



How to Improve American Schooling with Less High-Stakes Testing and More Investment in Teacher Development

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The average student in U.S. public schools spends 20 to 25 hours a year taking high-stakes tests and many additional hours preparing for such tests. Poor test performance may lead to sanctions for under-performing schools, and students who do poorly may themselves be held back from advancing to the next grade. Schools that have historically not performed well on standardized tests — typically schools serving students of color and students living in poverty — often place even greater emphasis on raising test scores than other schools. Yet many researchers have documented that too much focus on test preparation has multiple negative effects. Teachers may quit at higher rates, and students may lose important chances for engaged learning that encourages critical thinking.

My research indicates that U.S. students would likely benefit if large-scale assessment programs, particularly those required at the state level, were reformed by eliminating or drastically reducing the stakes of test-taking and by allowing teachers to design and score their own assessments. Importantly, district and state policymakers would still monitor the quality of students' learning, but teachers would be positioned as valued collaborators in this process.

Problems for Teacher Recruitment and Retention

Large-scale, high-stakes tests negatively affect teacher retention. In Georgia, almost half of teachers leave the profession after five years, and the state's Department of Education has referred to this mass exodus as "Georgia's teacher drop-out crisis." In a recent survey of 53,000 teachers conducted by the Georgia Department of Education, "teachers described a profession that was overcrowded with mandated tests, evaluated by unfair or unreliable measures, and constantly being changed without any input from the professionals inside the classroom." Because of these issues, two-thirds of the teachers surveyed indicated that they are unlikely to encourage high school graduates to enter the teaching profession. The top reason for dissatisfaction was "number and emphasis of mandated tests."

Too much high-stakes testing is not just a problem in Georgia. In a national survey, the National Council of Teachers of English found that "teachers and students experience high-stakes assessments as detrimental, in part because of their impact on student learning and in part because of the resources they divert from more useful activities." Such results suggest that reducing assessment stakes is crucial to any effort to improve teacher recruitment and retention.

How Tests Harm Student Learning

High-stakes tests also undermine instruction in critical thinking in schools, reducing opportunities for students to learn how to examine different perspectives, positions, and official claims and produce their own evidence-based understandings of the world. Too many public school students currently experience education as a matter of test preparation and memorization of facts, even after many decades in which educational researchers have lauded the benefits of critical instruction as a way to prepare students for college, careers, and civic engagement, and also honor students' curiosity, experiences, and agency.

Research-based theories and tools to support critical instruction are widely available through professional teaching organizations, but these resources are often underutilized because high-stakes, continuous assessments encourage narrowed curricula focused on test preparation. This test prep focus can reduce student motivation and increase dropout rates. Such negative consequences run directly counter to the avowed goals of federal accountability policies that aspire to have "no child left behind."

Solutions

If high-stakes testing is not improving education, how can public schools and teachers be held accountable for providing rigorous, critical, and nurturing educational experiences for all students? Instead of facing sanctions, teachers can be given more support through professional development that includes their involvement in both designing and scoring assessments.

Teachers are professionals — and should be treated that way. Research shows that many teachers are excluded from decision-making that directly affects them. Yet as stated by the National Council of Teachers of English, “Stakeholders closest to the process – families, teachers, students, and the local community — are most familiar with the intimate details of children’s learning and are in the best position to observe and document the small, yet important, steps that make up learning.” Involving teachers in designing and scoring assessments will increase educational rigor and simultaneously strengthen instructional practices.

The National Writing Project exemplifies this model by working with districts across the United States to help teachers design their own literacy assessments and score student work in collaborative groups. Teachers gain insight into their students’ strengths and weaknesses, and students receive feedback from someone with whom they can discuss their performance and set goals for the future. Professional development in peer settings is a better investment than spending money on expensive assessment systems and test preparation materials.

Moving in the right direction, Virginia recently passed legislation relaxing state-designated testing rules and allowing school districts to implement locally designed assessments, yet only in certain grade levels and subjects. In a full-blown alternative system, teachers would submit portfolios of work to the district and state that could be randomly sampled and reviewed by instructional specialists, who then give feedback and support to teachers whose students exhibit poor quality work. Instead of spending millions of dollars on testing systems, states could fund extended time for teachers to plan and collaboratively review student work. Funding could also be devoted to instructional coaches helping struggling schools and teachers figure out methods that work in unique contexts.

Giving teachers more control of their classrooms — along with necessary resources and support to design effective and critical instruction and assessment — is the best way to attract and retain excellent teachers, who in turn can equip the next generation with the critical skills they need to thrive.

Read more in Nadia Behizadeh, “Mitigating the Dangers of a Single Story: Creating Large-Scale Writing Assessments Aligned with Sociocultural Theory.” *Educational Researcher* 43, 3 (2014): 125-136.