



Texas Tests Harbor a "Soft Bigotry" of Their Own

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During the televised presidential debates, George W. Bush decried "the soft bigotry of low expectations" that public schools have historically held for poor and minority students. He touted Texas' high-stakes testing regimen for improving opportunities for minorities. Bush and the state board of education claim the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS), a series of tests administered in 3rd through 10th grades, will hold schools to high expectations for all children.

The real experiences of many poor, minority youth suggest otherwise. Instead of living up to his promise to leave no child behind, the Texas education reforms that Bush inherited and expanded upon are placing unnecessary obstacles in the paths of otherwise promising students.

Margarita is one such student, recently interviewed by University of Texas professor Angela Valenzuela while conducting research on the Texas education "miracle." Margarita's family came to the U.S. three years ago to pursue the American Dream. Immigrants from Mexico, her parents looked forward the day that their two oldest children would graduate from high school and enter college -- a first for their family. Her parents moved to the United States "para que los hijos se superaran" -- "so that the children might get ahead". Margarita embraced her family's aspirations that all of their children would go to college.

According to her teachers, Margarita was an excellent student who had met all of her credits for graduation. Though very capable, she struggles with her second language, English, in high-pressure situations. Rather than testing her true abilities, the tenth-grade TAAS, a requirement for graduation, was really testing her literacy in the English language.

One sign of her commitment to making it to college was her willingness to endure the humiliation and stress that came with taking the three-day TAAS test six times. On her final attempt, she was only 4 points shy of a passing score.¹

Margarita and her family are not the only ones to see their hopes dashed by the state's testing system. Boston College professor Walter Haney recently found that since TAAS was implemented, only 40% of minority students have progressed from ninth grade to graduation.² Among the state's Latino students, those who like Margarita have limited English skills are even more adversely affected.

Although Texas does not collect data on the dropout rates of students with limited English skills, TAAS scores illuminate their predicament. According to Texas Education Agency statistics, such students' test scores were among the lowest in the state and were in fact virtually identical to those of the state's special education students.³ Students with limited English skills also experienced the least amount of improvement in TAAS passing rates annually statewide.⁴ Based on this evidence, it's clear that the TAAS tests leave many students behind.

If the TAAS system remains in place, the problem it causes for many minority students will only grow. According to the Texas Bureau of Vital Statistics, in 1998 more babies were born to Hispanic mothers than to any other ethnic group in the state of Texas -- children who will be entering our school system in five or six years.⁵ The steadily increasing rate of births to Hispanic mothers represents a huge demographic bubble that will soon pop against the barriers that these tests constitute.

TAAS's one-size-fits-all approach ultimately makes students, rather than schools, bear the brunt of "accountability." The state's interest is hardly served by an accountability system that shuts the door on talented and college-aspiring children. A complete overhaul of Texas' assessment program is in order. In the meantime, a consideration of additional criteria for graduation that could override an unsatisfactory TAAS score, including teacher recommendations, a student portfolio, or classroom grades, is the least that the state can do.

The accountability system that Governor Bush heralded on the campaign trail is not only indifferent to the needs and goals of immigrant and minority youth in Texas, but is personally devastating for children like Margarita. If a Texas-style "accountability" plan is implemented on a national scale, a larger tragedy of lost opportunity promises to unfold.

¹ Valenzuela, Angela. Unpublished field research, 1999.

² Haney, Walt. "The Myth of the Texas Miracle in Education." *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, Vol. 8, No. 41, August 19, 2000. Available at: <http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v8n41/>

³ *Comprehensive biennial report on Texas public schools: A report to the 76th Texas legislature*. Austin: Texas Education Agency, 1998.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Texas Vital Statistics -- 1998 Annual Report*. Austin: Texas Department of Health, 1999. Available online at: <http://www.tdh.state.tx.us/bvs/stats98/text/98natal.htm>