

Go David Berliner!!

NEWS RELEASE--FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

[see Talking Points about the release at end of release]

HIGH-STAKES TESTS FOR STUDENTS OFTEN FAIL TO MAKE THE GRADE, NATIONAL ANALYSIS FINDS

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The Education Policy Studies Laboratory (EPSL) would like to call your attention to "The Inevitable Corruption of Indicators and Educators Through High-Stakes Testing," released by the Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice.

<http://www.greatlakescenter.org/pdf/EPSL-0503-101-EPRU.pdf>

EAST LANSING, Mich. (Friday, March 18, 2005)—America's public schools are setting goals and making harmful, irreversible decisions based on test results that in an increasing number of cases can't be trusted, said an independent study from the Education Policy Research Unit at Arizona State University.

The report, made possible by a grant from the Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice, determined that the pressure of

high-stakes tests is forcing school districts to take short cuts to avoid being labeled as failing for not meeting certain benchmarks. As a result, their scores are subject to corruption.

“Policy makers have oversold the public on the notion that high-stakes test scores are the best way to hold schools accountable,” said Teri Moblo, director of the Great Lakes Center. “Because of No Child Left Behind and other measures, school districts know that the results of one or two tests determine if they are considered successful. This creates enormous pressure on educators and their students, because long-term decisions are being made based on scores that can’t be trusted.”

David Berliner and Sharon Nichols, co-authors of the report, “The Inevitable Corruption of Indicators and Educators Through High-Stakes Testing,” point to examples of how unbridled pressure to reach unrealistic goals, whether in the boardroom, on the playing field, or in our own government, can inevitably lead to a “beat-the-system” mentality. “Now we see this kind of mentality seeping into our schools, where future generations are training merely to beat the system,” Berliner said. “Learning subject matter in depth is no longer the goal of schools in high-stakes states. We are witnessing proof of a well-known social science law, which basically says the greater the pressure to perform at a certain level, the more likely people will find a way to distort and corrupt the system to achieve favorable results.” Dr. Berliner suggests scrapping high-stakes tests and building an accountability system that is less inviting to cheating and distortions, and better measures students’ and schools’ achievement. A second report on high-stakes testing commissioned by the Great

Lakes Center due out in the coming weeks will look at the relationship between the pressures to succeed on high-stakes tests in a particular state, and whether that pressure actually does improve student learning.

In this study, however, the researchers looked at other effects that high-stakes tests have on our nation's school systems. Hundreds of news articles about high-stakes testing were examined. "Because it would be impossible to comprehensively catalogue every incident where high-stakes testing led to serious problems, our survey seems only to have uncovered the tip of the iceberg," said Berliner.

Some of the findings included:

- Teachers' and administrators' inability to be flexible about test administration meant a 14-year-old student whose brother was recently murdered was not allowed to be excused from a test;
- Eighty percent of North Carolina's elementary school teachers report they spent more than 20 percent of their total teaching time practicing for high-stakes tests;
- In New York, city school officials were accused of pushing thousands of students out of high school and into high school equivalency programs. Students who enrolled in such programs did not count as dropouts and didn't have to pass the Regents' exams necessary for a high school diploma; and
- A Georgia science teacher estimated 10 percent of the questions on the science section lacked a "best" answer because of errors in the information provided to students. State administrators acknowledged the errors even as some students failed to receive a high school diploma because they didn't pass the tests.

“Teachers are desperate to help their students and schools succeed. We found example after example where teachers worked very hard to help students from challenged schools raise their scores, but in the end they were still labeled as failing,” said Berliner.

Drs. Berliner and Nichols identified 10 trends that outline the consequences of high-stakes testing, which ultimately all negatively impact the quality of education for our nation’s children

. The trends are:

- Administrator and Teacher Cheating;
- Student Cheating;
- Exclusion of Low-Performance Students from Testing;
- Misrepresentation of Student Dropouts;
- Teaching to the Test;
- Narrowing the Curriculum;
- Conflicting Accountability Ratings;
- Questions about the Meaning of Proficiency;
- Declining Teacher Morale; and
- Score Reporting Errors.

The full report is available at www.greatlakescenter.org . The mission of the Great Lakes Center is to identify, develop, support, publish, and widely disseminate empirically sound research on education policy and practices with the explicit goal of improving the quality of public education for all students within the Great Lakes Region.

This document is also available on the web at:

<http://www.asu.edu/educ/epsl/EPRU/documents/EPSTL-0503-101-EPRU.pdf>

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Talking Points for

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

- This report suggests that high-stakes testing leads to corruption in ten critical school functions: administrator and teacher cheating, student cheating, exclusion of low-performing students from testing, misrepresentation of student dropouts, teaching to the test, narrowing the curriculum, conflicting accountability ratings, questions about the meaning of proficiency, declining teacher morale and score reporting errors.

- This report provides an anecdotal snapshot of high-stakes testing's impact on schools around the country.
- News reports used in the report dramatically illustrate the consequences of the nation's over-reliance on testing.
- This report uncovers an overwhelming call to re-evaluate the roll high-stakes testing current plays in decisions made about students, educators, schools, and entire districts.
- No Child Left Behind encourages and relies on testing at a level we have never seen before, yet we are using the same tests and results with which so many policymakers have historically been uncomfortable.
- We encourage educators and policymakers to use an alternate set of evaluation criteria to replace the current system—one that is less subject to the distortions this report reveals.

Background

- The searches were conducted between 2003 and 2004. Some of the articles date back to 1990.
- The Great Lakes Center commissioned the Education Policy Studies Laboratory, Education Policy Research Unit at Arizona State University to undertake this study. Dr. Berliner at ASU and Sharon Nichols at University of Texas at San Antonio are the authors of this report.
- The Great Lakes Center is a resource for educators, parents and decision-makers on a variety of education issues. The Center will continue to examine the top issues in education today through the commissioning of research by some of the top researchers in the field.
- In the next few weeks, the Center will release the second part of

this study that will in a more in depth way examine state-by-state the consequences of high-stakes testing.

Q& A

Q. What parameters did you use to designate a test as “high-stakes”?

A. A test was labeled “high-stakes” if its results could tangibly impact a student, a teacher, a school, or an entire school district.

Q. How did you determine which articles to use in the report?

A. The articles were gathered using LexisNexis, Index Robot, Google News Alerts, The New York Times and Ed Week Online. Article selection

was based on relevance to search terms and article focus. Search terms

such as achievement, testing, high-stakes, teacher cheating, teacher morale and NCLB, among others, were used. Traditional research, studies and stories told by educators about the effects of high-stakes testing also are included in the report.

Q. Doesn't this system of selection (e.g., including “teacher cheating” as a search term) lead to bias? Did the report authors also look at articles that suggest high-stakes testing works?

A. This study was carried out to see if Campbell's law (when one indicator or measure is relied upon too heavily, it becomes subject to corruption and distortion) was at work in education. The authors looked at the news reports that fit their search parameters, and

selected ones that provided details about how corruption occurs.

Q. What kind of conclusions can we draw from the study's results?

A. This research does not provide information about rates or frequencies. This is only a catalog of the occurrences reported in the news stories found by the report authors. Some reports, it should be noted, are about alleged events. This study compiled news reports to attach a human face to the consequences.

Q. While you state that this is only a catalogue, there are references to "rate" (pg. 54) and language such as "unequivocally" (pg. 52). How far can we go with our assumptions about the problem given the way in which the data was collected, and that the majority of the information was gleaned from news reports?

A. We undertook this type of study to get a glimpse of what's going on in local

communities and nationally. While news reports cannot be used to precisely determine the extent of a problem, it gives us a general sense of the sentiment around the country. This study tells us we need to take a closer look into the consequences of high-stakes tests.

Q. The report alludes to schools, states and administrators engaging in practices such as lowering their definition of proficiency or "cut scores" and "dumbing down" test content to make themselves

look better (pg. 125). Is this anecdotal or is this really happening at high rates?

A. Refer to above two answers.

Q. You recommend building a new indicator system. Do you have specific recommendations for what this should include?

A. There's no silver bullet, but it's clear that the current system is flawed. We encourage decision-makers to look at multiple indicators that provide a broad picture of students, schools and teacher performance.

Later this month Dr. Berliner and the Center will release another report that quantifies the impact of high-stakes testing's problems by examining the extent to which states are using high-stakes testing, and the consequences of their specific policies. This second report reveals further which accountability measures don't work, as well as those that do.

Q. You cite corruption of tests by teachers. If the tests are indeed unfair, does this give teachers license to cheat? Doesn't this cheating suggest that the teachers would be corrupt no matter what was "forcing" them to be corrupted? Maybe this is a good way to "weed" out the bad teachers?

A. Cheating is never acceptable. We see teachers who are spending their own hard-earned money to buy school supplies for their students. These same teachers are trying to work with a corrupt system that relies too heavily on high-stakes tests. One case of cheating is too many, but we do not have a clear picture to say that this is widespread problem. The majority of our nation's teachers go

above and beyond the call of duty every day. You compare the acts of cheating and violations by teachers and administrators to civil disobedience (pg. 24). Is this comparison condoning their behavior and comparing them to the heroes of say, the civil rights movement?

A. Again, cheating is never acceptable. What is clear from this report is that educators are working with a system that relies too heavily on flawed indicators. They are forced to make due with what they have. Let's help educators by giving them a fairer system that accurately captures the information needed to make these tough decisions.

Q. In the report, you compare the nation's school systems to businesses and corporations (and medicine, sports, politics and government agencies). Is it fair to make this comparison as many would disagree that they are not at all similar since we have the interest of a student's education at hand?

A. As educators ourselves, we know that educating children is unlike any other field or occupation. We have a special responsibility for the well-being of our nation's children. Knowing that, we heed what social science law tells us--people are people, and they will react similarly in similar situations. We need to listen to the lessons of events like the Enron scandal, even though at face value they seem to have nothing to do with high-stakes testing in schools.

Q. Is there any one place to lay the blame for this corruption? Is any one group more at fault?

A. This report shows us that there are many forces at play,

and that there are many groups and individuals who are affected by high-stakes testing. We should learn from this report that the consequences seem to focus on ten different areas and that not many in the education circle are immune. But this report cannot tell us who is more to blame or give us one place to point a finger.

Q. This seems to be more of a study about Campbell's Law than about education and high-stakes test. How is this report a resource for educators and decision-makers?

A. The important lesson here is that when certain indicators are too heavily relied upon, corruption occurs. This lesson can be applied to all cases of human interaction. The report used well-known and familiar examples from events, careers and organizations with which people can identify. The numerous examples in the report seek to drive home the point that this is a serious issue—and when applied to education, the stakes are just as high. (cases to note pg. 18, heavily reliance on recruitment figures lead Pentagon to military recruitment of people with criminal histories, leader of Abu Ghraib prison scandal had a criminal record; pg 18, Transportation Safety Administration hiring process and the hiring tests designed by Pearson and Thompson test publishers were a "farce;" pg. 19, when charter schools and voucher operators are tied to businesses, they are encouraging teaching directly to tests to affect outcomes and ultimately the company's stock prices)

The Education Policy Studies Laboratory (EPSL) at Arizona State University offers high-quality analyses of national education policy

issues and provides an analytical resource for educators, journalists, and citizens. It includes the Arizona Education Policy Initiative (AEPI), the Commercialism in Education Research Unit (CERU), the Education Policy Research Unit (EPRU), and the Language Policy Research Unit (LPRU). The EPSL is directed by Professor Alex Molnar.

Visit the EPSL website at <http://edpolicylab.org>

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