

FairTest

National Center for Fair & Open Testing

March 27, 2012

The Equity and Excellence Commission:

Dear Members of the Commission:

The National Center for Fair & Open Testing (FairTest) is concerned about the damage done to educational equity and excellence by the use of high-stakes testing. Among the widely documented problems are:

- That denial of a diploma based on a student's test score causes an increase in the dropout rate but does not improve long-term student outcomes such as admission to college or success in employment (references below).
- That high-stakes uses of tests in evaluating schools, as under the No Child Left Behind law, has not led to improvement in student learning, but has caused both a narrowing of the curriculum and within tested subjects a great deal of teaching to the test. In addition, an increase in expulsions, suspensions and pushouts have accompanied these high stakes.
- The consequences have fallen most heavily on the groups the law purports to help: racial minority and low-income students, as well as English language learners and students with disabilities.

These and other negative consequences to both equity and excellence were documented and analyzed by the National Research Council. FairTest has tracked changes in NAEP scores, contrasting pre- and post-NCLB periods, revealing that score gains have slowed or stopped in both subjects, all grades, for almost all demographic groups, since the advent of NCLB. Further, Georgia state investigators of the Atlanta cheating scandal attributed the increased prevalence of cheating on standardized tests has to the high stakes attached to the exams.

The assumption behind NCLB as well as many state laws, that high-stakes testing would improve schooling and outcomes, particularly for our most vulnerable children, has been disproven.

Therefore, if this Commission is to help the U.S. take significant strides toward educational equity, it must help expose the failure of test-driven "reform," call on Congress and the Administration to revisit that strategy and re-write ESEA in accord with the evidence, and encourage states to similarly revise their strategies. The Commission also should warn against

P.O. Box 300204, Jamaica Plain, MA 02108
fairtest@fairtest.org 617-477-9792 <http://fairtest.org>

expanding the use of test-driven “reforms,” as is now happening under the impetus of the Obama administration. The administration requires states that win Race to the Top or seek waivers from NCLB or plan to apply for Teacher Incentive Fund grants to create teacher evaluation systems that rely “in significant part” on student scores on the same tests that have failed to produce improved educational outcomes.

Meanwhile, other nations have had marked success using different strategies, ones that do not rely on excessive testing or high-stakes uses of individual student scores. The U.S. and the Commission need to learn from those other nations.

In addition, the Forum on Educational Accountability (which I chair) has offered detailed and summary recommendations for the overhaul of ESEA that, if adopted, would go a long way toward ensuring needed, positive changes in the course of school reform. Other positive recommendations have come from the Broader, Bolder Approach and the Forum for Education and Democracy.

FairTest recognizes that powerful forces support test-based “reform,” despite the evidence showing that strategy is not succeeding. By calling for a change in course, the Commission will support the educational needs of our nation’s youth and take an important step toward greater equity.

Monty Neill, Ed.D.
Executive Director
FairTest
monty@fairtest.org

PS: There are many sources of information to support the points made in this letter. A few of them are:

Darling-Hammond, L. 2010. *The Flat World and Education: How America’s Commitment to Equity Will Determine Our Future*. New York: Teachers College Press, Teachers College, Columbia University.

FairTest. 2009. NAEP Results Produce More Evidence of NCLB’s Failure. Available online at <http://www.fairtest.org/naep-results-produce-more-evidence-nclbs-failure>

Forum on Educational Accountability. <http://www.edaccountability.org>.

Georgia Bureau of Investigation (GBI). 2011. *Special Investigation into CRCT Cheating at APS*. Available online at <http://www.ajc.com/news/volume-1-of-special-1000798.html>

Guisbond, L., Neill, M. and Schaeffer, R. 2012. *NCLB’s Lost Decade for Educational Progress: What Can We Learn from this Policy Failure?* Boston, MA: FairTest.
<http://www.fairtest.org/NCLB-lost-decade-report-home>

Hout, M. & Elliott, S. Editors. 2011. *Incentives and Test-Based Accountability in Education*. Committee on Incentives and Test-Based Accountability in Public Education; National Research Council. Available online at http://www.nap.edu/catalog.php?record_id=12521

Neill, M., Guisbond, L., and Schaeffer, R. 2004. *Failing Our Children: How "No Child Left Behind" Undermines Quality and Equity in Education; An Accountability Model that Supports School Improvement*. Available online at <http://fairtest.org/node/1778>

Nichols, S. & Berliner, D. 2007. *Collateral Damage: How High-Stakes Testing Corrupts America's Schools*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

Ravitch, D. 2011. *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*. New York: Basic Books.