



Equity Dispatch

A Closer Look at High-Stakes Testing



February/March
2013



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IMPACT: Educate, Engage, Empower--For Equity

All schools for miles and miles around
Must take a special test.
To see who's learning such and such
To see which school's the best.
If our small school does not do well
Then it will be torn down
And you will have to go to school
In dreary Flobbertown.

---Dr. Seuss, Jack Prelutsky, and Lane Smith,
from *Hooray for Diffendoofer Day!*

Meet the Authors:

The newsletter at Great Lakes Equity Center is written and edited by [Kitty Chen](#), [James Kigamwa](#), [Erin Macey](#), [Jada Phelps](#), [Marsha Simon](#), [Seena Skelton](#), and [Kathleen King Thorius](#).

Educate

Tests are educational tools; in combination with other data, tests can help us improve our curricula and instructional decision-making (Kearns, 2011). However, in recent years, test results have been tied to increasingly serious consequences for students, teachers, and schools. When assessments are linked to grade promotion, diplomas, teacher pay, school grades, or school funding, they are referred to as high-stakes tests (Wilson, 2007). Some high-stakes tests serve as gatekeepers for students, preventing them from accessing schooling opportunities from their early years through postsecondary education and disproportionately restricting traditionally marginalized groups of students, including racial and ethnic minorities, English language learners, and students with disabilities. This is dangerous because these decisions are based on the assumption that tests provide accurate feedback on how well students have acquired

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specific knowledge and skills, but tests cannot tell us how much opportunity individuals have had to acquire information or how prepared they are for learning (Bransford et al., 2010). This concern has implications for stakeholders in education.

Retention Policies and Tests as Gatekeepers

A new wave of test-retention policies is sweeping the country. At the elementary school level, these policies require retention in the current grade if students do not achieve a passing score on state-mandated reading tests. For instance, third grade students in Chicago who do not pass the reading and mathematics subtests of the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) must attend summer school, and if their scores do not meet the standard at the end of summer school, they must repeat the third grade (Diamond, 2007). Retention under the test-retention policy has adversely affected school completion rates (Allensworth, 2005), and more generally research demonstrates that retained students are much more likely to drop out than students at the expected grade for their age (Alexander, Entwisle, & Kabbani, 2001). More immediately, students who are held back often have a feeling of failure; there is a stigma attached to being older than one's classmates, and students who are old for their grade may not be given age-appropriate learning opportunities (Allensworth, 2005; Holmes & Saturday, 2000). In spite of this research, more and more states are adopting similar test-retention policies.

Policies regarding high school diplomas also have important equity implications. With many states tying high school graduation or more prestigious diplomas to test results, certain students have a difficult time obtaining these credentials. For example, since 1985, high school students in New York have had to pass New York's Regents Exams to receive a more advanced diploma. In Ohio, students must pass Ohio's Proficiency Test to receive a diploma. Both of these states have experienced increased dropout rates and decreased graduation rates (Amrein & Berliner, 2002). These students are subsequently limited in their employment, earnings, income, and postsecondary options. In addition, data show that the average student without a high school diploma will have a negative net fiscal contribution to society of nearly \$5,200 (Sum, Khatiwada & McLaughlin, 2009). The outcomes associated with these policies are often long-term, irreversible, and cross-generational, with students of color and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds more likely to suffer unfavorable effects.

Test Validity and Opportunities to Learn

High-stakes test policies are premised on the idea that tests accurately reflect students' knowledge levels. Is this assumption valid? There are a number of reasons to question a link between test scores and students' abilities. For instance, students' test anxieties often result in lowered achievement, decreased social functioning, and lower self-esteem (Wachelka & Katz, 1999). In such instances, high-stakes tests may not test students' learning gains, but how well students manage test anxiety.

Furthermore, reliance upon high-stakes tests scores in decision-making concerning traditionally marginalized students such as students of color, students with disabilities, students living in poverty, and students who speak English as a new language appears ill-advised at least and unethical at most because these students tend to experience more limitations in opportunities to learn. These student groups often have different levels of access to high-quality instruction when compared to their white, middle class, English-speaking counterparts (Diamond, 2007).

James C. Kigamwa is a postdoctoral fellow at Great Lakes Equity Center. Dr. Kigamwa recently graduated with a Ph.D. in Literacy, Culture and Language Education from Indiana University, Bloomington. His dissertation, *Heritage Language Maintenance among African Immigrant Families in the US*, studied the changing language practices of African immigrants in the Midwest and documented some of the salient factors that are associated with limited generational transmission of heritage languages. Dr. Kigamwa has taught college-level courses related to the application of linguistics to literacy/reading instruction; ESL assessment; and multicultural education, both as an onsite and an online instructor at Indiana University, Bloomington and Indiana University-Purdue University, Indianapolis. His research interests are in bilingual education and in the development and use of equity tools.

Part of Dr. Kigamwa's postdoctoral tasks include participating in a research case study that will document aspects of a dual-language program for a large urban school district within the Center's region. The study will highlight perceptions of the dual language program among stakeholders including teachers, students, and parents. In addition to serving on technical assistance teams for cases, Dr. Kigamwa also manages the Center's [Virtual Equity Library](#), an online library of various practitioner-oriented resources related to educational equity. Dr. Kigamwa also participates in the Technical Assistance & Professional Learning, Networking & Dissemination, and Research & Evaluation work groups at the Center. Currently, he is collaboratively developing procedures for piloting *equity tools* that the Center is using with various school districts for broad-scale dissemination to the field.

Black students, for example, are more likely to be taught by novice or low quality teachers (Kozol, 2005). English Language Learners (ELLs) must pass the same English/Language Arts exams taken by native English speakers for high school graduation (Menken, 2006), yet they often do not have access to the same level of instruction as native speakers. ELLs consistently perform 20 to 40 percentage points below native English speakers across grade levels in language arts as well as content areas (Abedi & Diatal, 2004). Moreover, ELLs' dropout rate recently reached 30.5%, which is the highest of all student groups (Del Valle, 2002). Even within the same classrooms, students of different races, genders, or national origins may have differential access to educational resources. Students experience different teacher expectations, treatment, and levels of support based on their racial identities, leading to differences in academic performance (Chambers, 2009). These opportunity gaps make the tethering of stakes to test results extremely problematic.

So What Can We Do? Ideas for Educational Practitioners

Teachers:

Teachers' interpretations of student test results may shape their practice and in turn affect student learning (Diamond, 2007). Investigating low scores to discover the reason for them is vital. Assessing whether or not the test contains culturally biased items (Sackett, Schmitt, Ellingson, & Kabin, 2001) is an important first step. Looking at the extent to which students have had opportunities to learn the tested material is also crucial. Moreover, for ELLs, we may need alternative ways to assess content knowledge.

Teachers should also reach out to families and facilitate authentic involvement in their children's schooling processes. By doing so, families can examine whether their children's schools are organized in ways that facilitate ongoing effective instructional programming and practices for all students. Teachers can provide both practical and conceptual support to families. For example, teachers can help families understand which tests will be given to their students and how the tests are structured and administered. To make the test content clear to families, teachers can provide examples of test questions. Teachers should also inform parents of possible short-term and long-term consequences of taking high-stakes tests so that they know the ways in which such tests are used. This increased knowledge about high-stakes tests can empower parents to make well-reasoned decisions about participation in testing and to make sense of tests' results and uses.

School/District Administrators & School Board Members:

As leading arbiters within the district, administrators, and school board members should be aware of the interplay between people, practices, and policies that impact student outcomes. Interrogation of belief systems that guide decision making about schooling can help to build understandings among stakeholders to improve hiring practices, teacher professional learning provisions, academic programming, and other crucial policies that affect students. One potentially destructive belief concerns stereotype threat, an assumption that when confronted with the societal stereotype of black intellectual inferiority, black students' performance on academic tests suffers (Steele & Aronson, 1995). Administrators and board

Virtual Equity



Library

Upcoming Events

Illinois

March 16-18, 2013

[ASCD 2013 Annual Conference](#)
Chicago, IL

April 25-27

[NCEBC: Strategies to Increase Excellence in Education for African American Males](#)
[National Convention](#)
Chicago, IL

Indiana

April 5

[Research Day-Indiana University Purdue University, Indianapolis](#)
Indianapolis, IN

Michigan

March 9, 2013

[2013 Michigan SOGI \(Statewide Conference on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity\) Education Conference](#)
Rochester, MI

Minnesota

March 1-Nominations Due

[Recognize an Education Minnesota member for their work on human rights](#)

Ohio

March 6-8, 2013

[Ohio School Board Association Moving the Profession Forward: Preparing Teachers for a New World](#)

members can forward discourse with staff around stereotype threat in order to help identify instances where such beliefs impact delivery of instruction and support for students. They can ensure that policies align with expectations for teaching and learning practices in their schools. Race and ethnicity emerge as key factors in standardized testing success and failure (Kearns, 2011). However, holding high expectations and providing high quality instruction for all students can narrow opportunity gaps as well as disparate achievement between racial and linguistic groups.

In addition to facing and addressing issues such as stereotype threat, administrators and school board members can take additional steps to undermine problematic outcomes associated with high-stakes tests and test-retention policies. For instance, they can make budgetary allowances to enable schools to provide academic support services for students who need extra help (Lau, 2003). Moreover, they can use messaging as a tool to change public perceptions of students and schools hurt most by high-stakes testing results, highlighting the limitations of high-stakes testing as a single indicator of school and student success (Gordon & Reese, 1997). High-stakes testing and test-retention policies require systemic, multi-leveled and multi-perspectival attention to stimulate discussions and actions that will move the compass of student performance toward equity.

Conclusion

The consequences of high-stakes testing continue to trend toward grade retention and school dropout increases for certain groups of students. In light of problems concerning the validity of high-stakes tests to assess student content knowledge, as well as notable opportunity gaps experienced by students based on race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, language, and ability, more work needs to be done to change prevailing uses of high-stakes tests results in schools. Teachers and school leaders should be aware of inequities associated with high-stakes testing and broaden efforts to put into place the people, policies, and practices that will bridge opportunities for all students.

Have a question or comment about this article? [Share it here!](#)

Engage



Raise Your Hand for Illinois Public Education is a grassroots coalition comprised of parents, community members, and concerned citizens of Illinois. Its primary mission is to assist parents in becoming strong advocates for their children by arming them with vital information regarding issues of public policy in education. This organization positions children's learning potential at the center of discourse through dissemination of information advancing equity and research-based practices.

Since the organization's inception three years ago, Raise Your Hand has been integral to creating informative networks connecting research to all

[of Learning and Work- P – 16 Partnerships Conference](#)
Dublin, OH

Wisconsin

March 8, March 12, April 10
[School-Based Suicide Prevention Training](#)
Fennimore, WI

National

March 1 –31
[National Women's History Month](#)
[National Women's History Project](#)

April 27, 2013
[Teaching Equity Conference](#)
Des Monicas, WA

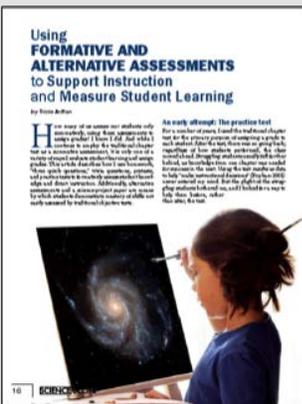
stakeholders in public education and their efforts have translated into successful advocacy work. Some notable successes include informational campaigns targeted toward school funding. The organization played a pivotal role in stopping a \$1.3 billion dollar budget cut and returning \$200 million of tax increment financing money to Chicago Public Schools (CPS).

Additionally, they have been actively engaged in bringing legislative information to the community through an assortment of town hall meetings, mayor forums, weekly news announcements, and specifically through their Apples to Apples campaign - a series of reports and infographics comparing and contrasting schools within CPS, allowing families to make more informed decisions regarding their student's school choice plans.

Raise Your Hand's advocacy and accomplishments have been noticed on a national level. CNN, the Huffington Post, the New York Times and a slew of other media outlets have recognized their work and as an equity assistance center, we too recognize the mission, vision, and efforts of Raise Your Hand. We support and commend this organization for its transformative approach toward achieving equity by using research, data, and information to empower families and communities.

Empower

Something to Use!



Alternative assessments are performance-based ways of evaluating students' understanding of content in various subject areas. Such assessments generally engage multiple sources of data and employ different methods of data collection. An underlying assumption in using alternative forms of assessment is that the use of single-source data sources does not provide accurate and sufficient information on students' progress, and may not give teachers an opportunity to

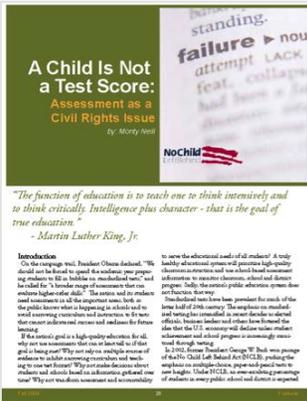
address any challenges students may be facing in the process of learning. A key advantage of using alternative assessments is the fact that they are based on data that is generated or observed in natural learning settings, and not under 'test' conditions. The article featured here is by Tricia Britton, a science teacher at Harrisburg Academy in Wormleysburg, Pennsylvania. The author describes how she uses homework, trivia questions, pretests, and practice tests to formatively assess student knowledge and thereby direct instructional decision-making. Please click on this [link](#) to access this very informative piece.

(Other tools for alternative assessments can be found at the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory website at the following [link](#)).

Something to Read!

This article traces the development and evolution of high-stakes tests from the

1970s, when some states started requiring that students take graduation tests. It highlights a lawsuit that delayed the implementation of the tests on the basis that some students had not had a fair opportunity to learn the content that was being tested, and presents a civil rights perspective on high-stakes testing. The author also presents strong arguments about the consequences of high-stakes testing, including the fact that emphasis on high-stakes standardized testing tends to undermine the quality of learning by dominating learning and class time. The author recommends that teachers obtain evidence of learning by using a variety of assessments and argues that good assessment practices are those that are formative and tend to hold teachers, schools, and districts, as well as students accountable. You may access the article by clicking on this [link](#). The article is taken from the Fall 2009 edition of *Root & Branch*, a publication of the Advancement Project.



Something to Watch!

This hour-long video is from a media briefing that was convened in July of 2012 by the New York Civil Liberties Union (NYCLU) and included renown educators who addressed some key concerns about the continued use of high stakes tests. At the briefing, the council released a letter that had been signed by more than 1,100 New York State professors that highlighted some of the harms associated with standardized testing, and the consequences to teachers and students alike. The panelists recommended the use of alternative assessments and argued that the alternatives are not a way of trying to avoid accountability, but rather are intended to promote equity and access to public schools. They also maintained that high-stakes tests have the effect of narrowing down curricula and causing teachers to focus only on some limited topics when they are under pressure to prepare students for tests. Other issues that are raised during the briefing include the fact that students of color, ELLs, and children with special needs are unduly punished by the closure of public schools as a result of decisions that are based solely on performance on high-stakes tests. Please click on this [link](#) to watch this 62 minute video.

[There is also a short 6 minute CNN Radio [podcast](#) presented by Steve Kastenbaum that highlights some of the key issues associated with standardized testing.]



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