

THE TRUTH

ABOUT HIGH-STAKES TESTING IN NEW YORK CITY PUBLIC SCHOOLS



CHANGE THE STAKES

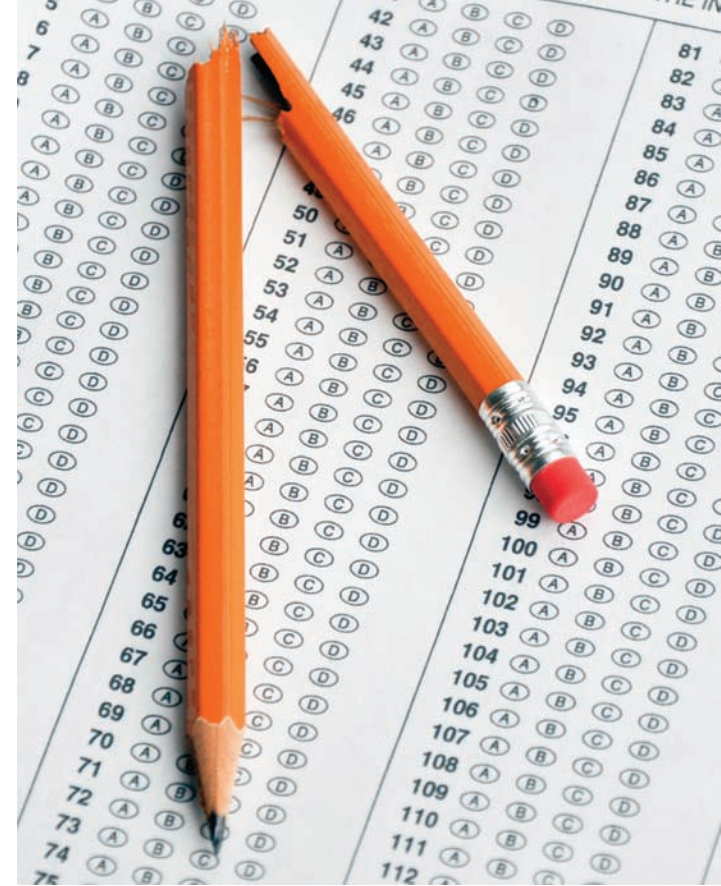
CHANGE THE STAKES IS A GROUP OF PARENTS AND EDUCATORS
WHO WANT THE BEST EDUCATION FOR ALL CHILDREN.

We are a growing group concerned with the harm high stakes-testing is doing to our children and schools. We oppose an over-emphasis on tests and misuse of the results for purposes they were never intended to serve. We believe high-stakes testing must be replaced by valid forms of student, teacher, and school assessment.

We are asking parents and community members like you from districts across the city to join hands to improve teaching and learning opportunities for all children. We believe a good education is the right of every child and a right that every parent should demand. It must never become a matter of luck, lottery or good fortune. And good education is not something that can be measured by a test score.

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

PLEASE VISIT OUR WEBSITE AT
changethestakes.org



What is high-stakes testing?

Tests are considered “high-stakes” for students when the results are used to make critical decisions about a student's:

- Access to educational opportunity
- Grade-level promotion or hold-over
- Graduation from high school

In New York State, the high-stakes nature of test scores also impacts teachers, administrators, and whole school communities in that they are rewarded or punished based on students' performance.

Just how high are the stakes in NYC?

- High school students must pass 5 Regents exams to receive a diploma
- All 3rd through 8th graders must pass a state test in ELA and math each year to be promoted to the next grade
- Increasingly, test scores are being used to evaluate teachers and to make personnel decisions
- Test scores are used as a justification for closing schools in predominantly low-income communities of color.

High-stakes testing has dramatically changed how students and teachers experience school.

Even young children now spend a large amount of time in class practicing for standardized tests. As poor test results lead to school closings for some communities and escalating anxiety for the rest, the approach has generated controversy. Those who support high-stakes tests argue that without high-stakes tests there would be no accountability because there would be no way to track student progress over time. How else would the public know whether students are learning basic knowledge and skills? Who could object to using tests to improve schools and make sure teachers are doing their jobs?

These arguments were the basis for the passage of No Child Left Behind in 2002. Over the last decade it has proven to be a deeply flawed approach. Test-based accountability wrongly assumes that higher scores on tests are synonymous with good education. In fact, a good education includes many types of learning that cannot be measured on a test. Moreover, test scores may reflect measurement error, statistical error, random variation, or a host of other factors. Do you want your child to be evaluated solely on the basis of an instrument prone to error and ambiguity? Below we outline the myths and facts related to testing in our schools.

The Myths of High-Stakes Testing

1

MYTH

High-stakes tests encourage my child to want to do well in school.

TRUTH

High-stakes tests have been shown to decrease motivation and cause students to become less engaged in the learning process.

Students who struggle to pass high-stakes tests often feel punished and misunderstood. These feelings of defeat carry over from grade to grade; students who might otherwise have become highly successful become disengaged from their education. Students of all ability levels find that the preparation — often a test-prep curriculum — is disconnected from their lives and does not challenge them. Teachers spend more time teaching particular skills that will be tested rather than guiding students in engaging activities designed to support students' critical thinking. Imagination, creativity and in-depth projects are neglected or cut-out completely. Students don't see a need to push themselves beyond "what is on the test," and by high school are often resistant to learn anything unless it will be "on the test."

THE ALTERNATIVE: The reality is that in order to do well in school children need to be engaged and interested in what they are learning. Tests should be a way to assess what students have learned but not the motivation for learning in the first place. Intrinsic motivation which comes from knowing the value of learning is ultimately more powerful than threats of failure. If teachers were able to spend more time thinking about what would hold their students' interest, rather than how to improve test scores, the result would be more students wanting to do well in school. A high-level of engagement can only come from an environment where long-term objectives are developed and motivation is not solely based on success on one test.

2

MYTH

High-stakes tests accurately tell me how my child is doing academically.

TRUTH

High-stakes standardized tests provide a limited snapshot of student progress designed at a distance.

There is no doubt that tests are useful, but many have compared the use of high-stakes tests to using nothing but a thermometer at noon to tell you about the weather for that entire day. There are many factors that can affect a student's score on one test at the end of the year that are completely unrelated to what he or she has learned. The tests can tell you very little and have a huge margin of error: a student who scores high may be struggling academically, and one who tests below grade level may have impressive academic strengths not reflected by their score. Clearly standardized tests should be one of many tools that we use to determine student progress, but actually the high-stakes nature of such tests make them an even less useful tool in informing you about how your child is doing. This is because there is increased pressure to focus on test preparation, so higher scores often reflect a test-prep curriculum that has limited lasting value in students' lives.

THE ALTERNATIVE: Your child's school can and should provide parents with a full picture of how your child is doing. Well-trained, experienced teachers can provide evidence from a variety of sources that can help you to understand your child's progress, and various types of assessments should be part of that composite picture. Using lots of different methods actually helps to ensure accuracy. The best assessments can only be designed and conducted by those with firsthand knowledge of your child.

3

MYTH

High-stakes tests are unbiased and raise the bar for students of all backgrounds.

TRUTH

Standard test-construction methods build in certain kinds of racial and class biases.

Many believe that the content of tests is equally accessible to students of all racial and socioeconomic backgrounds. But because students come to tests with extremely diverse lived experience, the real-life scenarios reflected on the test 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 who have never visited one. Most often, the references made on state exams correspond closely to middle and upper-class white experiences. Since the vast majority of students within the New York City public school system are Black or Latino, our students are being systematically denied a fair opportunity to achieve on tests that have drastic consequences for their futures.

THE ALTERNATIVE: Tests should be created by teachers to measure the skills and knowledge they have been teaching and used to adjust instructional practices. This would allow for a culturally relevant curriculum, and thus teachers could target their teaching practices to the individual needs of their students.

4

MYTH

High-stakes standardized tests encourage teachers to teach a well-rounded curriculum.

TRUTH

High-stakes standardized tests demand that teachers narrow curriculum solely to tested subjects and test preparation, neglecting other important nontested subjects.

In the "race" to high test scores, states, districts, and schools divert teachers' attention from quality curriculum and accurate student assessment. Teachers have to concentrate on test prep and "teaching to the test." Elementary schools concentrate 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 left out or taught only minimally. Even within one subject, high-stakes standardized tests do not—and can not—test the whole curriculum. As a result, the curriculum is narrowed and the content limited. Many schools see these high-stakes standardized tests as all too important. They do not use their funding for resources such as excellent curriculum materials, libraries, science labs, musical instruments, etc. They use them instead on test-prep materials and professional development focused on testing.

THE ALTERNATIVE: Schools should have a deep, rich and challenging curriculum that encourages students to think critically and complexly about the material they are learning. The curriculum must include art, music, physical education, science, science labs, social studies, foreign language, and field trips into the world around them.

5

MYTH

High-stakes tests accurately measure teacher quality and push teachers to work harder.

TRUTH

High-stakes standardized tests are imperfect and insufficient measures of student learning and teacher quality.

Today, the practice of singling out low-scoring schools to urge instructional staffs to improve "unacceptable" test performance is widespread. In NYC it is done by publicly labeling schools as "low performing" or "failing." The mayor's office argues that such characterization will spur the school's staff to do a better job, but in fact it does the opposite. It leads to teaching to the test, or in some cases, mass cheating. In addition, low test scores mean that student populations with the highest needs are left to teachers with the least experience, as increasing numbers of highly trained teachers are pushed out of schools slated for phase out or turn around.

THE ALTERNATIVE: A range of information is needed to make decisions about whether teachers are doing a good job at any given school. Administrators should consider teacher observations, teacher reports, student reports, and meeting with parents — just to name a few. Some public schools that are granted a waiver from state tests use portfolio assessments and other alternative methods that are both academically challenging and connect to students' interest.