

Assessment Versus Achievement: Winner Takes All!

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Florida schools consistently fail to make Adequate Yearly Progress [AYP] (FDOE, 2005d). Title I schools which serve poor and predominately students of color comprise the majority of schools designated as needing improvement in Florida. Black and Hispanic students, students with disabilities, and English language learners overwhelmingly perform below grade level on Florida's high stakes assessment, the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT). Many oppose high stakes tests because of assumptions that these tests promote narrowing the curriculum (Barksdale-Ladd & Thomas, 2000). Test preparation and ancillary activities often result in reduced time for academic learning at high levels. The author proposes alternatives to current school and state level policies in order to ensure that all students have the opportunity to learn the state curriculum. Furthermore, the author places the burden of change that will meet the needs of Florida's neediest children squarely on the shoulders of school leaders, including both teachers and administrators.

Keywords: High stakes assessment, Adequate yearly progress, Students with disabilities, Exceptional education students, Black students, African American students

Introduction

Districts and schools across the nation are struggling with the consequences of the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB)*. Florida schools are no exception. One major goal of *NCLB* is to close the achievement gap (USDOE, 2004). Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) is the mechanism for demonstrating that states are making progress toward closing the achievement gap by 2013 – 2014 (USDOE, 2004). Under *NCLB*, states are required to determine AYP according to standards-based statewide assessments (USDOE, 2004). These assessments measure student performance in reading/language arts, mathematics, and science based on racial/ethnic, socioeconomic status (SES), disability, and English language proficiency subgroups, to determine AYP. Despite above-average rate of compliance with federal requirements regarding standards, assessments, and accountability (Quality Counts, 2008), Florida has failed to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) since implementation of *NCLB* in 2002 – 2003 (FDOE, 2005a; Gay, 2007). Not only has the state failed to make AYP for its duration, Black, Hispanic, students with low SES, and students with disabilities have consistently failed to make AYP in Florida (FDOE, 2005d). High stakes assessments attach significant consequences for K-12 students in Florida (Amrein & Berliner, 2002; Barksdale-Ladd, 2000; FDOE, 2005b; Lee, Borman, & Tyson, 2005).

Policy makers, educators, parents, students, and community members base their support or opposition to statewide assessments on various and distinct assumptions, many of which have not been rigorously addressed (Amrein & Berliner, 2002; Barksdale-Ladd & Thomas, 2000; Skiba, Poloni-Staudinger, Simmons, Feggins-Azzia, & Choong-Geun, 2005). For example, Amrein and Berliner (2002) cite the manipulability of state assessments through narrowing the curriculum and exclusion of certain students from testing as their rationale for substituting the ACT, SAT, NAEP, and AP exams as proxies for statewide assessments. The proxy exams were used to evaluate students' learning transfer of domain-specific knowledge assessed on state assessments in 18 states, including Florida, that place high stakes on state assessments. Similarly, teacher reports to Barksdale-Ladd and Thomas (2000) indicated that teachers felt pressure from their administrators to teach test content, formatting and test-taking skills on a daily basis in preparation for statewide assessments. According to the teachers interviewed, test preparation activities superseded activities such as fieldtrips, cooperative learning activities, and science experiments that did not specifically address test content, but that would otherwise expand students' critical thinking and social skills. Hence, major assumptions driving opposition to high stakes testing are that these assessments result in less time for teaching and learning as well as narrowing of the curriculum as teachers spend valuable instructional time focusing on test-preparation activities and content included on the test (Amrein & Berliner, 2002; Barksdale-Ladd, 2000; Christenson, Decker, Triezenberg, Ysseldyke, & Reschly, 2007; Scheurich & Skrla, 2003; Smith 2000).

Moreover, often as efforts to remediate academic deficits are intensified, students fall farther and farther behind, as demonstrated by the persistent failure of targeted subgroups such as African-American and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds to make AYP in Florida (Amrein & Berliner, 2002; FDOE, 2005d). Although outcomes from the accountability movement remain mixed, Skrla, Scheurich, and Johnson (2001) call for a "...new consensus among educational researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and others connected to U.S.

education on all levels that children of color and children from low income homes are entitled to high levels of academic success in all schools” (p.231). While definitive causes of the achievement gap remain contested (Gay, 2007; Hargreaves, 2004; Jennings & Rentner, 2006; Obed, Ault, Jr., Bentz, & Meskimen, 2001), educators can take steps that will improve schools’ chances to make AYP. The purpose of this article is to propose alternatives to current assessment policies in Florida in order to help facilitate such improvement. The proposed alternatives aim to increase academic learning time (American Educational Research Association (AERA), 2007) as well as opportunities to learn (APA, 2001; Lee, Borman, & Tyson, 2005) for students at schools in need of improvement (SINI). The ultimate goal of proposed revisions to accountability policies in Florida is to affect improved outcomes for identified student subgroups that continue to perform below academic standards established for all students.

Standards, Assessments, and Accountability under NCLB

No Child Left Behind requires that states develop challenging academic content and achievement standards for all schools and all children in the state (USDOE, 2004). The standards in each state must include the “same knowledge, skills, and levels of achievement expected of all children” in reading, mathematics, and beginning in 2005-2006, in science (USDOE, 2004). In addition, the state standards must be part of the accountability system used to determine AYP for its schools and districts. States’ accountability systems must also include rewards and sanctions for making or failing to make AYP.

Although *NCLB* leaves it to the States to define AYP, certain guidelines apply to the definition. These guidelines require uniform applicability to schools and students, statistical validity and reliability, demonstration of “continuous and substantial improvement”, measuring progress primarily based on academic assessments, and disaggregation of data according to student subgroups (USDOE, 2004, p.1446). States may waive results for indicators when a statistically representative sample is unattainable or if the sample size is such as will reveal “personally identifiable information” about specific students (USDOE, 2004, p.1447). Furthermore, *NCLB* requires that the accountability model include the graduation rate for secondary students and one other academic indicator for elementary students. States have discretion to include additional indicators. If states choose to use additional indicators, they must also disaggregate these data by subgroups.

States must work with local educational agencies (LEA) to administer multiple, standards-aligned, student assessments in reading/language arts, mathematics, and science beginning in 2007-2008 (USDOE, 2004). These assessments will be the primary means of determining AYP for all students. The assessments must be valid and reliable for their intended use, according to professional standards. Moreover, states must administer statewide assessments in mathematics and reading/language arts at least once in grades 3-5, 6-9, and 10-12; the same applies in science beginning no later than 2007-2008. Additionally, states must assess all students in grades 3-8 against state standards by 2005-2006 in mathematics and reading/language arts. States must make provisions that ensure that statewide assessments accurately measure the performance of students with disabilities and English Language Learners (ELL) to determine achievement in content standards. Finally, states must expeditiously report assessment results to principals, teachers, and parents “in an understandable and uniform format, and to the extent practicable, in a language that parents can understand” (USDOE, 2004).

Standards, Assessments, and Accountability in Florida

Florida uses its statewide assessment, the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT), to make decisions about grade promotion and retention, and high school graduation, as well as to determine if schools make AYP. Specifically, grade 3 students must earn an FCAT Reading score of Level 2 or higher on a scale of 1 – 5 to progress to fourth grade. Graduating seniors must pass both the Reading and Mathematics sections of the Grade 10 FCAT to graduate from high school with a standard high school diploma. Moreover, districts may establish requirements of FCAT scores for passing to the next grade level as stated in each district's Student Progression Plan, as permitted by state statute (FDOE, 2005a).

Florida has continuously raised the stakes for statewide testing beginning with administration of basic skills competency tests in 1976 and the nation's first high school graduation test in 1977 (FDOE, 2005c). In 1998, students in grades 4, 5, 8, and 10 took the FCAT in reading and mathematics. In the same year, the legislature voted to allow the Commissioner of Education to waive the High School Competency Test (HSCT) for students who scored well on the 10th grade FCAT. The following year, the State used FCAT results to assign school grades for accountability purposes. The 2000 administration of FCAT marked a change as the test included performance tasks and multiple choice items. The same grades 4, 5, 8, and 10 that took the test in 1998, also took the test in 2000. The remaining grades in 3-10 took the test as a baseline measure. Additional changes came with the fourth administration of the FCAT in 2001; i.e., all grades 3-10 took the test, tenth-grade students were required to pass the FCAT to receive a regular diploma, and the state adopted achievement levels. In 2002, the science test was field tested and learning gains were discernible (FDOE, 2005c).

Florida calculates AYP based on 39 cells based on total school and subgroup participation rates (95%) and percent of students performing on grade level in reading, mathematics, and science (FDOE, 2008b). Participation and academic performance data is further broken down by subgroups; i.e., (a) racial/ethnic (White, Black, Hispanic, Asian, American Indian), (b) socioeconomic status (SES), (c) Exceptional Student Education (ESE), and (d) English Language Learners (ELL). Graduation rates for high schools, writing proficiency, and school grade of A, B, or C, round out the 39 cells. Students in schools with a school grade below "C" cannot make AYP. According to *NCLB*, State Education Agencies (SEAs) may apply a range of sanctions to schools that don't make AYP (USDOE, 2004). Florida is currently piloting the Differentiated Accountability Program (DAP), which allows districts to differentiate interventions/sanctions based on school needs (FDOE, 2008b). Title I schools and Repeating F, F, and D non-Title I schools are classified into five categories based on the number of years classified as a SINI, school grade (schools and districts are graded on a scale of A to F), and the percent of AYP achieved (FDOE, 2008b). Specifically, SINI schools categories are:

- a) Prevent I – SINI Years 1, 2, or 3; and are A, B, C, or ungraded; and meet at least 80% of AYP criteria,
- b) Prevent II – SINI Years 1, 2, and 3; meets less than 80% of AYP criteria; and all Title I D and F schools; and all non-Title I D schools,
- c) Correct I – SINI Years 4 or 5+, schools planning for or implementing restructuring; and meet at least 80% of AYP criteria,

d) Correct II – SINI Years 4 or 5+, schools planning for or implementing restructuring; and meet at least 80% of AYP criteria, all Title I D and F schools; and all non-Title I Repeating F and F schools, and

e) Intervene – Grades, AYP, and declining progress. (FDOE, 2008b)

Though the Differentiated Accountability Program allows Florida to implement targeted interventions according to a model that, contrary to the previous model, includes school grades alongside AYP and SINI status, the State must continue to adhere to *NCLB* mandates.

Time Demands for High Stakes Statewide Testing in Florida

Statewide testing takes a great deal of time prior to and during the testing window. For example, according to the Florida Department of Education, the FCAT takes 4-8 hours over nine days depending on grade level (FDOE, 2005b). Consideration of collateral time requirements for FCAT testing illuminates ancillary and potentially detrimental costs to academic learning (AERA, 2007; Smith 2000). The author will examine this phenomenon through the lens of a ninth-grader in a Central Florida district.

Scenario

Remie (pseudonym) is a tenth-grader in a large district in central Florida. Her aunt, Paquita (pseudonym), is somewhat of a surrogate for her because her parents are uneducated and tend to rely on her regarding school matters. One day, during one of Remie's and Paquita's daily conversations, Remie tells Aunt Paquita that she's frustrated with her Honors English class because all they do is practice for the FCAT.

Aunt Paquita calls Remie's teacher to inquire about the class. After a couple of days of no response from the teacher, Paquita emails the teacher at her school address. The teacher responds that "the district" requires them (teachers) to practice for FCAT every day. With this response, Paquita decides to contact the supervisor for Curriculum and Instruction for the district and the school principal to inquire if teachers were given the directive to practice for the FCAT during Honors English every day.

In the meantime, Remie tells her aunt that she is receiving a low grade in her Honor's English class because the students have to respond to a practice writing prompt and other students decide her grade. This further irritates Paquita. She is very concerned that, instead of learning to write research reports and read literature, Remie is doing irrelevant assignments that fall very short of preparing her for 11th grade, graduation and college.

The principal returned Paquita's call and assured her that no one at the school directed Remie's teacher to practice with the students for FCAT. After much discussion, the school moved Remie to another teacher's class, without prior notice to her parents or Aunt Paquita. Remie changed teachers, but about 30 other students remain in her former Honors English class.

This situation, which came to light in January 2009, a few weeks prior to administration of the first installment of the FCAT Writing test on February 10, 2009, depicts the dynamics of teaching and learning in a high stakes testing environment, including narrowing the curriculum (Hargreaves, 2004). This is a real world account of one student's experience of inadequate,

irrelevant, and inappropriate instruction. In addition to the 345 minutes, or approximately 6.41 hours of actual testing time involved in testing 10th-graders in reading, mathematics, and writing, Remie may have missed an additional 90 hours of instruction for a one-hour course within the 900 hours (180 days × 8 hours) in a typical school year. Remie missed about one-tenth of the instruction that she was due. The fact that Remie's high school has not made AYP for a number of years might explain the emphasis on test preparation. On the other hand, emphasis on test preparation might explain the schools' continuous failure to make AYP (NCLB Stories: Florida; Teale, Paciega, & Hoffman, 2007). Florida Statute prohibits the possibility of misallocation and misuse of time and resources in the name of test preparation thusly:

...Beginning with the 2008-2009 school year, a district school board shall prohibit each public school from suspending a regular program of curricula for purposes of administering practice tests or engaging in other test-preparation activities for a statewide assessment. However, a district school board may authorize a public school to engage in the following test-preparation activities for a statewide assessment..." (K-20 Education Code, 2008).

The statute then lists a litany of ways that schools can proceed to usurp assigned instructional uses of allocated time (AERA, 2007).

The misuse of instructional time occurs not only for students taking tests, but also for students not taking tests at certain times due to adjustments in schedules and/or instruction (Smith, 2000). A critical look at the 2009 Statewide Assessment Calendar confirms Florida's official testing schedule (FDOE, 2008b; Jennings & Rentner, 2006). Testing begins the end of January with NAEP and continues in one form or another until May 15th, with the Comprehensive English Language Learning Assessment (CELLA). Students miss instruction before, during, and after statewide testing (Smith, 2000). Before testing, teachers participate in school/district mandated professional development that takes them out of the classroom or the school. During testing, students miss instruction while testing and/or while others are testing. Additionally, during test administrations, schools often adjust their schedules to accommodate staffing and other needs associated with testing. Teachers, who may otherwise teach, often adjust curricula and instruction so that students taking tests such as the Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) or CELLA don't miss instructional content when pulled from class to take the tests. This is another example of narrowing the curriculum and the negative impact of exorbitant time demands on teaching and learning. These costs to students' achievement are nuanced indicators of the achievement gap that persists for students with disabilities, ELL's, and students in ethnic/racial subgroups, the very ones targeted by *No Child Left Behind* (see Gay, 2007, for additional discussion). The absorption of large segments of instruction by the statewide assessments schedule and related activities appear to preclude student learning gains.

If the SINI status of Florida's schools and student subgroups' AYP statuses are any indication, the loss of time for teaching and learning according to the Sunshine State Standards (SSS) might well be deleterious to student achievement. In 2007-2008, Florida identified 29.9% of schools that did not make AYP as SINI. More than half of SINI schools have failed to make AYP for more than three years; i.e., 2.2 percent are in Year 6 as SINI, 33.9 percent are in Year 5

as SINI, and 23.1 percent are in Year 4 as SINI (FDOE, 2008a). Moreover, each of the schools that have been SINI schools for 4-6 years are Title I schools serving mostly poor and minority students (Hargreaves, 2004; Lee, Borman, & Tyson, 2005). Current achievement data, school completion rates, poverty rates, and placement in programs for students with disabilities reflect a persistent achievement gap between Black students and students with disabilities and the majority student population (FDOE, 2005a).

For example, as a subgroup, Black students have failed to make AYP the past four school years (FDOE, n.d.). Furthermore, in 2007-2008, school completion rates for Black (62.5%), White (83.6), Hispanic (69.1%), Asian (84.2%), American Indian (80.3%), and Multiracial (80.5%) students show Black students trailing all other subgroups (FDOE, 2008c). Similarly, students with disabilities have not made AYP in the last four years (FDOE, 2005d). However, school completion data for students with disabilities are conflated with diploma options and mandatory special education services to age 22 (FDOE, 2004). Twenty-seven percent (27%) of ESE students exited the K-12 educational system without a diploma in 2007-2008 (FDOE, n.d.). Although in fall 2008, Black students comprised only 23.09 percent of the total K-12 student membership (FDOE, 2009a), they were disproportionately represented in Exceptional Student Education (ESE) programs and underrepresented in programs for gifted students. Specifically, Black students were 39% of students labeled Emotional/Behavioral Disabilities, 24% labeled Specific Learning Disabilities, 42% labeled Intellectual Disabilities, and 9.7% labeled Gifted (FDOE, 2009b). These data affirm that Black students and students with disabilities continue to underachieve on statewide assessments along every construct that the state uses to determine AYP. The State must develop and implement alternatives to the current assessment program if it hopes to close the achievement gap by 2013 – 2014 as mandated by *No Child Left Behind* (USDOE, 2004).

Recommendations

Assessment Guidelines

Two aspects of NCLB and Florida's execution of the law suggest alternatives to the current assessment model. The first alternative involves the stipulation that standardized testing occurs at least once in grade spans 3-5, 6-9, and 10-12 and that states must measure the academic progress of students in grades 3-8 on state standards. Florida has expanded testing since the inception of the assessment program. The 2008 Florida Legislature broadened the statewide assessment policy by mandating that students in grades 3-10 take the FCAT annually (K-20 Education Code). Instead of administering the FCAT to students in all grades 3-10, Florida could implement an assessment model that uses benchmark grades for statewide standardized testing. The standardized tests, combined with results from progress monitoring (USDOE, 2002) and a research-based portfolio system could become the multifaceted measurement of student progress based on state standards as required by *NCLB*. In addition, Florida currently requires schools to work with parents to develop and implement plans to monitor the progress of students who score below Level 3 in FCAT Reading and Math (FDOE, 2006). Although all students in grades 3-8 must be tested against the state standards by 2005-2006, the assessments do not all have to be standardized tests. In fact, progress monitoring, or curriculum-based measures provide ongoing, in-depth measurement of student achievement and greater predictive validity (Geisinger, Wells, & Foley, 2007; USDOE, 2002).

Reporting Guidelines

Another possible alternative involves public reporting guidelines. Under *NCLB* States must report assessment results to parents, principals, teachers and the public as soon as possible, but no later than the last attendance day for students (K-12 Education Code, 2008). Presently, because the assessment effort is so massive, Florida administers the FCAT in February and March. This early test administration results in schools and teachers focusing on test-preparation August through March, and delaying other legitimate aspects of schooling until after the FCAT. As one Florida teacher states, "Students are more than a test score. Similarly, teachers are a great deal more than test coaches!" (*NCLB Stories: Florida*, n.d.). Consequently, schools take field-trips and conduct other non-instructional activities from the end of the FCAT to the end of the year. Virtually one-quarter of the school year, the final nine-weeks, is lost to these activities. Another Florida teacher states that his principal established new policies during preplanning, in which the principal ended "Fun Fridays" and forbade curriculum related fieldtrips (*NCLB Stories: Florida*). If streamlined to meet *NCLB* standards, the State could adjust the assessment schedule closer to year's end. These alternatives may curtail test-preparation activities and subsequently begin to close the achievement gap, as teachers focus on teaching the curricula contained in academic standards at high cognitive levels (Clark & Linn, 2003).

Proposed Alternatives

No Child Left Behind stipulates that academic standards must (a) specify what children are expected to know and be able to do, (b) contain coherent and rigorous content, and (c) encourage the teaching of advanced skills (USDOE, 2004). In addition, States must develop achievement standards that (a) are aligned with the State's academic content standards, (b) describe students' achievement on two levels, and (c) describe a basic achievement level to provide information about the lowest performing students' progress toward mastering the proficient and advanced levels of achievement (USDOE, 2004). High stakes assessments may pose negative consequences disproportionately for student subgroups such as students of color and students with disabilities (Christenson et al., 2007; Gay, 2007; Hargreaves, 2004). Yet, on the other hand, without the accountability aspects of high stakes testing, the State and districts may revert to exclusionary practices that leave these students without requisite instructional and programmatic resources (APA, 2001; Lee, Borman, & Tyson, 2005; Scheurich & Skrla, 2003). Thus, statewide assessments may be necessary. It is up to educators and policymakers to ensure that statewide assessments do not delimit students' academic gains.

The statewide assessment schedule impacts instruction in numerous ways. When faced with high stakes accountability, teachers often focus disproportionately on aspects of the curriculum on which students are tested (Barksdale-Ladd, 2000; Christenson, Decker, Triezenberg, Ysseldyke, & Reschly, 2007). For example, urban districts have significantly increased instructional time for language arts by reducing instructional time in other subjects (Center on Education Policy (CEP), 2007, as cited in Teale, Paciga, & Hoffman, 2007). The Florida testing calendar takes up significant time even with recent legislation eliminating norm-referenced testing beginning in 2008-09 (K-20 Education Code, 2008). Teachers in Florida districts must balance effective teaching with testing requirements if closing the achievement gap is to be a realistic goal. Revising the statewide assessment model and schedule can improve

teachers' efficacy beliefs regarding their ability to teach students the knowledge and skills needed for success in school and in life. The following proposed revisions offer alternatives to focusing narrowly on test preparation.

The new statewide assessment model would include a) Sunshine State Standards (SSS), or Next Generation Standards progress monitoring twice each year in all grades K-5, and b) FCAT exit assessments in benchmark grades 3, 5, 8, and 10. Progress monitoring will allow educators to work with students who are not achieving grade level standards throughout the year, rather than placing such strong emphasis on the FCAT. Students who perform below grade level will maintain a standards portfolio using alternative assessments demonstrating progress on the standards the next school year. The State will use progress monitoring results to determine AYP for grades not taking grade exit exams. Report cards, now called progress reports will communicate students' level of progress on Next Generation Standards to parents. State standards will continue to apply to all students. The only difference will be the method of assessing students' progress on the standards.

The new model will allow more flexibility in terms of assessments. Students in benchmark grades can take the FCAT during a two-week testing window the last two weeks of April. All testing, including CELLA can be taken then. Grades K-2 will take DIBELS, as opposed to grades K – 5 currently, within progress monitoring schedule. Hence, this will reduce teachers' tendencies to teach for the test. As long as they teach the standards at high levels, students should perform well on rigorous monitoring assessments.

The cost to develop, distribute, administer, and report results from the FCAT was \$19.44 per student in 2008 (FIDOE, 2005a). The cost of the new model will be minimal. Many counties in Florida already use curriculum based measures (CBM), which would meet the standards' threshold, published by companies like Kaplan. The State can offset additional costs for developing progress monitoring instruments and progress report cards by extending pre-existing contracts to additional districts through a competitive bid process. Eliminating FCAT testing at certain grades would counterbalance additional costs resulting from expansion of CBM's. According to Florida statute, these companies will have to contract for services within the given timeline in order to be awarded county contracts (K-20 Education Code, 2008).

Discussion and Recommendations

No Child Left Behind requires that states measure student progress towards meeting the goal of closing the achievement gap by 2013-14. The assessment model that Florida and other states use to comply with *NCLB* may have unintended consequences. One consequence is narrowing the curriculum in order to prepare for statewide assessments. Adjustment of statewide assessment policies may reduce test preparation activities that result in narrowed curricula. Similarly, school and district leaders must focus turnaround efforts on closing the persistent achievement gaps between majority and/or high performing students and underperforming students in targeted subgroups, particularly in Florida's SINI schools.

Students in SINI schools cannot afford to wait for changes in statewide policies. Local educators must take immediate action to reform school structures and capacity on behalf of needy students. For instance, misappropriation of instructional time and inordinate focus on tested domain content, suggest competing interests at both teacher and administrative levels

(Barksdale-Ladd, 2000; Smith, 2000). In addition to statewide assessments, schools encounter planned and unplanned, documented and undocumented events that disrupt the school day. Smith (2000) notes that a combination of “special days” and “bad days” nets a 40 – 60 percent use of the school day for instructional purposes. Moreover, narrowing the curriculum by allocating less time to higher order cognitive instruction and student engagement results in lower levels of domain-specific knowledge integration (Clark & Linn, 2003). *No Child Left Behind* mandates standards-aligned assessments. Teachers and administrators must ensure that all students have the opportunity to learn the standards-based curriculum by teaching effectively and using time wisely. This requires that school leaders, including teachers and administrators, enact leadership praxis consistent with notions of equity and effectiveness.

Policy makers often view closing the achievement gap as evidence of social justice activism (Artiles, A.J., Harris-Murri, N., & Rostengurg, D., 2006; Furman & Gruenwald, 2004). Social justice leaders in education must acknowledge the role of contextual factors in students’ school performance (Thrupp & Lupton, 2006; Ylimaki, Jacobson, & Drysdale, 2007). In a research synthesis on leadership, Leithwood and Riehl (2003) conclude that although principals exert “demonstrable...distal... indirect” (p.13) effects on student achievement, successful leadership distributes to teachers, other professionals, and into the community. Moreover, effective school leaders exhibit core practices including (a) setting directions, (b) developing people, and (c) redesigning the organization, through which they develop organizational processes and structures required for student success. Leithwood and Riehl (2003) contend that though necessary, these practices are insufficient. Successful leaders must also promote “school quality, equity, and social justice” (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003, p. 24).

Contextual factors representing student diversity in terms of poverty levels, prevalence of minority students, students with disability labels, and English Language Learners (ELL) indicate the need for practices that extend beyond the basic repertoire of leadership skills (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Ylimaki, Jacobson, & Drysdale, 2007). The cumulative nature of mitigating contextual factors underscores the need to implement school improvement interventions early in students’ school years (Thrupp & Lupton, 2006). Thusly, school leaders seeking to lessen the impact of delimiting contextual factors will engage in transformative processes to promote student success.

Theoharis (2007) provides examples of leaders involved in transformative, activist efforts to improve school structures, staff capacity, and school culture and community on behalf of traditionally marginalized students. Principals established organizational cultures attuned to the needs of all students by structuring their schools to accommodate the unique needs of students of color, students with disabilities, and English Language Learners. These principals successfully combined critical reflection and rational discourse with policy praxis including “creative insubordination”, to effect change for students (Brown, 2006; Haynes & Licata, 1995; Lopez, Gonzalez, & Fierro, 2006). Their efforts resulted in improved outcomes for all students.

Likewise, teachers and administrators in SINI schools must immediately seize control of schools’ schedules to maximize the use of time for instruction at high cognitive levels. Professional development must strengthen teachers’ abilities to teach high order thinking to all students. Finally, educational leaders must revise school cultural messaging to advance ideological perspectives that place a higher premium on student learning in comparison to accountability mandates. In other words, as the notion of creative subordination suggests,

principals must place student achievement ahead of assessment results when managing their schools.

NOTES

1. NCLB uses the term “subgroups” to identify groups of students for whom States must identify and separate achievement data.
2. The author uses “Black” to describe students of African descent for two reasons. The first reason is to be consistent with terminology used in NCLB. The second reason is as a matter of personal preference. As a person of color who is of African descent, the author views the often, but not exclusively used terms “African American” or “African-American” as essentializing. By “essentializing”, I refer to the lumping of all people of color who live in the United States as African first, regardless of country of birth or generational ancestry.

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