

# The Dangers of K-2 High-Stakes Standardized Testing



No. 12-12

April 2012

Ushered in with the enactment of the federal No Child Left Behind Act in 2002, high-stakes testing has had an increasingly more negative than positive impact on K-2 education. Teachers are now required to spend more time teaching particular skills that will be tested. Young children are spending a disproportionate amount of time in class preparing for standardized tests, rather than experience engaging instruction that supports students' critical thinking and imagination. This fact sheet highlights five areas of concern recognized in educational literature related to high-stakes testing and young children.

**1. High-stakes tests have been shown to decrease motivation, adds to students' level of stress often resulting in students becoming less engaged in the learning process.**

Young children need the opportunity to explore their world and environment and integrate new concepts and ideas in concrete and authentic ways. Imagination, creativity and project-based hands-on learning experiences are often pushed aside or eliminated at the expense of preparing for high-stakes tests. In high quality pre-kindergarten classrooms, young learners thrive when they are exposed to developmentally appropriate learning experiences that incorporate "learning through play". All learners benefit when they have the opportunity for personal inquiry and exploration; they are more likely to be highly motivated and develop a life-long love of learning. (M. Gail Jones, Brett D. Jones and Tracy Y. Hargrove, (2003). *The Unintended Consequences of High-Stakes Testing*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers).

**2. High-stakes tests should be one of many tools that we use to determine student progress.**

With high-stakes testing there is the tendency for increased pressure on practitioners to focus on test preparation. The demand for higher test scores frequently reflects a test-prep curriculum that has limited lasting value in students' lives. Performance-based formative assessments provide a more effective lens by which to observe student growth and achievement and to modify instruction to meet the diverse needs of students in a classroom. (Heubert, J.P. & Hauser, R.M. (Eds.). (1999). *High Stakes: Testing for Tracking, Promotion, and Graduation*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press).

**3. High-stakes tests do not promote real learning and result in unintended, negative consequences often for immigrant students as well as students from low-income backgrounds who may attend resource-poor schools.**

Since students enter public schools with extremely diverse living and schooling experiences, the concepts and ideas reflected on standardized tests are more aligned with the experiences of some students than others. For example, a reference to an amusement park creates a disadvantage for those students such as English language learners who have never visited one. ELLs may be unfamiliar with test content because they have not been exposed to similar concepts in their native culture and have not lived in the United States for a long period of time. Also, when ELLs take standardized tests, the results frequently reflect their English language proficiency and may not accurately assess their content knowledge or skills. Wright, W. E. (2002). *The Effects of High Stakes Testing in an Inner City Elementary School: The Curriculum, the Teachers, and the English Language Learners*. Current Issues in Education, 5(5). Online at <http://cie.asu.edu/volume5/number5/index.html>

**4. High-stakes testing makes it difficult to teach an enriched curriculum.**

Pre-K through second grade teachers are forced to focus an inordinate amount of time on reading and math because reading and math are the high-stakes subjects tested. Science, social studies, music, art, foreign language, and physical education are either marginalized or eliminated. Schools do not use their funding for resources such as enriched curriculum materials, libraries, science labs, musical instruments, and field trips to explore and expose their students to the community and world in which they live. Instead, they use their funds to purchase expensive test-prep materials and professional development focused on testing. (McNeil, L. M. (2000). *Contradictions of School Reform: Educational Costs of Standardized Testing*. New York: Routledge).

**5. High-stakes testing utilizes funds that could better be spent providing students, including poor and minority students, with high-quality preschools, small class sizes in the early grades, well-qualified teachers, preventive health and nutrition programs.**

It's time to abandon high-stakes policies and substitute more formative testing programs that utilize portfolio assessments and other alternative methods that are both academically challenging and that connect to students' interests and lives. Building and expanding upon what children know through inquiry based learning rather than the "drill and kill" scenario of "teaching to the test" not only helps these young learners stay motivated, it builds a strong developmental foundation from which to learn.

NYSUT is not opposed to assessing student growth; we support multiple measures that are designed to improve instruction and facilitate student learning. A single assessment should never be used as the sole method to evaluate a student, an educator, or a program. Assessments should also not be used to reward or sanction individual children or practitioners. On-going, formative assessments not only encourage and support student growth; they effectively support quality student-centered instruction.

**Resources Related to High-Stakes Standardized Testing and Young Children:**

- Test Problems: Seven Reasons Why Standardized Tests Are Not Working: [http://www.education.com/reference/article/Ref\\_Test\\_Problems\\_Seven/](http://www.education.com/reference/article/Ref_Test_Problems_Seven/)
- New Race to Top Spurs Concerns About Testing Preschoolers: <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2011/08/18/01early.h31.html?tkn=ORTFmdI4RVIp%2F4ZXy0LbThFyYosK4%2BBJoHKN&cmp=clp-edweek>
- The Dangerous Consequences of High-Stakes Standardized Testing: <http://fairtest.org/dangerous-consequences-highstakes-standardized-tes>
- Doubts About High-Stakes Tests and Their Effect on Teachers: <http://www.nytimes.com/schoolbook/2012/03/20/doubts-about-high-stakes-tests-and-their-effect-on-teachers/>
- Pencils Down: Rethinking High-Stakes Testing and Accountability in Public Schools, edited by Wayne Au, Melissa Bollow Tempel: <http://www.rethinkingschools.org/ProdDetails.asp?ID=9780942961515>
- Twelve things the world should toss out: High-stakes testing by Diane Ravitch: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/special/opinions/outlook/spring-cleaning/high-stakes-tests.html>