Jones and Egley (2004) surveyed 708 Florida teachers and found that most teachers (80%) believed that Florida's testing program was not taking schools in the right direction. The reasons teachers provided included the improper use and accuracy of test scores, as well as negative effects on curriculum, teaching and learning, and student and teacher motivation.

Compared to teachers, principals tend to perceive testing and accountability programs more favorably. For example, Ladd and Zelli (2002) found that about 60% of the North Carolina principals surveyed agreed with the overall goals of their state's accountability program. In Florida, George (2001) interviewed 50 principals and 25 central office personnel to find out what strategies they were using to raise student achievement. He found that the accountability system had caused principals to try a variety of strategies, including setting standards-focused goals, engaging school personnel, using school achievement data, strengthening professional development, aligning the curriculum with the state standards, increasing time on the subjects tested, choosing instructional materials that support the state standards, building interdisciplinary teams, using incentives to motivate students, and spending more time as instructional leaders. Despite these positive changes, George reported that about half of the administrators found the state's testing program to be "deeply flawed and damaging to a developmentally appropriate education for their students" (2001, p. 32). While test scores may rise, these administrators argued that academic quality may be going down.

The results of these studies indicate that testing and accountability programs can lead to some positive changes. Even so, the administrators in George's (2001) study reported serious concerns about these types of programs. We were interested in whether Florida administrators thought that there was anything that could be done to improve Florida's testing program to reduce or eliminate the types of concerns raised in George's study. To find

out, we surveyed elementary principals and assistant principals from across Florida to ask them how they would improve upon or change Florida's test-based accountability program. The purpose of this paper is to discuss these administrators' suggestions and to provide some implications for improving high-stakes testing programs.

Background

The Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) was first administered in Florida's public schools and used for accountability purposes in the spring of 1999. The present study was conducted near the end of the fourth year of testing in the spring of 2002. Starting in the spring of 1999, schools were assigned a letter grade ranging from "A" (making excellent progress) to "F" (failing to make adequate progress) based on several criteria: (a) the percentage of students scoring above certain levels in reading, writing, and math (the percentages and levels varied for each subject); (b) the percentage of students making learning gains in reading and math compared to the previous year; (c) the percentage of the lowest 25% of students who made adequate progress; and (d) the percentage of students completing the test (e.g., 95% of eligible students were required to complete the test for the school to receive an "A") (Florida Department of Education, 2002b).

School grades were directly linked to accountability rewards and sanctions (Florida Department of Education, 2001). Schools graded an "A" or that had improved at least one grade level were eligible for monetary incentives. Students attending schools graded an "F" for two years in a four-year period were eligible for scholarships to attend another public or private school. Student retention decisions were made by the local school boards, although students were required to pass the reading and math FCAT in tenth grade starting in 2002-2003 to graduate from high school.

The test consisted of a criterion-referenced test that measured the state standards in reading, writing, and mathematics and a norm-referenced test that measured student performance against national norms (Florida Department of Education, 2001). The reading and math tests were given in grades 3 through 10 and the writing test was given in grades 4, 8, and 10. The FCAT consisted of multiple-choice items at all grade levels tested and "performance items" (requiring a written answer) in reading in grades 4, 8, and 10 and in math in grades 5, 8, and 10. Test results were provided at the student, school, district, and state level.

Method

Participants and Questionnaire

The results presented in this article are part of a larger study in which we surveyed administrators across Florida by inviting all 67 Florida school districts to participate. About half (47.8%) of all districts agreed to participate (32 out of 67 districts). We received completed surveys from 325 administrators: 212 principals, 96 assistant principals, and 17 who did not

indicate their administrative rank. These administrators represented 41.6% of the schools (264 out of 635 schools) within the school districts participating.

Two-thirds of the administrators were female (67.0%) and most were White or Caucasian (87.0%), while 10.8% were Black or African-American, 0.6% were Hispanic, and 1.5% were of another race/ethnicity. Participants ranged in age from 26 to 63 years old ($M = 49.7$ years old, $SD = 7.0$). The principals had an average of 9.9 years of experience as a principal ($SD = 6.6$) and 4.2 years of experience as an assistant principal ($SD = 3.3$). The assistant principals had an average of 0.3 years of experience as a principal ($SD = 1.1$) and 5.8 years of experience as an assistant principal ($SD = 5.0$).

Administrators completed an online questionnaire that required approximately 15-20 minutes to complete. To limit the possibility of having ineligible individuals complete the questionnaire, administrators entered a unique school code assigned to them by us. The questionnaire queried them about their demographic information and their beliefs about Florida's test-based accountability system.

Some of the quantitative results obtained from the questionnaire suggest that administrators viewed the FCAT positively because it provided them with data that was helpful in their roles as instructional leaders (Jones & Egley, 2004). Yet, 64% of these administrators claimed that the FCAT was taking Florida's public schools in the wrong direction. One of the major reasons for this belief was that they disagreed with the manner in which schools were assigned grades and allotted financial rewards.

To determine whether administrators believed that anything could be done to improve the testing program, we provided them with an open-ended item that asked: "How would you improve upon or change the FCAT in reading, writing, and/or mathematics?" Participants were provided with an online text box into which they could type a response of any length. Of the 325 administrators who completed the questionnaire, 253 (78%) responded to this particular item. Of the 72 administrators who did not complete this item, 66% indicated in a prior item that the testing program was taking Florida's public schools in the wrong direction. This percentage is comparable to the 63% of administrators who responded to this item, indicating that the non-respondents are no more or less in favor of the FCAT than those who did not respond to this item.

Procedure

The purpose of this paper is to describe the suggestions that administrators provided for improving the testing program. The overall analysis strategy involved a microanalysis of the teachers' responses based on a grounded theory approach to qualitative data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). We conducted this analysis to generate initial categories, and in doing so, we allowed the data to "speak" and we "listened closely" to what the administrators were trying to tell us (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 65). To do so, two researchers grouped similar responses together into categories. Using an iterative process, the researchers checked and re-checked the codes to create

new ones and delete ones that were no longer appropriate. Initially, the researchers created 55 coding categories. Then, the responses within each category were re-read to ensure that none of them were redundant or overlapped in function. As a result of this re-analysis, 27 categories were either re-categorized or eliminated because less than 2% of administrators responded with comments in these categories. In all, we ended up with a total of 28 coding categories.

Results and Discussion

As a result of our qualitative analysis, we categorized 432 responses into one of 28 coding categories (some administrators' responses were categorized into more than one category). We further grouped the categories into one of five themes as shown in Table 1. In this section, we discuss each of these themes and provide a few quotations that are representative of the types of comments that administrators made within each of the themes. After each quotation, we provide the grade of the school in which the administrator worked during the year of this study.

Table 1

Themes and Categories of Administrator Responses

Suggestions	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Theme 1: Suggestions regarding the use of the tests		
Use the tests as one piece of the assessment, but use other assessments too.	23	9.1
Use a well-known standardized test or a nationally-normed test.	14	5.5
Eliminate the tests.	10	4.0
Use portfolios to assess the students.	7	2.8
Theme 2: Suggestions for improving the usefulness of the tests		
Measure students' yearly academic growth.	59	23.3
Provide more test results that teachers can use as a diagnostic tool to improve student learning.	32	12.6
Give the tests later in the year or at the beginning of the school year.	15	5.9
Provide the results faster.	12	4.7
Expand the number of grades in which the testing occurs.	8	3.2
Theme 3: Suggestions for improving the test format or items		
Shorten the tests or give students more time to complete the tests.	42	16.6
Make the tests more accurate, valid, and developmentally appropriate.	17	6.7

(continued)

Table 1 (continued)

Suggestions	n	%
Improve the reading test.	10	4.0
Math Test:		
Improve the quality of the math questions.	8	3.2
Decrease the amount of reading involved in the math test.	7	2.8
Writing Test:		
Change the writing test to simulate authentic writing and/or to reduce formula writing.	7	2.8
Improve the writing prompts.	7	2.8
Modify the testing requirements for ESOL students.	7	2.8
Theme 4: Suggestions regarding school grading and testing consequences		
Eliminate the grading of schools.	27	10.7
Compare schools with other schools that have similar populations.	6	2.4
Lessen the pressure of one test.	7	2.8
Eliminate the rewards and sanctions.	18	7.1
Provide funds for all schools, not just the high-performing ones.	15	5.9
Provide more resources.	19	7.5
Don't change the testing rules each year or within the school year.	13	5.1
Don't retain students based upon the test scores.	7	2.8
Theme 5: No suggestions		
The tests are adequate.	18	7.1
I don't know.	9	3.6
The writing test is adequate.	8	3.2

Note. The percentage of administrators was calculated by dividing the number of administrators in each category by the total number of administrators who provided responses to the questionnaire item (253).

Theme 1: Suggestions Regarding the Use of the Tests

The first theme included four categories of suggestions regarding the use of the tests. The most common suggestion in this category (reported by 9.1% of administrators) was that other types of assessments should be used in conjunction with the FCAT as part of assessing students and schools. They felt that too much weight was placed on the results of one test. As one administrator responded:

The test itself is not the problem. It does a good job with what it is designed to do: measure student achievement. The problem is with how the results are used. The FCAT is only one of many measures of student and school performance. (Grade A school)

Other administrators were unsatisfied with the FCAT and suggested either eliminating the test altogether (4.0% of administrators) or replacing it with a well-known standardized test (5.5% of administrators) or portfolios (2.8% of administrators). The following two administrators' comments provide some insight into why they suggested a different standardized test:

I would eliminate the FCAT Reading and Math test and replace it with the Stanford 9. Classroom teachers and parents get more information from that test as compared with the FCAT Reading and Math. It is much easier to track children's growth with a standardized test. (Grade A school)

Use a nationally-normed test, not one that is made up by employees of the politicians and then manipulated through particular methods of grading. (School grade unavailable)

Other administrators felt that assessments should include authentic student work such as that typically provided in portfolios (a collection of student work created throughout the year). One administrator explained:

Every student should be looked at individually. Every school should look at every child's standardized test scores, informal and formal classroom assessment pieces, class work, homework and anecdotal records. Then, the child is assessed. (Grade C school)

All of the suggestions provided in this theme called for the implementation of alternative types of assessments (in place of the FCAT or in addition to the FCAT) to be included as part of the total assessment of the students and schools. Taken as whole, these comments reflect what all good educators and measurement experts know: Assessing students is a complex process that often requires multiple types and formats of assessments. Some of these administrators are not entirely against using the FCAT as one of these assessments, but they are against using it as the sole determiner of students' learning.

Theme 2: Suggestions for Improving the Usefulness of the Tests

The responses categorized into Theme 2 provide suggestions as to how the FCAT can be made more useful to students, teachers, administrators, and/or parents. The most frequent response in this category was that the tests should measure students' yearly academic growth (23.3% of administrators). Administrators want to be able to see how each student has grown academically from the beginning of the year to the end. As one administrator reported:

If we really wish to see how well our students are learning, we should give the FCAT in September and again in April. This would enable us to see how much growth has taken place with each student during the school year. With this information we should be able to modify or change the Sunshine State Standards and improve education. (Grade C school)

This suggestion is in concert with the remaining four suggestions in this theme, all of which indicate that the test results could provide better information to administrators, teachers, students, and parents about student achievement. The first of these suggestions calls for the test results to pro-

vide more diagnostic information that can be used to improve student learning (12.6% of administrators). One administrator explained:

It is unclear how to use this data to improve instruction. The data also does not report which specific standards have not been met so specific intense instruction can be prescribed. (Grade A school)

Another suggestion was to give the tests later in the school year (or in the beginning of the next school year) to more accurately assess students' gains for the entire school year (5.9% of administrators). In the year of this study, the tests were given in February and March, a couple of months before the end of the school year. The following administrator discussed one of the problems with giving the test this early:

Students in fourth grade make very big strides in the last three months of their year, so telling them that they did not meet promotion criteria because of a test they took three months earlier is not helpful! The school year does not end in March. (School grade not available)

Some administrators (4.7%) indicated that it would be helpful to receive the test results sooner. Providing results faster would help in a variety of ways, as is explained by the following administrator:

What good is a test that comes back in the summer? Teachers do not have an opportunity to go over it with the parents. The test results are not useful in the summer. They need to be returned in a timely manner in order to make them useful to the classroom teacher. (Grade A school)

Others (3.2% of administrators) suggested expanding the number of grades in which the testing occurs. Seven of the eight administrators in this category suggested testing students in all elementary grades from first to fifth grade. The other administrator suggested giving the writing test to students in third and fifth grade (in addition to the current fourth-grade test).

In sum, all of the suggestions in this theme indicate that administrators want data that will help them to be more effective instructional leaders, help their teachers to be more effective teachers, and provide students and parents with accurate information.

Theme 3: Suggestions for Improving the Test Format or Items

The suggestions in Theme 3 provide specific recommendations as to how to improve the test format or items. By far, the most common suggestion in this theme (16.6% of administrators) was either to shorten the tests or give students more time to complete them. Administrators explained that the tests were too long and that students got stressed out, tired, lost focus, and/or gave up. As one administrator shared:

The test itself is very grueling. Each session of testing is 50 minutes long. That is 50 minutes for 3rd, 4th, and 5th graders (8, 9, and 10 year olds). The first day of testing requires testing for three 50 minute sessions. This is not valid accurate testing. Some students just give up or are too tired to complete it. (Grade A school)

The next most common suggestion in this theme was to make the test more accurate, valid, and developmentally appropriate (6.7% of admin-

istrators). The following comments are indicative of the type of suggestions in this category:

Florida needs to constantly evaluate the results, test items, and reporting of the results to check for currency and validity. (Grade C school)

Make CERTAIN it is based on what reliable research tells us is developmentally appropriate and realistic for each grade level age group. (Grade B school)

The remaining suggestions in this theme included comments specifically related to the reading test, math test, writing test, or the requirements for English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) students. Administrators (4.0%) made two major suggestions regarding the reading test: Use passages that are of interest to children (such as skateboarding or swimming), and reduce the difficulty of the reading passages. For instance, one administrator claimed:

My teachers have commented that readability levels of reading tests are too high. Readability levels of the 4th grade reading passages rank at the 6.5 to 7.5 grade level. (Grade B school)

One of the categories for the math test included general comments that suggested improvements be made in the math questions (3.2% of administrators). The other category included the more specific suggestion that the amount of reading in the math test be reduced (2.8% of administrators). This comment from one administrator typifies this concern:

My main issue with the math test is that it actually is a reading test. Students with challenges in reading cannot be successful with the word problem applications. I would suggest a subsection of pure computation so that these skills could be demonstrated. (School grade unavailable)

Two major suggestions emerged regarding the writing test. First, 2.8% of administrators suggested changing the writing test to make it more closely simulate authentic writing and reduce “formulaic” writing. To evaluate writing, these administrators believe that it takes more than a single prompt with a specified time limit. As one administrator explained:

The FCAT writing test is a completely artificial writing situation. When I taught fourth grade (for 5 years) I could teach my kids how to write well for the FCAT test. But when we really “got down” to writing projects that encompass standards, the writing took a good length of time, reflection, and always the use of a thesaurus and dictionary. Authentic writing samples taken over the course of the school year (in a broad range of genres) would provide far more information about children’s functional writing. (Grade D school)

The second suggestion related to the writing test was to improve the writing prompts given to students (2.8% of administrators). Because students are given only one prompt from which to write their essay, some of these administrators suggested providing a few prompts from which the students could choose:

I do think that the students should be given a choice of prompts for the writing test. Sometimes a good student just doesn’t have anything to say about a particular prompt. These are young students! (Grade C school)

The final suggestion in this theme was to modify the testing requirements for ESOL students (2.8% of administrators). The major concern by administrators was that it was unreasonable to expect accurate results on the tests from a student who speaks another language as his/her first language. A few administrators suggested not testing ESOL students until they have had time to read and understand English better. One administrator stated:

I wouldn't require ESOL students being in the program only two years to be a part of the school grade if we must be graded. It takes six years for an ESOL student to have the skill to perform on assessments with true accountability. We don't allow them enough time. (Grade C school)

The variety of suggestions related to the testing format and items suggests that administrators believe that improvements can be made to the tests. Many of the comments were general, such as improving the quality of the tests. Based on these comments, test developers should continue to assess the measurement properties of the tests to ensure that they accurately measure Florida's state standards and that valid inferences can be made from the test scores.

Theme 4: Suggestions Regarding School Grading and Testing Consequences

The suggestions in Theme 4 related to school grading and the consequences associated with the grading, rewards, and sanctions. Several administrators (10.7%) reported that they would eliminate the grading of schools altogether. They provided several reasons for wanting the grades removed, including: that it would decrease anxiety, that it would take the politics out of testing, that the school grade is not a valid measure of school quality, that the rules for grading change, and that it is unfair to compare schools with different student populations. In fact, another suggestion in this theme was to compare schools with other schools that have similar student populations (2.4% of administrators). The following administrator expressed this sentiment:

I would make it broader, more comprehensive, and normed to the socio-economic background of the student. Like students should be compared to like students and like schools should be compared to like schools. If proper norming were done, then the results would be valid to a larger audience, and thus, more useful. Right now, it's useless, except for politicians and real estate agents. (Grade C school)

Other administrators (2.8%) suggested lessening the pressure of the tests. Although they did not provide suggestions about how to do that, several mentioned that eliminating the schools grades and/or rewards would likely do so.

Some administrators focused more on the monetary rewards given to schools and suggested eliminating the rewards (7.1% of administrators). Others (5.9%) specifically discussed providing funds for all schools, not just the high-performing ones. As one administrator responded: "Awarding schools bonus money is a waste of available dollars to education. All

schools should be appropriately funded” (Grade B school). Other administrators (7.5%) discussed the need to increase other types of resources, including such things as providing teachers with the skills to be successful, reducing class sizes, and providing more technology in the classrooms.

A few administrators (5.1%) stressed the importance of keeping the rules related to the school grading and rewards the same from year to year and within years. One administrator said, “Whatever is decided, just keep the rules the same, don’t change during midstream as was done this year!!!” (Grade A school). Of course, this makes perfect sense and we cannot imagine that anyone would argue against this suggestion. The final suggestion in this theme was to not retain students based on the test scores (2.8% of administrators).

The overall message that appears to emerge in this theme is that administrators want more focus on student learning and less focus on the amount of pressure applied to students and educators. Instead of grading schools in an unfair manner and providing rewards and sanctions based on these grades, administrators would like to see all schools (not just the high performing ones) obtain the resources that they need to be successful. This theme reflects a philosophical difference between some administrators who focus on children’s learning and their perception of policymakers as focused on rewards and punishments.

Theme 5: No Suggestions

Theme 5 includes all of the administrators who made a comment on the survey, but did not have any suggestions. Eighteen administrators (7.1%) reported that the tests were adequate in general and 3.2% specifically claimed that the writing test, in particular, was adequate. Other administrators (3.6%) responded that they didn’t know how to improve upon or change the FCAT. These comments suggest that some of the administrators are content with the current testing program.

Implications and Conclusion

The suggestions provided by administrators have implications for policymakers and test developers. In this section, we discuss two of the major implications that we believe address many of the administrators’ suggestions. First, the test results should be made more useful to students, parents, and educators. For this to happen, the test scores need to be valid and more reliable; otherwise, the results only provide misinformation. Some administrators suggested giving students more time to complete the tests, which implies that doing so would allow students to more fully demonstrate their knowledge and skills and, thus, result in a more accurate assessment. In addition, the test scores need to be reported in a manner and at a time that is useful to students and educators. One suggestion was to provide a means to measure students’ yearly academic growth. Future research should identify what types and formats of results are most useful to students and educators. Teachers may be able to collect some types of data more easily and accurately themselves throughout the year. The state test results should

complement these types of teacher assessments. Further, administrators want the results before the end of the year, but they also want the tests to be given as late in the year as possible so that they can maximize the time for instruction prior to the testing. The testing schedule should be reexamined to determine whether such modifications can be made in a practical manner.

The second major implication of these findings is that the rewards and sanctions aspects of the accountability system should be eliminated or significantly modified. In Florida, rewards and sanctions are applied both at the school level (i.e., the school grade assigned, monetary incentives, and vouchers for students at low-performing schools) and the student level (i.e., student retention at the third and tenth grade). Although administrators made suggestions related to both of these types of rewards and sanctions, more administrators discussed eliminating or modifying the rewards and sanctions at the school level. This finding is consistent with the results of Pedulla et al. (2003) who found that increased school-level rewards and sanctions were associated with greater pressure on students and teachers, more time on test preparation, and more teaching to the test. Eliminating the school grades would also eliminate the monetary rewards given to high-scoring schools and this money could be distributed to needy schools and school programs by more equitable means. Further research is needed to better understand how reducing rewards and sanctions would affect students, teachers, and administrators.

Administrators have many suggestions for improving the test-based accountability system in Florida. Although some of their comments were contradictory, several themes did emerge, including: suggestions regarding the use of the tests, suggestions for improving the usefulness of the tests, suggestions for improving the test format or items, and suggestions regarding school grading and testing consequences. These suggestions should be considered by policymakers and test developers as a way to improve the existing accountability program in order to help achieve the ultimate goal of increasing student learning.

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