

MINNESOTA ASSOCIATION OF ALTERNATIVE PROGRAMS

Position Paper: High-stakes Testing

Adopted by the Board of Directors January 10, 2003

We oppose high-stakes testing required by the federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) statute for reasons widely shared among scholars, researchers and psychometricians. We do not believe that high-stakes testing leads to achievement of broad educational goals and the efficient learning of basic skills. We believe high-stakes testing produces unintended consequences damaging to schools and students. We describe our reasoning in this brief paper.

MAAP schools will be among the first to be labeled underperforming not because of deficiencies in the quality of the program but because we correct massive failures in the education of our students as they come to us. After many years of conventional education most students arrive in our programs well behind in academic performance, negative about schooling, and sometimes with belligerent or defeatist attitudes. No program corrects such deficiencies overnight. Schools serving the most troubled students should not be devastated by pejorative terms such as “underperforming” or “needs remediation” or should be “reconstituted.” Labeling our schools will be unproductive and unfair.

We accept the purposes of NCLB that all students need to improve in basic skills and we accept being held accountable for success with our students. Our teachers work hard at providing quality programs for students and bringing dropout-prone students to graduation. We measure student progress not through testing alone but through a variety of measures that take into account students’ present state and their living environment.

Here are other points that we make about high-stakes testing:

- The heavy emphasis on raising test scores is having unintended consequences: teaching to the test, narrowing the curriculum, losing creative teachers, increasing dropout rates, and as we have seen in various places, cheating. The single-minded focus on tests may raise scores but it does not result in long-term, deep learning. It’s akin to cramming for exams. The dropout rate is rising in many school districts desperate to raise test scores. Pushing students out of school because they may have a deleterious effect on a school’s test scores is appalling and unethical.
- A new study, *The Impact of High-Stakes Tests on Student Academic Performance: An Analysis of NAEP Results in States With High-Stakes Tests and ACT, SAT and AP Test Results in States With High-School Graduation Exams*, examined student data from 28 states and found that high-stakes tests may ultimately hinder student achievement rather than improve it. The study undertaken by the Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice, can be found at the website, <http://www.greatlakescenter.org/research.htm>
- Higher test scores do not prove whether schools are good or bad without measures of complex thinking skills, citizenship outcomes, ethics or other broad goals of a comprehensive education. Studies show a low correlation between school grades and success in life. John Taylor Gatto points out that no one asks physicians about their high school chemistry grades.

- A heavy emphasis on tests can be damaging to vulnerable students' mental health and self-esteem according to researchers at the University of California at Los Angeles, Center for Mental Health in Schools. There will be students who do poorly on tests but become fine citizens and workers. *Fortune* magazine (“Overcoming Dyslexia,” May 13, 2002) wrote of four highly successful adults running major companies who had low test scores in school. Many personal character traits matter more for success in life than the artificial construct of school test scores or grades. We must not throw roadblocks in the path of students or go overboard about everyone having to reach some artificial standard. We don’t write off students whose learning style does not match traditional teaching or schools working with such students. What about the student who cannot pass the test for graduation but wants to become a plumber or chef? We don’t relegate students to a scrapheap because of test scores.
- There are many ways of determining if programs are succeeding using such measures as: graduation rates, accreditation, awards, dropout rates, attendance rates, staff morale, student and parent satisfaction, comments by visitors to the program, and narrative descriptions of challenging student projects (for example, the “at-risk” student who writes a novel or tutors younger students).
- There's no problem determining student levels of achievement. Simply, ask their teachers. Test scores with their seemingly precise numbers are a simplistic measure, lack depth and represent a lazy form of research about schooling. Reasoning from specific celebrated instances of low achievement (such as Dexter Manley testifying before Congress that he graduated from college and can't read) to conclude that schools are failing hardly constitutes scientific research.
- There's too much testing now in schools. With test preparation it amounts to at least 10 to 15 days per year. This takes away from other vital learning experiences. In his book, *The Case Against Standardized Testing*, Alfie Kohn says “Tests measure what matters least, reinforcing compliance and standardized thinking rather than creativity and innovation. In addition, tests offer little insight into the quality of instruction in a school. They tend to reinforce pedagogy that is not supported by research.”
- Heavy-handed, inflexible regulations from Washington violate state and local control of education. This intrusion comes with cumbersome and bureaucratic rules that strangle initiative and innovation. Some think it is an attempt to castigate public education and open doors to vouchers and privatization. Even successful suburban school districts will be labeled underperforming because the disaggregation of test scores must show success with all subgroups, low income, recent immigrants, special education and minorities. The testing section of NCLB and its remedies for underperforming schools is doomed to fail and we want no part of it.