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Using High Stakes Tests to Raise Achievement

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Using High Stakes Tests to Raise Achievement

Abstract
“Educational reformers and most of the American public think that teachers ask too little of their pupils. These low expectations, they believe, result in watered-down curricula and a tolerance of mediocre teaching and inappropriate student behavior. The prophecy of low achievement thus becomes self-fulfilling.”

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Using High Stakes Tests to Raise Achievement

Based on Remarks by Dr. John Bishop

There is increasing agreement that the standards conversation has had a tremendous positive impact on the equity conversation. The standards are not negotiable for anyone. The battle, rather, is finding the levers to make the system work for all kids.

—Peter McWalters

High Achievement Is Thwarted by Peer Culture

Educational reformers and most of the American public think that teachers ask too little of their pupils. These low expectations, they believe, result in watered-down curricula and a tolerance of mediocre teaching and inappropriate student behavior. The prophecy of low achievement thus becomes self-fulfilling. (Bishop and Mane, 1998) Students themselves, responding to a 1997 survey, said they do not perceive that they are working very hard and that, if more was required of them, they would try harder. (Johnson and Parkas, 1997) Several factors account for these low standards and the failure of schools to deliver challenging curricula. First, adolescent peer culture in America demeans academic success and scorns students who try to do well in school. (Steinberg, Brown and Dornbush, 1996) Further, student avoidance of challenging courses in favor of getting higher grades in the less demanding courses is often supported, even encouraged, by parents and sometimes teachers as well. In addition, teachers find themselves in a difficult double bind when they try to combine the role of mentor with the role of final judge. Sometimes the role conflict is resolved by lowering expectations. Other times the choice of high standards means close, supportive relationships with students are sacrificed. (Bishop, Unpublished)

Trying Hard Academically Lacks Peer Rewards

Peer norms matter a lot in terms of what kids choose to do and how they choose to spend their time. A survey of approximately 36,000 students in 135 schools from five northeastern states shows that about 10 percent of kids are insulted, teased, and made fun of to their face almost every day. While most just grin and bear it, some react by switching to the anti-intellectual norm rather than behaving in ways teachers would like.

Dr. John H. Bishop is a professor in the Department of Human Resources Studies at the New York State School of Industrial and Labor Relations at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. He has served on advisory panels, conducted research, and testified before Congress. He has published numerous articles on issues including education reform; the impact of education on productivity; and the impact of the hiring, training, and promotional policies of business on incentives for students to study and schools to set high standards.

Peter McWalters is the Commissioner of Education in Rhode Island.
A focus on kids who demonstrate an effort to do well in school—the “nerds,” who are then rewarded by becoming outcasts among their peers—shows the impact of peer norms on effort in school. Looking at traits ascribed by sixth and seventh graders in the survey to popular kids shows the expected responses, such as “cool clothes” and “attractive.” But, also among the data was the finding that “attentive in class” was a trait describing the most popular crowd only 24 percent of the time, compared to “not attentive in class” at 28 percent. This data from middle schools is especially relevant because this is where the peer norms that have holding power over time seem to be established.

At the 10th grade less than half the respondents said, “It’s annoying when students try to get the teacher off track” and 35 percent disagreed with the proposition, “My friends think it’s important for me to do well in English.”

Research findings that show a lack of support among students for hard study have been reported in research across the nation since the early 1960s. A 1960 study of a Jewish High School in New York City found kids rated the athletes who were brilliant, but not studious, as the most popular. Consequently, the norm within student culture appears to be not that it is bad to be smart, but simply that it is bad to be studious. James Coleman’s work in 1961 also found the athlete held great status and concluded this was because the athlete was doing something for the school, leading the team to victory, whereas the outstanding student, by contrast, has few, if any, ways, to bring glory to the school. Further, the victories of the studious are often at the expense of his or her classmates who must work harder to keep up.

Curriculum-Based External Exit Exams Put Teachers and Students on the Same Team

Curriculum-based external exit exams (CBEEEs) are subject specific. The responsibilities for preparing students for a particular exam lay within that department and are not a generic responsibility of all teachers in the school. The exams may be taken at various instances across the students’ career in school. Most of Europe and Asia use some type of curriculum-based external exam to signal a student’s achievement and success. This is not the case in the United States, except for New York where the Regents Exams, curriculum-based external exit exams, are given. The role of the teacher in these other countries is to help students prepare for an external judgment and, much like a sports coach, in the process can be very demanding and give lots of feedback about how the students are doing. This allows a stronger sense of trust to build between the teacher and student and between the teacher and parents because the teacher is the essential ingredient for achieving against the external goal.

17 States included in the research are Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York, Connecticut, and Massachusetts. See Bishop, Unpublished.
Winning: A Group Effort and A Group Reward

"Except for my family, no other group of people has loved me, held me accountable and expected the best from me as my boat mates and coach." From a letter defending crew to the Wall Street Journal, June 3, 1999.

The coach in this experience is like the theater director, preparing the students for an external demonstration of their competence and achievement. The final judgement of success is made by others; it's external.

In crew, a highly interdependent sport, the performance of each student or participant is visible to everyone else and screwing up or slacking off can make the team lose the race very quickly. Coordination is essential. Everyone holds everyone else accountable.

As told by Dr. John H. Bishop during the Institute.

Class rank and teacher grades mark student achievement and success in most U.S. schools. In a typical class if the students are able to slow the class down and get the teacher off track, that simply lowers the total amount that is taught and therefore, the amount that is on the exam, and the class is better off. In environments with external exams, this behavior works against the interest of all the students and it is annoying. It also means that students are more likely to think it is important that their friends do well in a particular class since they are not being evaluated in comparison to each other.

Impact on Peer Culture

A look at comparative differences among the states in the northeastern survey provides an opportunity to contrast attitudes relevant to student effort and the impact of a curriculum-based external exit exam, as is used in New York, on student behavior, schools, teachers, the costs of education, and student achievement. New York is the only state in the study with a curriculum-based external exit exam, the Regents exam. Minimum competency exams, like the one used in New Jersey, are not likely to have as big an effect as a curriculum-based external exit exam, because responsibility for how well kids perform on the exam is more diffused across the teachers and is not part of the final course grade. The Regents exam is part of the final grade in a course along with other exams. A comparative look at the states in the study shows that students in New York were more engaged in their classes, completed more of the assigned homework, spent more hours outside of school studying, selected more of their leaders from among good students, and expected to complete more years of schooling.

18 The northeastern study was conducted prior to implementation of the requirement that all students in New York take Regents exams.
Impact on School Management and Teachers

Out-of-Field Teaching - External exams also drive changes in how schools are managed and their efforts to focus more on academics. Out-of-field teaching is common in the United States, with 54 percent of high school history students taught by teachers who did not major or minor in history. The percentage of students in physical science classes taught by out-of-field teachers is 56 percent and for biology it is 39 percent. In Canada, where external exams are used, the proportion of teachers who are specialists in math is 20 percent higher. The same is true for science.

Teacher Pay - The United States is unusual compared to the rest of the world in its tendency not to pay teachers very well. This is evident in comparisons between the salary of teachers with 15 years of experience and the average of all other workers in the society. In the United States, teachers receive about 30 percent more than the average of all other workers. In countries that have an external exam, pay is nearly twice and up to three-quarters more. Another way to look at the salary distinction is to compare teacher salaries in the United States over time in relationship to other college graduates. For example, in 1940 when teaching was one of the few fields for women college graduates, the salary for those who did go into teaching and those who did not was roughly equal. Now, with more options available to women, they earn 20 percent less than those going into other fields. For men it has always been lower, and it continues to fall even further. Despite the fact that the real wages of teachers have risen, they have fallen relative to college graduates who go into other kinds of work.

Teacher Qualifications - If there is a desire for students to perform well on an external exam, efforts will be made to hire people who can teach to high standards. Those people with the competence and the knowledge in the relevant subjects are in short supply, as is evident from the background of those who are currently teaching these subjects. Therefore, higher wages are expected to accompany higher standards. Looking at wages in New York compared to other states bears this out.

Impact on Students

The stakes do not have to be very high to have an impact. The old Regents exam results that are captured in the northeastern study are very low stakes. Regents courses and tests were not
required and when they were taken, they accounted for a small portion of the students’ grades. Yet, they have had very substantial effects without causing an increase in dropout rates.

The reason for moving to a higher stakes system where every student must pass the exams in order to graduate is that it shifts the focus among students to those who are struggling, the less able kids. This is a critical policy choice and the trade-offs may be painful. Making a shift in this direction is likely to open the system to legal challenges and all kinds of stress for students, teachers and parents, but ultimately it is a fairer system.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>New York Students Compared to Those in Other States</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Scored 46 points higher on the SAT.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Scored one grade level higher on the National Assessment of Educational Progress.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• A higher proportion go to and stay in college.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Presented by Dr. John H. Bishop during the Institute.

How New York Made the Shift to High Stakes

The shift in New York to a high stakes, curriculum-based external exit exam for all students is a demonstration of tremendous public will. The steps taken to accomplish the task are instructive. It is being phased in over three years, beginning with the requirement for the class of 2000, which must take a new six-hour Regents English examination and pass it at the 55 percent level. The new requirements will effectively abolish the bottom track.

A great fear exists among many educators that if the absolute standard is raised and applied before student learning has accommodated to it, a disproportionate impact will fall most harshly on those already struggling. Introduction of high stakes testing is not a simplistic answer to the question of how to raise student achievement. Careful planning, timing, and training must be put in place first. A representative group of teachers, school administrators, and parents, called the “Safety Net Study Group,” agreed that the most important change is to increase the amount of time that struggling students spend on the task of learning. A look at the steps taken in New York may be helpful. The shift to all students being required to take Regents tests may not be a big deal in most of Westchester County, but it is huge for New York City, Buffalo, and Syracuse. Yet, they are making the required shift.

19 The new Regents exam graduation requirement does not apply to the 10 percent of students who are in private schools, nor to special education students with an Individualized Education Plan.
How New York Made the Shift to High Stakes

The Curriculum Was Made More Rigorous and Academic
- All 9th graders were required to take expository writing.
- 7th & 8th grade math and science became more rigorous.
- Foreign language was started in 6th grade.
- Vocational courses were crowded out.

Resources Were Redirected
- Teaching assistants were hired to tutor students.
- Aides were hired to supervise study halls and monitor hallways, freeing teachers to tutor.
- Department chair release time was ended.
- School hours and buses were scheduled to allow students to remain after 3:00.
- Funds for professional development were increased.
- Peer tutoring was expanded.

Teachers Worked a Lot Harder
- They began tutoring during their free period.
- Extra periods were added to the beginning and end of the school day for tutoring.
- Teachers stayed late to help students.
- Teachers offered nighttime review sessions.

Presented by Dr. John H. Bishop during the Institute

Recommendations and Implications for State Policy\textsuperscript{20}

The success in upgrading standards will depend on a systemic program of prevention and intervention strategies, including, but not limited to the following:

1. **Grade Specific Curriculum** — Each school district and school should have grade specific curricula consistent with state standards.

2. **Extra Help/Extra Time** — Each school district should have, at every grade level, an assessment system to provide information on student performance. Enrichment and remediation should be provided as additions to and reinforcement of core courses of study as opposed to “pullout” programs.

\textsuperscript{20} These final recommendations are taken from those made to the New York Board of Regents and are from the “Safety Net Study Group” of teachers, school administrators, and parents convened by New York State’s Commissioner of Education and reported in The New York State Reform Strategy: Incentive Effects of Minimum Competency Exam Graduation Requirements, Bishop and Mane, 1998.
3. **Mandatory Summer School** – When students fail to meet academic expectations, based on grade-level assessments, they should be required to attend state-financed summer school.

4. **Professional Development** – Each district should provide professional development for all staff, kindergarten through grade 12, to enable them to help students meet the new graduation requirements.

5. **Student Promotion Guidelines** – Each school district should have a plan that explains the movement of students from grade to grade and identifies ways that schools engage parents, students, and other community members to help students understand and achieve higher standards.

Some of the most important implications for state policymakers include the following:

1. **Teacher Pay** – Teachers cannot be expected to work longer hours without higher pay or renegotiated contracts. The state must find ways to help districts meet demands for higher pay.

2. **State Aid Increases** – Additional state aid should be targeted toward preparing students to meet the new higher standards by funding summer school, longer school hours, the hiring of teaching assistants, and the grading of Regents exams by teachers in a centralized location as part of staff development.

3. **Status and Image of Academic Excellence** – The state is in a unique leadership position to work with the large companies and the media throughout the state to bring attention and status to the academic achievements of particular schools and individual students.

4. **College Selection Criteria** – In states that have a curriculum-based external exit exam, state leaders should try to persuade universities and colleges to use it as a part of the student selection process and de-emphasize the SAT.
New York Moves the Standards to the Next Level

Student achievement is the heart of the matter. Education leaders in New York must develop creative strategies to help students meet the standards. One district superintendent told me that of 1200 juniors in his region, all but 76 had passed the English Regents exam—a whole year before they were expected to. He knew by name each of the 76 students who hadn’t yet passed. Knowing your students by name means knowing what they need and then providing it.

Education leaders in New York know we have never faced a greater challenge as an educational community—but never have we been so primed for success. Until recently, we didn’t have the data to prove what we already knew—that there are gaps in student achievement. Now as we are midway through phase-in of the standards, we have data to show where the problems are and that means we know where to focus our efforts. We all know how tough it will be. Some of the work before us has never been done before. Very few have tried to close the gaps in student achievement. Not at this level anyway.

We must ask ourselves to think about what we want for our children. The answer is always, “To be happy and healthy. To become educated and productive citizens. To engage in meaningful work.” New York has developed the standards to ensure that all children will be able to achieve what they want, and that no child will be left behind. It is our job to make sure that all students make it.

The challenges facing education leaders over the next five years will be difficult. All eyes will be on them. The eyes of the community, the eyes of the media, the eyes of the parents, and most importantly, the eyes of the students. The critics will want us to back down—we can’t. We have to stand tall in the face of those who say that not all students can do it. The students are already proving the critics wrong—they are rising to the challenge.

Richard P. Mills, New York Commissioner of Education