

Cases in Print

CHAPTER 15: UNDERSTANDING AND USING STANDARDIZED TESTS

The States Raise the Stakes

*Because standardized test scores, either by themselves or in conjunction with other data, are being used to determine whether students get promoted to the next grade or graduate from high school, whether teachers and administrators receive financial rewards or demotions, and whether school districts receive additional state funds or lose their accreditation, this practice is commonly referred to as **high-stakes testing**, and it has swept the nation.*

Schools Find Higher Standards Mean More Retentions, Dropouts

By RON HARRIS

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MEMPHIS, Tenn. -- When the Memphis City Schools toughened the promotion standard for seventh- and eighth-graders for this school year, the thinking was, "If we raise the standard, the students will rise to the standard," said Board of Education member Patrice Robinson.

But they didn't.

Instead, hundreds more of the school system's middle-school children are failing this year under new guidelines that require middle-school students to repeat the grade if they fail either math, science, English or social studies, no matter their grade-point average.

"The seventh-grade is a disaster," Harold McRae, interim principal at Westwood High School, moaned last week. "About 30 to 40 percent of them failed at least one main course and many of them several."

At Kingsbury High School, more than one of every four eighth-graders flunked. At

East High School, the alma mater of movie and television star Cybill Shepherd, nearly half of the more than 200 eighth-graders failed.

Memphis is not unique. As school systems around the nation raise standards, they are finding the going tough. And their experiences show the difficulties and unintended consequences that educational reform can bring.

That's likely to be even more significant in the months ahead as all states – including Missouri and Illinois – put additional attention on educational standards because of the new federal “No Child Left Behind” Act. Although student promotion and retention policies are not part of the act, the law demands that states make sure students meet minimum standards or their schools could face state takeover.

Florida is another state reeling from changing standards. About 13,000 of the state's high school seniors haven't received their diplomas this year because they failed to pass a mandatory exit exam. And nearly one-fourth of the third-graders are scheduled to repeat that grade after failing a promotion-based test that went into effect for them this year. That's more than twice the number of the prior year.

Those statistics prompted public protests by parents and students and have pushed President George W. Bush's brother, Florida Gov. Jeb Bush, to try to convince the state legislature to modify the policy he helped push through so that more seniors can get their diplomas.

In Missouri, school officials are awaiting the results of a new state promotion policy that went into effect this year.

Under state legislation passed in 2001, any child in the fourth grade reading below the third-grade level at the end of the year must be held back. How that measurement is done

is determined by each school district.

Meanwhile, some states, wary of results similar to those in Florida and Tennessee, have retreated from the educational criterion that they had earlier imposed.

In Texas, state Board of Education members decided after reviewing dismal preliminary test results to lower the standards on a promotion-based exam because they feared tens of thousands of additional third-grade students would fail and be held back a grade.

After reviewing earlier this year the disturbing results of preliminary assessment tests for children in upper grades, Texas board members are now faced with deciding whether to also lower the standards for those students, who will be required to pass a similar test next year or be held back.

Looking for a lever

Florida, Texas and many other states, including Missouri and Illinois, had begun to revamp their educational standards long before the federal “No Child Left Behind” legislation became law in 2001. And many of their efforts, such as promotion-based testing and retention policies, are not requirements of that federal legislation.

But states are banking on those new standards to improve student performance and ultimately help them reach their goal of 100 percent pupil proficiency by 2014, as the law requires.

Under the law, school systems with continually low performing schools ultimately will face penalties, such as loss of funds and the removal of the school’s teachers and administration. Meanwhile, school districts could be forced to provide vouchers to the parents of the children so they can attend schools elsewhere.

While all educational professionals say they are happy to see states looking for ways to boost student achievement, many are concerned about how they are doing it.

Kathy Christie, vice president of the research and information arm for the Educational Commission on the States, said raising standards now makes sense because it begins to put the onus on kids for their education.

“You hear it from teachers all the time that you need some kind of lever to let children know that some of the responsibility is theirs,” Christie said. “Having promotion depend on academic performance is one way of having that lever.”

In Memphis, Vance Middle School principal Clinton Coleman said the belief that raising standards will focus students because of fear of retention won’t hold true for kids who need the most help.

“Yeah, the students who are doing well are going to be concerned about the new rules, the new standards,” Coleman said. “But the ones who are not doing well . . . they don’t understand the gravity of the situation. Those are the ones who don’t have a lot of support at home. For them, school is just something they have to do.”

Consequently, many educators share the view of Kingsbury principal Alex Hooker regarding the impact of higher retention under the new standards.

“As we move forward with this, I’m afraid we’re going to see the dropout rate increase,” Hooker said.

Jay Heubert, one of the researchers on a 1999 National Academy of Sciences study on the impact of holding children back, argues that the high number of retentions caused by increased standards will ultimately be detrimental to children and the nation.

“Anything that increases dropouts is taking us away from our national goal and

retention leads to dropout,” said Heubert, a professor at Columbia University’s Teachers College and Columbia Law School. “So it’s taking us away from the things that lead to a good American life.”

The Chicago experience

The largest experiment with retention so far has been Chicago’s school system, which in 1997 put in strict standards designed to end social promotion. Jenny Nagaoka, 33, a researcher at the University of Chicago, was part of a team of social scientists who recently completed an exhaustive study of the results of the change.

“There are some good things about it,” Nagaoka said. “By setting promotional gates, it makes clear what the expectations are. The kids can equate with the idea that what I’m doing here matters. Overall, the test scores went up initially, though there’s been no change recently.”

“On the other hand, there are a lot of kids who are being retained. So, they’re reaching high school at 16, and this puts them at a much greater rate of dropping out. It’s unclear if this is really giving them any benefit in the long term.”

The dropout rate for Chicago students between ages 13 and 19 was about 43 percent, according to researchers.

Robert Hauser, a demographer and professor of sociology at the University of Wisconsin said Chicago is an example of what goes wrong when school systems depend too heavily on retention as the stick to spur students toward achievement.

“There is no overall gain in achievement in Chicago,” said Hauser, who also worked on the National Academy of Sciences study on retention. “The main effect is to increase the likelihood of high school dropout later on.”

Hauser points to a study of Baltimore students by Carl Alexander at Johns Hopkins University that found that 65 percent of students who had been retained once would later drop out of school. Of those retained more than once, 90 percent would drop out.

The alternative, critics of Hauser point out, is to pass along kids that aren't necessarily ready for the next level, something that schools are struggling not to do.

Hauser says he knows it sounds illogical, but studies have shown repeatedly that retention is more detrimental than moving kids along with help.

"I know that it doesn't make sense to most laymen and it doesn't make sense to most teachers, but the National Association of School Psychologists and others have found that promotion with remediation is the best strategy."

"The question is would we be better off having these kids complete high school tolerably, not as outstanding students to be sure, than having them not complete high school and be out on the street. Because that's the real alternative."

Counting on summer

In Memphis, administrators are hoping to keep kids from dropping out in the future and reduce high retention numbers by passing large numbers of students onto the next grade by educating them through the school's six-week summer school program.

More than one of every five children at some Memphis schools goes to summer school annually to make it to the next grade, school officials said. And this summer's session is likely to be needed even more.

But some educational experts don't like that fix. They say that summer school, which students must pay for, does very little to help children gain knowledge.

Memphis Board of Education member Sara Lewis said the system must find a better

answer to reduce the high number of failed students.

“As one mother told me, I didn’t send my child to school to fail. He can fail at home,” she said.

Questions and Activities

1. Patrice Robinson, a member of the Memphis City Schools Board of Education, stated, “If we raise the standards, the students will rise to the standard.” But they didn’t. As has been the case in other states, large numbers of students failed to meet the new promotion standards. One could argue that such policies are destined to fail because they are based on simplistic assumptions about the nature of classroom learning and teaching. Identify the assumptions people probably make (whether or not they are aware of them) when they argue that teachers will deliver more effective instruction and students will work harder and more effectively only when the stakes are raised.
2. State Board of Education members in Texas were forced to lower the promotion standard for promotion to fourth grade to avoid large-scale retentions and abnormally large class sizes the following year for third grade. What does this tell you about how that standard was established?
3. A study conducted at Johns Hopkins University found that 65 percent of students who had been retained once would later drop out of school, and that 90 percent of those who had been retained more than once eventually dropped out. The clear implication that flows from these findings is that students should not be retained. Critics, however, say that the alternative, social promotion, is just as damaging and should also be avoided. Why is this issue framed in either/or terms – either retain students who fail to meet promotion standards or promote them to the next grade anyway? Use

the material discussed in Chapters 7-12 of the book to think outside this box and formulate an innovative solution to this problem.