

PREFACE

High-stakes tests—those assessments that have serious consequences attached to them—have been imposed on our nation’s schools by the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law of 2002. The scores on such tests are believed by many to be an appropriate way to hold educators accountable for the academic achievement of our country’s youth. But the term *accountability* is not just associated with the idea of counting something, like items on a test; it is also associated with the idea of “giving an account,” providing verbal and written reports about some matter of importance. In this book we rely primarily on the accounts of journalists, teachers, administrators, and researchers to inform us about the functioning of our nation’s schools. Our goal is to give an account of how the high-stakes testing program demanded by NCLB is working in our schools.

A few states were already experimenting with high-stakes testing as a way to increase student achievement in the years leading up to the signing of NCLB. Teachers, administrators, and experts on testing, even then, were beginning to express concerns about the use (and misuse) of high-stakes tests for raising student achievement. The idea for this book originated then, before NCLB, when David Berliner was studying the impact of high-stakes testing and concluded that high-stakes testing not only regularly failed to increase achievement but that it is a theoretically flawed endeavor, as well.¹ In the fall of 2003, after NCLB required high-stakes testing in all our states, we extended the initial study to look further into the intended and unintended effects of high-stakes testing. This effort yielded two reports. One report showed that high-stakes testing does not increase achievement (and in some cases may erode it), while the other report documented how unintended outcomes of the high-stakes testing policy were detrimental to the educational process.² Our well-warranted conclusions about the ineffectiveness of high-stakes testing, published in

a respected peer-reviewed journal, seem not to have dampened the enthusiasm for high-stakes testing by our legislators. So in this book we go beyond those empirical findings and demonstrate that high-stakes testing is harmful as well as ineffective. Here, we elaborate on our second report, highlighting the distortion, corruption, and collateral damage that occur when high-stakes tests become commonplace in our public schools.

We hope our book will give more exposure to the reports and research about individuals and groups from across the nation whose lives have been tragically and often permanently affected by high-stakes testing. Our nation needs to worry about the environment created by high-stakes testing, since we found hundreds of examples of *adults* who were cheating, costing many of these people their reputations as well as their jobs. The high-stakes testing environment has produced numerous instances of administrators who “pushed” children out of school or did little to keep them in school if their test scores were low, costing too many students the opportunity to receive a high school diploma. We also found school boards that had drastically narrowed the curriculum and who forced test-preparation programs on teachers and students, taking scarce time away from genuine instruction. We found teacher morale plummeting, causing many to leave the profession. The pressures brought about by high-stakes testing seem undeniably to be corrupting our educators and our system of education.

Supporters of high-stakes testing might dismiss these anecdotal personal experiences as idiosyncratic or too infrequent to matter. But these accounts are neither unique nor rare. Moreover, many other respected scholars have documented similar problems, validating the personal, vivid, and often tragic stories we have found in the press. The evidence from journalists and researchers alike continues to provide us with fresh accounts of the problems inherently tied to the use of high-stakes testing. We collected these data on the high costs of high-stakes testing through the summer of 2006, when we finished this book.

Up until that time, we had continually and systematically scoured news outlets and scholarly journals for accounts of high-stakes testing. We amassed a significant collection of evidence that high-stakes testing does more harm than good. But since our work relies so heavily on what

journalists report, several caveats are worth mentioning. First, although our ongoing research has been deliberately broad, we did not have the ability to collect all the relevant stories about the corruption of educators. We are quite sure that the stories we present throughout this book do not represent the universe of educational stories available on these topics. We suspect, therefore, that we vastly underestimate the problems we describe.

Second, it is not possible to provide information about rates or frequencies of events. We catalog here only the occurrence of events as reported in the news stories we found using standard search engines. Given our inability to tap all news sources equally, the ambiguity of some of the stories we did find, and the fact that many of the incidents we want to report on are often “hushed up” at the local level, we are strengthened in our belief that our data provide a vast underestimate of the incidence of these problematic events.

Another important caveat about drawing on journalistic sources for stories about high-stakes testing is that some newspaper reports focus on *allegations* of wrongdoing. Follow-up stories to allegations are not always printed, and if they are printed it is often months after the original incidents. This makes it difficult to find and to match these reports with earlier ones. Although we made our best efforts to provide any relevant follow-up information, we must remind readers that we cannot independently verify allegations reported in the news. Again, our goal in including these kinds of news stories is not to point fingers at any particular individual or institution but to indicate the range of ways that reliance on high-stakes testing can distort values and behavior.

Last, readers may notice that some of our stories date back to the years before high-stakes testing was made into national policy by NCLB. We decided to keep these stories in spite of the risk of them seeming “outdated” because they seemed excellent examples of our overall argument. A story of an administrator cheating to secure a large bonus or to make high school graduation rates look better illustrates the same point whether it occurred in 1999 or 2006. The point is that as the pressure on educators to produce certain kinds of school outcomes grows, so too does the pressure to get precisely those outcomes, no matter what and no matter when.

Our goal was to present a cohesive and convincing set of examples of

the problems associated with high-stakes testing. We hope this will convince legislators and other supporters of high-stakes testing that the costs associated with high-stakes testing are simply not worth it. We also set out to describe a social-science theory that informs us that high-stakes testing of the type associated with NCLB can *never* be used successfully in our schools. We hope we are successful in explaining this theory, since denying confirmed scientific principles seems patently foolish. We hope also that our brief review of alternatives to high-stakes testing will be taken seriously. We have no doubt that high-stakes testing is corrupting educators and harming our common schools, and so we hope others will join us in demanding an immediate moratorium on high-stakes testing.

Reprinted from Sharon L. Nichols and David C. Berliner, *Collateral Damage: How High-Stakes Testing Corrupts America's Schools* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2007). You may copy and distribute among colleagues for educational purposes only. Posting on a public website or on a listserv is not allowed. Any other use, print or electronic, will require written permission from the Press. Harvard Education Press is an imprint of the Harvard Education Publishing Group, 8 Story Street, Cambridge, MA 02138, tel. 617-495-3432. Copyright © 2007 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College. All rights reserved. For more information about the book, please visit www.harvardeducationpress.org.