
Yes, President Bush, Johnny's Test Scores May Be Up, But Can He Read?

By Harold Berlak

Center for Education Research, Analysis, and Innovation
School of Education
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
PO Box 413
Milwaukee WI 53201
414-229-2716

March 14, 2001

C E R A I O

Center for Education Research, Analysis, and Innovation

Is Now

EPSL | Education Policy Research Unit

CERAI-01-10

Yes, President Bush, Johnny's Test Scores May Be Up, But Can He Read?

By Harold Berlak

Many Americans are rightly worried that their children are not learning the basics needed to thrive in the competitive global economy. President Bush's solution is to raise standards by testing both Johnny and his teachers.

The argument for the policy is simple: Provide tangible rewards to those who succeed, in the form of more money and access to educational and job opportunities; and punish principals, teachers and students for their failures.

Does it work? In Texas the scores are up, and the new President assures us he will bring the Texas miracle to the entire nation.

A closer look at both the size and educational significance of the gains¹ in Texas, California, and elsewhere tells a different story. The gains average 5 percentile points. On a fifty-item standardized reading test, this is a gain of 2.5 multiple-choice test questions – paltry considering the many billions spent in direct and indirect costs, and the enormous commitment of school time, energy and resources devoted to coaching students on tests.²

It is also important to recall what standardized reading tests actually measure: the ability to scan quickly the texts of a set of unconnected paragraphs and, for each passage, to pick the correct answers to questions from a set of four or five alternatives. As useful as this skill may sometimes be, it has little to do with reading as you or I know it, whether we do it for a practical purpose, for pleasure, or for inspiration.

The questions surrounding the validity of these tests are no secret. The Office of Civil Rights in 2000 issued guidelines asserting that the use of test scores as the single factor to determine retention, graduation, and college admission is improper, and possibly a Civil Rights violation.³ The 1999 standards of the leading professional research associations assert that an educational test, to be valid, must contribute to student learning, and that test validity cannot be established without consideration of a test's negative consequences.⁴

Numerous studies confirm that heavy reliance on standardized tests degrades the curriculum and marginalizes whatever does not contribute directly to short-term gains in test scores, including critical thinking, multicultural studies, citizenship education, the arts, physical education, and bilingual education. And high-stakes testing increases illiteracy by pushing more and more students out of school.⁵

Among the most disturbing consequence of state-mandated tests is that the students who are first in line for a culturally truncated curriculum and are most likely to drop out of high school are the poor, immigrants, and people of color.

If President Bush is to become the unifier as he promises, he must forthrightly address these concerns.

First, we must invest in the education of teachers and greatly improve their salaries and working conditions. This is essential if we are to increase the chances that every child is taught by teachers who know the subjects they teach, how to teach, and how to relate effectively to children, parents, and the community. Without competent and committed teachers who are paid decent wages, no test, however well designed, no educational leader, however capable and inspirational, will improve the quality of teaching and learning in the schools.

Second, the extreme inequalities in resources in the nation's schools must not be tolerated. This nation has the wealth and resources to provide every child with access to qualified teachers, a well-stocked library, up-to-date textbooks and teaching materials, and safe, clean, and inviting schools.

Finally, our political leaders and school officials must address the institutional racism that is pervasive in schooling policy and practices, which includes the reliance on standardized tests for making judgments about school quality as well as about the achievement or potential of individual students.

Bush's call for more high stakes tests tied to punitive consequences will harm all children, most of all children of the poor and of color. Eliminating high stakes testing will not, of course, solve the problem of providing all children with the skills and knowledge they will need to confront the challenges of the 21st Century. But it would be an important step toward helping Johnny – and Juanita, Jamal, and Jane – to read and think clearly, rather than merely helping them take tests.

Harold Berlak is Senior Research Fellow at the Applied Research Center in Oakland, California, and a Fellow in the Educational Policy Project at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee. He lives in Oakland.

1. At best the gains are mixed. California reports 4-5 percentile points on the Stanford 9. Texas reports as much as 11 percentile points gain on its own test (TAAS). A recent Rand report, *Improving Student Achievement: What State NAEP Scores Tell us?* (available at <http://www.rand.org>) shows gains of three percentile points or less. On the other hand, the Nation's Report Card compiled by National Center for Educational Study indicates a small but steady decline in NAEP reading scores of high school students. (available at <http://www.nces.ed.gov>)

2. Seven years ago, Boston College Researchers Walter Haney, George Madaus, and Robert Lyons estimated in direct costs at 20 billion annually (*The Fractured Marketplace for Standardized Testing*, Boston: Kluwer, 1993). According to the Bowker Annual, direct expenditures on tests doubled annually between 1980 and 1997 to 200 million dollars. These are low estimates, given the proliferation of tests over the last five years.

3. See proposed *U.S. Department of Education Civil Rights Guidelines* on the use of standardized test scores for high school graduation and college admissions, Washington D.C.: Office of Civil Rights, 1999.

4. 1999 *Standards, for Educational and Psychological Tests* produced jointly by the American Educational Research Association (AERA), American Psychological Association (APA) and National Council on Measurement in Education (NCME)

5. *MCAS: Making the Massachusetts Dropout Crisis Worse*. MCAS Alert Fair Test / CARE (Coalition for Authentic Reform in Education) September 2000.

Also see:

Linn, Robert, "Assessments and Accountability," *Educational Researcher* 29:2 2000.

McNeil, Linda, *Contradictions of School Reform: Educational Costs of Standardized Testing*. New York: Routledge, 2000.