
Democrat and Chronicle, Rochester, NY

**Pupils Lose Their Grip on Education if Schools Hold Too
Tightly to Tests**

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Extensive research now documents the misuse and dire results of high-stakes testing across the country, even in President Bush's state of Texas. Yet in the March 9 editorial "Standards diluted," the *Democrat and Chronicle* editors urge Bush not to back off his "vision" for "strong education" based on uniform annual testing. Accepting the Texas myth that Bush "improved local public schools using much tougher state standards," the editors warn of the "danger in giving exemptions, making exceptions, watering down," which would "perpetuate inequities," shortchanging urban students.

In fact, available evidence demands that states reconsider their inflexible, unfair use of high-stakes tests, which are rarely aligned with standards or school curriculum, use arbitrary cutoff scores and deadlines, and result in greater inequities by provoking drop-outs and diluting education, especially among low income minority students.

To use as an example Bush's own state of Texas, whose alleged "education miracle" serves as a model for his federal initiative, recent exhaustive research by professors Walt Haney of Boston College and Linda McNeill of Rice University in Texas document the dismal consequences of The Texas Assessment of Academic Skills. Only 50 percent of minority students have progressed from grade nine to high school graduation since the test started 10 years ago; in all, from 1992 to 1999 about 700,000 pupils in Texas were lost (dropped out) before high school graduation, substantially more than before the testing program began.

Seven of the 20 urban districts with the highest dropout rates are in Texas. Also under The Texas Assessment of Academic Skills, almost twice as many black and Hispanic pupils as whites are being held back in their grade; by the late 1990s, nearly 30 percent of black and Hispanic pupils were retained in grade nine alone.

Furthermore the watering down of school curriculum in Texas schools, as intensive year long test preparation and mind-numbing non credit “TAAS courses” have replaced standard curricula in traditional subjects, has especially impacted poor and minority students. No wonder a recent court ruling conceded that the TAAS has resulted in discriminatory adverse impact on black and Hispanic students in Texas.

Meanwhile, unimpressive scores of Texas students on the SAT and the National Assessment of Educational Progress, compared with those of students across the country, belie claims of increased passing rates on TAAS tests (resulting in large part from the exclusion of many students from school counts). Such is the Texas model behind Bush’s federal education plan to “leave no child behind”.

Closer to home, *Democrat and Chronicle* editors applaud New York state’s “uniformity” in its own testing regime. Meanwhile, many states across the country have now begun to recognize the catastrophe awaiting them if they do not reconsider their overly hasty, ill-thought designs. In the last few months, state officials and legislatures in Alaska, Wyoming, Arizona, Louisiana, Ohio, Massachusetts, North Carolina, Alabama, Maryland and California have adjusted or delayed testing plans, largely in response to predicted high failure rates.

None have abandoned their drive for high standards (nor, regrettably, their reliance on tests); they are simply becoming more aware of their need to provide multiple measures for high-stakes decisions, appeals processes and accommodations for special education and limited English proficiency students, and realistic alignment of curriculum and standards with tests.

I urge the editors and readers who choose to think more critically to contact the Coalition for Common Sense in Education (234-0189) for more information on the extensive research evidence against high-stakes testing.

Noble, of Rochester, is the teacher coordinator at the Cobblestone School in Rochester, and a member of the steering committee, Coalition for Common Sense in Education, a local group of parents and educators concerned about high-stakes testing.