

High-Stakes Testing

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Public Law 107-110, a.k.a. the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, a.k.a. NCLB, like all federal laws affecting education, is an uneasy truce of contentious pedagogical, legal, political, and ideological forces that, for the most part, neutralize one another.¹ There is little that is exciting or inspiring in its hundreds of pages of abstract policy, yet one of its provisions has become the first great educational controversy of the twenty-first century: high-stakes testing. At first glance, the passages that describe such testing, in “Section 1116. Academic Assessment and Local Educational Agency and School Improvement,” don’t quicken the pulse:

(1) IN GENERAL—Each local educational agency receiving funds under this part shall—

(A) use the State academic assessments and other indicators described in the State plan to review annually the progress of each school served under this part to determine whether the school is making adequate yearly progress as defined in section 1111(b)(2); (B) at the local educational agency’s discretion, use any academic assessments or any other academic indicators described in the local educational agency’s plan under section 1112(b)(1)(A) and (B) to review annually the progress of each school served under this part to determine whether the school is making adequate yearly progress as defined in section 1111(b)(2), except that the local educational agency may not use such indicators (other than as provided for in section 1111(b)(2)(I)) if the indicators reduce the number or change the schools that would otherwise be subject to school improvement, corrective action, or restructuring under section 1116 if such additional indicators were not used, but may identify additional schools for school improvement or in need of corrective action or restructuring....²

1. The complete document may be found at: <http://www.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/index.html>.

In actual practice, however, the blurring of the oft-contested lines between state and federal educational oversight, the testing of students to determine how schools will be funded, and, above all, the use of examinations to promote democratic values, have set off debates among educators and politicians that show no sign of abating.

In her informative book *China: Ancient Inspiration and New Directions*, Judith Blatchford describes what might be characterized as “the Mother of all High-Stakes Testing”:

For nearly fourteen hundred years, the imperial Chinese bureaucracy was staffed by men who had passed through a strict civil service examination system.... The long examination process began with district examinations—a set of five day-long examinations administered once every three years to candidates who might be anywhere from fourteen years of age to well into the seventies.... Those who passed were eligible to take similar examinations at the prefectural level where about half the candidates were eliminated. This was a three-day ordeal which was conducted very strictly.... Someone might stay at this level for many years, taking examinations to get to the next level which was the first real civil service test.... The entire compound was sealed while the examinations were in progress. If a candidate should die during that time, his body was thrown over the wall.³

While the No Child Left Behind Act, as its name implies, would preclude throwing anyone over a wall, researchers have described a phenomenon known as “pushout.” Within a year of the passage of NCLB, the New York group Advocates for Children published “Pushing Out At-Risk Students,” a paper that revealed the alarming

2. www.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/pg2.html#sec1116.

3. Blatchford, Judith G. *China: Ancient Inspiration and New Directions*, Rudolf Steiner College Publications, 1989, p 23–24. Rudolf Steiner discussed the predominance of souls reincarnating from ancient Asia who are now living in American bodies. (See *The Soul’s Progress through Repeated Earth Lives*, Berne, December 14, 1920.) Perhaps they have brought their predisposition for high-stakes testing along with them.

numbers of under-performing high school students who were discharged from public schools before a high-stakes test was due to be administered. One example concerned 126 students who were dismissed from an Orlando high school in the weeks before the Florida state test was given, raising the school's "accountability rating" from an F to a D.⁴

And even for those who do get to take the high-stakes tests, success has its limits. The Texas TAAS exam, used by the Bush administration as a model of effective testing, was described in a *Texas Observer* article as producing "a class of students who will be perfect employees for a low wage economy. They will lack training in critical thinking and be unprepared to find knowledge in the information age. It's not a good recipe for a vibrant democracy."⁵

Referring to the classroom impact of TAAS on teaching, educator Becky Mcadoo told a reporter, "It became like an assembly-line education. Nothing mattered but the TAAS." The *Observer* reported federal data showing the teacher resignation rate in Texas climbed from 8.6 percent to 11.3 percent from 1997 to 2001. "Under pressure from politicians, businessmen, and administrators, school districts consistently inflate scores," the article concludes. "There are various ways to game the system." These include placing children in special education, keeping children home on test days, and focusing teaching on kids with close-to-passing scores while ignoring those far from passing or sure to pass. Former teacher Deborah Diffley told the *Observer*, "I've seen whole classes sent down the hall to watch videos while others were drilled." Several cheating scandals have also erupted in Texas.⁶

Although the stated intention of NCLB was to help public schools, especially in the most underserved districts, the federal government's draconian "accountability" demands, in tandem with the shrinking educational budgets of most states, may have done more harm than good to the cause of public education. The effect on some school districts has been so dramatic that it has even spawned a new conspiracy theory: George Bush's real agenda is to create a circumstance in

which many public schools cannot possibly thrive. Once they fail, their facilities will be handed over to educational businesses such as the Edison Project so that American schools can be privatized.⁷ It is tempting to present high-stakes testing as a creation of the Republican Party in its efforts to reward its moneyed supporters while disenfranchising the urban poor. An article from the *Boston Globe* is a case in point:

CONCORD, N.H. —Democratic presidential hopeful Hillary Rodham Clinton on Friday criticized the Bush administration for outsourcing teaching to private tutoring companies, arguing that many firms have close ties to Republicans.

"This is Halliburton all over again," the New York senator said.

The 2002 No Child Left Behind Act requires school districts to provide free tutoring in math and reading to poor children in schools that repeatedly fail to meet state testing standards. Clinton said that amounts to \$500 million a year being paid to tutoring companies and other supplemental service providers that aren't held accountable.

"Nobody's looking over their shoulder. And we're not really seeing results," she told members of the National Education Association's New Hampshire chapter.

"Why would we outsource helping our kids to unaccountable private sector providers?" she said. "They don't have to follow our civil rights laws, their employees don't even have to be qualified, they aren't required to coordinate with educators, there's a grand total of zero evidence that they're doing any good."⁸

There is a great deal in NCLB that was not created by Republicans, however, and that simply carries over the nation's earlier efforts at reforming education at the federal level. Among these efforts were the 1983 study *A Nation at Risk*, undertaken during the Democratic administration of Jimmy Carter, as well as the Elementary and Secondary School Act (ESEA) of 1965, a bill creat-

4. From "Failing Our Children," an article on the FairTest.org web site, http://www.fairtest.org/failing_our_children/chapter_two.pdf.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

7. Proponents of this theory and many other critiques of NCLB may be found by visiting www.youtube.com and searching for "No Child Left Behind."

8. Ramer, Holly. "Clinton Promises Educational Improvements," *The Boston Globe*, March 30, 2007.

ed by Francis Keppel, Commissioner of Education in the Democratic administrations of John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson (NCLB itself is actually one of many five-year reinstatements of the original 1965 ESEA). Hillary Clinton did not choose to mention that the “standards-based” approach that created the need for such extensive tutoring in the first place was established in 1994, during the presidency of her husband Bill—although she did admit that one of her first deeds in the Senate was to vote in favor of NCLB.⁹

Regardless of which party is victorious, high-stakes standardized testing is too ingrained in modern western culture to go away any time soon.¹⁰ The extremes to which this methodology has been taken, however, may prove to have awakened a significant number of even the most conventional educators to the need for alternatives. The National Center for Fair and Open Testing, for example, publishes a list (now 735 strong and growing) of colleges and universities that give little or no credence to the SAT and ACT exams.¹¹ The Center also offers numerous studies and guides for parents and teachers on portfolio and authentic assessment methods that may serve as viable alternatives to high-stakes testing. Another respected mainstream organization, The International Reading Association, suggests that in the face of high-stakes testing:

Teachers should

- construct rigorous classroom assessments that will demonstrate the effectiveness of instructional techniques to outside observers.
- educate parents, community members, and policymakers about classroom-based assessment.
- teach students how tests are structured, but not teach to the test.

Parents and child-advocacy groups should

- ask questions about the effects of tests on their children and their schools.
- lobby for the development of classroom-based assessment that improves instruction and helps develop better readers and learners.

Policymakers should

- design assessment plans that reflect the complexity of teaching and learning to read.
- base decisions on multiple assessments.
- avoid using test scores as a basis for rewarding or punishing schools or teachers.¹²

Almost all of these recommendations have been a part of Waldorf school classrooms for decades. The dark cloud of NCLB and the storms surrounding high-stakes testing have the potential of offering a silver lining for Waldorf schools: this could be the perfect opportunity for proponents of Waldorf education to help shape the debate that has erupted in a fragmented and inchoate manner all over the nation.

That I use such conditional terms as “have the potential” and “could be the perfect opportunity” is due to my observations of nearly one hundred Waldorf schools over the past two decades. The testing virus that is so endemic throughout the mainstream educational world has not left Waldorf schools unaffected. There is a widespread lack of clarity, and, with that, a concomitant lack of honesty, about the way in which a Waldorf school “sets standards,” “creates goals,” and develops assessment methods and instruments to “measure achievement.”

Although many Waldorf schools state definitively in their brochures, catalogs, or web sites that “children are not tested,” and assert this again when parents are first interviewed, most American Waldorf class teachers from fourth through eighth grade now give spelling quizzes, math quizzes, and block tests. Some Waldorf high schools administer an entrance exam for applicants, even testing students who have been in a Waldorf early childhood program and grade school all the way through. Once they have entered a Waldorf high school, students often face their share of daily and weekly tests. And, of

9. Ibid.

10. For a look at the unfolding of standardized testing in the twentieth century, see Schwartz, Eugene, “Roots of Leaves?” in *Millennial Child*, SteinerBooks, 1999, pp. 213–227. Compared to the tests taken by secondary school graduates in most of the developed world, American high-stakes tests are relatively easy-going. Our educational traditions have generally looked askance at all-or-nothing exams, however, and the emphasis on such determinative criteria marks a new departure for our nation.

11. <http://www.fairtest.org/optinit.htm>.

12. http://www.reading.org/resources/issues/positions_high_stakes.html.

course, Waldorf schools in the U.S. and Canada that accept state or provincial aid may have to allow some standardized testing to enter into the lives of their schools. (Paradoxically, Waldorf teacher education centers throughout the world do not administer entrance exams, nor are trainees ever required to take any quiz or test in the course of their studies. If frequency of testing really does raise academic standards, then the average Waldorf school sixth grader is receiving a far more rigorous education than any of her teachers.)

Before Waldorf educators can bring aid and clarity to the turbulent battles erupting around high-stakes testing, we may have to engage in a debate among ourselves. It is very difficult to get a handle on the issue of testing in the Waldorf school movement when most schools—and their associations—seem disinclined to even raise the issue, far less discuss it. As a school movement, we are wise to avoid the melee of politics and pedagogy that characterizes public education, but I suspect that the issue of testing in our schools will rouse more passion and defensiveness than we ordinarily care to deal with.

The educational opportunities of millions of American children have already been compromised by high-stakes tests, and the likelihood is that, no matter who wins the next presidential election, millions more will suffer. Waldorf education, at its truest and best, has a viable alternative to present to the American mainstream, but that viability is weakened when we ourselves are uncertain about our goals and assessment methods. We must seriously consider convening a national gathering on the subject of testing with presentations from those willing to take a stand, pro or con.

I believe Rudolf Steiner once said that children could be led to learn through fear, ambition, or love, and that we [Waldorf school teachers] should try to do without the first two. The forces that stand behind high-stakes testing are gradually reducing children's school experience to a set of responses conditioned by fear and ambition. If we are willing to engage in an internal debate within the Waldorf school movement in order to understand the role of tests, we will then have a chance to advocate for the power of love in education. The stakes, indeed, are high.

