

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

An Analysis of Some Unintended and Negative Consequences of High-Stakes Testing

by

Audrey L. Amrein

and

David C. Berliner

Arizona State University

Education Policy Research Unit (EPRU)

Education Policy Studies Laboratory

College of Education

Division of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies

Box 872411

Arizona State University

Tempe, AZ 85287-2411

December 2002

EPSL | **EDUCATION POLICY STUDIES LABORATORY**
Education Policy Research Unit

EPSL-0211-125-EPRU

<http://edpolicylab.org>

An Analysis of Some Unintended and Negative Consequences of High-Stakes Testing

Audrey L. Amrein and David C. Berliner

Arizona State University

Executive Summary

In this study of 16 states that have implemented high-stakes high school graduation exams, we look at a number of possible negative effects associated with high-stakes testing policies. We examine whether there has been an increase in the student dropout rate from high school; a decrease in the high school graduation rate; or an increase in the rate of student enrollment in General Education Diploma (GED) programs as students pursue alternative, and often easier, high school diplomas.

Quantitative state-by-state analyses of these three questions (see appendix) lead us to conclude that, indeed, state adoption of high-stakes testing policies leads to increased drop-out rates, decreased graduation rates, and higher rates of younger individuals taking the GED equivalency exams.

In addition to these quantitative analyses, news reports and qualitative studies were used to inquire whether sufficient evidence existed to support other claims about negative and unintended consequences of high-stakes testing policies. We found support for believing that high-stakes testing policies are associated with:

- Higher numbers of low performing students being retained in grade before pivotal testing years, apparently to ensure that students are properly prepared to take high-stakes tests.
- Higher numbers of low performing students being suspended before testing days, expelled from school before tests, or being reclassified as exempt from testing because they are determined to be either Special Education or Limited English Proficient (LEP)—all strategies to prevent low-scoring students from taking high-stakes tests;
- Higher numbers of students from whom equal opportunities to learn subjects such as art, music, science, social studies, and physical education are being withheld. Because these subjects are not often tested, teachers and administrators tend to focus less on these subjects as high-stakes testing dates approach.
- Higher numbers of urban school teachers, in particular, “teaching to the test,” limiting instruction to only those things that are sure to be tested, requiring students to spend hours memorizing facts, and drilling students on test taking strategies;
- Higher numbers of teachers who leave their public school positions to teach in private schools, free of state testing mandates because state rules make them feel compromised as professionals;
- Instances of cheating by teachers and other school personnel in response to the pressures of high-stakes testing.

Substantial evidence exists that high-stakes tests do create the negative, unintended consequences about which critics worry and that make high-stakes high school graduation exams objectionable. It is quite possible that the adverse consequences of high-stakes tests outweigh the benefits that advocates claim they have since even the intended benefits, for example increased academic achievement, of these tests are hard to corroborate.