



Testing OUR *Children:*

WHY NORTH CAROLINA'S HIGH STAKES
TESTING POLICY GOES TOO FAR

*A Policymaker's Guide to Questions,
Answers and Solutions to North Carolina's
High Stakes Testing Program*

North Carolina Justice
and Community Development Center



About the Justice Center



The North Carolina Justice and Community Development Center (Justice Center) is a non-profit, non-partisan organization founded and governed by low-income people, non-profit groups and legal and community leaders. The Justice Center is dedicated to helping low income and working poor North Carolinians escape poverty and achieve economic security. It includes several well-known projects within its umbrella and is professionally staffed by a team of lawyers, community educators and policy analysts.

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Summary

This year, North Carolina is on course to retain one in three (nearly 30,000) fifth-graders on the basis of scores on standardized tests. Under the state's new Student Accountability Standards (SAS) adopted by the State Board of Education, it will not necessarily matter that many of these students have worked hard and received passing grades the entire year. As third and eighth-graders are phased in next school year, the number of students at risk of retention will increase to nearly 90,000. A disproportionate number of these students will be African-American, Native-American, and Latino. Parents whose children face retention will not be allowed to see their child's graded exam and will face a patchwork appeals process that fails to provide uniform and fair procedures.

Some students with disabilities and limited-English proficiency will face unfair and inappropriate testing conditions. All students will endure the high stress of taking a test where the results will matter more than the sum total value of every homework assignment and classroom test taken this year.

North Carolina's application of high stakes tests to major education decisions, like grade retention, is condemned by leading professional education research, psychological, and teacher associations including the N.C. School Psychology Association. In fact, education research tells us that we should expect grade retention as a policy to: (1) increase dropout rates; (2) fail to increase achievement; and (3) increase discipline problems.

While testing has helped hold schools accountable, North Carolina's high stakes testing program has gone too far, promising more harm than good. Parents expect and deserve to have important education decisions regarding their children's future made carefully and on a fully informed basis. Policymakers should act now to bring our state's education system back in line with the best educational interests of our children by enacting the following common sense recommendations:

- Consider a student's whole performance, not just one test in promotion decisions.
- Provide the early intervention needed to catch children up before they fail.
- End the secrecy surrounding tests by making graded exams available to parents.
- Establish fair and uniform appeals procedures statewide for parents who believe their child should be promoted.
- Improve fairness in testing conditions for LEP students and students with disabilities.
- Provide focused intervention and transportation for failing students without cost.
- Conduct an independent assessment of the validity and reliability of state tests.

Questions AND Answers

ABOUT TESTING IN NORTH CAROLINA

Walk into any school in North Carolina and ask teachers, parents and even students what really matters in our schools. The answer most frequently given is "testing, testing and more testing". This response should not come as any surprise. For the past six years North Carolina has increasingly made scores on standardized tests preeminent above all other indicators of education success or failure. Yet, ironically, few policymakers and even many educators do not fully understand our state's testing policies or the impact that tests are having on the intellectual lives of our children.

This guide will provide answers to basic questions about North Carolina's testing program, its impact on schools and, most importantly, its impact on students and learning. By better understanding the state's testing program, policymakers will be better positioned to make changes that, in the end, restore reasonableness and balance to our education system.



What Do the Terms "Standardized Tests" and "High Stakes" Mean?

"Standardized tests" are tests given to large groups of students across North Carolina. All students are asked to answer a small number of the same questions, usually by picking from possible multiple choice answers. Students are given only a limited amount of time to take these tests.

"High Stakes" standardized tests have major consequences for teachers, schools and students. They often determine:

- Graduation from high school with a diploma;
- Promotion to the next grade;
- Placement of students in remedial groups; and
- Teacher bonuses.

What Are the Student Accountability Standards?

The Student Accountability Standards (Standards) are a set of mandated rules adopted by the State Board of Education that must be followed by every school system. The Standards direct that 3rd, 5th, and 8th graders who fail End-of-Grade exams in math, reading or writing should repeat their current grade in most instances. They set up only the barest of frameworks for an appeals process. The Standards also require local school boards to pass policies for implementation, placing enormous pressure on principals to rely on test results, effectively removing the principal's long-standing discretion vested by North Carolina law.

How Will the Standards Operate in My Local School System?

At the end of the school year, all students in grades 3, 5 and 8 will be required to take an End-



of-Grade exam in math and reading. If students fail either exam, they are typically re-tested within two weeks. If they fail again, they will usually be directed to summer school. The financing of summer school and remediation programs will be left to individual districts. At the end of summer school, students will be tested a third time. If a student fails either the math or reading portion of the third exam, they will likely be retained. High school students take End-of-Course tests which normally count as a portion of their final grade.

Parents and teachers have a right to bring an appeal if they believe a student should be promoted. The appeal process varies from school system to school system and it is likely that many parents will not understand that they have the right to appeal. Although the Standards provide that a principal makes the final decisions to retain or promote, principals will be under overwhelming pressure to disregard other measures of student achievement and rely solely on the high stakes tests.

If the Statewide Student Retention Policy Proceeds Unchanged, What Should We Expect to See Happen?

While it is hard to predict precisely how many students will be retained this year based on high stakes test scores, nearly one in three fifth

graders is at risk of retention. The chart below, for students entering the 5th grade this year, suggests that the retention policy will inflict the most harm on students of color—a trend that threatens to continue harmful historic patterns.

Is Using a Standardized Test to Decide Whether to Promote a Student a Good Idea?

No, for many reasons:

- The nationally-recognized American Educational Research Association is just one of the many professional organizations to warn that "decisions that affect individual students' ... educational opportunities should not be made on the basis of test scores alone." Tests tell us only how a child answers a small number of questions on a single day, and provide only a limited picture of what a child really knows.
- It is especially unfair to use high stakes tests to evaluate students whose schools have not provided adequate opportunities—including a qualified teacher who teaches in subject—on the basis of a test score.

- Relying on a test score detracts from classroom teaching, with teachers spending more time teaching to the test. In fact, a National Science Foundation study found this trend of teaching to the test was more prevalent in schools with high numbers of minority students.
- It is wrong to send the message that one test can be substituted for a year's worth of work—this message can leave students feeling that hard work throughout the year will not be rewarded.
- Some students simply do not score well on tests, even though they may have the knowledge needed to move onto the next grade.
- The tests are limited to reading, math, and writing--by making promotion decisions on these limited basis, we devalue other important subjects such as science, social studies and history.

Isn't Retention an Effective Way to Help Students Catch Up?

Only in a limited number of situations. The N.C. School Psychology Association has

STUDENTS ENTERING THE 5TH GRADE-2000/01

STUDENTS	CENSUS	PASS RATE	NUMBER FAILING	PROPORTION FAILING
Native American	1,390	57.6%	589	1 in 2
Asian	1,643	75.7%	399	1 in 4
African American	29,653	48.9%	15,153	1 in 2
Latino	3,164	57.0%	1,361	1 in 2
Multi-Racial	1,323	71.6%	376	1 in 4
White	62,184	79.6%	12,686	1 in 5
Total	99,372	69.3%	30,507	1 in 3

Source: *The 1999-00 Preliminary State Testing Results*, N.C. Department of Public Instruction (Aug. 31, 2000). Estimates are based entirely on the 1999-2000 test results for fourth graders and are not controlled for changes in population size or ability. Fourteen students whose race or ethnicity were unknown were omitted.

reviewed the scientific evidence and concluded that while retention may provide some marginal benefit in the short term, it is a harmful experience for most students. It has been linked to increased risk for dropping out of school and harmful behaviors such as substance abuse and early sexual activity—all with no proven long-term increase in achievement. Indeed, students who are retained once have a 45% chance of dropping out of school. If students are retained twice, there is a 90% chance they will drop out.

Aren't Schools Required to Help Students Before They Fail the Exam Under State Policy?

INCREDIBLY, THEY ARE NOT. State policy does not require a Personal Education Plan for students until **AFTER** they fail high stakes tests, even if schools know students are failing at the beginning of the year. Even then, resources are inadequate to ensure that every child has an effective Personal Education Plan.

Don't Schools Have the Resources They Need to Ensure that Every Child Can Pass High Stakes Tests?

Not necessarily. Although the legislature has given new dollars to schools in the past two years to help students catch up, these resources are not enough to ensure that every student in North Carolina has a full and fair opportunity to pass high stakes tests. Children need schools equipped with the resources to provide early intervention—to catch them up before they fail an exam at the end of the year.

Is There a Better Way to Address the Issue of Social Promotion?

YES. First, it is important to recognize that schools already retain many students. This

may be the best course for a limited number of students. However, using it as a broad-based education policy, a policy of "social retention", strips educators of the ability to use retention responsibly as a targeted intervention. A better alternative, not covered by current state policy, would be to promote students to the next grade level requiring them to participate in a plan of focused intervention. This would avoid the harmful effects of retention while providing students with the focused attention they need.



Will Ensuring That Promotion Decisions Are Made on the Basis of a Student's Whole Performance Rather than Standardized

Tests Remove Accountability from the System?

NO. To the contrary, by ensuring that schools examine a student's entire performance, the state can send a message that work done during the year counts—showing students they are accountable everyday. Students can still be accountable through a policy that considers statewide exams as part of their entire performance without introducing the harm that results from substituting a single test for a year's work.

What is Wrong with the Current Appeals Process?

Although the state has instituted a statewide policy concerning retention, the appeals portion of that process is delegated to local school districts without sufficient safeguards to ensure a uniformly fair process. Under the current rules, a

Ten Reasons Why.....

parent in one district could and likely will face a different appeals process from a family living in a different district, just a few miles away. Given that the state is making an education decision with major life-consequences for students, the appeals process is fatally vague. Students who face a two-week suspension for discipline problems have more substantial due process protections than the state policy provides for students facing a year-long retention.

How Will High Stakes Testing Affect Students with Disabilities and Limited English Proficiency?

Students with certain disabilities have experienced difficulty receiving accommodations in the interest of fairness during testing. For example, blind students have had difficulty receiving accommodations that would allow a test administrator to read sections of the exams.



Students with limited English proficiency must take math examinations in English-leading to lower scores and frustration. This practice detracts from the ability of the test to measure math skills, essentially becoming a double English and math test—placing unfair burdens on these students.

1. **Testing Saturation is Hurting Instruction** -- North Carolina students spend more time preparing for and taking tests than most students in the nation. This time could otherwise be used to teach and instruct students. In many schools it is not uncommon to see teachers abandon creative instructional techniques and, instead teach to the test using practice exams and "drill and kill" techniques. As our state's policy continues, the intellectual life is being squeezed out of our schools as they are transformed into "test prep" centers.
2. **The Testing Program has been Developed by a Small Group of Government Officials With Virtually No Public Accountability** -- High stakes tests have been developed, largely in secret, by a relatively small number of government officials and cannot be seen by parents or the public. As a result, there is virtually no public accountability for the accuracy of the tests, what questions are asked, how tests relate to the curriculum or the fairness of testing conditions. There is no other area of public policy in which the legislature has allowed government officials to operate with such secrecy. Other states and testing programs (e.g., Texas, Ohio, the SAT) allow parents and the public to see test questions after tests are administered.
3. **Parents Cannot See the Tests Used to Judge Their Children** -- Traditionally, parents see their child's graded homework and classroom exams in order to support their child's education. But, under the state policy, parents have no right to review what is clearly the most important exam their child will take all year. Rather, their child can be retained or denied a diploma on the basis of an exam that is machine graded without a chance to check for grading errors or to provide feedback on test questions.

.....POLICYMAKERS AND PARENTS SHOULD
BE CONCERNED ABOUT HIGH STAKES TESTING
IN NORTH CAROLINA

4. Not All Students have Adequate Resources to Ensure that they have a Full and Fair Opportunity to Pass the Test -- Using high stakes tests to make important decisions such as grade retention unfairly punishes students whose schools, or whose very classrooms lack the resources to provide a sound basic education. There are big differences in the quality of a child's education depending on the resources available to a school, the skill of the classroom teacher or unforeseen events like a hurricane. In some cases, resources disparities will mean that some fifth graders will not have certified teachers this year.
5. Tests are not Perfect Measures of a Child's Abilities or Achievement because they have a Relatively Large Margin of Error -- North Carolina's standardized tests have relatively large measurement errors because they were developed years ago for the sole purpose of holding schools accountable. The tests were never intended to be used to make crucial decisions about individual children's educational futures. The State Board of Education recently recognized the importance of having accurate tests when it delayed the state's high school exit exam. End of Grade and End of Course Tests have similar high stakes but, regrettably, have not been subject to the same scrutiny.
6. N.C. Tests May Unfairly Judge Many Students -- Educators have not fully informed the public and parents that the tests are not perfect or that they have large measurement errors. In fact, the "measurement errors" in North Carolina tests are so large that thousands of students will be told that they are not "proficient" when, in fact, they may well be at or above grade level. Likewise, many students will get a passing grade on the tests but, in fact, be below grade level because of measurement errors built into the tests.
7. The Testing Program Does not Value Individual Differences Among Students -- Tests are based on the assumption that "one size fits all." However, children have different learning styles, and they develop at different rates. Yet, the new policy focuses on test results, effectively stripping school principals of their traditional role of evaluating these individual differences.
8. Tests Don't Help Students During the School Year When it Really Matter -- North Carolina's high stakes tests are not used to diagnose and help students. Instead, they are given at the end of the school year primarily to rate and sort students.
9. Testing is Expensive and it is Big Business -- There is money to be made off of North Carolina's high stakes testing program. The state has spent millions of dollars to develop its testing program with millions more planned to be spent in the future. A number of companies are poised to make money off of high stakes testing, including companies that plan to market test preparation materials for students and parents in North Carolina.
10. Many Young Children are Experiencing Negative Health and Psychological Effects from High Stakes Testing -- As the time for high stakes tests approaches, many schools, teachers and parents report instances of mental and physical illness among children. These negative consequences of high stakes testing have been noted by the N.C. School Psychology Association in a recent report on testing in North Carolina schools. (See: <http://www.ncschoolpsy.org>).

Recommendations for Improving

THE TESTING POLICY

- ◆ Consider a student's whole performance, not just one test. Under the new student accountability standards, principals have the ultimate say over grade promotion decisions. However, the way the standards are written, many school principals will make their decisions based on test scores, not the whole performance of the student. New legislation should require principals to consider factors such as classroom work, grades, quality of instruction received, and a student's best educational interests when deciding whether to promote.
 - ◆ End the secrecy surrounding tests. If a student may be held back in the same grade because of scores on a standardized test, parents should have the right to review their student's graded exam. Texas and other states already use this fair and common sense procedure. Legislation requiring the release of test questions after tests are given should be enacted.
 - ◆ Create a fair process for parents to appeal education decisions concerning their children that are based on high stakes standardized tests. When a parent's child receives a low score on a test and faces summer school or retention, that parent has the right to appeal but only in grades 3, 5 and 8. School systems that have local policies that go beyond the state policy do not (and in some cases are not) letting parents appeal the decision to retain their child. Legislation is needed to provide parents and students with a fair and independent review of decisions concerning their child. A fair review process would include: clear notice of parent's rights; the right to have an advocate present at the hearing; the right to ask questions of school officials; the right to obtain records and information from the school including a student's test questions and answers; and, the right to present information and evidence on behalf of the student.
 - ◆ Require schools to identify and help children catch up before they fail the exam. Current state policy requires students who receive low grades on exams in grades 3, 5, and 8 to receive help. However, this intervention is not required until after the child has failed state tests.
- Moreover, this intervention is not necessarily required in other grades. Thus, schools may ignore problems until it may be too late. Legislation is needed which would ensure that all students scoring below grade level should receive a personal education plan to help them get back on track when the school knows or should know the student is likely to fail the new standards.
- ◆ Improve fairness in testing for disabled students. Students with disabilities should have special rules regarding high stakes tests including: broad accommodations and alternative methods of assessment which, at a minimum, match up with their IEP's and Sec. 504 plans; high stakes tests should not be used to make high stakes decisions for disabled students such as promotion and graduation; parents should be given extensive training and information about the assessment system and options for participation of disabled students; and the state should conduct research regarding the validity and reliability of any assessment system used for special education students. LEP students should be provided with modifications which allow them to take math tests in their native language or have the test read to them in their native language.
 - ◆ Schools must provide focused intervention and transportation without cost. Some schools may be forced to charge parents fees for summer school and/or requiring parents to provide transportation for their students in order to participate in focused intervention and summer school. Legislation is needed to make sure that remediation is provided totally free of charge to students and parents.
 - ◆ State to Conduct an Independent Assessment of Tests. North Carolina's testing program has been largely developed without any independent assessment of the tests' reliability, validity or fairness for grade promotion, retention remedial placement or graduation. Legislation is needed to commission such assessments with reporting of results to the Joint Legislative Education Oversight Committee of the General Assembly.

