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NEW REPORT SHOWS UNEVEN IMPACT OF STATE TESTING PROGRAMS

First-Ever Comparative Study Reveals Perceived Effects of High-, Moderate-, and Low-Stakes State Tests on Teaching and Learning; 360 Teachers, Administrators Interviewed in Massachusetts, Michigan, and Kansas

CHESTNUT HILL, MA (3-04-03) – The results of the first-ever comparative study of the perceived effects of high-, moderate-, and low-stakes state-sponsored tests on teaching and learning have been released by the National Board on Educational Testing and Public Policy at Boston College.

*** **[Media Note: A summary of key findings begins on p. 2]** ***

The study's findings suggest that test-based stakes are an uncertain lever for producing change, and that a one-size-fits-all approach to standards, tests, and accountability is unlikely to bring about the greatest motivation and learning for all students in a state.

The findings show that the impact of high-stakes testing on students is uneven, with high-achieving and suburban students most likely to be motivated and low-achieving and at-risk students most likely to be demoralized. The report also reveals a consistently greater impact on students and educators at the elementary level, regardless of the stakes attached to the test results. Some of these effects were positive, but others produced a classroom environment that was test-driven and unresponsive to students' needs.

"This finding is of particular concern in the current policy climate since the accountability requirements of the federal *No Child Left Behind Act* are placing an even greater testing burden on the early and middle grades," said Dr. Marguerite Clarke, a senior member of the Boston College research team. "In order to increase the chances of deep, rather than superficial changes in student knowledge, testing should be in the service of learning, not in control of it."

The study, funded by The Atlantic Philanthropies Foundation, is based on 360 interviews with elementary, middle, and high school teachers as well as school- and district-level administrators in urban, suburban, and rural districts of three states: Kansas, Michigan, and Massachusetts. The goal of the study was to identify the effects of state-level standards-based reform on teaching and learning, paying particular attention to the state test and associated stakes.

The stakes for educators were similar in all three states (school accreditation or potential takeover based in whole or in part on state test scores), but the stakes for students varied dramatically -- from low in Kansas (no official consequences) to moderate in Michigan (endorsed diploma and college tuition credit attached to the eleventh-grade test) to high in Massachusetts (starting with the class of 2003, students had to pass the tenth-grade test in order to graduate from high school).

Interviews (120 in each state) were conducted between winter 2000 and fall 2001 with broad topic areas including the effects of the state standards on classroom practice, the effects of the state test on classroom practice, and the effects of the state test on students.

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Among the study findings:

In all three states:

- Educators noted positive, neutral, and negative effects of the state-mandated curriculum standards and tests on teaching and learning;
- Elementary teachers as well as those in rural and large-urban districts reported the most effects of the state test on classroom practice, and suburban educators reported the least;
- Educators reported a more negative than positive test-related impact on students, particularly elementary students, special populations, and students in urban districts.

As the stakes for students increased (i.e., moving from Kansas to Michigan to Massachusetts):

- Educators more often mentioned teaching to the state test rather than the state standards;
- The number of reported effects of the state test on classroom practice increased dramatically;
- Educators reported an increasingly more negative impact on students, particularly elementary students, special populations, and students in urban districts.

"The fact that some of the biggest differences in impact are not between states, but within states highlights the complexities involved in implementing a one-size-fits-all reform in different contexts and with different populations," said Dr. Clarke, the senior author of the study. "The findings also illustrate that increasing the stakes attached to the test results does not necessarily bring about improvement in teaching and learning, but can adversely affect the quality of classroom practice and have a negative impact on at-risk student populations."

The Boston College researchers offer several recommendations, including that:

- Decisions of consequence should not be made on the basis of a single test. Instead, states should be flexible in the options available to students for demonstrating achievement so that all have a chance to be successful. The researchers note that this recommendation is in keeping with guidelines provided by several national organizations, including the American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, and National Council on Measurement in Education.
- Test results should not be used to compare teachers and schools unless student demographics and school resources are equated and the latter are adequate to produce high student performance.

STATE SPECIFIC HIGHLIGHTS

KANSAS HIGHLIGHTS

OVERTESTING SEEN AS MAIN REASON FOR POOR PERFORMANCE ON THE KANSAS STATE ASSESSMENTS

- Two-thirds of Kansas interviewees felt that their state curriculum standards were having a neutral to positive impact on classroom practice.
- Compared to their peers in Michigan and Massachusetts, Kansas educators reported the fewest effects of the state test on classroom practice. The most frequently reported activity was the removal of content not covered by the test from the curriculum.

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- Elementary teachers were twice as likely as middle school teachers and three times as likely as high school teachers to say they removed content from the curriculum to prepare for the Kansas Assessments. They also were most likely to note that this had a negative impact on the quality of their instruction.
- The most frequently reported test-related effects on students were overtesting (one-third of interviewees), unfairness to special populations (one-fifth of interviewees), and stress (one-fifth of interviewees).
- Overtesting was viewed as the main reason for students' low motivation to do well on the state test. Another perceived problem with getting students to "buy into" the state test was the delay in getting back test results with one-fifth of the interviewees noting that the results came back too late to be useful.
- One-third of those interviewed felt that state test results were influenced by factors over which schools had limited or no control; half felt the test results did not represent student achievement in a subject area.

MICHIGAN HIGHLIGHTS

URBAN EDUCATORS LEAST LIKELY TO REPORT MEAP SCHOLARSHIPS MOTIVATE THEIR STUDENTS

- Compared to their peers in Kansas and Massachusetts, Michigan educators were the least enthusiastic about their state curriculum standards. Slightly more than half felt the Michigan standards were having a neutral to positive impact on classroom practice. The mathematics standards drew the most praise, the social studies standards the most criticism.
- Michigan interviewees reported more test-related effects on classroom practice than their peers in Kansas, but fewer than those in Massachusetts. The most frequently reported activity was the removal of content not covered by the MEAP (Michigan Educational Assessment Program) from the curriculum.
- Elementary teachers were twice as likely as middle and high school teachers to mention emphasizing topics covered by the MEAP. They also were the most likely to say that they used commercial test preparation materials and that their teaching strategies changed after the test. Elementary teachers were twice as likely as middle or high school teachers to report that preparing for the MEAP had negatively affected the quality, pace, and developmental appropriateness of their teaching.
- Reported test-related effects on students included stress (two-fifths of interviewees), overtesting (one-fifth), and unfairness to special populations (one-fifth).
- One-third of those interviewed felt that the state test results were influenced by factors over which schools had limited or no control; almost half felt they did not represent student achievement in a subject area.
- Less than one in ten educators in the large urban district felt that the scholarship money attached to the high school test motivated their students, while more than one-third of the educators in the suburban and rural districts felt that this money encouraged their students to try harder.

MASSACHUSETTS HIGHLIGHTS

MAIN IMPACT OF MCAS IS DEMORALIZATION RATHER THAN MOTIVATION OF STUDENTS

- Compared to their peers in Kansas and Michigan, Massachusetts educators were the most enthusiastic about their state curriculum standards. About three-quarters felt that the standards were having a neutral to positive impact on classroom practice.

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- Compared to their peers in the other two states, Massachusetts educators were the most likely to say that they taught to the state test rather than the state standards (over two-thirds versus one-third in Michigan and one-fifth in Kansas).
- Massachusetts interviewees reported more test-related effects on classroom practice than did those in Kansas or Michigan. The most frequently reported activity was the removal of content not covered by the MCAS (Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System) from the curriculum. About one-third felt that this had a negative impact on teaching and learning, particularly in terms of making it difficult to cater to students' individual strengths and interests.
- Elementary teachers were twice as likely as middle or high school teachers (fourth-fifths versus two-fifths at each of the other two levels) to mention that they removed topics from the curriculum in order to prepare for the MCAS. In addition, elementary educators were more likely to note that the MCAS reduced creativity in learning activities and that preparing for the test created a developmentally inappropriate pace.
- Reported MCAS-related effects on students included unfairness to special populations (two-thirds of interviewees) and stress (two-thirds). Two-fifths reported that the tests had negatively affected students' perception of education. One-fifth felt that the tests encouraged students to learn.
- The main theme at the high school level was demoralization rather than motivation of students, with over half of these interviewees noting that the MCAS graduation test has negatively affected students' perceptions of education, particularly those of special education students.
- More than half of all Massachusetts interviewees felt that the test results were influenced by non-educational factors and that they did not provide a complete picture of student achievement in a subject area. Most (four-fifths) felt that the MCAS should not be used as the sole criterion for graduation.

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 testing instruments and other forms of assessment in schools, the workplace, and the military and to recommend 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 Interviews with Educators in Low-, Medium-, and High-Stakes States," can be downloaded from the National Board website at <http://www.bc.edu/nbetpp> or obtained by contacting Dr. Marguerite Clarke, Assistant Research Professor, Boston College Lynch School of Education at 609-275-1394 or clarkemd@bc.edu.

As part of the overall project, a separate study was conducted involving a nationally-representative multi-state survey of classroom teachers, "Perceived Effects of State-Mandated Testing Programs on Teaching and Learning: Findings from a National Survey of Teachers." A copy of that executive summary or full report also can be downloaded from the National Board website at <http://www.bc.edu/nbetpp>. For more information contact Dr. Joseph Pedulla of the Boston College Lynch School of Education at 617-552-4521 or pedulla@bc.edu.]