

[MEDIA CONTACT: Dr. Joseph Pedulla, Associate Professor, Boston College Lynch School of Education, and Director, The Center for the Study of Testing, Evaluation and Educational Policy at Boston College. Phone: 617-552-4521; email: pedulla@bc.edu]

NATIONAL SURVEY OF TEACHERS SHOWS
STATE TESTING PROGRAMS HAVE RESULTED
IN MAJOR CHANGES IN INSTRUCTION PRACTICES

Broadest Survey Ever Conducted on This Issue
Reveals Greatest Changes in States Where Testing Stakes Are Highest

CHESTNUT HILL, MA (3-04-03) – State testing programs are leading teachers to change both what they teach and how they teach, according to a new report by The National Board on Educational Testing and Public Policy at Boston College.

The report also reveals that the greatest changes in instructional practices take place in states where the official consequences of state testing programs are the most severe.

The report, based on a two-year study, surveyed a nationally representative sample of teachers, the broadest ever to be conducted on this topic. According to the survey results, teachers in high-stakes situations reported feeling more pressure to have their students do well on the test, as well as to align their instruction with the test and to engage in more test preparation. In states with high stakes for students, three-quarters or more of teachers reported that students felt intense pressure to perform well and were extremely anxious about taking the state test.

In addition, a substantial majority of teachers at each grade level, but particularly elementary teachers, indicated that state testing programs have led them to teach in ways that contradict their ideas of sound instructional practices. Across all stakes and grade levels, about 4 in 10 respondents indicated that teachers in their school could raise test scores without really improving learning. Roughly, three-quarters of all teachers, again regardless of stakes or grade level, found that the benefits of the testing program were not worth the time and money involved.

"These findings call into question what state test results are really telling us," said Lisa Abrams, a member of the research team. "It is undeniable that these tests are having a profound impact on what happens in the classroom, and in many cases are affecting instruction in ways that contradict the intent of state education reform policies."

A majority of all teachers, however, were positive in their opinions of their state's curricular standards, and the vast majority indicated that their district's curriculum was aligned with the state test. And, while the majority of teachers across stakes and grade levels disagreed that the test was causing many students to drop out of high school or to be retained in grade, almost a third of teachers in states where the stakes are the highest agreed.

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Funded by The Atlantic Philanthropies, the multi-state survey of 12,000 teachers examines the perceived effects of state-mandated testing programs on teaching and learning in the United States. Approximately 4,200 teachers responded to the survey, which was conducted between February and March 2001, for a response rate of 35 percent.

"Teachers are on the front line every day," said Joseph Pedulla, associate professor at the Boston College Lynch School of Education and a member of the research team. "Their voice on this issue must be heard; their opinions must enter into the formation of sound testing policy."

The survey sample was designed to reflect the views of teachers in states in which low, moderate or high stakes are attached to test results. In a state considered to have low stakes, there may be no apparent rewards or sanctions related to test scores, whereas in a state with high stakes, for example, student graduation and school accreditation may be tied to them. The study reports results for five types of state testing programs, ranging from those with high stakes across the board (for districts, schools, and/or teachers as well as for students) to those with moderate or low stakes.

Major areas surveyed include (1) school climate, (2) pressure on teachers, (3) perceived value of the state test, (4) alignment of classroom practices with the state test, (5) impact on the content and mode of instruction, (6) test preparation and administration, (7) perceived unintended consequences and (8) accountability and use of test results. Within each area, the researchers present findings for stakes levels, grade levels, and stakes combined with grade levels.

Among the survey findings:

- The severity of consequences attached to state tests affects the instruction students receive. Generally, as stakes increase, so does the influence of the test; and in some cases, this influence varies for elementary, middle and high school teachers within the same testing program.
- Significantly more teachers (40%) in states with high stakes for schools and students than in low-stakes states (10%) reported that their school's results influenced their teaching on a daily basis.
- In general, teachers in high-stakes states reported feeling more pressure than those in lower-stakes states. A large majority of teachers felt that there is so much pressure for high scores on the state-mandated test that they have little time to teach anything not covered on the test. This view was most pronounced in states where high levels of accountability are demanded of districts, schools, teachers, and students.
- Elementary teachers in high-stakes states reported spending more time on test preparation than did their high school counterparts. Further, elementary teachers were more apt to report engaging in test preparation throughout the year than were middle or high school teachers. Also, more elementary and middle school teachers than high school teachers reported their students are extremely anxious and under intense pressure because of the state test.
- Across all types of testing programs, teachers reported increased time spent on subject areas that are tested and less time on areas not tested, such as fine arts, physical education, foreign languages or industrial/vocational education, as well as on other activities such as field trips and enrichment projects.

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- Teachers in high-stakes states, more so than those in low-stakes states, reported that the test brought much-needed attention to education issues, but it was a minority of teachers across all stakes levels who agreed with this view.
- On average across all the states, teachers were neutral regarding the use of state test results for student accountability. The use of the test for school accountability, however, was seen on average as moderately inappropriate, and for teacher/administrator accountability as moderately to very inappropriate.
- The majority of teachers across stakes and grade levels, however, did not agree that the test was causing unintended consequences such as preventing student instruction in writing on computers, or causing many students to drop out of high school or to be retained in grade.

"The findings in this report need to be examined by policymakers and educators in their own state to determine whether the effects of the state test, as reported here by teachers, are the desired ones," said Dr. Pedulla. "Only by listening to what teachers tell us is happening as a result of these testing programs can we be confident that these programs are having the intended effect."

The National Board on Educational Testing and Public Policy at Boston College was formed in 1998 with support from the Ford Foundation with a mandate to investigate trends, practices, and impacts of the use of standardized test instruments and other forms of assessment in schools, the workplace, and the military and to recommend the improvements in testing that would promote the identification and nurturing of talent, especially among racial, ethnic, and linguistic minorities.

The Board is housed at The Center for the Study of Testing, Evaluation, and Educational Policy (CSTEPP), one of the nation's leading educational research organizations, located in the Carolyn A. and Peter S. Lynch School of Education at Boston College.

MEDIA NOTE: A copy of the executive summary or full report, "Perceived Effects of State-Mandated Testing Programs on Teaching and Learning: Findings from a National Survey of Teachers," is available at <http://www.bc.edu/nbetpp> or by contacting Dr. Joseph Pedulla at 617-552-4521 or pedulla@bc.edu.

As part of the overall project, a separate study was conducted involving in-depth interviews with administrators and classroom teachers in both urban and rural districts of three states: Kansas, Massachusetts and Michigan. That report, "Perceived Effects of State-Mandated Testing Programs on Teaching and Learning: Findings from Interviews with Educators in Low-, Medium-, and High-Stakes States," is available at <http://www.bc.edu/nbetpp> or by contacting Dr. Marguerite Clarke, Assistant Research Professor, Boston College Lynch School of Education at 609-275-1394 or clarkemd@bc.edu.]

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