

Tests, Cheating and Educational Corruption

"The more any quantitative social indicator is used for social decision-making, the more subject it will be to corruption pressures and the more apt it will be to distort and corrupt the social processes it is intended to monitor. . . when test scores become the goal of the teaching process, they both lose their value as indicators of educational status and distort the educational process in undesirable ways."

Campbell's Law, 1976

Erasing errors and filling in correct test answers is just one of many ways to "cheat" on standardized tests. The scandals in Atlanta, Baltimore, Washington DC, Pennsylvania, New Jersey and many other jurisdictions are the tip of an iceberg. Across the nation, strategies that boost scores without improving learning, including narrow teaching to the test and pushing out low-scoring students, are spreading rapidly. Widespread corruption that undermines educational quality is an inevitable consequence of the overuse and misuse of high-stakes testing, just as Donald Campbell predicted.

. ***Intensive test preparation undermines learning and drains test scores of their already limited meaning.*** The damage done by a heavy focus on tests is twofold: It takes time away from broader and deeper learning, leaving students unprepared for the challenges of higher education and life. It also inflates test results by making it look like there's real academic growth when there may be little or none. These are the two kinds of corruption described in Campbell's law.

. ***Teaching to the test deemphasizes untested subjects and skills.*** The higher the stakes, the more schools limit instruction to tested material. Subjects not covered by exams, such as science, social studies, music, art and physical education, are reduced or eliminated. The many important skills not measured by standardized tests - such as writing research papers, public speaking or conducting laboratory experiments - are not taught. This narrowing of curriculum is most severe for low-income students, racial minorities, students with disabilities and English language learners because on average they have lower scores.

. ***Focusing on students most likely to make the jump from failing to passing neglects the rest.*** There is substantial evidence that many schools direct teachers to focus on children most likely to move from failing to passing -- so-called "bubble kids." They neglect both the kids who are far behind and those who are most advanced.

. ***Adjusting cut scores and test difficulty creates a false picture of progress.*** Rather than engage in practices that produce real student learning, officials can make tests easier or lower the required passing score. This misleads the public. New York City Mayor Bloomberg trumpeted soaring test results until an independent review in 2010 showed the exams' difficulty level had been lowered over time.

. ***Districts or schools can manipulate the pool of tested students for optimal results.*** Students can be forced to repeat a grade because those who are held back generally score higher the second time around (even though retention hurts students in the long run). They can be classified as having severe special needs so they are not tested with their peers. Suspending or expelling low-scoring students means their scores won't lower the school's average. Encouraging them to leave school makes that solution a permanent one, even though many youth who are pushed out end up unemployed or in prison.

. *There are more subtle ways to cheat than erasing wrong test answers and filling in the correct bubble.* For example, teachers or proctors can hint at the right answers as students take tests. They can leave material on the walls of the classroom that may help test-takers figure out questions. Teachers may obtain copies of the exam in advance and drill students on slightly altered questions. Most commonly, they may base such drills on the content of previous tests - indeed, such drills are increasingly the focus of instruction.

NCLB and related state and local high-stakes testing policies put intense pressure on teachers, principals and other educators. The Georgia investigation into the Atlanta cheating found, "The targets set by the district were often unreasonable, especially given their cumulative effect over the years. Additionally, the administration put unreasonable pressure on teachers and principals to achieve targets. . . ultimately, the data and meeting 'targets' by whatever means necessary, became more important than true academic progress."

Focusing on the most obvious forms of cheating leads to the false conclusion that better enforcement is the answer. But more policing will not solve the major problems caused by high-stakes testing, from changing student answer sheets to corrupting and distorting teaching, learning, and test results themselves. Policing will damage school climate and increase student alienation, a leading cause of dropping out. High-stakes uses of standardized testing must end because they cheat students out of a high-quality education and cheat the public out of accurate information about public school quality.

--- For more information on the harmful consequences of high stakes testing and better assessment, see the fact sheets and other material at <http://www.fairtest.org>.

References

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