



TOO MUCH EMPHASIS ON TESTING?

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## Too Much Emphasis on Testing?

Parents for Public Schools believes that parents should be informed about state and federal laws that impact how student achievement is measured and what is required of our schools by state and federal authorities. This brief article and chart will provide information that can help parents, chapters, and others make sense of the standardized testing issue and all of its implications.

The issue of high-stakes testing has become a significant issue for parents and others around the country. While some individuals and groups have always been opposed to the standardized tests required by No Child Left Behind, the opposition is gaining steam and spreading. While Parents for Public Schools has not taken an official position on standardized tests and No Child Left Behind, PPS is an organization interested in improving public schools for all children. The issue of high-stakes standardized testing, with all of its inherent implications, is an important one for all of us and for our students.

More than 525 Texas school boards have signed a national resolution on high-stakes testing, calling for an end to the over-emphasis on standardized testing (<http://timeoutfromtesting.org/nationalresolution>). The law known as No Child Left Behind was part of then President George Bush's major overhaul of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 2001. NCLB was modeled on what some called the Bush "Texas Miracle" – the Texas accountability system by which President Bush claimed improved test scores on standardized tests in Texas. The Texas experiment was the forerunner of NCLB, which Democrats joined Republicans in voting for. The National Resolution on High-Stakes Testing has been signed by school boards, groups, and individuals across the country.

The resolution states that the over-emphasis on standardized testing has "caused considerable collateral damage in too many schools, including narrowing the curriculum, teaching to the test, reducing love of learning, pushing students out of school, driving excellent teachers out of the profession and undermining school climate." Further, the resolution calls for "a system based on multiple forms of assessment which does not require extensive standardized testing, more accurately reflects the broad range of student learning, and is used to support students and improve schools." The resolution also argues against any role for the use of student test scores in evaluating educators.

In February of this year, President Obama responded to Congress's lack of action on reauthorizing No Child Left Behind by using his executive powers to grant waivers (relief from NCLB requirements) to states that embrace his educational agenda. That agenda has included more rigorous teacher evaluation systems and the overhaul of low-performing schools. The waivers applied to ten states, and then in May, the waivers were extended to eight additional states. Eighteen other states have requests for waivers pending. The first set of waivers was granted to Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Jersey, New Mexico, Oklahoma and Tennessee. The second group of states included Connecticut, Delaware, Louisiana, Maryland, New York, North Carolina, Ohio and Rhode Island.

Prior to President Obama's use of executive powers to grant waivers, the Senate Education Committee passed a bill that eliminated the use of scores on standardized reading and math tests to designate tens of thousands of public schools as failing schools. The Senate bill would still require states to test students in reading and math every year in grades three through eight, as well as once in high school – and to make the scores available to the public.

The approach that both the President and the Senate have endorsed is one that seems to dismantle the NCLB framework and create a new framework that takes away federal power and grants more power back to the states. They are calling on states to raise standards, increase teacher effectiveness and improve accountability. The challenge to the states is to have every student ready for college or career when they leave high school.

These actions seem to indicate that the federal government is more interested in focusing on improvement in the worst-performing 5% of schools and those schools that show the greatest achievement gap between minority and white students – rather than supporting the NCLB requirement that all students reach academic proficiency by a certain date. However, the Obama Administration and Congress do not necessarily agree on changes to the federal role in education. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has expressed criticism of the Senate bill and believes that it falls short of needed goals, including teacher evaluations and student achievement.

Added to the murkiness of the current status of federal regulations, school boards, citizens, parents, and certain other groups are now expressing a strong desire to move schools away from the overuse of standardized tests and toward the use of multiple indicators of student achievement.

Many school boards have fought the battle of implementing No Child Left Behind for over a decade now. While many school boards have seriously worked to implement NCLB, they have done so with increasing frustration over the years. In addition to its being an unfunded mandate that required budget expenditures for implementation and legal issues, many school boards resent the emphasis on testing for basic skills. They want to see broader measures for evaluating student achievement, and they want the emphasis to include creativity in the classroom and higher level thinking skills. They want to emphasize the importance of non-tested subjects such as art, music and history. They want to eliminate the stress that students have come to feel about “the test”, and they want to decrease the pressure on classroom teachers. Many school boards do not agree that teacher evaluations should be based on student test scores, one of the most controversial issues surrounding standardized testing.

Also at stake in this issue is the concept of accountability itself – how public schools can be accountable to the public which funds public education. NCLB ushered in a new era of accountability, which provided, for the first time, concrete data regarding student progress. NCLB measurements required assessing students according to sub-populations, which made it possible for the first time to know how minority and poor children were achieving.

There is likely to be more and more conversation around the issue of high-stakes standardized testing. It is an important one for all of us and our children. We must be informed and involved.

A chart is provided here to offer some of the pros and cons of No Child Left Behind's attempt to ensure that public schools are held accountable for educating all children.

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