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With the recent re-authorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) that calls for testing at virtually every grade level, a growing debate is taking place regarding the utility of mass, but especially high-stakes, testing whereby schools, principals, teachers, and students are held accountable for increased children's achievement (e.g., Scheurich et al. 2000; Scheurich and Skrla 2000; Valencia et al. 2001).[1] Proponents of the current system of accountability in Texas, which does have high-stakes testing as its linchpin, see the system as bringing attention to previously under-served African American and Mexican American children, the majority of whom are poor (Scheurich et al. 2000; Scheurich and Skrla 2000; Skrla et al. 2000a, 2000b).[2] "High stakes" testing extends beyond the concept of standardized testing to denote the attaching of high-stakes consequences (like retention, promotion, or graduation) to test performance (Heuber and Hauser 1999).

Opponents take issue not with the concept of accountability, but rather with the high stakes that are attached to the tests themselves, as well as to their collateral effects, including the marginalizing of curriculum, children, or both (McNeil 2000; McNeil and Valenzuela 2001). Sloan (forthcoming) reconciles these perspectives by suggesting that while proponents have an "outside-in" view, critics possess an "inside-out" perspective. In other words, proponents view the classroom from the outside (i.e., a "top-down" perspective) and note that previously under-served children have been accorded greater teacher and administrative attention. Critics, on the other hand, look at high-stakes testing policies from the perspective of the classroom where they witness the collateral effects brought about by such high pressures to generate positive performance. These include narrowing the curriculum by "teaching to the test"; marginalizing children, their languages and cultures; and "gaming" the system such as by retaining children in grade or relegating them to test-exempt status categories to produce positive test results and school ratings.

Regardless of one's perspective, I maintain that it is difficult to justify tying high-stakes consequences to younger children's grade-level promotion and retention as Texas is intending to do with all third graders in the coming 2002-2003 school year. Given that the scholarly literature clearly suggests that retention has negative consequences on children (e.g., Alexander, Entwistle, and Dauber, 1994; Holmes, 1989; Shepard and Smith, 1989; Valencia and Villarreal, forthcoming), requiring them to repeat the same grade on the basis of a test score devalues their rights to a fair and comprehensive evaluation of their performance through as many means available. In theory, grade repetition helps children to master the curriculum that they previously failed to master. Nevertheless, as discussed in more detail below, children often not only fail to improve academically, but retention can actually decrease their chances for future success. Research evidence further shows a consistent correlation to dropping out (Shepard and Smith 1989; Holmes 1989; Intercultural Development Research Association 2001; Valencia and Villarreal forthcoming). Moreover, as with other educational outcomes like achievement and dropping out, patterns in grade-level retention correspond to racial/ethnic as well as overlapping class inequalities, suggesting an inability of our educational systems to teach to these sub-populations (Valenzuela 1999; Stanton-Salazar 2001; García in press).

Although issues of curriculum and pedagogy are beyond the scope of this paper (for an excellent review, see García in press), they inform the larger backdrop of inequality about which critics and opponents of accountability are concerned. After a brief review of this larger, historic backdrop, I examine current education policy in Texas, including projections regarding the expected impact of the state's new policy on social promotion. In the final section, I make the case for a "compensatory," rather than Texas's current "conjunctive," multiple criteria assessment system (Heubert and Hauser 1999; Valencia and Bernal 2000). In the conclusion, I further suggest how a multiple criteria compensatory assessment model can operate within a broader framework of culturally relevant, systemic change. In light of the current national appetite for mass testing embodied in the newly re-authorized ESEA, my primary purpose, however, is to challenge the "wisdom" of attaching high stakes consequences to tests.

The Larger Backdrop of Inequalty

It is important to take both structural- and individual-level variables into account to begin to grasp the larger backdrop of inequality. At the macro level, research conducted by Orfield (1992) and Chapa and Valencia (1993) shows that immigration patterns have combined with poverty, frustrated desegregation efforts, and systemic educational neglect to give U.S. Mexicans the unfortunate distinction of being the most segregated ethnic/racial group in our nation's schools: "Hispanic students attending schools in California and Texas experience greater segregation than Blacks in Alabama and Mississippi" (Orfield, 1992). Moreover, such segregation is correlated with underachievement on numerous indices, including standardized tests, high dropout and retention rates, and ultimately, at the end of the "educational pipeline," a very low matriculation rate to higher education (Murdock et al. 1997; Solorzano and Yosso 2000).

Important mediating variables that compound the problem of segregation are inequities in school funding, the availability of certified teachers, and the quality of the curriculum with which achievement is correlated. Although a decade-long litigation battle (1984-1993) challenged the state's system of school finance and resulted in a more equitable system of state funding to schools (Cárdenas 1997), Texas has not invested in public goods like schools, parks, and health care in proportion to either its wealth or demographic change (McNeil 2000; Murdock et al. 1997).

With respect to school funding, the increases have never been sufficient to ameliorate decades'-long neglect (McNeil 2000). McNeil (2000) and Valenzuela (1999) find, for example, the existence of schools lacking in books, labs, and high-quality curriculum materials. To this, Valenzuela (1999) adds that the state curriculum to which youth are subjected is culturally subtractive. Historically, rather than building on children's social, cultural, and linguistic competencies, schooling, as a tool of Americanization, has played the role of subtracting from children their language, culture, and community-based identities (Valenzuela 1999; Spring 1997). Ironically, even as Latino and other minority youth have been "de-culturalized" into monolingual English-speaking students, they continue being viewed as if they are in need of ever more "fixing" or socialization (De Villar 1994; Spring 1997). Though outfitted today under the

guise of “standards-based reform” and its attendant, high-stakes accountability system (Meier 2000), our state curricula may arguably be characterized as yet another instance of the state’s role in the reconstitution of the class and raical/ethnic hierarchy (Blanton forthcoming; San Miguel 1987; San Miguel and Valencia 1998; Valenzuela 1999; McNeil 2000).

With respect to the prevalence of certified teachers, Treisman (1999; cited in Valencia and Villarreal forthcoming) analyzes State Board for Educator Certification data in Texas and finds that 1 in 5 public school students in Texas are taught by teachers who are not certified in the subjects that they teach. Moreover, as the degree of segregation increases, the percentage of certified teachers decreases and achievement on the TAAS test also decreases.

Fassold (2000) complicates the picture of inequities through analyses of the Texas Education Agency’s (TEA) own system for rating campuses, as well as the relation of TAAS scores to course-taking patterns in mathematics in analyses of the 1995 high school cohort. Ranging from high to low, a school or district may obtain one of the following four ratings: “exemplary,” “recognized,” “academically acceptable,” or “academically unacceptable/low-performing” (www.tea.state.tx.us). These ratings are further based on a formula that combines the following three criteria: the students’ passing rates on the three sections of the TAAS (reading, writing, and mathematics), school attendance levels, and the school’s dropout rate as a whole (Texas Education Agency 2001). He finds that African Americans and Latino students disproportionately attend the lowest accredited schools according to the TEA’s own rating system. He finds that success on the math portion of the TAAS correlates strongly to access to higher-level math (e.g., geometry, statistics, and calculus). Ideally, by the students’ sophomore year, they are enrolled in geometry. However, less than 48 percent of both African Americans and Mexican Americans—in comparison to 67 percent of Anglos—were enrolled in either geometry or higher-level math.

Worthy of note in the Fassold (2000) study are the stark differences in school ratings at elementary, middle, and secondary levels on campuses with high concentrations of either Anglo or minority (Latino and African American) students. He finds that on campuses where Anglo students are most highly concentrated (50%, 66%,

or 90% majority), their campuses were consistently rated by the TEA as superior. For example, even in the most diverse contexts attended by Anglos where they constitute 50% of the elementary, middle, or high school population, their campuses continue to receive the top two accreditation—i.e., recognized and exemplary—ratings.

Regional differences in the degree of inequality also have a long history, with poor schooling conditions being especially pronounced in Texas schools. The landmark 1970 U.S. Commission on Civil Rights study found, for example, that in comparison to other Southwestern states, Texas "has the highest proportion of grade repetition in the first and fourth grades, [and] also has 74 percent, the highest proportion of Mexican American eighth graders reading below grade level" (cited in Valencia and Villarreal forthcoming). According to Texas Education Agency data analyzed by Valencia and Villarreal (forthcoming), high rates of retention continue today. A further projection that Valencia and others make (Intercultural Development Research Association 2001) is that the state's new policy against social promotion promises to aggravate these historic problems while placing the burden of change on children, as well as their families.

As with retention rates, Texas dropout rates are among the nation's highest. Evidence from the U.S. Department of Education (Haney 2001a) shows that the Houston Independent School District (HISD), fifth largest in the nation, ranks 89th of the 100 largest U.S. districts in the percent of the students (46.7%) that it graduates (below both Detroit and New York city). Dallas, San Antonio, and Austin also rank low among U.S. cities.

Several scholars, including Haney (2000; 2001a) suggest that high dropout and retention rates may be key reasons why the TAAS scores have gone up, as well as why the racial/ethnic gap on the TAAS test has been narrowed (Texas Education Agency 2000). Haney (2000) maintains that "One clear cause for the decrease in the racial gap in grade 10 TAAS scores in the 1990s is that Black and Hispanic students are increasingly retained in grade 9 before they take the grade 10 TAAS test." (p. 73). Haney (2000) argues that despite the myth of a problem with social promotion in Texas, retention in grade is a much more common experience than the rhetoric would suggest. In short, these historic patterns of under-education and mis-education of Mexican American children, coupled with adverse structural conditions overlap, at the individual level, with

a high incidence of low rates of educational attainment and assimilation to which I shall now turn.

For the most part, the parents of both Mexican American and Mexican immigrant children are undereducated. Parents of first-generation, immigrant students attain an average of six years of school. Based on information provided by the U.S. Census Bureau, García (in press) offers a bleak portrait: Hispanics, of which 64.3 percent are of Mexican origin, register a nearly 50 percent dropout rate and a 50 percent rate of over-agedness at grade 12, attesting to high retention rates in school. Consistent with Orfield's (1992) observations, 82 percent of Hispanic students attend segregated schools (García in press).

Generational comparisons, a proxy for level of assimilation, show that while parents of first-generation, Mexican immigrant youth average six years of schooling, parents of U.S.-born youth complete an average of no more than nine years of schooling (Chapa 1988; Valenzuela 1999; Fix and Passel 1994). Not only does this pattern correspond to the above-mentioned concerns over ninth-grade retention, it also means that historically, far too many children have parents who either have a non-high school experience or a negative one as their experiential base. In an analysis of 1990 U.S. Census data, Chapa (1988) corroborates these results in Texas. Specifically, he finds that third-generation, adult Mexican Americans complete an average of 9.3 years of education and that the dropout rate is 56 percent. This evidence is consistent with numerous other studies which confirm that "straight-line assimilation," whereby the third generation is fully assimilated in socioeconomic terms, is atypical of the Mexican American experience (e.g., Vigil and Long 1981; Buriel 1984; Buriel and Cardoza 1988; Portes and Rumbaut 1990; Ogbu 1991; Matute-Bianchi 1991; Suárez-Orozco 1991; Kao and Tienda 1995; Steinberg et al. 1996; Zsembik and Llanes 1996).

At school level, as various researchers have found (Romo and Falbo 1996; Valenzuela 1999; Fassold 2000), Latino children are further concentrated in the general, non-college bound curriculum that reinforces teachers' and administrators' views of them as culturally deficient. As Romo and Falbo (1996) aptly observe in the context of their study of Latino, underprivileged youth in the Austin Independent School District, Latino children's lack of placement in the privileged rungs of the curriculum jeopardizes their

chances of obtaining the skills they need to be successful academically, including their passage of the state's standardized examination itself. More just and democratic assessment alternatives constitute an important step toward providing children with the educational opportunities that they need to be successful in life.

Education Policy Context

Texas's Current System of Testing

Since 1990-91, Texas has had a system of accountability that relies on mass, standardized testing. That is, the means of holding teachers and administrators accountable is the average passing rate of each school's children on the state's standardized tenth-grade exit test, the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills, or "TAAS." Every school and district in the state is also rated, most visibly in state newspapers, though also on the TEA website. Despite wide-ranging differences between schools at elementary, middle, and high school levels, particularly in terms of access to certified teachers and other resources, judgements of school and district quality, in effect, assume a level playing field. School and district quality get reduced to single scores in reading, writing, and math based on a per-school calculation of average passing rates in these areas. These scores are typically further broken down by race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status. Since schools are such highly complex enterprises with varying levels of quality across course offerings, programs, and staff, a single indicator violates commonsense assumptions and ways that parents have of talking about school quality.

While schools, principals, teachers, and students are held accountable in this manner, children arguably bear the greatest burden through—at the tenth-grade, exit level—their graduation or non-graduation based on their test performance. As previously discussed, educational outcomes for Mexican American children both reflect, and are the product of, a corollary system of advantages and disadvantages to which their scores correlate and over which they have no control. Placing this burden on children is therefore tantamount to "blaming the victim." Following students, teachers bear the next greatest burden as they are held accountable for the outcomes at the same time that they do not control the resources or the flow of finance to which the outcomes are tied (Dye

2002).[3] Given existing disparities, it is therefore unjust for the state to hold all children and teachers accountable to a uniform standard.

Although technically, the TAAS exam is only high stakes at the exit level, its public-ness in the form of regularly published school ratings in state newspapers render them high stakes at all levels were they are administered (McNeil and Valenzuela 2001; Sloan forthcoming). Test scores, for example, translate into consequences attached to real estate values, as well as to the careers of both educational bureaucrats and politicians (Sloan forthcoming; Valenzuela and Maxcy forthcoming). Such pressures force districts and schools to divert their few discretionary dollars and limited instructional time to the purchasing of test-prep materials and extensive test preparation, particularly in poor, minority schools (McNeil and Valenzuela 2001).

High school youth in our state who are not passing the exit test are increasingly taking courses like "TAAS-Math" and "TAAS-Reading" for which they receive only "local credit" instead of credits for graduation. The sole purpose of the course is for the students to pass the TAAS test. If after taking the test they fail the exam, they get another semester of local credit during which time they could have been taking real math courses like algebra and geometry (McNeil and Valenzuela 2001).

High-stakes testing not only affects time allotted to math and language arts in the classroom. Social science and science teachers are also asked by their principals to participate in test-prep activities alongside their colleagues in the English and math department (Sloan forthcoming; Hampton forthcoming). Instructional time for subjects that are not covered by the test is diminished while teachers that do test in the tested subject areas describe methods they used to narrow both instruction and delivery format to make them consistent with the TAAS format (Hampton forthcoming; Sloan forthcoming). Writing, for example, follows a strict, five-paragraph format on the exam. Rather than leave outcomes to chance, teachers often reduce the meaning of writing to a sterile, formulaic interpretation, particularly in schools that are poor and minority.

McNeil and Valenzuela (2001) and Valenzuela (2000b) argue that especially in poor, minority schools, logic dictates that when assessment gets tied to the threat of sanctions that teachers and administrators must bear if test scores drop or remain stagnant, perverse incentives exist to marginalize children through various mechanisms.

Other popular strategies include the following: relegating them to test-exempt status categories (Valenzuela 2000b; Valenzuela and Maxcy forthcoming), as occurs with limited English proficient (or "LEP") and special education youth; "encouraging" the academically weak to remain so by retaining them at the ninth-grade level so that they do not become tenth-grade TAAS-test takers who lower school averages; and by "pushing students out," such as by the practice of withdrawing students for lack of attendance (Valenzuela 1999).

A case in point is a virtually all-Mexican, large, urban school located in Houston's inner city. In a Houston Chronicle (May 4, 2000) article titled, "HISD Sophomores Post Gains on TAAS," the author notes increasing scores at the school though fewer students were tested—254 students compared to 434 in the previous year. That is, the school registered higher scores though an astounding 42 percent fewer students than in the previous year were tested.

Around the same time that this newspaper report appeared, I observed a similar pattern of test score and exemption data in a case-by-case review of HISD schools through the district's Research and Accountability office. Consistently, albeit with some exceptions, HISD schools that showed higher scores were also those that exempted large numbers of LEP and Special Education youth. While there are sound reasons for exempting some children from testing, dramatic shifts in the number of exemptions, inasmuch as they exist, squarely implicate the testing system itself in the reproduction of inequality.

Whether or not accountability contributes to what appears to be a rising dropout rate, especially among Mexican Americans, is currently being debated (Carnoy et al. 2000; Haney 2000; 2001a). What cannot be disputed, however, is that the dropout rate in Texas has continued unabated despite 12 years of accountability. This debate notwithstanding, since retaining children in grade is solidly correlated to the probability of dropping out, the emerging, ever higher-stakes policy context in Texas merits careful attention and scrutiny from scholars and policymakers alike.

Texas's New Policy on Social Promotion: Ever Higher Stakes

In the 1999 legislative session, two bills were passed that promise to increase retention rates among children in Texas. First, Senate Bill 103 was passed to further expand the accountability system to include additional end-of-course exams consisting of algebra, biology, chemistry, and physics. The difficulty level of the tests at all grade levels was also increased for the newly developed exams that go into effect during the 2002-2003 academic year. The new exam is called the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) exam. In light of this change, I hereafter refer to the state's standardized exam as the "TAKS" test.

Second, Senate Bill 4 bans social promotion by attaching high-stakes consequences to the new generation of tests for the students in grades 3, 5, and 8. The new TAKS tests are to be phased in by 2008 and the 2002-2003 third-grade cohort will be the first to be subjected to a total of four corresponding high-stakes exams at the third, fifth, eighth, and exit level in order to be promoted to each respective grade level.

Students will be given three attempts to pass the TAKS test. Accelerated instruction will be provided to students who fail the test on their second try. If students fail a third time, they will be retained in grade. The student's parent or guardian may appeal the decision to a "grade placement committee" comprised of themselves, the principal (or designee), and the child's teacher corresponding to the subject area on the test that they failed. However, not all parents will appeal, leaving the decision in tact. Among those that do, the process is prejudiced against them, particularly if they are poor, non-English-speaking, or minority. For a retention decision to be over-ridden in the context of an appeal, the committee must unanimously decide to promote.

The default assumption is that the child is to be retained unless reasons for promotion are otherwise adequately demonstrated—or, in the parlance of the legal system, the opposite of "innocent until proven guilty." Unfortunately, this presumption places the parent or guardian appealing the decision in a weak power position vis-à-vis the principal, teacher, and the strong arm of the law. Especially for poor, non-English-speaking, and minority parents, discussions of extenuating circumstances that may suggest the need for an exception in their child's case, may be difficult to communicate in an effective manner. Such circumstances may include how other academic criteria should be weighted, the importance of certain aspects of the child's prior academic

record, the presence of a non-certified classroom teacher, a lack of quality curricula or other resources, the effects of a family move at mid-year, and so on. A more equitable and just alternative would therefore be a default assumption that the child should be promoted rather than the obverse. The committee's conversation would then consist of whether a preponderance of evidence exists to retain the child with only a unanimous decision resulting in such a consequence.

Unlike so many other areas of social scientific inquiry where findings are consistently debated and challenged through consideration of other counterbalancing factors, research on retention strongly suggests that retaining children in grade is harmful to them (for an excellent review of the retention literature vis-à-vis Mexican Americans, see Valencia and Villarreal forthcoming; also see Shepard and Smith 1989; Holmes 1989). Great care should thus be taken in the making of all promotion and retention decisions. Given this weight of evidence, the passage of Senate Bill 4 may seem surprising. However, as suggested by Albert Kauffman (2000)—former lead attorney of the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund—who opposed the bill, its passage partly reflects the fact that no researchers were present to provide expert testimony on the matter when the bill was heard in the Texas legislature.

As with conservative policies in bilingual education, such as Proposition 227 in California that essentially eliminated bilingual education, its passage also reflects the political whims and prejudices of some lawmakers rather than a commitment to research-based policies, even where a preponderance of countervailing evidence exists. The evidence shows that the practice of requiring students to repeat the same grade not only harms them academically, but also socially, with 50 percent doing no better the second time and 25 percent actually doing worse (Intercultural Development Research Association 1999). Moreover, being retained in grade increases the child's probability of dropping out of school by 50 percent (Valencia and Villarreal forthcoming). Being retained twice results in a close to 90 percent probability of the child dropping out of school (Intercultural Development Research Association 1999, 2001).

Before the TAAS system of testing was in place (prior to 1990-91), retention rates for minority students at the ninth-grade level were around 10 percent. After the TAAS test began to be administered, those rates went up to 25 percent. State data confirm that

for every 1,000 children in the ninth grade, 250 of them have been held back (Haney 2000; 2001a). In light of the state's new policy on social promotion, these already high figures can expect to soar, beginning in the lower grades. Accordingly, researchers would do well to begin tracking retention rates in earlier grades (K-2) as schools prepare for high-stakes testing at the third-grade level.

The Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA) (2001), a non-profit, education research and advocacy organization for Texas's Mexican American community, has projection estimates regarding the negative impact of Senate Bill 4 based on 1996-97 retention data in combination with information on 2000 TAAS failure rates.[4] Without taking into account the fact of a more difficult exam, an unprecedented increase in third-grade retention rates is expected to occur. In the third grade, for instance, instead of 4,400 children being retained—as were retained in 1996-97, approximately 28, 300 students will be retained, constituting a net increase of 643 percent from the 1996-97 third-grade retention rate.

A mitigating factor may be the success of remediation provided through accelerated instruction to which the children are entitled according to Senate Bill 4 should they fail the test (Valencia and Villarreal forthcoming). Due to a lack of specificity in the law regarding the meaning of accelerated instruction, however, this will potentially translate into a continuance of test drills and test-prep rather than an authentic curriculum lodged in a disciplinary perspective. While assisting children's passing rates, their command of subject matter could be compromised (for an elaboration of this argument, see McNeil and Valenzuela 2001).

How the effects of Senate Bill 4 shall play out remains to be seen. The potential for success through remediation will probably help some children reach the next grade level. For others, the fact of a more demanding exam coupled with inadequate resources for remediation provided within the law shall be a stumbling block. IDRA (2001) makes note of rising costs associated with retention that include the need for additional teachers and classroom space as a result of increased retentions in the affected grade levels. IDRA's admonition that "a train wreck [is] scheduled to happen in Spring of 2003" is thus well heeded. Though time, as well as a conservative political legacy are

countervailing factors, legislative remedies are still within reach, including an assessment system that makes use of multiple compensatory criteria.[5]

The case for a Multiple Compensatory Criteria Assessment System

To make the case that Texas needs a "multiple *compensatory* criteria" assessment system, it is important to differentiate this proposal from the "multiple *conjunctive* criteria" system that is in place (Heubert and Hauser 1999; Valencia and Bernal 2000). Under the latter system, Texas students not only have to pass the test, they must also maintain a 70 grade-point average, meet a certain number of credits for graduation, and attend school a certain number of days annually. A student's test performance, however, is the decisive hurdle since it can neither be offset by the other criteria, nor by any other showing of their cognitive abilities. In other words, students with extremely high grades still have to obtain a 70 on the TAKS to graduate. A single point shy of the 70-point cutoff score disqualifies the student from receiving their diploma. While students have 8 opportunities to pass the test, many never get that far and many of those that do, still fail in high proportions (Fassold 1999, 2000).

A preferable policy alternative is an assessment system premised on multiple compensatory criteria whereby grades, portfolios, teacher recommendation, and even other test score and assessment information could be used to offset a low TAKS score.[6] This assessment model would mirror the college-admissions process whereby decisions are based on a multiplicity of factors of which test scores are a part. Low scores, for example, can be offset, or compensated for in admissions decisions with some combination of the following: high school rank, grade point average, letters of recommendation, or writing samples. At all levels affected by the state's new policy on social promotion, similar kinds of criteria can be applied in promotion decisions. A multiple compensatory criteria system in K-12 education is thus desirable for the following reasons:[7]

- **The current system of testing violates professional ethics.** Most fundamental is the moral argument advanced by national reputable associations like the American Educational Research Association, the National Research Council, the

American Psychological Association, and the National Academy of Sciences—alongside the makers of the tests themselves—that *no single test be used as the basis for any high-stakes decision like retention, promotion or graduation.*

• **Multiple assessment criteria allow decision-making to reside among various parties.** The use of multiple assessment criteria moves the process of assessment away from an unregulated testing industry toward those who best know their children's capabilities, namely, teachers and parents.

• **The use of multiple assessment criteria promises to provide a more reliable and valid measure of the students' abilities and potential, strengths and weaknesses.** Under the current system of testing, the chances are greater that children will be evaluated in a way that hurts, rather than helps them. Decades of research on college testing shows that multiple criteria and a sliding scale of test scores and grades results in more valid decisions, as well as decisions that have a smaller adverse impact on both minorities and females rather than using test scores in isolation (Haney 2001b). Multiple assessments guarantee that all children will be fully and fairly evaluated and that children will not be mis-evaluated and unfairly penalized, especially LEP students for whom the tests are particularly challenging (Valenzuela 2000a). In a word, this approach promotes *equity* rather than favoring individuals on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender, income level, or language ability.

• **The use of multiple assessments safeguards against curricula being driven by standardized testing.** Given that the state exam is wide in scope but shallow on content vis-à-vis the state curriculum standards, the narrowing of the curriculum that follows from any excessive "teaching to the test" will be minimized.

• **Multiple assessments encourage the use of extended projects, portfolios, exhibitions, presentations, and other classroom-based work.** Personal development and citizenship thus acquire greater prominence as central goals of education reform. Furthermore, diverse and multiple sources of assessment information will result in better guidance to teachers and parents on ways to improve their children's performance in school.

• **The use of multiple assessments provides relief to teachers, children, and their families of anxiety associated with "the test."** Multiple assessments encourage students to focus their efforts on learning the curriculum instead of simply "passing the test." Increased interest and motivation in school is therefore encouraged.

• **The use of multiple assessments shifts the burden of change away from students to schools.** Students have no control over the quality of instruction, staff, and resources. A de-emphasis on the state exam as the primary criterion for accountability means that the state's role may be focused more on fostering excellent programs rather than standardizing achievement at the expense of both children and real standards.

• **Promoting multiple criteria is not equivalent to opposing the state's system of testing.** Instead, this is an argument *for* multiple assessment, thus quelling the concerns of potential detractors who might see this move as reducible to an attack on "the test." More information on children means both better assessment decisions and thus, better accountability.

Conclusion

Though proponents of the current system of accountability in Texas see it as a system that has brought attention to previously under-served children, I submit that this system reflects yet another way in which children and their communities are objectified—or treated as objects. From its development to it implementation, this

system is something that has been done *to*, rather than *with*, them and their communities. I address this issue of objectification of students in my book, Subtractive Schooling: U.S.-Mexican Youth and the Politics of Caring (1999). The TAAS—and now, TAKS—test is part of a larger system that subtracts resources from youth, one that subtracts students' language, culture, and their definition of what an education should optimally be.

Children need to be affirmed both as individuals and as cultural beings and as members of communities that they cherish. Schools alienate children and rob them of meaning when becoming a better human being and being well-educated in the "Mexican" sense (*ser bien educado)*—is a non-existent goal (Valenzuela 1999). Rather than feeling that schools have their best interests in mind, many children grow distrustful toward school officials whose "bottom line" is at best, a self-serving agenda, and at worst, a lifeless and alienating treatment program that reduces their worth to bureaucratic exigencies. In the words of one educator with whom I recently spoke, "It's [testing] killing their spirits." He referred specifically to the impact of the testing system on both teachers and children in his south Texas, Rio Grande Valley, school.

This assault on the spirit is well documented in my three-year, qualitative and quantitative study of a Houston inner-city, virtually all-Mexican school. Ethnographic research on Mexican-American and Puerto Rican youth in Los Angeles and Chicago schools, respectively, provide additional evidence of widespread student alienation among our youth (Patthey-Chavez 1993 and Flores-González 2002; also see Stanton-Salazar's [2001] research in a San Diego, California, school). These combined studies suggest a much-needed re-focusing of reform efforts in ways that both bring added resources to schools and valorize the language, culture, and richness of children's identities in order for them to make better, more meaningful, sense of schooling.

Minimizing the use of the TAKS test, perhaps through a multiple criteria assessment system, will not eliminate the more fundamental problems facing minority youth. Indeed, major systemic change is still necessary. A return to the earlier, pre-high-stakes, status quo is not the solution. However, because the current status quo exacerbates a previously problematic status quo of high dropout and retention rates, and ultimately, a low

matriculation rate to higher education (Murdock et al. 1997; Solorzano and Yosso 2000), bold, progressive change is necessary.

In the present context, frustrated efforts at educational reform (as evidenced in Texas's chronically high dropout rate) are predictable when children and their teachers are held accountable for reaching a uniform educational standard when they do not control the resources that relate to the outcomes (Dye 2002). This suggests a need to sidestep the current framework such as through a multiple assessment system rather than to pursue change by adding ever higher-stakes consequences to students' test scores.

When restaurants, hotels, and other public establishments were forced to integrate several decades ago, it would have been illogical to have held either the clients or workers accountable to this policy. In a parallel fashion, it is irresponsible to have a policy framework that requires teachers, but especially children, to bear the greatest burden of accountability. This responsibility must be shared with higher-level administration (i.e., district superintendents, and the Texas Education Agency) and translate into a reciprocal process whereby they address, in a substantive manner, the historic inequities that Mexican American and other minority youth continue to face.

The Coalition for Authentic Reform in Education (C.A.R.E.) in Massachusetts provides an excellent point of departure for reconceptualizing accountability because of its core principles that local schools know students best and that the state should not be making decisions about individual students.[8] In the view of the Coalition, ensuring students' access to high-quality teaching, resources, and schooling conditions to guarantee their success is the state's appropriate role. The state's role in the area of curriculum is to define an essential, but limited, body of knowledge and skills. This essential curriculum in turn should be based on a predetermined set of broadly defined competencies (Valencia, Valenzuela, Sloan, and Foley 2001). Within these parameters, school districts and schools will be free to define and create their own assessment systems tailored to their unique student population, as well as to the particularities of their local economies.

In the area of assessment, the C.A.R.E. proposal suggests the creation of school quality review boards at state and regional levels. The primary responsibility of the review board at the state level is to assess on an annual basis the quality of resources,

opportunities, instruction, and curriculum in publicly funded schools. The state then reports any findings of extant disparities to districts and communities so that all can work constructively together toward reducing these. Precedence for this in some sense already exists in Texas with respect to the state's annual review process associated with charter schools. A key goal of this board is thus to ensure equity and reciprocity in terms of the state's responsibilities to schools (Dye 2002).

Through quality review boards at the regional level, schools would be required to report on student progress annually to their communities. Such boards would be comprised of various stakeholders, including teachers, parents, administrators, business representatives, members of the community, and state education staff. In Texas, all twenty Regional Service Centers could potentially serve this purpose. These centers currently provide various forms of services to schools within their purview, including the development and maintenance of curriculum; training of school personnel; facilitating the flow of information across local, regional and state units; and supporting research, development, and evaluation initiatives pursued by local districts. These functions make them good candidates for quality-review-board status and responsibilities.

With assistance from the state educational agency as well as their local districts, teachers could develop portfolios of their school's reform effort which illustrate progress along a set of indicators that extend beyond standardized test scores and that demonstrate how students have met the state curriculum. For instance, student exhibitions, products, and performance tasks, and external reviews or evaluations can be brought into the mix of how schools can demonstrate accountability to their communities, or regional quality review boards. In this framework, schools can decide for themselves which types of assessment they wish to deploy both within and beyond state curricular guidelines. All school-level plans would be approved by each school district and quality review board to ensure the presence of high quality instruction, appropriate assessments, and coherence.

In this framework, it would be possible for districts and regions to evaluate the state's educational agency in terms of it responsiveness to providing technical assistance, support, and meeting targeted equity goals of their communities. Rather than elaborating a full proposal, my intent here is to stimulate discussion on an alternative accountability

design (also see Padilla forthcoming). To be sure, careful thought in designing such a process would have to be undertaken, in order to not create another layer of bureaucracy.

To frame this more authentic model of assessment in terms of a "return to local control" is to misinterpret this proposal. The issue is hardly one of local versus state control over education. Rather, a different division of labor, whereby the state controls the resources while assessment rests in the hands of the local community, is proposed (Dye 2002). The intent here is to create an evaluation process that is fluid, participatory, and constructive, promoting equity and excellence not through a pre-fabricated, prescriptive meaning of reform, but rather through a transparent, institutionalized framework for innovation.

As Sloan (forthcoming) suggests, I do enter this debate from an inside-out perspective. On the basis of my three-year qualitative and quantitative study in a Houston school, I saw first-hand how the logic of the testing system played out at ground level (Valenzuela 1999, 2000a). McNeil (2000) and others (Hampton 1997; Sloan forthcoming) in different districts throughout the state are seeing the same or other collateral effects as those observed in Houston schools (Valenzuela 1999; McNeil and Valenzuela 2001; Martinez 2001). The advantage of this perspective is that it enables us as scholars to determine whether a state policy is yielding its intended effect. Assuming that the intention never was that any child should be harmed or that many children would be left behind, the view from the bottom affords little comfort.

A more democratic, participatory framework of the kind embodied in the C.A.R.E. proposal, coupled with a pedagogical concern over the development and elaboration of children's cultural and linguistic competencies—needs to supercede the top-down, rigid, and culturally-biased framework that exists. In the interest of fairness and due process alone, a major shift in how we educate our youth is needed lest we leave far too many children behind through ill-conceived promotion and retention policies.

If all children really count, "accountability" needs to indeed reflect a commitment to a rigorous and complete assessment of students' capabilities based on multiple compensatory academic criteria (not multiple tests). A more robust assessment system is not only fair and valid, but also more humane and democratic than the high-stakes

environment that children and their teachers currently endure. A multiple compensatory criteria system is thus an important step toward equity for Texas and other states to take.

Endnotes

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[1] The final act (House Resolution 1) is called "No Child Left Behind." Among its many provision all states must develop school report cards for individual schools and make them available to all parents. Achievement data shall be based on each proficiency level provided by state assessments, with information disaggregated by gender, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, English proficiency, disability status and migrant status.

[2] I use the terms, "Mexican American," "U.S.-Born Mexicans," "Hispanic," and "Latino" interchangeably when no distinction based on nativity is necessary.

[3] For evidence on the salience of resources to outcomes, see Berliner and Biddle (1995) and Grissmer, Flanagan, and Williamson (1997) and Grissmer, Flanagan, Kawata, and Williamson (2000).

[4] Since the TAAS test has increased in difficulty over time, 2000 data on passing rates provide a better basis for making projections than 1996-97 data.

[5] Two multiple criteria bills were indeed pursued in the last legislative biennial session. Carried by State Representative Dora Olivo (Fort Bend), House Bill 2118 and House Bill 2570, respectively, called for using multiple criteria at the exit- as well as at the third, fifth, and eighth grade levels affected by the new social promotion policy (http://www.capitol.state.tx.us/tlo/billnbr.htm). Both bills passed the House of Representatives with a majority vote but were blocked in the Senate. These bills will be considered again in the 2003 meeting of the legislature—hopefully in time to affect the state's new policy on social promotion with testing going into effect literally during the months that the legislature will meet.

[6] Haney (2001b) appropriately expresses concern over the phrase "compensatory criteria" because it implicitly assumes the validity of test results. Consequently, he prefers the phrase "sliding scale" guidelines to convey the idea of taking grades as well as test scores into account.

[7] Though substantially revised, the following rationale is drawn from Valenzuela (2000b).

[8] The document by the Committee for Authentic Reform in Education is titled, "A Call for an Authentic State-wide Assessment System – Summary" and may be obtained from the following website address: http://www.fairtest.org/care/Accountability-sum.html

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