

“A New Paradigm for American School Reform:
from ‘High-Stakes Testing’ to ‘Helping Schools Improve’”*

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Introduction

Good morning! Thank you to the Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL) for inviting me. I’m very much looking forward to presenting and then being able to explore these ideas with you in the question and answer period.

Since “high-stakes testing” has been the dominant American strategy for school improvement and accountability, i.e. “school reform,” for about the last 20 years, the issue before this panel is perhaps the most important one in American public education today: Should the country retain high-stakes testing as its dominant school improvement/accountability strategy and, if not, what should replace it?

I believe that high-stakes testing has failed and will fail to achieve its goals and must be replaced. I will offer a specific replacement strategy: helping schools make the specific changes in policy and practice that have been shown to work in turning around low-achieving schools. Thus, I have titled this talk: “A New Paradigm for American School Reform: from ‘High-Stakes Testing’ to ‘Helping Schools Improve’”.

Both to evaluate the effectiveness of high-stakes testing and to develop “common ground,” or widespread agreement, on an alternative, I believe the most useful place to start is to ask: what purposes is high-stakes testing supposed to achieve?

To answer that, we need to remind ourselves what are the basic purposes of American public education in general and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), especially Title I, in particular.

Thus, I will address four basic questions: 1) What are these purposes? 2) What’s wrong with high-stakes testing as the strategy for accomplishing them? 3) What strategy should replace high-stakes testing? and 4) What must happen to reach common ground on replacing “high-stakes testing” with “helping schools improve”? (Because full answers to these questions would take more time than we have, I hope you will understand that there will necessarily be some over-simplification.)

I. What Purposes is High-Stakes Testing to Serve?

Turning to the first question, as the Supreme Court recognized in *Brown vs. Board of Education* in 1954, American public education serves critical national political, economic and defense purposes, among others. It is essential to enable citizens to participate intelligently in, and preserve, our democratic form of government, to qualify for jobs, and to serve effectively in our military.

*Prepared text of talk, slightly revised

** Executive Director and Founder, Citizens for Effective Schools, www.citizenseffectiveschools.org . In the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act, part of the “War on Poverty,” Congress went further. It recognized that disadvantaged children widely did *not* have educational opportunities equal to their more advantaged peers and sought to “improve educational quality and educational opportunities in the Nation’s elementary and secondary schools.” Title I is intended to “ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education.” Its funding is specifically to benefit “economically disadvantaged students” - whose learning has historically been way below that of more advantaged students.

Whether the national goal is for virtually all children to gain academic “proficiency,” as under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), or to become “college and career ready,” as is being discussed for the ESEA reauthorization, it’s clear that in the increasingly high-tech, internationally competitive world of the 21st century, “basic skills” is no longer enough. All students must learn higher-order thinking, problem-solving and communications skills.

Since high-stakes testing has been adopted as the dominant means of accomplishing these purposes - improving public schools and student learning, especially for disadvantaged students - it must be judged by whether it has succeeded in achieving these purposes. I believe that high-stakes testing fails this test!

II. What’s Wrong with High-Stakes Testing?

So, what’s wrong with high-stakes testing? Three things: it’s ineffective in accomplishing its goals; based on false premises; and causes harmful effects.

Notwithstanding about 20 years of high-stakes testing-based accountability, reading achievement on the nation’s most reliable assessments, the National Assessment of Educational Progress, has barely increased and math increases have been modest. As stated by chaired Professor Carolyn Heinrich of the University of Texas - who participated in a recently completed landmark study by the prestigious National Academy of Sciences:

[Our] committee ... was asked to carefully review the nature and implications of America’s test-based accountability systems, including school improvement programs under the [NCLB], high school exit exams, test-based teacher incentive-pay systems, pay-for-scores initiatives and other uses of test scores to evaluate student and school performance and determine policy based on them. We spent nearly a decade reviewing the evidence as it accumulated ... to uncover the key lessons for education policymakers and the public.

Our conclusion ... was sobering: *There are little to no positive effects of these systems overall on student learning and educational progress....* (Emphasis added)

<http://www.statesman.com/opinion/insight/standardized-tests-with-high-stakes-are-bad-for-2230088.html>

Further, it is not so surprising that high-stakes testing, especially NCLB, has failed to achieve its goals: it is based on false premises! These include that: the teachers and administrators in low-achieving schools

already know what to do to dramatically improve students' learning - they just need to be pressured, or given financial incentives, to work harder; if they don't know what to do, the pressures or incentives will induce them to find out and make the necessary changes; and otherwise, the States have the necessary technical assistance and resource capacity to provide the required help.

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/gary-m-ratner/no-child-left-behind_b_830635.html

But, in fact, teachers and administrators in low-achieving schools widely lack the necessary knowledge and skills. Pressures and rewards do not, and cannot, generate the sophisticated understanding and capacity necessary to implement the fundamental and complex changes required; and States widely lack the necessary capacity to provide in-depth help, especially for the vast numbers of schools needing it.

Moreover, high-stakes testing causes harmful effects. These include: narrowing the curriculum; emphasizing "drill and kill" for students to pass State tests - the very opposite of the high level, intellectually challenging and engaging work disadvantaged students need; manipulating standards and tests, including "pushing out" the lowest-achieving students; increasingly broadly reported cheating to raise test scores; destroying morale of teachers and administrators; driving good teachers out of public schools; and undermining the public's confidence in public schools.

III. What Strategy Should Replace High-Stakes Testing?

Instead of intense pressure to raise scores on State tests, what low-achieving schools need is intensive help to: improve their own work; increase support from parents, caregiver and community members; and dramatically improve preparation of school leaders and teachers. Fortunately, we can now offer valuable help.

We now know that it is possible to turn around low-achieving schools and that there are common strategies and practices, i.e. "common elements", that low-achieving schools typically implement to successfully turn around. <http://www.citizeneffectiveschools.org/successfulschoolturnarounds.pdf> While these "common elements" could be categorized other ways, I believe that the most useful is to group them into the following five elements: 1) Leadership; 2) Instruction; 3) Curriculum; 4) School Climate; and 5) Parent, Caregiver and Community Engagement and Support.

Further, research and experience identify specific concrete strategies, or "sub-elements," that successful turnarounds implement for each "element." These sub-elements include, for example: having a skilled and committed leader who acts as the catalyst for positive change by leading development of a new vision for the school and working collaboratively with staff, parents and community to develop, buy into and cooperatively implement this vision; peer collaboration time among staff; mentoring, especially for beginning teachers; an intellectually challenging, rich curriculum; high expectations for all students' academic achievement; and programs to strengthen parents support for their children's learning at home. <http://www.citizeneffectiveschools.org/successfulschoolturnarounds.pdf>

And there is a sound process for low-achieving schools to go through to turn around. It should include an initial evaluation of the school's needs by an external evaluator, such as a State-level school quality review team, collaborative planning with all stakeholders, full implementation within about 5 years, and

State technical assistance and supplementary financial support.

<http://www.edaccountability.org/pdf/FEA-TurnaroundStatementJune2010.pdf>

Under this new accountability paradigm, Congress should require whichever lowest-achieving schools it mandates to engage in turnarounds and for which it provides special federal funding (e.g. the bottom 5%) to implement the common elements and sub-elements and engage in the turnaround process. These schools should be required to engage in the turnaround process. And they should be required to publicly report selected statistical indicators - such as average teacher time/week in peer collaboration and school suspension rates - to reflect how much they're implementing the elements.

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/gary-m-ratner/whats-necessary-for-congr_b_1260155.html

For other Title I-funded schools, Congress should explicitly establish in ESEA that implementation of the common elements is a central goal for Title I schools. While not mandating these schools to implement the common elements, Congress should require these schools to report the statistical indicators - to encourage them to focus on implementing the common elements, rather than raising test scores as an end in itself. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/gary-m-ratner/how-to-overhaul-nclb-to-h_b_839130.html

In addition, to remedy the severe deficiency in the number of skilled turnaround leaders, Congress should establish a school leadership academy to develop and conduct a cutting-edge program to train and mentor experienced principals as turnaround leaders. It should bring the turnaround leader training program to scale by establishing regional centers.

And, importantly, to greatly improve teacher preparation, Congress should continue to condition federal grants to teacher preparation institutions on adopting what works: at least 1 year clinical programs, with close supervision, integrating theory and methods into teacher candidates' practical experience assisting in the schools.

Under this new paradigm, State standardized tests would still be administered and publicly reported on a disaggregated basis. But, instead of raising those scores remaining the central goal of American school reform and the driver of accountability, they would merely become part of a comprehensive qualitative and quantitative evaluation of schools' needs, to assist and supplement implementation of the common elements. In short, the whole emphasis of the improvement and accountability strategy would shift toward helping all Title I schools become good schools.

IV. What Must Happen to Reach "Common Ground" on Replacing "High-Stakes Testing" with "Helping Schools Improve"?

As to the fourth question - what must happen to reach common ground on replacing the high-stakes testing strategy with helping schools improve, I believe there are already some significant steps in this direction.

There is increasing media, public and Congressional recognition that high-stakes testing, at least as embodied in NCLB, is not working well as a school improvement or accountability strategy, and that it is causing serious harms, including narrowing the curriculum, teaching to the test, push-outs and cheating.

Second, it is increasingly recognized, even by Bill Gates, that if we are really to improve student learning, the biggest factor is to improve what happens in the classroom: to help teachers improve instruction. http://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/23/opinion/for-teachers-shame-is-no-solution.html?_r=1

Third, the House education committee has recognized that there are common elements of successful school turnarounds. Further, as former committee Chairman George Miller noted, they essentially need to be done together.

Fourth, the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), in its accountability “Roadmap,” recognizes that “[t]urning around our lowest performing schools will require systemic change” and endorses the importance of “comprehensive ... diagnostic reviews” to assist improvement.

Fifth, the Senate education committee has already bipartisanly approved a bill establishing a school turnaround leadership training academy along the lines advocated above.

Finally, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) is actively working with multiple States to help them transform their teacher preparation programs in the clinical direction urged above.

Conclusion

In conclusion, to achieve the purposes of American public education and ESEA, we need to replace high-stakes testing with what works.

Thank you.