

A SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECY

By Iris C. Rotberg¹

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Accountability has become the centerpiece of political rhetoric on educational reform. The assumption is straightforward: If we hold teachers and students accountable for students' scores on standardized tests, academic standards will rise. Sounds good, but it doesn't work.

The preoccupation with standardized testing began in the 1980s with the publication of reports claiming that the U.S. education system had declined. While this conclusion was not supported by the data, the accountability measures it triggered may have created a self-fulfilling prophecy by seriously weakening the academic standards they were intended to raise.

- *High stakes testing weakens academic standards when the test becomes the education program.*

The emphasis on cramming for the test is inevitable so long as teachers and students are held accountable for test scores. Many schools spend weeks, even months, on test-preparation activities. Because the tests typically do not reflect a curriculum, teachers have no choice but to teach to the test. Therefore, the tests themselves become the curriculum, which replaces the school's ongoing academic program. The focus on testing, in turn, narrows the curriculum and encourages rote learning. Even the few tests that measure broader skills like writing or analytical thinking never were intended to serve as the basis for a course of study. It is not surprising, therefore, that private schools and some charter schools (when the choice is available) do not participate in high-stakes testing programs.

- *High stakes testing weakens the quality of education by encouraging, or even requiring, policies that may not be in the best interest of the child.*

Some jurisdictions pressure educators to include "all" children in the testing program. Others facilitate assignments to special programs specifically to exempt potentially low-scoring students from the test. The risk is that children's experiences may depend more on the incentive systems in each state and school district than on a careful examination of their individual needs. Moreover, high-stakes testing gives school systems incentives to retain potentially low-scoring students in the grade immediately preceding the test-administration year—a practice that leads to the appearance of test-score gains, but also increases drop-out rates. My point is not hypothetical, nor is it limited to the current generation of accountability plans, or to the United States. In the 1940s, for example, Irish schools responded to accountability pressures by increasing grade retention.² More recently, World Bank studies report exclusions in China and Kenya.³ Similar reports are emerging in the

United States from Kentucky and Texas, states that place strong emphasis on test-based accountability. An assessment coordinator in Kentucky put it this way: "I'm concerned because we have fewer students after grade 9 and it looks like it's to a school's advantage to get a kid to drop out rather than to keep him on the rolls and have poor test scores at grade 12."⁴

- ***High stakes testing weakens academic standards when it discourages the most qualified teachers and principals from remaining in the profession.***

A focus on test-based accountability has significant implications for the teaching environment because it affects instructional practices, public image, salaries, school takeovers, and the resources available to schools. If well-intentioned policies lead to excessive demands on teachers and principals, they may have adverse effects on job satisfaction and, in turn, on the ability to attract and retain highly qualified educators. There are reports of teachers leaving the field, or requesting transfers to a grade that is not tested, because they feel that the tests have adverse effects on instructional methods and working conditions. It also is becoming increasingly difficult to attract and retain principals. *The New York Times*, reporting on shortages of principals, described it this way:

"As the academic year begins for the nation's 53 million students, a growing number of schools are rudderless, struggling to replace a graying corps of principals at a time when the pressure to raise test scores and other new demands have made an already difficult job an increasingly thankless one. ... In Kentucky and Texas, where the pace at which principals are fleeing is as accelerated as it is in Vermont, job openings in some districts that drew more than a dozen applicants as recently as five years ago are now attracting as few as three, according to principals' associations there."⁵

Thus, policies intended to strengthen academic standards might have precisely the opposite effect from that intended.

While it is an illusion that high-stakes testing creates high academic standards, we use the terms interchangeably. When we read that states have raised academic standards all we know is that they have initiated a high stakes testing program. We know nothing about whether the quality of the education program has improved. For example, if 25% of students drop out of school because they fail the test, we have not improved our schools—they simply are not serving the lower performing students.

The irony is that after all the energy and resources devoted to test-based accountability programs, the tests tell us little about the quality of a school's education program. They tell us mostly about student selectivity (which students take, or are excluded from, the test) and teaching to the test (or occasional cheating). They also tell us about how long the test has been administered by the district. Educators are familiar with the protocol: a new superintendent; a new test resulting in low test scores; cramming for the new test; test score gains; another superintendent; another test

Most troublesome is the fact that the focus on test-based accountability has diverted attention from underlying causes of low academic achievement. We cannot improve education for “all” children without addressing problems of poverty and the serious inequalities in resources available to schools serving affluent and low-income populations. Nor can a test substitute for a comprehensive and sustained academic program or a working environment that encourages the most qualified teachers and principals to remain in the profession.

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2. George F. Madaus and Vincent Greaney, “The Irish Experience in Competency Testing: Implications for American Education,” *American Journal of Education*, February 1985, pp. 268-294.

3. Vincent Greaney and Thomas Kellaghan, *Equity Issues in Public Examinations in Developing Countries*, Technical Paper No. 272 (Washington, D.C.: The World Bank, 1995).

4. Richard F. Elmore, Charles H. Abelman, and Susan H. Fuhrman, “The New Accountability in State Education Reform: From Process to Performance,” in Helen F. Ladd, ed., *Holding Schools Accountable: Performance-Based Reform in Education* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1996, p. 80).

5. Jacques Steinberg, “Nation’s Schools Struggling to Find Enough Principals,” *The New York Times*, September 3, 2000, p. 1.