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Students say to high-stakes testers: You flunk

Taking high-stakes tests didn’t do them a bit of good, say majorities of young people in Wisconsin and five other Great Lakes states who graduated from high school in the past dozen years. Responding to a recent survey, 60 percent said the test results were “never” used to help them in school, and 54 percent said taking the test wasn’t useful to them “in any way.”

Do high-stakes tests have any value? According to 56 percent of the young people surveyed, the tests at least measure what students are learning in school — but not very well. Of five measurements used to determine what students learn in school – including regular classroom tests and quizzes, teacher comments, report card grades, daily grades on classroom assignments and high-stakes test – respondents in all six states ranked high-stakes tests last for accuracy.

These were among the findings revealed in a survey commissioned by the Great Lakes Center and conducted by EPIC • MRA in September, 2005. The researchers interviewed 720 young people aged 18 to 30 living in Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio and Wisconsin. The survey has a margin of error of ±3.7 percent, larger for subgroups.

While results varied a bit from state to state, majorities ranging from 56 percent to 64 percent in all six states said the test results were not used to help them in school. As for whether taking the tests was of any use to them at all, 50 percent of Wisconsin’s young people said they were not, while in the other five states, from 46 percent to 67 percent rated them a complete waste of time.

“Findings such as these make it difficult to justify the costs of high-stakes testing,” according to Teri Moblo, Director of the Great Lakes Center. “It’s not just the dollars that are spent on the Student Assessment System and the Knowledge Concepts & Reading Concepts tests in Wisconsin and other tests like those in other states,” she said. “It’s also the cost to the students and the teachers. They spend a lot of time and effort preparing for and taking these tests with little or no return.”

The survey also revealed a high level of stress associated with the test, as many parents can attest. Overall, 57 percent of the young people surveyed said the tests created at least some stress. Stress levels for students varied from state to state – Wisconsin registered the lowest, with 49 percent reporting “at least some” stress, and Michigan the highest, with 64 percent reporting “at least some” stress.
It’s not just the students who are stressed by these tests. Overall, 40 percent of the survey respondents said tests created at least some stress for their teachers. Minnesota can be said to have the coolest teachers in the region, as only 30 percent of the Minnesota respondents said they saw signs of “at least some” test-related stress in teachers there. Indiana seems to have the most stressed-out teachers, as 52 percent of these respondents said they saw “at least some” stress signs in their teachers. In Wisconsin, 33 percent reported their teachers showed “at least some” signs of stress.

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