

## *Democratic School Accountability*

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### **Foreword**

By Monty Neill

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For several decades, education in the U.S. has been increasingly under the sway of policies to improve public schools that focus on standards, tests and consequences. States promulgate standards stating what students are to know and be able to do; "rigorous" assessments "aligned" to the standards are used to determine whether or how well students meet the standards; and students and teachers are rewarded or face sanctions for their test scores. The underlying idea is that schools will focus on what is most important ("laser-like" is a common term) and will change curriculum and instruction, leading to higher scores. Those rising scores will be proof that schools are improving.

Many states had moved quite a way down this road even before the No Child Left Behind law (NCLB) imposed a federally-mandated structure of tests, "adequate yearly progress," and sanctions. If the tests-and-sanctions theory were valid, we should already be seeing significant improvements in schools. That we are not leaves this approach vulnerable to conceptual attack and empirical criticism.

From the start, the concept has faced strong criticism from two general directions. One includes pedagogical critics who charge that this approach will not produce improved learning outcomes. Instead, they say, it will undermine good education and not induce high quality where schooling is now poor. The second includes those who argue that this approach is a diversion from addressing the real problems by blaming schools for not overcoming the consequences of racism and poverty. If rich learning is the desired goal, students must have adequate nutrition, housing, and health care as well as stable and caring families, communities and schools. Racial segregation must be attacked anew. Schools themselves cannot do their job well without increased resources.<sup>i</sup>

My organization, FairTest, has concurred with the second critique while focusing primarily on aspects of the first. While schools can do better, and some do well in difficult circumstances, the current framework for school reform will not improve education. Since public schools are so important in the lives of our children and communities, the nation must pursue better ways to improve schools and to ensure all children receive the kinds of support they need so that, in the words of the Children's Defense Fund, we truly "leave no child behind."

As an approach to improving teaching and learning, the tests-and-consequences scheme has always been shaky. Standardized tests, even if based on decent standards, cannot be the primary goal or the measure of school improvement. The theory of action underlying this approach will not lead to high-quality changes.

Standards are not necessarily a bad idea. FairTest applauded the standards initially advanced by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM), seeing them as a vehicle to improve teaching and learning as well as assessment. However, questions soon arose as the professional standards became codified and mandated in state laws and regulations. Many of

these standards are simply absurd, irrational, as authors such as Deborah Meier, Alfie Kohn, and Susan Ohanian have pointed out.<sup>ii</sup> The volume of standards grew to gargantuan dimensions. It soon became clear that no living human, never mind a student, could actually meet all of them. As a result, any test based on them would have to be very selective and would inevitably not be comprehensive. On top of all this, standards-setting became the terrain of political battles as various groups, particularly conservatives, used state power to dictate their ideas of educational correctness.

The standards rubber hits the road with the tests. Study after study has found that state tests are not well aligned with their own standards. The tests focus on what is easy to measure, not what is important, relying primarily on multiple-choice questions. In New York, teams of scholars examined the Regents high school exams. Published authors of fiction evaluated the Language Arts exams, and historians considered the history tests. College admissions officers looked at several tests, including language arts, history, and environmental sciences. In all cases, the exams were excoriated as being largely irrelevant to what students needed to know and be able to do in college.<sup>iii</sup>

More recently, Achieve, an entity set up by state governors to promote test-based accountability, surveyed professors who taught college freshmen. As is usually the case, the professors were unhappy with student preparation, but what they say is lacking is instructive, including the ability to read complex materials with understanding, the ability to write extended papers, and oral proficiency. The tests do not measure or promote these important skills.

The tests, then, do not align with the standards. However flawed the standards may be, the tests are worse. Some may feature a solid open-ended question. Some of the declarative knowledge covered by the multiple-choice questions is valuable. But there are too few meaningful questions and far too much trivia. For example, the only question about the civil war, its causes and consequences, on the grade 10 Massachusetts MCAS U.S. history exam one year asked: Who was the commanding U.S. general at the battle of Gettysburg?

With high stakes attached, the curriculum becomes mastery of often disconnected facts and rote applications. Memorization is prized, thinking given short shrift. Because low-income and minority-group students are more likely to score low, they are most likely to find their schools turned into test-prep programs. Students from upper-income families may at least partly escape this consequence because the culturally skewed tests do not present the same kind of threat to them and because their parents have some idea what the children need to learn if they are to succeed in college.

In short, test-based sanctions backfire, if the goal is improving education rather than centralizing control over education or producing low-level thinking, compliant workers-to-be. Of course, education means different things to different people. To some, it does mean rising scores on narrow tests. For most people, however, it means a lot more, from academics that include critical thinking to preparing students for a complex range of adult activities. But that is not what school reform today seems to mean to most policymakers.

Thus, test-based accountability will fail our children by narrowing and dumbing-down education, to say nothing of denying diplomas to tens of thousands of students, mostly poor and of color, who will then have virtually no chance of economic security.<sup>iv</sup>

State exams cannot be used to provide trustworthy evidence of educational improvement. Years of research find that teaching to the test produces score inflation: the scores go up but real knowledge, even as measured by other standardized tests, does not. No test assesses the range of academic knowledge our students need, never mind additional attributes the public desires, such

as civic responsibility, creative thinking, and the ability to use knowledge. But the U.S. employs few indicators other than test scores as the main forms of evidence of school success. Two available indicators that are useful to look at are the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and graduation rates.

On NAEP, high-school scores have remained flat for decades: intensifying the stakes attached to state exams has not produced improvement either on NAEP or college admissions tests.<sup>v</sup> While NAEP results provide useful information, its exams are quite limited. Individual students take 20-30 minute slices of the whole exam, too little time to probe for conceptual understanding or the ability to do extended work. Worse, narrowing the curriculum to the tested subjects of reading and math is very common, likely producing the overall score gains seen across the nation on the grade four NAEP. Through intense drill, scores increase modestly in the tested subjects, but at the expense of greater understanding in those disciplines and the reduction, if not elimination, of other subjects. The nation may be getting less real education while fooling itself that things are improving.

Turning schools into test-prep programs has been accompanied by an apparent drop in graduation rates, according to several studies. The southern states, pioneers in high-stakes testing, have averaged a five-point decline.<sup>vi</sup>

FairTest does not believe that all U.S. schools are a disaster because of test-based accountability. Many schools serve their students well. Teachers work effectively and caringly. Even in some schools with low scores and low college-attendance rates, educators may be doing great things under enormously difficult circumstances. Overall, however, test-based accountability is undermining, not enhancing, schools, especially for our most disadvantaged students.

Critiques of test-based accountability do not by themselves advocate an alternative approach: What if the nation went about school improvement differently? Could another path put useful attention on schools, avoid the clear harmful consequences, and actually improve schools? Is there is any empirical evidence to support that direction and guide action?

FairTest has long promoted authentic performance and formative assessments in our own work and in collaboration with others.<sup>vii</sup> Classroom-based assessment must be the foundation of all assessment work, which means skilled teachers employing a wide array of methods to discern students strengths and weaknesses, how students learn, how best to help them, and how to ensure that students also learn to self-assess. Through this process, students and teachers can find and develop what Patricia Carini has described as the standards that emerge from each child's own work and growth<sup>viii</sup>, as well as help students meet the formal standards of the school, district or state. There is some evidence, from the U.S. and elsewhere, that qualified teachers using these kinds of assessments do lead to improved outcomes.<sup>ix</sup> The work students do can be compiled in portfolios, which become the basis for shared understanding of how well students meet educational goals. Collaboratively reviewing portfolios and using them to enrich instruction is one key way for educators to improve schools.

FairTest has also helped develop ideas for improved accountability, using a richer array of measures (classroom- and school-based assessments, school inspections, and exams) and a different theory of action. These have included working with the Massachusetts Coalition for Authentic Reform in Education and with a national network that is "rethinking accountability."<sup>x</sup>

In addition to classroom-based evidence and limited use of external tests, school inspections as conducted in England, in Rhode Island, and with charter and pilot schools in Massachusetts, can be a valuable tool for school self-reflection. Finally, educators need to report to the public on

both academic measures and indicators of the overall climate and health of the school, and construct methods for public review and feedback. This requires a different theory of action: that educators together with students, parents and the community should be the core of improvement efforts, conducted not through threats or directed toward boosting test scores, but cooperatively, with accountability looking at processes as well as a range of evidence on results.

Accountability, however, cannot be a one-way street. Policymakers have exempted themselves from the damaging consequences of test-based accountability and have too often abrogated their responsibility to ensure that schools have the resources to do their jobs well. They have conceptualized accountability as tests and punishments, not as obtaining rich evidence to be used for improvement.

FairTest has also built national coalitions of education, civil rights, and other organizations to point the way toward an overhaul of the "No Child Left" law and the many state policies that head down the same dangerous road.<sup>xi</sup> Complex questions remain as to how best to ensure that the federal government can help schools improve their capacity to serve all children well without micromanaging either through testing or through bureaucratic directives. We will be working on these questions in the months leading up to the 2007 reauthorization of NCLB.

We therefore welcome this powerful, illuminating, highly valuable book. It addresses the purposes and uses of accountability – to improve schools, to ensure they serve each and every child well, and to foster democracy. To attain the goal of a high-quality education for every child, we need to know how accountability processes can help, rather than undermine, progress toward the goal. This volume contributes greatly toward answering that "How?" and I commend it strongly to you.

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<sup>i</sup> Rothstein, R. (2004). *Class and schools*, Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute; Berliner, D. (May, 2005). Our impoverished view of educational reform. Presidential Invited Speech to the American Educational Research Association meeting, Montreal, Canada. Available on the web at <http://www.tcrecord.org/search.asp?kw=Berliner&x=14&y=17>; Kozol, J. (2005). *The shame of the nation: The restoration of apartheid schooling in America*. New York: Crown.

<sup>ii</sup> Meier, D. (2002). *In schools we trust*. Boston: Beacon; Kohn, A. (1999). *The schools our children deserve*. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin; Ohanian, S. (2002). *What happened to recess and why are our children struggling in kindergarten?* New York: McGraw-Hill.

<sup>iii</sup> See <http://www.performanceassessment.org/consequences/ccritiques.html> for details of the reviews.

<sup>iv</sup> The arguments on the consequences of high stakes testing are summed up in Neill, M., and Guisbond, L. (2004). *Failing our children*. Cambridge, MA: FairTest.

<sup>v</sup> Nichols, S., Glass, G., and Berliner., D. (2005). *High-stakes testing and student achievement: Problems for the No Child Left Behind Act*. Tempe, AZ: Education Policy Studies Laboratory, Arizona State University, on the web at

<http://www.asu.edu/educ/eps/EPRL/documents/EPRL-0509-105-EPRU.pdf>; Amrein, A. & Berliner, D. (2002). Education Policy Analysis Archives, on the web at

<http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v10n18/>; Nichols, et al., explain that only in grade 4 math is there some chance that greater test-based accountability pressure produced greater gain, but more likely greater exclusion of English-language learners and students with disabilities, among other things, probably explains the apparently greater gains.

<sup>vi</sup> Barton, P. (2005). *One-third of a nation: Rising dropout rates and declining opportunities*. Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service, Policy Evaluation and Research Center;

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- Southern Regional Education Board. (2005). *Getting serious about high school graduation*. Atlanta: Author. <http://www.sreb.org/main/Goals/Publications/05E06-Graduation.pdf>
- <sup>vii</sup> Neill, M., et al. (1995). *Implementing Performance Assessments*. Cambridge, MA: FairTest; National Forum on Assessment (1995). *Principles and indicators for student assessment systems*. Cambridge, MA: FairTest.
- <sup>viii</sup> Carini, P.F. (1994). Dear Sister Bess: An essay on standards, judgment and writing. *Assessing Writing* 1(1), pp. 29-65.
- <sup>ix</sup> Black, P. & Wiliam, D. (1998). Inside the black box: Raising standards through classroom assessment. *Phi Delta Kappan* 80(2), pp. 139-148; See also various issues of FairTest *Examiner*, on the web at <http://www.fairtest.org/examtoc.htm>.
- <sup>x</sup> Coalition for Authentic Reform in Education. A call for an authentic state-wide assessment system. <http://www.fairtest.org/care/accountability.html>; FairTest (2004). Draft principles for authentic accountability. In Neill, M. & Guisbond. L. (2004). *Failing our children*. Cambridge, MA: FairTest. Principles alone on web at <http://www.fairtest.org/nattest/Authentic%20Accountability/Draft%20Principles.html>.
- <sup>xi</sup> Joint Organizational Statement on No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act. On the web at <http://www.fairtest.org/joint%20statement%20civil%20rights%20grps%2010-21-04.html>.