Excluded Children, Lost Learning:
The Costs of Doing Business with NCLB

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While No Child Left Behind (NCLB) has focused school officials’ attention on staying off the dreaded list of schools failing to make Adequate Yearly Progress, the story of the law’s negative effects on teaching and learning, particularly in schools at risk of failure, is beginning to emerge.1

Narrow Curriculum

A student at an elementary school in Maryland described her day this way: “In the morning we read. Then we go to Mrs. Witheras and read. Then after lunch we read. Then we read some more.” Particularly in many poor districts with poor tests results, much of what was once considered essential to a good public school education is getting squeezed out, including art, music, science, social studies, gym, and recess.2

In Florida, pressure to improve scores on the state’s standardized exams has teachers reporting a sacrifice in the quality of their teaching and students’ experience in the classroom.3 “We’re just racing through everything,” said Denise Edgar, a 10-year teacher at Woodlawn Elementary. “We were just talking at lunch today about how elementary school was a time when you find out what you’re good at and what you like. It was a time when you liked school. Not any more.”

Two recent studies support a flood of news stories depicting how NCLB is narrowing curriculum to math and English test preparation. “Academic Atrophy: The Condition of Liberal Arts in America’s Public Schools” described how the arts, foreign language, and elementary social studies are being squeezed.4 The Council for Basic Education’s March 2004 report found evidence that narrowing was most severe in schools with higher numbers of minority and low-income students.

A report from the National Association of State Boards of Education concurs that NCLB’s pressure is narrowing school curricula.5 “The Complete Curriculum: Ensuring a Place for the Arts and Foreign Languages in America’s Schools” reported, “Arts and Foreign Language instruction has been marginalized and is increasingly at risk of being completely eliminated as part of the public schools’ core curriculum.”

The essence of this part of the story is that schools become reduced to test-preparation programs. The test is the curriculum, instruction is controlled by the imperative to raise scores, and all else—from children’s human and social needs to other subjects—is eliminated. If a subject such as social studies or history is tested, inevitably the testing revolves around memorized random information that turns the subject into a travesty.

High-Tech Test Prep

When it comes to improving academic achievement for low-income minority students, there is widespread agreement that well-trained teachers providing high-quality instruction are essential. Instead, some poor students are getting test preparation via computer, paid for with NCLB funds. An insightful series of articles by Baltimore Sun reporter Alec MacGinnis on “a new digital divide” illustrated how NCLB is creating new ways to widen rather than narrow the race- and class-based gap.6 MacGinnis described the ways computer and software companies target administrators in underfunded, low-scoring schools. They push expensive test preparation products, often making claims for the products based on their own, unsubstantiated research. Wealthy schools more often use computers to enhance cognitively complex work. MacGinnis concluded, “Instead of closing the achievement gap between rich and poor students, the landmark law might be underwriting a new ‘digital divide’ at the very time when, thanks to billions in public investment, needy schools are catching up in their access to computers.”

Dropouts/Pushouts

The Orlando Sentinel reported in June 2004 that state officials were investigating allegations that close to 160 Florida schools transferred struggling students to new schools before state test time in hopes of improving school scores.7 Researchers and educators report that pressure to rid schools of low-scoring students and thereby improve results is growing under NCLB. According to State Senator Miguel del Valle (D-Chicago), chairman of the Illinois Education Committee, there is “tremendous pressure” on districts from NCLB, which creates “a disincentive to hang on to students and help them go the extra mile to stay in school.”8

NCLB’s lax accountability for graduation rates is likely to increase the temptation to push out low scoring children, worsening an already abysmal graduation rate for minority students. Nationally, according to a February 2004 Urban Institute study, about 75 percent of white students graduate in four years, compared to 50 percent of blacks, 53 percent of Latinos, and 77 percent of Asians.9

One way the push-out phenomenon
manifests itself in the rising numbers of teens opting out, or being encouraged to opt out, of traditional high school programs in favor of General Educational Development (G.E.D.) programs.9

At the elementary level, methods to raise test scores by excluding certain children from the population being tested vary from state to state, but they include dropping students from enrollment by transferring them to other schools (as charged in Florida), and finding other ways to drop students and/or their scores from a school’s reported statistics.

An example of the latter point: a Kentucky rule requires students to attend the same school at least 100 days during the academic year for their scores to be included in the school’s score, which has the effect of retaining students who would not otherwise be held back a grade.10

Such methods were pioneered in schools under the watch of Rod Paige (U.S. Secretary of Education in George W. Bush’s first term) when he was superintendent of Houston schools.11 For example, Paige achieved improved test scores in Houston by retaining more kids in the ninth grade so they wouldn’t take the 10th-grade test; placing more students in special education programs so their test scores wouldn’t count; redefining “dropouts” so that these students would not be counted; and manipulating the score computations.12

Reasonable and Responsible Assessment

Testing of any kind, including classroom and large-scale assessment, should have the primary purpose of improving student learning.13 Assessment provides useful information about whether students have reached important learning goals and about the progress of each student. It should employ practices and methods that are consistent with learning goals, curriculum, instruction, and current knowledge of how students learn. Classroom assessment that is integrated with curriculum and instruction should be the primary means of assessment, including such methods as structured and informal observations and interviews, projects and tasks, paper-and-pencil tests, performances and exhibitions, audio and videotapes, experiments, portfolios, and journals. Such evidence can be aggregated and evaluated, together with scores on large-scale exams and the use of such evaluation techniques as school quality reviews.

Multiple-choice methods and particularly assessments intended to rank order or compare students, if used, should only be a limited part of the assessment system. The educational consequences of assessment should be evaluated to ensure that the effects are beneficial. Punishing students, educators or schools based solely on the results of one type of assessment violates all standards of proper test use and should not be done.

Assessment of student learning is an important part of accountability. However, assessment must not include merely standardized tests of that which is easy to measure. Schools and systems also must not assume that the only important element of schooling is academic learning; rather, useful methods for evaluating student affect (emotional health) and motivation and school climate should be included in the evaluation and improvement process.14

Notes

3. FCAT stands for Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test, www.fldoe.org/NCLB/.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.

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