High-Stakes Testing and Student Achievement: Problems for the No Child Left Behind Act

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

by

Sharon L. Nichols
Assistant Professor
University of Texas at San Antonio

Gene V Glass
Regents' Professor
Arizona State University

David C. Berliner
Regents' Professor
Arizona State University

Education Policy Research Unit (EPRU)
Education Policy Studies Laboratory
College of Education
Division of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies
Box 872411
Arizona State University
Tempe, AZ 85287-2411

September 2005

EPSL | EDUCATION POLICY STUDIES LABORATORY
Education Policy Research Unit

EPSL-0509-105-EPRU
http://edpolicylab.org

This research was made possible by a grant from the Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice.

High-Stakes Testing and Student Achievement:

Problems for the No Child Left Behind Act

Sharon L. Nichols
University of Texas at San Antonio

Gene V Glass
Arizona State University

David C. Berliner
Arizona State University

Executive Summary

Under the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), standardized test scores are the indicator used to hold schools and school districts accountable for student achievement. Each state is responsible for constructing an accountability system, attaching consequences—or stakes—for student performance. The theory of action implied by this accountability program is that the pressure of high-stakes testing will increase student achievement. But this study finds that pressure created by high-stakes testing has had almost no important influence on student academic performance.

To measure the impact of high-stakes testing pressure on achievement and to account for the differences in testing pressure among the states, researchers created the Pressure Rating Index (PRI). The PRI was used in two ways. Correlations between the PRI and National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) results from 1990 to 2003 in 25 states were analyzed and the PRI was used in replications of previous research. These analyses revealed that:

- States with greater proportions of minority students implement accountability systems that exert greater pressure. This suggests that any problems associated with high-stakes testing will disproportionately affect America's minority students.

- High-stakes testing pressure is negatively associated with the likelihood that eighth and tenth graders will move into 12th grade. Study results suggest that increases in testing pressure are related to larger numbers of students being held back or dropping out of school.

- Increased testing pressure produced no gains in NAEP reading scores at the fourth- or eighth-grade levels.

- Prior increases in testing pressure were weakly linked to subsequent increases in NAEP math achievement at the fourth-grade level. This finding emerged for all ethnic subgroups, and it did not exist prior to 1996. While the authors believe a causal link exists between earlier pressure increases and later fourth-grade math achievement increases, they also point out that math in the primary grades is far more standardized across the country than the math curriculum in middle school and, therefore, drilling students and teaching to the test could have played a role in this increase**.** This interpretation is supported by the lack of evidence that earlier pressure increases produced later achievement increases for eighth-grade math achievement or for fourth- and eighth-grade reading achievement.

The authors conclude that there is no convincing evidence that the pressure associated with high-stakes testing leads to any important benefits for students' achievement. They call for a moratorium on policies that force the public education system to rely on high-stakes testing.