



The Inevitable Corruption of Indicators and Educators Through High-Stakes Testing

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Executive Summary

This research provides lengthy proof of a principle of social science known as Campbell's law: "The more any quantitative social indicator is used for social decision-making, the more subject it will be to corruption pressures and the more apt it will be to distort and corrupt the social processes it is intended to monitor."¹ Applying this principle, this study finds that the over-reliance on high-stakes testing has serious negative repercussions that are present at every level of the public school system.

Standardized-test scores and the variables that lead to a mean score for school districts have become corruptible indicators because of the high stakes attached to them: employment status and bonus pay of teachers and administrators, promotion of a student

to a higher grade, achievement of a high school degree, reconstitution or classification of a school, and federal and state funding that a school or school district receives.

Evidence of Campbell's law at work was found in hundreds of news stories across America, and almost all were written in the last few years. The stories were gathered using LexisNexis, Inbox Robot, Google News Alerts, *The New York Times*, and Ed Week Online. In addition to news stories, traditional research, studies, and stories told by educators about the effects of high-stakes testing are also part of the data. The data fell into 10 categories. Taken together these data unveil a striking picture of the corrupting effects of high-stakes testing:

- 1. Administrator and Teacher Cheating:** In Texas, an administrator gave students who performed poorly on past standardized tests incorrect ID numbers to ensure their scores would not count toward the district average.
- 2. Student Cheating:** Nearly half of 2,000 students in an online Gallop poll admitted they have cheated at least once on an exam or test. Some students said they were surprised that the percentage was not higher.
- 3. Exclusion of Low-Performance Students From Testing:** In Tampa, a student who had a low GPA and failed portions of the state's standardized exam received a letter from the school encouraging him to drop out even though he was eligible to stay, take more courses to bring up his GPA, and retake the standardized exam.
- 4. Misrepresentation of Student Dropouts:** In New York, thousands of students were counseled to leave high school and to try their hand at high school equivalency programs. Students who enrolled in equivalency

programs did not count as dropouts and did not have to pass the Regents' exams necessary for a high-school diploma.

- 5. Teaching to the Test:** Teachers are forced to cut creative elements of their curriculum like art, creative writing, and hands-on activities to prepare students for the standardized tests. In some cases, when standardized tests focus on math and reading skills, teachers abandon traditional subjects like social studies and science to drill students on test-taking skills.
- 6. Narrowing the Curriculum:** In Florida, a fourth-grade teacher showed her students how to navigate through a 45-minute essay portion of the state's standardized exam. The lesson was helpful for the test, but detrimental to emerging writers because it diluted their creativity and forced them to write in a rigid format.
- 7. Conflicting Accountability Ratings:** In North Carolina, 32 schools rated excellent by the state failed to make federally mandated progress.
- 8. Questions about the Meaning of Proficiency:** After raising achievement benchmarks, Maine considered lowering them over concerns that higher standards will hurt the state when it comes to No Child Left Behind.
- 9. Declining Teacher Morale:** A South Carolina sixth-grade teacher felt the pressure of standardized tests because she said her career was in the hands of 12-year-old students.
- 10. Score Reporting Errors:** Harcourt Educational Measurement was hit with a \$1.1 million fine for incorrectly grading 440,000 tests in California, accounting for more than 10 percent of the tests taken in the state that year.

High-stakes tests cannot be trusted – they are corrupted and distorted. To avoid exhaustive investigations into these tests that turn educators into police, this research supports building a new indicator system that is not subject to the distortions of high-stakes testing.

¹ Campbell, D. T. (1975). Assessing the impact of planned social change. In G. Lyons (Ed.), *Social research and public policies: The Dartmouth/OECD Conference*. (Chapter 1, pp 3-45). Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College, The Public Affairs Center. (p. 35)
