

Predictable Casualties

Do We Risk Leaving *More* Children Behind?

By Mary Hatwood Futrell and Iris C. Rotberg

As our children returned to school this fall, they faced an increasing emphasis on standardized tests that ultimately will determine their life chances. Within the next two years, more than half the states will use student scores on these tests to determine promotion and graduation. The expected result is that students who do not perform up to expectations will have to repeat the grade. The practical effect is that dropout rates will increase and fewer students will graduate.

Which children are most likely to drop out? The fact is most of the children will be from low-income families. These are the children who must fight the odds of an uneven playing field both because of their poverty and because of the inadequate resources devoted to their schools. Poverty is the major variable predicting low educational achievement. It is associated with a wide range of factors—low parental education, poor health and nutrition, and a host of social problems—which make it difficult for children to compete academically. Children from low-income families, on average, start school with fewer academic skills than do more affluent children. Low-income parents are less likely to participate in their children's education—a predictable outcome because of educational background, inadequate financial resources, and inadequate time. They are less able to help with homework, pay for tutors, or afford the cram courses that more advantaged children are routinely given to raise test scores. Indeed, it is quite remarkable that many of these children overcome the odds and excel academically. Yet, the fact remains that their probability of doing so is significantly lower than it is for affluent children.

The odds against these children are compounded by the fact that as a nation we devote the fewest educational resources to children whose families have the fewest resources. Per-pupil expenditures are lower, the infrastructure and educational materials are inferior, and—most important—low-income communities are less likely to have access to qualified teachers. Salaries are lower, working conditions are more demanding, and, as a result, out-of-field teaching and teacher shortages are higher. In addition to large inequities in public funding, schools in low-income communities do not have access to the rather significant parental contributions that increasingly subsidize wealthy schools.

Moreover, we have one of the largest gaps between rich and poor children when compared with other industrialized nations, and we also have one of the largest discrepancies between the resources spent on rich and poor schools. What happens, then, if we further increase the barriers by imposing a test-based accountability system that deter-

mines a failure of our societal and education policies—even though the schools, without the lower-achieving students, might look great on paper.

Based on experience over a period of many years both in the United States and abroad, there is little uncertainty about the outcome of promotion and graduation requirements. If students are held back, particularly in middle or high school, they are more likely to drop out and therefore not receive a high school diploma. These findings have been reported in states like Kentucky and Texas that emphasize test-based accountability. Similar results have been reported worldwide—for example, in China, Ireland, and Kenya. The latest round of high-stakes testing can be expected to have the same outcome: Fewer students will remain in school to graduate.

The public-policy implications are clear: We should design policies to keep children in school, encourage them to graduate from high school, and make it possible for them to participate in higher education. If promotion and graduation requirements are carried

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out as planned, we will increase schools' average test scores, but at a high cost—more children out of school. That is the most predictable result of high-stakes testing. It is what comes from the rhetoric "a high school diploma must mean something." We cannot give gold stars to schools with high test scores if the apparent achievement gains were accomplished by increasing dropout rates—a proof of failed societal and educational policies, not evidence of success.

This is not to suggest schools should be in holding patterns with weak academic programs. It means that if we want to strengthen schools, we need to provide incentives to attract the most qualified educators to low-income communities. Those incentives are high salaries, the resources needed to do the job, and working conditions that will encourage our most qualified young people to enter and continue in the field. Then we will perhaps be able to overcome, at least to some degree, the negative force of poverty, which has such a major effect on student achievement.

Poverty, however, should not be used as an excuse for denying students a quality education. But the fact is that the quality of education children now receive is determined by their families' socioeconomic status, where they live, and which schools they attend. If tests are administered, then children must have equal access and opportunity to participate in an academic program that ensures they will have an in-depth understanding of the material on which they will be assessed—not as a crash course, but as part of their regular educational experience. They should be taught the subject matter on which they will be tested, and their teachers, in turn, should be trained both to teach that subject matter and to teach it to the diverse students in their classes.

Unfortunately, many children do not have access to a quality program, particularly in low-income communities. Yet they are required to pass the same tests. If, in fact, we do not want to leave millions of children behind, we must begin by correcting that basic educational inequity by ensuring that all children have access

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to an educational program that enhances rather than restricts learning opportunities.

This objective cannot be accomplished, however, if the most qual-

Every child who drops out reflects a failure of our societal and education policies—even though the schools, without the lower-achieving students, might look great on paper.

ified teachers and principals leave the field or move to other schools. Recent reports suggest that is already happening, in part because many educators feel that test-based accountability weakens the academic program and imposes sanctions that have adverse effects for the learning environment. **As a result, the quality of children's educational experience**

ened, if teacher shortages in low-income communities continue to increase.

Moreover, the hoped-for "additional" resources have not materialized to any meaningful extent, and certainly not at the



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level needed to make teaching jobs in low-income communities competitive with those in more affluent areas. If policies cause the best teachers to leave, no amount of rhetoric or testing will strengthen academic programs.

We have understood the roots of the problems—poverty and inadequate educational resources—for many years. We have not made the investment needed to address them. Slogans will not help. We might hope to "leave no child behind," but our current policies will have the opposite effect if we create a situation in which both the students and the teachers leave the schools. ■