

# **MISSISSIPPI ASSOCIATION FOR ASSESSMENT REFORM (MAAR)**

**MARCH 22, 2005**

Michael Martin of AZ School Boards Assn offered the following comment on 'cheating' on tests:

I have to marvel at the use of the word "cheating" in this context. In the current context of merit pay and test scores, teachers are being paid to raise test scores. In any logical sense, teachers should be the judges of student progress, even if one chooses to use standardized tests. The point being that the logical role of the teacher is that of an independent referee in determining student progress. BUT when you institutionalize test outcomes to determine the teacher's performance then you have essentially corrupted the referee. It is no different than putting traffic ticket quotas on police officers, or bribing judges. You cannot institutionalize corruption and then claim cheating. If you pay people to become corrupt, and they become corrupt, then you ipso facto have to conclude this is intended. In the America legal system there is a concept called "subornation" which is defined as "the crime of inducing another to commit perjury." Even if high-stakes testing was based on a valid test, which is usually incorrect, and even if high-stakes testing validly measured student progress, which is demonstrably false, and even if high-stakes testing had some empirical relevance to student success, which has never been demonstrated, and even if high-stakes testing could mathematically measure minimum knowledge, which it cannot, it would still be idiotic to bribe the referees. Thus high-stakes testing is a fraud to begin with, imposed in a corrupt regime, that creates a circumstance where it is only rational for cheating to occur, indeed it is suborned by the institutionalization.

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From the NEA, NCLB legislation introduced by a Republican from Nebraska:  
Cong. Terry Introduces Bill to Fix No Child Left Behind  
In a major breakthrough on No Child Left Behind, the first Republican-initiated bill to

amend the No Child Left Behind Act was introduced March 14 by Rep. Lee Terry (R-NE). The State and Local Education Flexibility Act (H.R. 1177) is consistent with many of the changes NEA and others have long sought.

Among other things, the legislation:

a.. Better aligns NCLB and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act by allowing certain students with cognitive disabilities to be assessed in a manner consistent with their Individualized Education Plans.

b.. Ensures that local assessments are comparable across districts and are aligned with state content standards.

c.. Provides greater flexibility to help special education and rural teachers who teach multiple subjects meet NCLB highly qualified requirements.

d.. Exempts limited-English proficient students' test scores from Adequate Yearly Progress calculations during their first three years.

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## Making the Grade

When I started inquiring about cram schools for my 5-year-old son's primary-school entrance exams, I knew I would be chastised for starting late. It was May, and most children in Tokyo had already been studying a year or two for the tests in November. "You haven't done any preparation yet?" one woman from a major chain of cram schools asked me. I confessed that I was a single parent working full time. "Oh, you are on your own," she replied. "A private school might be difficult."

Single working mothers are increasingly common in Japan but remain a rarity in the exclusive world of primary-school entrance examinations, where the two-parent family with a stay-at-home mom is the norm. Most schools consider a single mother too harried to raise a well-adjusted child and too poor to afford the tuition. For eight years, my ex-husband and I lived in Berlin, Beijing and Moscow, where we had adopted our son from Kazakhstan. After our divorce three years ago, my ex, who is American, stayed abroad and I came home with Yataro.

Since our return, I still hadn't grown accustomed to being underestimated. I kept hoping for the best for Yataro with or without a father. I was not alone. One aspiring mother put it plainly on an exam-information Web site fittingly called *Espoir*: "Can one not enter a private elementary school without a father?" The reply from the site wasn't encouraging: "The highly competitive schools or schools for boys and girls of good upbringing would be difficult," adding that for lower-ranked schools "we don't rule out the possibility."

Of course, Seikei Elementary, the school I was interested in, had five stars. My father is an alumnus, but that wasn't guaranteed to help. As luck would have it, Seikei is known for denying entrance to many children of graduates in the name of fairness.

During the next months, several afternoons a week, Yataro attended one cram school for his written exam and craft making and another for sports and more crafts. I relied on my mother and baby sitters to take him to the schools and often rushed in at the end when the teachers summarized the lesson and offered pointers to parents. "Don't take such a big bag to the test," one teacher told me, gesturing toward my briefcase. A handbag and tote were preferred. We were also instructed to wear dark suits to the schools even if we were just picking up an application.

These were easy compromises; my divorce was going to be more of a stumbling block. At a lecture on parental interviews, a former private-school teacher advised, "Just explain, before you take your seat, that you are divorced and therefore had to come to the interview alone." Translation: admit your guilt before being charged. Two of Yataro's cram-school teachers recommended toning down our application essay. There was no need to spell out that I was divorced and had adopted Yataro (another quirk considered suspect). I didn't want to hide facts I felt had shaped Yataro. But was I sacrificing my son's opportunities for some lofty principles? I caved in and took out the word "divorced" and just said that Yataro and I lived alone.

In the frenzied run-up to exams, a cram-school teacher asked students to name what they had eaten for breakfast. Yataro answered: yogurt, a kiwi and a prune, bread and cheese. "That is an excellent breakfast, everyone," the teacher exalted. "The school will think, There is a wonderful mother." Praised as a good mother before a room of full-time moms, I was beaming.

But later when I was coaching Yataro with another question -- "When does your mother praise you?" -- he replied, "When I give the correct response about breakfast." I started to laugh then caught myself. Here I was twisting truths to come across as the best parent, and Yataro had called my bluff.

On interview day at Seikei, two days after Yataro took his written exam, mothers and fathers in nearly identical dark blue or black suits and children in navy shorts or skirts and white shirts filled the waiting room. I ran into a business acquaintance and her attractive husband. I wondered if Yataro had noticed that we were the only pair among threesomes.

First, the children were sent to classrooms where teachers observed them in group activities -- Seikei's alternative to individual child interviews. Once I was called, I entered a room with three young male teachers. I skipped the suggested apologetic divorce confession and sat down. One teacher asked, "What considerations do you have in raising Yataro?"

"He needs to be strong to survive societal prejudices," I said. "But I hope he can also, because of his background, understand the pain of others and be that much kinder."

Two days later, Yataro's registration number was on the acceptance list posted at the school. I'll never know what got him in, but standing there next to other parents, all in the requisite dark suits, I had become part of the group.

Kumiko Makihara is a writer in Tokyo. Until January, she was the executive assistant to the president of Phoenix Seagaia Resort.

— Kumiko Makihara

*New York Times*

2005-03-20

<http://query.nytimes.com/mem/tnt.html?tntget=2005/03/20/magazine/20LIVES.html&tntemail0>

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## Wait a minute. . . weren't these kids held back last year?

### One in 3 City 4th Graders May Not Advance to 5th

Almost a third of the city's fourth graders have received letters saying they are in danger of being held back, despite a new policy intended to ensure that children who were unprepared for fourth-grade work would be retained in the third grade.

Education officials said this week that 23,163 fourth graders, or 30.1 percent, received letters last month warning that they could be held back if their performance did not improve. Last year, 26,053 fourth-graders, or a slightly higher 32.2 percent, received such letters. The figures on "promotion in doubt letters" were first reported yesterday in *The Daily News* and *The New York Post*.

Critics of Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg's third-grade retention policy, which was instituted amid an uproar last year and has since been extended to fifth graders, said the large number of letters sent to fourth graders cast doubt on the policy's effectiveness.

The retention policy holds that children in those grades must meet certain cutoffs on standardized English and mathematics tests to be promoted; in other grades, such decisions are largely a matter of teacher discretion. If this year's fourth graders, the first class to be held to the new standard, are truly more prepared, the critics say, why are so many in danger of being left back?

"The Bloomberg-Klein administration's much-touted program to eliminate social promotion, announced a year ago, has not worked," Betsy Gotbaum, the New York City public advocate, said in a statement. "Chancellor Klein's quick-fix policy of pouring millions of dollars into untested programs has come back to haunt this administration."

Jay P. Heubert, a professor of education and law at Teachers College at Columbia University who helped prepare a National Research Council report on the issue of grade retention, said the relatively stable number of fourth-grade "promotion in doubt" letters sent out "certainly warrants further investigation."

"It is a cause for concern, if the administration believes that everyone who entered fourth grade in the fall of '04 was ready for fourth grade, that come March of the same school year, as high a percent are in jeopardy as were in last year's fourth-grade class," Dr. Heubert said.

But Carmen Fariña, the deputy chancellor for teaching and learning, cautioned against reading too much into the letters, which always far outnumber the total of students held back. "These letters were never meant to be a barometer of student

achievement," she said. "This is something that says to a parent, 'You need to pay attention to what your child is doing and get them help.' "

In all, 301,341 city students received such letters, up from 281,307 last year. Many more high school students received the letters: 105,137, up from 79,399 last year.

On his weekly radio program yesterday, Mayor Bloomberg said that could be a good thing as well as an encouraging sign that "the teachers are taking this very seriously."

"They feel there is some support behind them from the Department of Education that they're there to educate," he said. "They're trying to do what's right and give the parents ample warning."

Jill Chaifetz, executive director of Advocates for Children, a nonprofit group that monitors the school system, called upon the Department of Education to examine the fourth-grade numbers.

"Are these kids in the fourth grade the same kids who got 'promotion in doubt' letters in the third grade?" Ms. Chaifetz asked. "If it's a whole different group of kids, you've got to wonder, how did they slip through the cracks in the prior year as well?"

Jacquelyn Kamin, who was appointed to the city's Panel for Educational Policy by C. Virginia Fields, the Manhattan borough president, said it was disheartening to learn that so many fourth graders had received the letters. The situation, she said, highlighted the limits of a special five-week summer school program, after which lagging third graders were given the chance to retake their standardized tests.

The letters were also sent to 29,647 third graders and 24,837 fifth graders, the two grades that are subject to the retention policy. But only a fraction of those are likely to be left back. This year, only 3,012 children are repeating the third grade under the new retention polic

— Elissa Gootman

*New York Times*

2005-03-19

<http://query.nytimes.com/mem/tnt.html?tntget=2005/03/19/nyregion/19promote.html&tntemail0>

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## Test Scores Fall Sharply at Scrutinized Schools

Almost all of the Houston elementary schools under scrutiny for possibly cheating to produce high test scores in past years posted significantly weaker results under this year's tightly monitored exams.

Campus passing rates at all but one of the 18 schools with questionable testing histories dropped at a greater clip than the overall Houston Independent School District passing rate on the third-grade Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills reading exam.

The sharp decline is not outright proof of cheating or wrongdoing, but adds to suspicions, said Thomas Haladyna, an Arizona State University professor specializing in standardized test research.

"That's very improbable," Haladyna said. "You wonder about the validity of scores when they jump around like that. All citizens have a right to question the validity of scores when the results are so implausible."

Students took the TAKS last month in classrooms monitored by 600 HISD employees. Reacting to allegations of possible cheating made in late December, HISD officials had warned teachers and principals that this year's scores would be closely analyzed for signs of impropriety.

Other factors besides cheating, such as teacher turnover rates and changing student populations, could cause major score fluctuations, Haladyna said. But that doesn't explain why virtually every suspected school regressed more than the typical campus, he said.

HISD officials cautioned against reading too much into the poorer results by the 18 schools. In an e-mail, spokesman Terry Abbott pointed out that some of the 170 elementary schools that have not been suspected of cheating also posted scores substantially lower than last year's. And the cheating investigations at most of the schools are focusing on score anomalies at other grade levels and subjects rather than third-grade reading, Abbott said.

The three schools being investigated specifically for questionable third-grade reading scores in 2004 — Douglass, Osborne and E.O. Smith — had some of the sharpest drops in 2005 scores.

Passing rates at the 18 schools facing cheating allegations fell an average of 19 percentage points. The drop ranged from 30 or more points at Crawford, Douglass and E.O. Smith elementaries to just 1 percentage point at Isaacs Elementary. Overall, the passing rate for the 14,751 HISD students who took the reading test that's used to determine whether they move on to the fourth grade fell five percentage points to 82 percent.

#### Numbers down

In addition, average scale scores, which measure the number of correctly answered questions, increased 10 points for HISD's English-speaking students but fell an average of nearly 70 points at the 18 schools with suspect testing histories. Only two of those schools — Kashmere Gardens and TSU/HISD Lab School — increased their average scale scores at a higher rate than the rest of the school district.

Last year, 13 of the schools suspected of cheating recorded average scale scores that ranked in the top half of all HISD schools on the English exam. This year, that number shrunk to four.

Seven of the 14 Houston schools with the biggest drops in average scale scores are under investigation for cheating.

It would be wrong to conclude that cheating occurred at any school based solely on the scale scores, Abbott said.

While their English-speaking classmates posted lower scale scores on the exam, Spanish speakers at Petersen and Scott elementaries showed progress. The three

other schools facing cheating allegations that tested students in Spanish— Sanchez, Crawford and Gregg — produced lower scale scores in both languages.

HISD Superintendent Abe Saavedra ordered investigations of possible cheating at two dozen schools earlier this year after a Dallas Morning News analysis of scale scores revealed statistically improbable improvement in hundreds of classrooms across the state. All but one of those investigations are ongoing. Last month, HISD administrators fired two fifth-grade math teachers at Sanderson Elementary and demoted the principal after determining the teachers gave answers to students and that the principal should have been aware of the cheating. The teachers have denied any wrongdoing.

#### Further investigation

The sharp decline in scale scores at the 18 elementaries warrants further investigation, said Gregory Cizek, a University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill professor who teaches educational measurement and evaluation. The Texas Education Agency recently hired Cizek to review test security procedures and suggest possible improvements across the state.

"Seventy points is a pretty meaningful change," Cizek said.

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— Jason Spencer  
*Houston Chronicle*  
2005-03-18

<http://www.chron.com/cs/CDA/ssistory.mpl/metropolitan/3092365>

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## Failing the Wrong Grades

**Comment:** I wonder why Ravitch couldn't just present Stosky's report, without the sideswipes at whole language and what Lynne Cheney called fuzzy math (See MAAR, 3-06).

There is no such thing as *high school grade level*. And the so-called NAEP proficiency levels are at once arbitrary and capricious. Funny thing: I've been deeply involved in education for more decades than I want to admit, but I've never heard this term *parking lot*. Maybe I don't travel in the right circles.

Here is the board of directors of the National Association of Scholars, labeled *independent* by Ravitch:

John Agresto  
James David Barber  
Jacques Barzun  
Walter Berns  
John H. Bunzel  
Edwin J. Delattre

Chester E. Finn, Jr.  
Eugene D. Genovese  
Robert P. George  
Gertrude Himmelfarb  
Paul Hollander  
Irving Louis Horowitz  
Harry V. Jaffa  
Robert Jastrow  
Donald Kagan  
Jeane J. Kirkpatrick  
Irving Kristol  
Richard D. Lamm  
Mary R. Lefkowitz  
Leslie Lenkowsky  
Seymour Martin Lipset  
Sir Hugh Lloyd-Jones  
Harvey C. Mansfield  
Nelson W. Polsby  
Milton J. Rosenberg  
Stanley Rothman  
John R. Silber  
Christina Hoff Sommers  
Shelby Steele  
Stephan Thernstrom  
Edward O. Wilson  
James Q. Wilson

**Here is Gerald Bracey's letter to *The New York Times*.**

Editor:

I certainly agree with Diane Ravitch that the governors' plan will increase the dropout rate. I disagree that the performance of American students is "appalling."

Ms. Ravitch says only a small proportion of students are "proficient" on the National Assessment of Educational Progress. This is true, but it only means that the NAEP definition of "proficient" is inappropriate. In fact, the NAEP definitions of basic, proficient and advanced have been rejected as "fundamentally flawed" by the National Academy of Science, the National Academy of Education, and the Government Accounting Office. Ms. Ravitch knows this.

A couple of examples to illustrate how bizarre the levels are: in 1996 27 percent of fourth-graders were proficient in science--but they ranked third in the world among 26 nations in an international study the same year. In another year, only 32 percent were proficient in reading but they ranked second among 27 nations. It's the proficiency levels and Ms. Ravitch's promotion of them as meaningful that are appalling, not the students.

Sincerely,

Gerald W. Bracey  
Graduate School of Education  
George Mason University

EVERYBODY who is anybody seems to have decided that the American high school is responsible for the failings of American students. The Bush administration, many

governors and even Bill Gates have now called for radical reforms. Reflecting this growing consensus that the high school is, in Mr. Gates's words, an "obsolete" institution, the governors of 13 states have pledged an overhaul of the high school system, and more are expected to jump on the bandwagon of reform.

Let's slow down here. American education is famous for inspiring crusades, and the history of the 20th century is littered with the remains of failed reform movements. This 21st century campaign will fall flat, too, unless the proponents are clear-headed about the nature of the problem and willing to rethink their proposed solutions.

It is true that American student performance is appalling. Only a minority of students - whether in 4th, 8th or 12th grade - reach proficiency as measured by the Education Department's National Assessment of Educational Progress. On a scale that has three levels - basic, proficient and advanced - most students score at the basic level or even below basic in every subject. American students also perform poorly when compared with their peers in other developed countries on tests of mathematics and science, and many other nations now have a higher proportion of their students completing high school.

While the problems of low achievement and poor high-school graduation rates are clear, however, their solutions are not. The reformist governors, for example, want to require all students to take a college-preparatory curriculum and to meet more rigorous standards for graduation. These steps will very likely increase the dropout rate, not reduce it.

To understand why, you have to consider what the high schools are dealing with. When American students arrive as freshmen, nearly 70 percent are reading below grade level. Equally large numbers are ill prepared in mathematics, science and history.

It is hardly fair to blame high schools for the poor skills of their entering students. If students start high school without the basic skills needed to read, write and solve mathematics problems, then the governors should focus on strengthening the standards of their states' junior high schools.

And that first year of high school is often the most important one - many students who eventually drop out do so after becoming discouraged when they can't earn the credits to advance beyond ninth grade. Ninth grade is often referred to by educators as a "parking lot." This is because social promotion - the endemic practice of moving students up to the next grade whether they have earned it or not - comes to a crashing halt in high school.

It makes no sense to blame the high schools for their ill-prepared incoming students. To really get at the problem, we have to make changes across our educational system. The most important is to stress the importance of academic achievement. Sorry to say, we have a long history of reforms by pedagogues to de-emphasize academic achievement and to make school more "relevant," "fun" and like "real life." These efforts have produced whole-language instruction, where phonics, grammar and spelling are abandoned in favor of "creativity," and fuzzy math, where students are supposed to "construct" their own solutions to math problems instead of finding the right answers.

Besides, in many ways our high schools are better than our primary system. They are the part of our educational system where students are most likely to have teachers who have a degree in the subject they are teaching. In the lower grades, most teachers are likely to have majored in education, not in mathematics or science or

history; some even have both a major and a minor in pedagogy, yet end up teaching core academic subjects.

This does not mean, of course, that our high schools are ideal. To some extent, the present-day comprehensive high school, in which most American students are enrolled, tries and fails to be all things to all students. It does not adequately challenge high-performing students, who get low scores when compared with their peers in other nations. It does a poor job preparing average students, nearly half of whom need remedial courses when they enter college. And it loses low-performing students, who are likely to drop out while still lacking the skills they need for gainful employment.

A report released last month by the National Association of Scholars, an independent group of educators, outlined proposals that make more sense than those endorsed by the governors. Written by Sandra Stotsky, a former associate commissioner of education for Massachusetts, it proposes that students entering ninth grade be given a choice between a subject-centered curriculum or a technical, career-oriented course of study. The former would look like a traditional college-preparatory curriculum, with an emphasis on humanities, sciences or arts. The latter would include a number of technologically rigorous programs and apprenticeships. All students, regardless of their concentration, would be required to complete a core curriculum of four years of English and at least three years of mathematics, science and history. Students graduating from either program would be well educated and prepared for higher education.

THE report also recommends that teachers of core subjects have a solid background - at least an undergraduate major - in the main subject they teach, that teachers of technical subjects have either solid academic training or work experience in their fields, and that American schools have a longer school day and school year.

In addition, contrary to the philosophy of Mr. Gates's foundation, which has spent millions to create hundreds of small high schools with no more than 500 students, the report recommends that schools should have a minimum of 500 students. Larger schools provide better staff depth and stability - imagine how disruptive it is to a tiny high school if just a couple of teachers leave over the summer - and have a broader range of music, art, drama, debate and sports offerings. And research by Richard Ingersoll of the University of Pennsylvania has shown that small high schools are more likely than large ones to have out-of-field teachers - that is, teachers who have neither a major nor a minor in their subject.

Our officials should be lauded for their concern about high school graduation rates. But the governors should scrutinize with great care the popular reforms of the day before imposing them on their states' schools. Just because Bill Gates is ready to pour millions of dollars into a big new idea doesn't make it a good one.

Diane Ravitch, a research professor of education at New York University, is the author of "Left Back: A Century of Battles Over School Reform."

— Diane Ravitch, with response from Gerald Bracey  
*New York Times*  
2005-03-15

<http://nytimes.com/2005/03/15/opinion/15ravitch.html>

The fundamental problem with Dr. Ravitch's theory is that, in fact, the progressivists/constructivists have never controlled education. I'm not certain that

she ever read Dewey or John Locke or Piaget. Her background is in English, not education. (Sound familiar?) Similar to her discussion of Gates involvement are my own thoughts about our own little Barksdale mess that is stealing so many childhoods right here in good ole' Mississippi.

By the way, Ravitch is up for the John Dewey Award this year!

I'm convinced that Bush never thought that his high school reform would be accepted. I think it was some kind of smoke screen. Time will tell.

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Here is what Joanne Yatvin, a member of the National Reading Panel (NRP), says in response to Dr. Ravitch. Ms. Yatvin is one of the few members of the panel with actual classroom teaching experience.

**To the editor**

From Joanne Yatvin

Submitted to *New York Times* but not published (03/16/2005)

Whenever there is a problem in education, Diane Ravitch finds some aspect of progressivism to blame. This time the bogeyman under the bed is Whole Language, which she says not only keeps students from reading well enough to do high school work but also damages their spelling and grammar skills.

Progressivism, the educational philosophy associated with John Dewey, claims that students need to see meaning and utility in a subject in order to learn it well and use it in their professional, personal, and civic lives.

Ravitch rejects progressivism in favor of the "Ali Baba" theory of education: open students' heads and pour in all the facts and skills they will hold. In the wake of NCLB, that's just what our high schools are now doing. That philosophy, not progressivism, is the central cause of student apathy, failure, and dropping out.

If we want better high school performance, we need to go in the opposite direction from what Ravitch suggests. Make our high schools more like good elementary and middle schools, living centers of critical thinking, exploration of ideas, community service and real problem solving.

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

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.

Every level.

## 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."

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 other variables used for judging the performance of school districts have become corruptible indicators because of the high stakes attached to them. These include future employability of teachers and administrators, bonus pay for school personnel, promotion/non-promotion of a student to a higher grade, achievement/non-achievement of a high school degree, reconstitution of a school, and losses or gains in federal and state funding received by a school or school district.

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 reveal 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.

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— Sharon L. Nichols and David C. Berliner  
*Education Policy Studies Laboratory (EPSL)*

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

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And this guy's a Republican !

**No Child Left Behind Act Is Stifling State Innovations in Education**  
Here is a strong statement against NCLB

The seeds of the No Child Left Behind Act -- President George Bush's sprawling education reform initiative -- were planted decades ago, and not by the federal government. They were carefully sown by the states, cultivators in search of the best way to measure and improve student performance.

Many of the law's components took root in the early 1980s when states stopped tracking the "seat time" each student spent in school and started measuring what that student was learning. By the time NCLB deliberations began in 2001, nearly every state had developed its own method for gauging student achievement. They did so through research and experimentation. But the innovation stopped when No Child Left Behind came along. It had to stop. It was no longer allowed. Like a weed, NCLB has stifled the blossoming of states' ideas.

K-12 education historically has been a state responsibility and has been funded by state and local revenues. In this classic example of the tail wagging the dog, the federal government contributes less than 8 percent of the cost of K-12 education, less than \$40 billion of the \$500 billion expended nationwide. States that were once pioneers are now hostages of a one-size-fits-all education accountability system that brings the federal government into the day-to-day operations of public classrooms.

It doesn't have to be this way. Through the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL), a bipartisan task force of state lawmakers just finished an exhaustive review of the law. They recommend 43 ways Congress and the administration can adjust it so that it makes sense for states, and, in turn, students. Many, if not most, of these recommendations propose more flexibility for states, because state legislators believe that the freedom to respond to their area's unique needs is the freedom to innovate.

The rigid and inaccurate yardstick that No Child Left Behind uses to measure student improvement was itself left behind by many states as they fine-tuned their accountability efforts. The federal measurement compares, for example, this year's fifth-graders to next year's fifth-graders. Many educators complain that it is not a valid way to evaluate student progress.

Some states, in the pre-NCLB days, developed better models. California, Kentucky, North Carolina and Virginia were using more sophisticated and accurate systems that gauged the growth of individual students, not just groups of students and entire schools. NCLB allows states to draft their own plans for meeting the goals of the law, and those plans are subject to federal approval. None of those states was allowed to continue using its own system under NCLB. The federal law undermined innovative approaches like these.

NCSL's Task Force on No Child Left Behind recommends that the federal government show true flexibility by approving state accountability plans that meet the spirit of the law, not just the letter. Washington, D.C., should not meddle in state processes but should focus instead on monitoring states' results in narrowing the achievement gap. All agree on the need to eliminate the achievement gap. The solution will not be found by abandoning the system of vibrant federalism that has served us so well.

More specific recommendations call on the federal government to give states leeway to: focus on the schools and students most in need; measure more than just standardized test scores; set their own proficiency goals and determine the sequence of consequences for schools that don't make adequate yearly progress. Currently schools that don't achieve their improvement targets must let students attend a different school before they receive tutoring at their current school. Often, that sequence doesn't make sense.

Other consequences for schools that fail to make adequate yearly progress can be harsh. For schools that fail several times, think of a federally mandated state takeover and staff replacement. It's no wonder states such as Michigan lowered academic standards and softened accountability

systems that were in place before No Child Left Behind, rather than risk falling short of absolute federal benchmarks. States have learned to use accountability to diagnose problems and address them; the federal law uses accountability to punish. This is counterintuitive.

NCSL's task force recommends that Congress and the Bush administration reconsider the law's 100 percent proficiency goal. While that's certainly a laudable aim, under the current student proficiency measurement scheme, it is not statistically achievable. Not when disabled students who are permitted individualized education plans under civil rights law are expected to perform at grade level. Not when English learners in their third year in the country are expected to perform at grade level, regardless of their language and academic skills when they came into the United States. Not when the law expects perfection, but fails to acknowledge differences in schools and students.

And certainly not when there are consequences that actually divert money and energy from teaching. Principals and superintendents told NCSL's task force some schools that missed reading proficiency targets ended up losing reading specialists. They had to use the money that paid those specialists' salaries to fund transportation to implement school choice.

The administrative costs of implementing the act are more than the federal government provides. And the true cost of the program is actually much more because complying with the law doesn't even begin to address the remediation costs of meeting proficiency targets. NCSL's task force also asks Congress and the administration to direct the Government Accountability Office to determine both the costs of compliance with NCLB and the costs of meeting proficiency targets.

States can elect not to participate in No Child Left Behind. They could forgo the federal funding and free themselves from the strings. But it's not that simple. Officials in Utah found that by not participating, they wouldn't just lose the \$43 million in NCLB money, but also nearly twice that amount in other federal funding. No Child Left Behind dollars, also known as "Title 1 funds," are the basis for an important state funding formula. Not participating means a state has no related formula for Washington to figure funding levels for a host of other programs, including technology, safe and drug-free schools, literacy for parents and after-school programs. States have little choice in whether to participate in NCLB.

It's time to prune the law. State legislators have handed Congress and the administration the hedge clippers. We believe we know what education methods work best within our borders, and we look forward to serving, again, as test gardens of democracy.

Steve Saland is a Republican state senator from Poughkeepsie, N.Y. He is co-chairman of the National Conference of State Legislatures' No Child Left Behind Task Force. He is a former president of the organization.

— Steve Saland, New York State Senator  
*infozine.com*  
2005-03-20  
<http://www.infozine.com/news/stories/op/storiesView/sid/6557/>

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Three cheers for Janis H. Houston, who has the courage of her convictions *and* is willing to sign her name.

**By Janis M. Houston**  
**March 18, 2005**

I am angry. Madly, passionately, blindly angry.

For the past two weeks I've sat with a group of eighth-grade special education students, struggling to take the Colorado Student Assessment Program tests. By definition, these students are classified special education because they do not have the capabilities of other students. Their reading levels are second, third, and fourth grade, but they must by law take the eighth-grade CSAP tests.

You can see the despair in their faces. They can't answer the questions because they don't understand them. Their teacher encourages them to do their best, and they understand it won't be good enough.

Being so young, they only blame themselves.

I am not their teacher, I'm the media specialist. Their teacher works all year trying to get these students ready for this test because it counts big. The scores these students make will be averaged in with the scores of all the other students in our school. Once again our school will be considered, at best, partially proficient. Once again, our teachers will be subjected to endless in-servicing, as though it is their fault that the students cannot pass this test.

Because of CSAP, when I retire this year, I will not be replaced. Neither will two other teachers: a gifted-and-talented teacher and a physical education teacher. We're expected to lose 100 students from our population, which amounts to three teachers. These days, principals can't afford to lose language arts, math or science teachers, so everyone who is considered "nonessential" to CSAP doesn't get replaced. Who will be next to go - school counselors?

For 26 years I've taught students how to do research, to love reading, and how to use computers. I've tried to inspire children to do their best and look forward to the future as productive citizens and community contributors.

I am ashamed of this country. We are allowing our political leaders who do not understand education to belittle our children. We are letting people who know the least make decisions about our schools. We are allowing the rich to dictate a program of poverty to the poor, and call it accountability. And if this continues, we are going to end public education. Is this what Americans want?

This CSAP test is an end-run. The people who want to end public education have found a way to do it.

Both students and teachers have so much pressure to perform. Teaching to this test is like trying to hit a moving target. Every year the tests are different. The teachers have no idea what questions will be asked. They aren't allowed to keep a copy of the test for future reference. The test doesn't even match the curriculum that by state law we are supposed to teach.

And so I watch these students struggling. Their "accommodation" for being special education is that they get to spend all day taking this test, while the rest of the student body spends only three hours in the morning at the task.

These struggling students will walk away even more disheartened at the end of the school day. And so will I, because I don't see testing as a way to improve education, but as a way to ruin it, a way to make public education look much worse than it truly is, a way for politicians to

make themselves look much better than they are, and a way to keep the poor down and feeling bad about themselves.

I am proud of the work I've done for more than two-and-a-half decades with Colorado's children, and I am disgusted with this system of no child left untested.

*Janis M. Houston is a media specialist at Aurora's West Middle School. She is a resident of Thornton.*

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