

Creating New Inequalities

Contradictions of Reform

High-stakes state-mandated standardization is rapidly spreading throughout the U.S. Ms. McNeil examines the widely emulated accountability system in Texas and concludes that it has adverse effects on teaching and learning, stifles democratic discourse, and perpetuates inequities for minority students.

BY LINDA M. McNEIL

THE ENDURING legacy of Ross Perot's school reforms in Texas is not merely the strengthening of bureaucratic controls at the expense of teaching and learning. It is also the legitimating of a language of accountability as the governing principle in public schools. Incipient in the Perot reforms was the shifting of control over public schooling away from "the public" and away from the profession — and toward business-controlled management accountability systems. These systems use children's scores on standardized tests to measure the quality of the performance of teachers and principals, and they even use a school's aggregate student scores as data for the comparative "ratings" of schools.

There have been several iterations of state testing and test-driven curricula implemented since the reforms first begun under the Perot legislation in Texas in the mid-1980s. The current Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) is rarely referred to by its full name. It is known by its advocates in the state government and among the state's business leaders as "the Texas Accountability System," the reform that has "shaped up" schools. It is touted as the system that holds "teachers and principals accountable." In many schools, tenure for principals has been replaced by "performance contracts," with "performance" measured by a single indicator — the aggregation of student TAAS scores in the school. Publicity about the "Texas Accountability System," centered on rising test scores, has generated copycat legislation in a number of states, where standardized testing of students is increasingly being used as the central mechanism for decisions about student learning, teacher and administrator practice, and even whole-school quality.¹

Teachers know well that most reforms have a short life and that "this too shall pass." The specific rules and prescriptions enacted under the Perot reforms did, in-

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deed, pass. But the institutionalizing of a shift in the locus of control over curriculum, teaching, and assessment, which began with the legislated reforms of the 1980s, has more than persisted.

As a result, a very narrow set of numerical indicators (student scores on statewide tests) has become the *only* language of currency in education policy in the state. Principals report that there can be little discussion of children's development, of cultural relevance, of children's contributions to classroom knowledge and interactions, or of those engaging sidebar experiences at the margins of the official curriculum where children often do their best learning. According to urban principals, many have supervisors who tell them quite pointedly, "Don't talk to me about anything else until the TAAS scores start to go up."

Teachers also report that the margins — those spaces where even in highly prescriptive school settings they have always been able to "really teach" — are shrinking as the accountability system becomes increasingly stringent, with teacher and principal pay tied to student scores. Under the Perot reforms, teachers were still sometimes able to juggle the official, prescribed, and tested curriculum with what they wanted their students to learn.² Even if they had to teach two contradictory lessons in order to ensure that students encountered the "real" information (as well as the test-based facts), many teachers managed to do so in order that their students did not lose out on a chance for a real education. Under TAAS, there are fewer and fewer opportunities for authentic teaching.

A continued legacy, then, of the Perot reforms is that the testing of students increasingly drives curriculum and compromises both teaching and the role of students in learning. This prescriptive teaching creates a new form of discrimination as teaching to the fragmented and narrow information on the test comes to substitute for a substantive curriculum in the schools of poor and minority youths. Disaggregating school-level scores by children's race appears to be an attempt to promote equity, but the high stakes attached to the scores have made many schools replace the reg-

ular curriculum in minority students' classrooms with test-prep materials that have virtually no value beyond practicing for the tests. The scores go up in these classrooms, but academic quality goes down. The result is a growing inequality between the content and quality of education provided to white, middle-class children and that provided to those in poor and minority schools.

Mandating a Noncurriculum

In minority schools, in the urban school district where I conducted case studies, and in many schools across Texas, substantial class time is spent practicing bubbling in answers and learning to recognize "distractor" (obviously wrong) answers. Students are drilled on such strategies as the pep rally cheer "Three in a row? No, No, No!" (If you have answered "b" three times in a row, you know that at least one of those answers is likely to be wrong, because the maker of a test would not be likely to construct three questions in a row with the same answer indicator.) The basis for such advice comes from the publishers of test-prep materials, many of whom send consultants into schools — for a substantial price — to help plan pep rallies and to "train" teachers to use the TAAS-prep kits.

Under the Perot-era system of test-driven curricula, the observed teachers retained some discretion over how to "teach" to the test-based curriculum. They could teach the numbered curricular content items (as the district directed them to do). They could ignore the official, numbered curriculum and hope that their students would do well on the tests by virtue of having learned from the lessons the teacher had developed. Or they could try to juggle the two — an important option when they saw that the test-based curriculum format so trivialized and fragmented course content that the "knowledge" represented was too far removed from the curriculum the teachers wanted their students to learn. The testing, by having students select among provided responses, negated the teachers' desires that their students construct meaning, that they come to understandings, or that they connect course content with their prior

knowledge.

Teachers, even those who know their subjects and their students well, have much less latitude when their principals purchase TAAS-prep materials to be used in lieu of the regular curriculum. The decision to use such materials forces teachers to set aside their own best knowledge of their subject in order to drill their students on information whose primary (often sole) usefulness is its likely inclusion on the test. A particular example reveals not only how test prep diminishes the role of the teacher, but also how it distances course content from the cultures of the students.

One teacher, a graduate of an Ivy League university with a master's degree from a second selective college, had spent considerable time and personal money assembling a rich collection of historical and literary works of importance in Latino culture. Her building of this classroom resource collection for her high school students was extremely important given the school's lack of a library. Her students responded to her initiative with a real enthusiasm to study and learn. Upon returning from lunch one day, she was dismayed to see that the books for her week's lessons had been set aside. In the center of her desk was a stack of test-prep booklets with a note saying, "Use these instead of your regular curriculum until after the TAAS." The TAAS test date was three months away. (The prep materials were covered with military camouflage designs, calling for "war against the TAAS." The company's consultants came to the school in camouflage gear to do a TAAS pep rally for the students and faculty.)

This teacher reported that her principal, a person dedicated to these students and to their need to pass the TAAS in order to graduate, had used almost the entire year's instructional budget to purchase these expensive materials. The cost was merely one problem. Inside the practice booklets for the "reading" test were single-page activities, with brief nonsense paragraphs, followed by TAAS-type multiple-choice questions. This teacher's students, who had been analyzing the poetry of Gary Soto and exploring the initiation theme in

Bless Me, Ultima, had to set aside this intellectual work to spend more than half of every class period working through the TAAS-prep booklet. This is not an isolated horror story. It is a case all too representative of the displacement of curriculum in the name of raising building-level test scores in minority schools.

The imposition throughout the entire school of TAAS-prep as a substitute curriculum recast the role of teachers, making them into people who need outside consultants to tell them ways to raise test scores (and to "pep them up"). That these commercial materials were imposed precluded resistance on the teachers' part. It also made it difficult for teachers to make accommodations at the margins, to try to hold onto the more substantive curriculum and cultural connections essential to real learning.

When their students' learning is represented by the narrow indicators of a test like the TAAS, teachers lose the capacity to bring into the discussion of the school program their knowledge of what children are learning. Test scores generated by centralized testing systems like the TAAS — and by test-prep materials aimed at producing better scores — are not reliable indicators of learning. It is here where the effects on low-performing students, particularly minority students, begin to skew the possibilities for their access to a richer education.

At the school whose principal had purchased the high-priced test-prep materials and at other Latino schools where TAAS-prep is replacing the curriculum, teachers report that, even though many more students are passing TAAS "reading" tests, few of their students are actual readers. Few of them can use reading for assignments in other classes; few choose to read or to share books with their friends. In schools where TAAS reading scores are going up, by whatever means, there is little or no will to address this gap. First, so much publicity surrounds the rising scores — and the principals' job security and superintendents' bonuses are contingent on that rise — that the problem of nonreaders is swept under the rug. Second, with the problem hidden, there can be no leverage to add the necessary resources, change the teaching, or invite discussions about the sources of the problem. In fact, the opposite occurs: the rise in scores is used to justify even more TAAS-prep, even more pep rallies, even

more substituting of test-based programs for a serious curriculum.

Advocates of TAAS sometimes argue that being able to pass the reading skills section of TAAS is better than not being able to read at all. However, teachers are reporting that the kind of test prep frequently done to raise test scores may actually hamper students' ability to learn to read for meaning. In fact, high school students report that in the test-prep drills and on the TAAS reading section, they frequently mark answers without reading the sample of text: they merely match key words in the answer choice with key words in the text. And elementary teachers note that so many months of "reading" the practice samples and answering multiple-choice questions on them undermines their students' ability to read sustained passages of several pages. The reading samples are material the students are *meant to forget* the minute they mark their answers; at all grade levels this read-and-forget activity is using up the school year with a noncurriculum.

That this is happening chiefly in African American and Latino schools means that the gap between what these children learn and what the children in non-test-prep — usually middle-class and white — schools learn is widening even more dramatically. The subjects not yet tested (science, arts, social studies) are also affected as teachers in historically low-performing schools (minority, poor) are increasingly required to stop teaching those subjects in order to use class time to drill for TAAS math or reading — not to teach reading, but to drill for reading or grammar sections of the TAAS. As Angela Valenzuela has noted, under this system there is a growing, cumulative deficit separating minority students from the education being provided their more privileged peers.³

What is happening to and with students under the test-prep system — and what is happening to their access to curriculum content — is completely absent from consideration under an accounting system that uses only one set of indicators on which to base administrative, economic, and instructional decisions in schools.

Equally serious in its consequences is the legacy of institutionalizing the externalized authority over schools. During the years of desegregation, there were public discussions of the purposes of education, the role of the school in the community, and the issue of who should be educated

and who should govern access to and provision for education. There were even debates over what constituted a public language with which to discuss public education — the languages of equity, of academic quality, and of community values all intersected and mutually informed the highly contested decisions regarding means to break the power of segregation. When education is governed by an "accountability system," these public languages are displaced by an expert technical language. When educational practice and policy are subsumed under a narrow set of indicators, then the only vocabulary for discussing those practices and policies and their effects on various groups of students is the vocabulary of the indicators — in this case, scores on a single set of tests.

Behind the test scores and the technical policy debates, however, is the growing reality that the Texas system of educational accountability is harming children, teaching, and the content of public schooling. Even more significant for the long run, this system of testing is re-stratifying education by race and class.

The New Discrimination

The educational losses that a centralized, standardized system of testing creates for minority students are many. What such youngsters are taught, how they are taught, how their learning is assessed and represented in school records, what is omitted from their education — all these factors are hidden in the system of testing and in the accounting system that reports its results. The narrowing of the curriculum in test-prep schools is creating a new kind of discrimination — one based not on a blatant stratification of access to knowledge through tracking, but one that uses the appearance of sameness to mask persistent inequalities.

This masking shows up first in the words of well-meaning people who re-stratify expectations by a focus on "basics." The myth that standardization produces sameness — and therefore equity — is based on the notion that standardization "brings up the bottom." The idea is that everyone should get the fundamentals. First, students have to "get the basics" before they can get to the "creative" or "interesting" part of the curriculum. According to this myth, any good teacher or good school will "go beyond the basics" to provide a creative, in-

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teresting education.

There is increasing evidence that this focus on "basics" is being applied to minority children, who are viewed as "other people's children."⁴ If "those children" are somehow different from "our children" (who are getting the regular curriculum), then they should be grateful for an education that provides them for the first time with the basics. But evidence from classrooms points out several flaws in the constructing of curriculum around the needs of "those students" for the basics.

First, students learn the "basics" when they undertake purposeful instructional activities, when they have models of thinking to emulate, and when they can see how new skills can be applied at the next level. The teachers in the schools in which I conducted case studies (heirs to Dewey and others) engaged students' minds so that they could learn both the "basics" and the ideas and knowledge that cannot be sequenced in a linear fashion because they are part of an organic whole. Yet officials' pride in the TAAS system stems largely from the notion that, "for the first time, those students are getting the same education that *our* students have been getting." The sameness is false, because the resources provided to the schools of minority children and to the academic tracks in which they are frequently placed are dramatically inferior to those provided to the schools and tracks of white, middle-class children. The apparent "sameness" of the test masks these persistent disparities in the conditions of learning that the children face.

That the political climate is becoming more accepting of this patronizing characterization of minority children was made graphically clear at an event in which Latino students would be demonstrating their learning. A white corporate executive had sponsored the implementation of several packaged curricula in Latino schools in a poor neighborhood. Each of the programs was expensive, including classroom materials, consultants to train the teachers to use the materials, tests to evaluate the students' mastery of the content, and so on. The curricular programs, in math and reading, were aimed at the "basics."

The Latino children, dressed in their Sunday best, filed in by grade level to demonstrate their skills in basic math operations. The children's parents and teachers were seated in the large hall. Between the performances by groups of children, the corporate executive would talk about the program. After one group of children had exhibited their skills in adding, he looked over the heads of the Latino parents to the white corporate and community leaders standing around the room and said, "Isn't this great? Now, this may not be the math you would want for *your* children, but for *these* children — isn't this just great?" His remarks were met with smiles and nods.

The pervasiveness of TAAS-prep as a substitute for the curriculum in poor and minority schools is legitimated by the tacit (and mistaken) understanding that for such children repetitive practice in test-drill workbooks may be better than what they had before and is useful in raising their test scores.

Data are beginning to emerge that document the exact opposite. In a compelling study to be released this year, Walter Haney has analyzed graduation rates of cohorts of high school students from 1978 to the present. Using official data from the Texas Education Agency, Haney tracked ninth-grade cohorts to graduation. In 1978, more than 60% of black students and almost 60% of Latinos graduated — 15% below the average graduation rate for whites. By 1990, after four years of the Perot-era standardization reforms, graduation rates for blacks, Latinos, and whites had all dropped. By 1990, according to Haney, *fewer than 50% of all black and Latino* ninth-graders made it to graduation. (The graduation rate for whites was more than 70%.) The gap between minorities and whites was widening. By 1999, Haney's data show that the white graduation rate had regained its 1978 level (around 75%). The graduation rate for Latinos and blacks, however, remained below 50%.⁵

Standardization may, through intensive test-practice drills, "raise scores." But standardization has not enhanced children's learning. To those who would say that the graduation rate is dropping because the

TAAS is "raising the bar," one must answer that to increase cut-off scores and make no investment in equalizing educational resources is no reform. It is a creative new form of discrimination.

Masking Inequities

The TAAS system of testing restratifies access to knowledge in schools. It further harms the education of poor and minority youths by masking historical and persistent inequities. When the precursor to TAAS was implemented in the 1980s, two rationales were given. First, it would provide an "objective measurement" of the curriculum. Second, according to a central office administrator, it would ensure that "Algebra I at [a poor, minority high school] is the same as Algebra I at [a suburban, middle- to upper-middle-class, mostly white high school]." The imposition of the test-based curriculum, however, carried with it no new resources for the historically under-resourced schools. Sameness, without massive investments at the under-resourced schools, is achieved by "leveling down" from the top, if at all. It is a poor proxy for equity.

The TAAS system of test-driven accountability masks the inequities that have for decades built unequal structures of schooling in Texas. The investments in expensive systems of testing, test design, test contracts and subcontracts, training of teachers and administrators to implement the tests, test security, realignment of curricula with tests, and the production of test-prep materials serve a political function in centralizing control over education and linking public education to private commerce.⁶ But these expenditures do nothing to reverse the serious inequities that have widened over time across the state. In fact, investments in the "accountability system" are cynically seen to obviate the need for new investments in the schools. Even more cynical is the inverting of investments related to accountability *not* to equalize resources but to reward those whose scores go up: the investment comes as a reward for compliance, not as a means to ensure educational improvement.

Meanwhile, scarce resources at the school and district levels are being invested in those materials and activities that will raise scores, not in curricula of lasting intellectual or practical value to students. Experience over the past five years — the period in which principals have traded tenure for TAAS-based performance contracts — shows that it is the historically under-resourced schools, those serving the greatest numbers of poor and minority students, that have shifted their already scarce resources into the purchase of test-prep materials.

Jean Anyon writes compellingly in *Ghetto Schooling* about the pauperization of central city Newark — the dwindling of neighborhood resources in all areas of funding and public goods — as whites left those parts of the city.⁷ The poverty of the people and the institutions that remained was a result of this pauperization by alliances of more powerful political and economic interests. In much the same way, the stratifying of academic resources in the name of compliance with an accountability system is pauperizing many urban schools, which only serves to compound their academic insufficiencies, since they are already academically weak and there is little public will to address their lack of resources.

Accountable to Whom?

Accountability implies responsibility to a higher authority: being held to account for or being obligated to account to. Within the urban district I have studied and in the state of Texas, during the Perot reforms and at present, accountability has been invoked to locate the problems of schooling at the level of the lowest employees, the teachers. The use of the word itself distracts from the historical inequities in funding, staff allocation, investment in materials, and social support from the broader community. By implying a hierarchy and a culpability at the bottom of the system, such calls for accountability empower those who use the term. The presumption is that those who are calling for accountability feel that they are in control and that others (located beneath them) must answer to them. A common feint is to claim that “the public demands accountability” — though, when the public has tried to demand accountability in education, it has traditionally tried to make the top of the education structure responsive to its par-

ticular school and community.

The current accountability system bases assessment of schools and school personnel on children’s test scores. A system of education that reduces student learning to scores on a single state test — and uses those scores for such high-stakes decisions as grade promotion and high school graduation — rules out the possibility of discussing student learning in terms of cognitive and intellectual development, in terms of growth, in terms of social awareness and social conscience, in terms of social and emotional development. It is as if the “whole child” has become a stick figure. Upper-level administrators who tell principals not to speak about their students or their programs except in terms of TAAS scores are participating in the de-legitimizing of students as young human beings.

Furthermore, the reduction of students to test scores has two contradictory but equally depersonalizing effects. First, the individual scores ignore the social and collaborative aspects of learning. Second, in the reporting of scores, children are subsumed into depersonalized, often meaningless, aggregates. A 75% passing rate at a school this year may appear to be an improvement over a 66% passing rate at the same school last year, but in an urban setting there is no assurance that even half of the children are the same in two successive years.

The accountability system likewise depersonalizes teachers, flattening any representation of their particular practice into the aggregate pass rates for their schools. The role of principal has been severely limited; principals now have greater authority

Has Any Good Come out of TAAS?

PROFESSOR Larry Cuban of Stanford University provided a response to the initial presentations of these findings in the symposium on the Moral and Historical Implications for Prescriptive Teaching at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association in San Diego in 1998. Cuban inquired whether this research fit the category of “the study of unintended negative consequences” of a policy. If so, he stated that that research tradition first required an examination of the intended *positive* consequences of the policy. Although I did not construe this study to be in the tradition he described, his question prompted me to reexamine the question of whether there had been positive consequences of TAAS that were not visible to me. To pursue this question, I raised the issue with dozens of teachers and a number of administrators during the year following the San Diego meetings.

Administrators, if they felt they were being “interviewed,” answered with test score results (positive or negative). In more informal conversation, they discussed the pressures on them to produce test scores. Teachers tended to consider the question naïve, uninformed, or “unfriendly.” Their answers led me to an ever greater understanding of many of the negative effects on reading and writing that I’ve alluded to here.

The two most positive responses not provided by central administrators or state officials regarding the effects of TAAS on teaching and learning are these. The first example comes from a largely Latino community in South Texas that saw its children’s low TAAS scores as evidence that the state had neglected the school system by claiming it to be “satisfactory.” This community successfully lobbied the state for additional funds. The second example comes from a middle school teacher. She said, “Yes, there has been a positive effect at our school from the TAAS. There were some ESL [English as a second language] students who are now being taught math. They were getting almost no math instruction before.” She paused and added, “But it’s not real math. It’s just TAAS math. It’s not the math you’d want for your kids.”

I am grateful to Larry Cuban for raising the question of positive effects. My school-level investigations have shown isolated, individual positive effects, but overwhelmingly generalized and widespread negative effects. — LMM

to allocate resources for activities aimed at raising test scores but less discretionary power to undertake other kinds of work in their schools or to have that work recognized.

The use of a language of accountability also takes the discussion of public schooling away from the normal language of families and communities. Parents feel that they have to master a jargon to understand how their children are doing; teachers feel mystified by the mathematical formulas that can turn known weak schools into "exemplary" ones. Parents report feeling confused by their children's TAAS report sheets.

Finally, "accountability" is a closed system that allows no critique. The only questions about the system that generate a response are those having to do with technical aspects: At what point should children whose first language is not English have to take the reading portion of TAAS in English? Are the test questions valid? Are they culturally biased? Is the cut-off score for graduation set too high or too low? Questions about technical tinkering are tolerated. And to all such questions, there is one basic answer: more controls. If there is lax security, the test materials must be more tightly controlled. If scores are going up, then test prep must be working. If scores are slipping, then more test prep must be needed. There is no acknowledgment among district or state officials that the real problem is not cheating by altering answer sheets. Instead, the real problem inherent in such an accountability system is that it severely undermines teaching and learning, while masking problems within the school.

The educational costs of standardization, then, include not only the direct impact on teaching and learning, but also the high costs of compliance when compliance silences professional expertise and marginalizes parental and public discourse.

If the language of accountability comes to dominate public school policy, it will eliminate the means by which the public — parents and teachers and other citizens of a community — can challenge the system of accountability. We have already seen the harmful effects of such a system on curriculum and teaching. We have seen its tendencies to create new forms of discrimination as its control mechanisms reward those administrators who shift resources into the means of compliance rather than toward improving the quality of education — a pervasive pattern in minority schools

with a history of low scores on standardized tests.

More than two decades ago in *Legislated Learning*, Arthur Wise warned that attempts to legislate learning and to legislate teaching frequently have "perverse effects."⁸ He was speaking of the kinds of effects that have been documented in the poor and minority schools described here in their responses to the TAAS. And the effects within schools and school systems may not be nearly so "perverse" as the effects within our system of democracy, because these attempts to legislate and control learning reduce the public's possibilities for retaining democratic governance of schools once the controls are in place. One reason for this — mentioned above — is that an accountability-based control system, because it is a closed system, structures out possibilities for external criticism.

Throughout the history of public schooling in America, maintaining our democracy has been cited as the fundamental justification for public support of schools. Education is essential for effective citizenship, for playing an active role in the economic, cultural, and political life of the nation. Democracy has been both the real reason for extending an education to all children and — at times — the cover story that masked our failure to provide such an education equitably. Even when the education we provided was inequitable, it carried such democratic slogans as "separate but equal." Given our democratic heritage, the ways in which the language of accountability is displacing democratic discourse need to be carefully examined.

The current accountability system has been implemented slowly and in stages. First came state tests that held almost no consequence for students; then came state tests that held moderate consequences for students (scores were recorded in their records but not used for high-stakes decisions). Now the system uses students' scores for the evaluation of teachers, principals, schools, and even districts. Students who have been in school only during the past 10 years (the life span of the TAAS) know nothing different. Teachers who have taught for fewer than 10 years and who have not come in from another state assume outcomes testing to be a sad but "inevitable" feature of schooling. The incremental normalizing of an accountability system and the casual use of its language in conversations about education can silence criticism

and stifle the potential to pose counter models and to envision alternative possibilities. That is the insidious power of the language of accountability: to sound just enough like common sense not to be recognized as a language meant to reinforce unequal power relations.

It is only by understanding the differential effects of accountability systems on varied groups of students, on teachers, on parents, and on communities that we can know whether they serve our children and our goals for public education well. And it is only by going inside schools and inside classrooms that we can begin to build that understanding at a deeply informed level.

These highly rationalized and technical systems of schooling are being touted as very beneficial for their states and districts — after all, test scores are rising. When we examine such systems more closely, however, we may find that these benefits prove to be short-lived and as artificial and inflated as the test scores produced by months of test preparation. And we may also find that the costs of these systems are being borne by the weakest participants in our education systems — the children. The slogans of "reform" can be truly seductive. As researchers and as citizens we need to look behind those slogans and see what effects our fancy systems are having on the children.

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7. Jean Anyon, *Ghetto Schooling: A Political Economy of Urban Educational Reform* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997).
8. Arthur Wise, *Legislated Learning: The Bureaucratization of the American Classroom* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979). **■**