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Resistance to High Stakes Testing Spreads

Submitted by fairtest on August 27, 2012 - 3:39pm [FairTest in the News](#) [fairtest on national](#) [high stakes](#) [k-12](#)
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Thu, 08/23/2012 - 9:55pm

Resistance to High Stakes Testing Spreads

A national resolution to limit standardized testing is gathering support.

By: *Bob Schaeffer*

District Administration, September 2012

Resistance to High Stakes Testing Spreads Members of the American Federation of Teachers react to comments made at their annual conference this past summer in which AFT President Randi Weingarten stated that high-stakes testing should be used to inform, not impede, instruction. AFT unanimously passed a resolution that says the focus on standardized tests has undermined the nation's education system.

A rising tide of protest is sweeping across the nation as growing numbers of parents, teachers, administrators and academics take action against high-stakes testing. Instead of test-and-punish policies, which have failed to improve academic performance or equity, the movement is pressing for broader forms of assessment. From Texas to New York and Florida to Washington, reform activists are pressing to reduce the number of standardized exams. They also seek to scale back the consequences attached to test scores and use multiple measures to evaluate students, educators, schools and districts.

The nation's second-largest teachers union also took a stand recently against high-stakes testing, passing a resolution in July at its annual convention in Detroit that says the focus on standardized tests has undermined the United States' education system. The American Federation of Teachers approved the resolution unanimously, stating that testing should be used to inform and not to impede classroom instruction. "It's time to restore balance in our schools so that teaching and learning, not testing, are at the center of education," stated AFT President Randi Weingarten. "Test-driven education policies continue to force educators to sacrifice time needed to help students learn to critically analyze content and, instead, focus on teaching to the test. And students lose out on rich learning experiences when districts cut art, music, sports, social studies, science and other subjects to focus strictly on math and reading tests."

Of course, opposition to high-stakes testing is not new. In the early years of NCLB and state-mandated exams, scattered boycotts of those tests took place in communities such as Scarsdale, N.Y., and Cambridge, Mass. What is very different in 2012 is the breadth and depth of the protests. Never before have large numbers of school board members, administrators, principals and parents stood up to challenge testing policies.

The current movement gained significant momentum, oddly enough, in Texas, the state where many high-stakes testing practices began. The catalyst was a January 2012 statement by Robert Scott, the former state superintendent of schools who left the office in July, in which he called the belief that standardized testing is the "end-all, be-all" of education a "perversion." Scott also labeled "the assessment and accountability regime" not only "a cottage industry but a military-industrial complex." Almost immediately, local school boards began endorsing resolutions charging that overreliance on high-stakes exams is "strangling" classrooms. So far, nearly 550 local school boards in Texas have signed on, including those in big cities such as Dallas, Houston and San Antonio as well as those in hundreds of smaller communities. All told, these school boards represent districts that are responsible for educating 3.3 million Texas students, or more than half of the state's public school enrollment.

Meanwhile, in New York state, more than 1,400 principals from urban, suburban and rural schools signed a letter protesting the state's new test-centric teacher-evaluation policy. Their statement concludes with a reminder that a 2011 report by the National Research Council found that the past decade's emphasis on testing had produced little learning progress. A series of errors in writing, administering and scoring this year's New York State Regents exams accelerated the movement. Most notorious was "Pineapplegate" in which several questions on the exam about a poorly written reading passage titled "The Hare and the Pineapple" had no coherent answers.

A National Resolution Is Born

Responding to the enthusiastic embrace of the Texas resolution and educators' statements, the National Center for Fair and Open Testing (FairTest) spearheaded an effort this past spring to craft a statement that would appeal to a broader audience. The result, the National Resolution on High-Stakes Testing, gained initial sponsorship from a dozen other education, civil rights and religious groups, including the NAACP Legal Defense Fund and Educational Fund, the United Church of Christ's Justice and Witness Ministries, Parents Across America and the National Education Association. Many local groups, including Time Out from Testing in New York City and Parents United for Responsible Education in

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Chicago, also helped launch the signature-gathering campaign.

The resolution urges state officials to “reexamine school accountability.” It calls for a system “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.” It also asks Congress and the Obama administration to overhaul NCLB. At the federal level, the resolution’s goal is “to reduce the testing mandates, promote multiple forms of evidence of student learning and school quality in accountability, and not mandate any fixed role for the use of student test scores in evaluating educators.”

As of mid-June, more than 10,000 individuals from all 50 states and 350 organizations, including the National Council of Teachers of English and parents groups in Tucson, Baton Rouge, Minneapolis and Charlotte, had signed the resolution.

The National Resolution, in turn, has stimulated activists in several regions to press for their own versions. In Florida, another state where high-stakes testing had long dominated the education reform debate, a dozen countywide school boards signed on within a three-week period. Endorsers included Broward County Public Schools, the nation’s sixth-largest district, and the School District of Palm Beach County. With grassroots resolutions sweeping the state, the Florida School Board Association took up a version at its annual conference last spring. Despite a condescending lecture from the state education commissioner warning delegates against passage, they voted to adopt it overwhelmingly, even though they are still legally required to administer the controversial FCAT exam.

And, three school boards in the Tulsa, Okla., area, as well as boards in Ohio and Virginia, endorsed the resolution. The national Parent Teacher Association issued a statement noting that its policy positions were consistent with the resolution.

Boycotts Pepper the Nation

Diane Ravitch, research professor of education at New York University, speaking at the NCTM regional conference this past summer, discussing the impact of school reforms. Aside from extensive media coverage about the movement, New York parents this past spring organized a boycott of a “field test” designed to try out potential questions for future exams. Parents at more than five dozen schools refused to allow their children to take the trial exams.

Boycotts also spread in other states, including Colorado and California. In Snohomish (Wash.) School District, 550 parents stopped their children from taking the Measurements of Student Progress test, the state’s exam for third- through eighth graders, and are working to promote test refusal in other communities.

What’s behind the surge of criticism of high-stakes testing and support for assessment alternatives? Several forces are at work. First, and most important, is the widespread recognition that test-driven education “reform,” embodied by NCLB and state graduation tests, has failed. Multiple statistical studies, such as FairTest’s report “NCLB’s Lost Decade for Educational Progress,” have shown that federally mandated testing did not increase average academic performance or narrow achievement gaps significantly. In fact, U.S. students made greater gains on the National Assessment of Academic Progress (NAEP) before NCLB became law. Reports by independent experts, including the National Research Council, have found little evidence that proves high-stakes testing has improved academic performance among students.

Second, parents and educators saw that test-driven schooling damaged educational quality and equity by narrowing curriculum and focusing on the limited skills that standardized tests measure. These negative effects fell most heavily on classrooms serving low-income and minority children.

Third, a series of errors in test construction, administration, scoring and reporting damaged the industry’s credibility. The public now understands that the tools politicians mandate to enforce educational “accountability” are produced by unaccountable companies focused on generating profits, not helping children learn.

Finally, test-cheating scandals have undermined confidence in policies that rely on standardized exams. Investigations in Atlanta, Baltimore, Denver, El Paso, Houston, Indianapolis and New York City have shown that many highly promoted gains resulted from score manipulation. Improper behaviors range from erasing wrong answers to barring certain students from school on testing days. According to FairTest, cheating cases have been confirmed in 36 states and the District of Columbia over the past four years.

The Alternatives

Robert Scott, former Texas education commissioner, publicly stated that the idea that high-stakes testing was the end-all, be-all was a “perversion,” creating a greater push for the movement. Overwhelmed by the evidence, defenders of high-stakes testing typically fall back on one last-ditch argument: “So what’s the alternative?”

However, many concrete proposals made by groups like FairTest, the Forum on Educational Accountability, and the Broader, Bolder Approach to Education have demonstrated that better methods for evaluating student progress already exist. Assessment based on student performance on real learning tasks is more useful and accurate for measuring achievement than any multiple-choice test.

Trained teams of educators can also be used to rate academic performance. Such a process is already used to grade the non-multiple-choice portions of Advanced Placement exams. Studies have shown that with training, the level of agreement on grading among judges is high. As with multiple-choice tests, safeguards are necessary to ensure that race, class, gender, linguistic or other cultural biases do not affect evaluation.

The United States is the only economically advanced nation that relies heavily on multiple-choice tests. Other nations, such as Finland, primarily use performance-based assessments. Their students are evaluated based on real academic work such as essays, projects and activities. Ironically, because these nations do not focus on teaching to multiple-choice exams, they even score higher than U.S. students do on those tests, as several researchers, including Finnish policy analyst Pasi Sahlberg, have demonstrated.

Using Campaign to Close Gap

Why, then, do so many public officials continue to advocate high-stakes testing? The major problem is a disconnect between the views of voters and educators on the one hand, and politicians and their high-dollar supporters—particularly the Broad, Gates and Walton foundations—on the other. Public opinion polls consistently show support for cutting back on high-stakes testing. But policy makers and their close supporters continue to defend the status quo, even though the evidence reveals that it has not succeeded.

This past summer and this fall, the assessment reform groups who initiated the National Resolution are using the election campaign season to close that gap. The groups plan to press all candidates for Congress, local offices and even as high as the president to take public positions against test misuse and overuse.

In St. Petersburg, Fla., voters convinced seven of eight contenders for the Pinellas County School Board to support a statement opposing high-stakes standardized exams. By “bird-dogging” candidate forums, publishing letters-to-the-editor in local media, commenting on political blogs, and asking pointed questions, advocates expect to deliver a clear message to those who ultimately make assessment policy.

Leaders of the testing reform movement are realists. They know that a winning campaign requires more than one resolution or a single electoral cycle. They are confident, however, that the increasing power of public opinion will ultimately lead policy makers to roll back excessive high-stakes standardized exam mandates and finally adopt better forms of assessment.

Last May, California Senate President Pro Tem Darrell Steinberg speaks with Sen. Elaine Alquist after his school testing bill, SB1458, was approved by the Senate. The bill, which makes schools less reliant on student testing, is part of a larger education package under consideration. If passed in the Assembly, it would need governor approval. Last May, California Senate President Pro Tem Darrell Steinberg speaks with Sen. Elaine Alquist after his school testing bill, SB1458, was approved by the Senate. The bill, which makes schools less reliant on student testing, is part of a larger education package under consideration.

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