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Do high-stakes tests boost student achievement? Can good schools be labeled 'low-performing'?

Which of the following is true?

(a) If the President of the United States says a school is great, it won't be put on a list of failing schools.

(b) If the U.S. Department of Education says a school is exemplary, it won't be put on a list of failing schools.

(c) If a school is succeeding in imparting both factual information and critical thinking skills to a diverse student body, it won't be put on a list of failing schools.

(d) A nationwide scientific experiment conducted over two decades has shown that high-stakes tests do not improve student achievement.

You won't be graded on this, but it's a very high-stakes question, because the new federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) mandates a testing regime that impacts every school.

"Every teacher knows tests have a role to play," says NEA Student Achievement Director Stephanie Fanjul. "Teachers use tests all the time, including standardized tests. We want to be sure our students are learning and growing. But there are lots of ways that we collect that information, not just tests. Almost never does a bubble sheet reflect back the breadth of what a child understands.

When tests are punitive, all the attention is focused on the scores. That doesn't help us educate our children."

So now let's try to answer our question. Let's see...as experienced test takers, we know we can improve our chances by eliminating clearly wrong answers. This is an open-Web test, so let's do some research.

Checking out (a), we learn that President Bush, touring the country last May to promote the new federal education law, stopped at Vandenberg Elementary School in Southfield, Michigan, and said, "This is a successful school....This school doesn't quit on kids, and that's why it's heralded for its excellence." A few weeks later, Vandenberg found itself on the Michigan low-performing schools list.

For (b), we discover that *USA Today* found 19 U.S. Department of Education Blue Ribbon exemplary schools on low-performing lists.

Let's try (c). We investigate Hart Middle School in Rochester Hills, Michigan, a vibrant learning environment—and a Blue Ribbon winner. It, too, did not escape the low-performer list (see "Blue Ribbon or Below Par?" page 9).

That leaves (d), which seems the least likely answer—except that it's true.

Scientists at Arizona State University announced last December results of the most comprehensive study ever conducted of high-stakes testing. High-stakes testing, they concluded, does not improve student achievement.

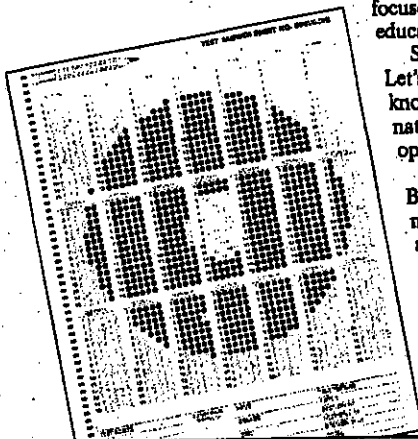
The Arizona researchers took advantage of the fact that a giant experiment on high-stakes tests had been inadvertently conducted for the last 20 years: 28 states adopted high-stakes tests, while the others did not.

So the scientists posed a simple question: How did student achievement change when states put on the high-stakes pressure? Did students in high-stakes states improve more or less than students in the states that left student assessment mostly to local educators?

For an answer, the researchers looked at results on several national tests, including the reading and math tests of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), which are given to random samples of students under the auspices of the U.S. Department of Education and are widely accepted as the nation's best measure of achievement. The Arizona scientists also looked at SAT, ACT, and Advanced Placement scores.

"The data presented in this study suggest that after the implementation of high-stakes tests, nothing much happens," researchers Audrey Amrein and David Berliner reported. "No consistent effects across states were noted. Scores seemed to go up or down in a random pattern."

There was actually a small tendency for states that adopted high-stakes testing to improve less on national tests than states that avoided the high-stakes pressure. But in most high-stakes testing states, the public impression has been that the tests work. That's because scores on the



ESEA Testing Timeline

2002-03

Using a federal formula applied to 2001-02 state test results, each state calculates a percentage of students who should score "proficient" in reading and math this year. Each school must meet this target for all students and for each subgroup of students. In many states, officials say most schools

are below their targets. Schools have two years to reach the target. (For schools that fell short of state targets for two or more years under the old federal law, the new law says penalties are supposed to have started this year.)

2003-04

Schools strive to make "adequate yearly progress" (AYP), enough to reach the target by 2004-05.

2004-05

States must raise the target percentage of "proficient" students even higher. Title I schools that

have not made AYP for two years are to get extra help. Also, they must offer students the choice of transferring to other public schools and must pay for transportation.

2005-06

Annual testing in reading and math is now required in each of grades 3-8 and at least once in grades 10-12. Title I schools that have not made AYP for three years must offer supplemental services such as tutoring.

2006-07

Title I schools that have not made AYP for four years must take "cor-

rective action," ranging from hiring an outside expert to replacing some staff members.

2007-08

States must again raise the target percentage of students who score "proficient" (These test score targets go up in equal increments to reach 100 percent in 2014.) Meanwhile, annual testing in science begins.

June 30, 2008

The law expires or (more likely) is reauthorized by Congress with changes.

E 1/2

Blue Ribbon Or Below Par?

A great school gets a bad label

high-stakes tests themselves generally did improve, so state officials were able to claim success.

But the higher scores were apparently due to the enormous amounts of time and effort that schools poured into teaching the content and exact wording patterns that students would see on those particular tests. The improvement did not carry over into better performance on other tests of the same general content—they did not reflect real gains in learning.

MORE DROP-OUTS

In a second study, the Arizona researchers studied what happened to drop-out rates and graduation rates when states adopted high-stakes graduation tests.

The results were disturbing. Graduation rates fell. Drop-out rates rose.

Further investigation revealed that the reason wasn't just that students got discouraged or fled the pressure. The researchers found that some administrators encouraged low-achieving students to leave school, probably to improve their schools' scores.

The twin studies were funded by the Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice, a collaborative of NEA state affiliates in Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, and Wisconsin. The studies were then reviewed by independent research scientists.

The results of these studies are consistent with earlier, more limited scientific assessments of high-stakes testing in Texas and Massachusetts.

High-stakes tests "result in narrowing the curriculum," says study co-author David Berliner. "People are doing anything they can to achieve the scores they need. They're not teaching students to transfer knowledge, but just to answer questions like those on the state test. They're not preparing

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Educators at the Hart Middle School in Michigan were delighted last May when they learned they had won the coveted Blue Ribbon award from the U.S. Department of Education.

But the euphoria crashed at the first staff meeting of the new school year when the principal broke the news that Hart was also on a list of low-performing schools. "We were all just floored," says science teacher Nate Childers. "There was a lot of anger. How could this happen?"

Hart wasn't the only school with this strange Blue Ribbon/low-performer rating. *USA Today* conducted a partial survey of schools on low-performing lists and found 19 Blue Ribbon schools among them—19 schools singled out for excellence and then told they were below par

Each week, two or three teachers go out to the trailer park after school to work with students there. Hart also has a Saturday school for students who need extra help. Parent involvement is strong.

Hart has solid school programs across the board. There's an active school choir, and the faculty recently installed climbing walls in the gym to challenge students.

And the academic program is top of the line. Science teacher Childers, for example, takes his students to a local river every year to monitor pollution. One year, they discovered a spike in their readings, traced the pollution to a construction site, and got it shut down—an unforgettable learning experience for eighth graders.

"This is not a simulation," notes Childers. "They're doing real science."

Support professionals were among those interviewed by the federal evaluator during the Blue Ribbon competition. They, too, play a key role in building the educational environment.

But the low-performing label has nothing to do with unforgettable learning experiences or sound educational environments. It's attached to any school that doesn't meet test score standards.

More than 40 percent of Michigan schools were on last year's low-performer lists, more than in any other state. Why? Because for last year's list, the new federal law rested on old state standards. Michigan had extremely tough standards, intending them as targets that schools should shoot for. Michigan not only required that students score high, but also that the scores rise each year. Although Hart students scored high, scores didn't rise enough—ironically in science—to meet the requirement.

Now that the stakes are higher, Michigan and some other states with high standards have decided to relax them in an effort to shrink the low-performer list. Hart Middle School is off the hook—for now.

But the first year's results from the new federal law are just a taste of things to come. State education officials are predicting even more schools will land on low-performer lists when the new law reaches a new phase of implementation in the 2004-05 school year (see accompanying story).

Meanwhile, after *USA Today* released its list of 19 Blue Ribbon "low performers," the federal Department of Education took steps to avoid a repeat. In the future, getting a Blue Ribbon will depend on test scores.



The hard work of science teacher Nate Childers (bottom) and colleagues won Hart Middle School a national Blue Ribbon award last year, but the school still landed on a low-performer list.

and must shape up or face punishment. Ten of the 19 were in Michigan.

Hart fully deserved its Blue Ribbon. It does an outstanding job of educating a highly diverse student body, which includes children of millionaires and children from a trailer park.

2008-09

Title I schools that have not achieved AYP for six years must reopen as charter schools, replace staff, hire private managers, or give control to the state.

2010-11

States once again raise the percentage of students who must score "proficient" in each school and in each subgroup of students.

June 2014

Every student in America is "proficient."

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