

Testing Teachers to Raise Standards: Does it Work?

By Harold Berlak

Parents, politicians and school boards across the nation are rightly concerned about the quality of teaching and learning in the nation's elementary and secondary schools.

The nation's largest cities report growing shortages of teachers who are both legally credentialed and fully qualified. The problem is especially acute in public schools that serve the poor, African-American, Latino, and immigrant communities. Many children are being taught by a continuous and changing procession of "permanent substitutes."

High turnover, especially among entry-level teachers, plagues the profession. According to a recent report of the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, an extraordinary 30 percent of new teachers -- after spending five or six years in pursuit of an educational credential -- leave in less than five years.¹ The exodus continues and is particularly striking in mathematics, the sciences, computer technology, and other specialized curricular areas.

Teachers as a group are held in low esteem, and in spite of the fact that they are highly unionized, their salaries fall further behind other public service employees and professionals with comparable years of education.²

As we enter the high season of election year politics, the pollsters tell us that education reform is at the top of the list of public's concerns. The remedies aspiring office holders, from the presumptive presidential candidates on down, offer in the face of such concerns are unfortunately a replay of the familiar.

At the center of almost every proposal circulating today to raise the quality of teaching is more teacher testing. In recent months even the American Federation of Teachers has joined in the call for a new national teacher test..

At first glance, a policy intended to weed out the illiterate and raise the quality of the pool of candidates for education careers appears to be a reasonable, common-sense solution to the problem of low teacher quality. Who could possibly object?

Yet, in spite of honorable intentions, the tests that the vast majority of states now require as a condition for entry into teaching and other public school professions are making matters worse, especially for minority teachers. These mandatory tests that limit who can enter the profession have failed on two counts: They have not raised the standards of teaching and learning in classrooms, and they have sharply reduced the numbers of qualified teacher candidates -- especially so-called "minority" candidates.

The current wave of teacher testing began in 1983, when the California legislature, responding to the call for educational excellence, imposed a basic reading, writing and math test called CBEST as a condition for entry to a teacher credential program. Today there are, according to the National Research Council, 41 states that require prospective teachers to pass one or more tests.³

These are not licensure tests equivalent to bar exams or medical boards, which are controlled by the professions and taken after completion of training. Instead they are high-stakes gatekeeper tests, used to restrict *entry* to professional training. Unlike the SAT, GRE, or other admissions tests required by law or medical schools, however, the teacher tests are enshrined in legal mandates. Results on this single test override all other state requirements -- including successful teaching experience.

Thirty-seven states mandate such a “basic skills” test. Others offer a mix of tests intended to assess pedagogical or subject matter knowledge, or both. Virtually all these tests depend entirely on the familiar fill-in-the-bubble multiple choice test technology, sometimes augmented by a few standardized, open-ended questions.

This 17-year-old California policy has not achieved its avowed purpose of raising the literacy levels of California’s educational professionals, however. Nor has CBEST contributed to enhancing learning and achievement among California’s children.

The evidence is found in a large body of research and many thousands of pages of testimony and studies commissioned by both sides of a civil rights suit brought against the state of California and challenging CBEST.⁴

Not only has CBEST failed at its avowed purposes, it has greatly compounded an already serious shortage of teachers and school administrators and other specialists by unnecessarily reducing the pool of competent, caring, and qualified educators. Moreover, by a two-to-one margin, those denied were disproportionately persons of color -- African-Americans, Asian-Americans and Latinos.

Some have argued that while this is unfortunate, it is the price we must pay for raising standards. Yet what is striking in this body of work is that there is no empirical evidence whatsoever to support this claim.

Regardless of the organization conducting the research, including the studies commissioned by the State of California itself:

- There is no connection between a person’s performance on the these tests and his or her performance as a teacher;
- There are no indications that that teachers who successfully complete other requirements for a credential lack basic literacy skills;
- The single greatest obstruction to increasing the proportion of persons of color in the teaching force is CBEST.^{5,6}

A recently released interim report of the National Research Council (*Tests and Teaching Quality*, 2000) confirms that there is no significant connection between standardized teacher tests and actual performance; that the tests have no demonstrable predictive value; and that those who are disproportionately excluded by the tests from the teaching pool are persons of color.

Understanding why this is so requires a lengthy explanation beyond the scope of this brief commentary. Very simply, however, the test's authors used widely discredited methods to validate it; California's newly elected Superintendent of Public Instruction arbitrarily raised the test's minimum passing scores far above the levels proposed by the test's authors; and the testing technology itself is based on a number of implausible presumptions, one of which is that a fixed percentage of test-takers *must* fail, regardless of their raw scores. Finally, the test ignores the persistence of cultural and racial bias that continues to pervade the technology of testing and the testing process.⁷

The use of standardized teacher tests to control access to teaching as a career is self-defeating. It compounds the problems of achieving educational excellence with equity. Focus on testing has served to divert us from addressing the problems of providing every child with the opportunity to be taught by a qualified, knowledgeable and caring teacher. Because there is no connection of tests to job performance, furthermore, one of the chief consequences of the use of teacher testing, whether intended or not, is to install and to strengthen a form institutionalized racism.

Testing teachers as a fix for raising educational standards is just one part of the education reform agenda advanced by Presidents Bush and Clinton and now embraced by those who seek to be their successors. High-stakes testing across the school population, from the youngest students to the most senior teacher, has become the backbone of the nation's prescription for improving our schools.

These policies, hatched by politicians and the established Washington think tanks, maintain the support of corporate leaders, governors, and many national and state legislators. They will not end of their own accord, but only when the public sees through the sham of raising educational standards by mandating tests, and demands some serious answers.

ENDNOTES

1. Darling-Hammond, Linda, *Solving The Dilemmas of Teacher Supply, Demand, and Standards*. National Commission on Teaching & America's Future. New York, August 1999. Available at <http://www.tc.columbia.edu/~teachcomm/CONFERENCE-99/SOLVING/>
2. *Education Week* Vol. XIX no.18, Jan. 13, 2000, p. 36; citing U.S. Census data 1992-1999. Available at <http://www.edweek.org/sreports/qc00/>

3. Committee on Assessment and Teacher Quality, *Tests and Teaching Quality*, Interim Report. National Research Council, National Academy Press, Washington, D.C. Available at <http://books.nap.edu/catalog/9788.html>
4. *Assn. of Mexican-American Educators et al v. State of California*, Civil Rights Class Action C92-3874-WHO, U.S. District Court of Northern California.
5. Poggio, John, Direct Testimony of Plaintiff's Expert, Civil Rights Class Action C92-3874-WHO, U.S. District Court of Northern California, 1995
6. Izu, Jo Ann, C. Long, K. Stansbury, and D. Tierney, *Assessment Component of the California New Teachers Project: Evaluation and Assessment Practices*, Far West Laboratory for Educational Research and Development. San Francisco, 1992
7. Berlak, Harold, *Adverse Impact: How CBEST Fails the People of California*, Applied Research Center, Oakland, 1999. Available at <http://www.arc.org/Pages/Ecbest.html>