

4-2015

## Consequences of High-Stake Testing

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High-stakes testing affects students and educators all over the United States. Though high-stakes testing is not new to education, in 2001, it became national policy as a result of the No Child Left Behind Act. The goal of this act was to better the education system in the United States. The paper examines the many positive and negative consequences of high-stakes testing. Opinions greatly differ about high-stakes testing. In order to present the positive and negative consequences, the author has attempted to synthesize findings from 13 research articles. The purpose of this study is to present a systematic review of the available evidence-based literature concerning the research question. The research question investigated is: Is high-stakes testing helping to improve the education system in the United States? Additionally, the author attempts a better understanding by reviewing experiences by current educators in the field.

**Document Type**

Thesis

**Degree Name**

MS in Special Education

**Department**

Education

**First Supervisor**

Susan Schultz

**Subject Categories**

Education

Consequences of High-Stakes Testing

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree  
M.S. Special Education

Supervised by

Dr. Susan M. Schultz

School of Education  
St. John Fisher College

April 2015

## Abstract

High-stakes testing affects students and educators all over the United States. Though high-stakes testing is not new to education, in 2001, it became national policy as a result of the No Child Left Behind Act. The goal of this act was to better the education system in the United States. The paper examines the many positive and negative consequences of high-stakes testing. Opinions greatly differ about high-stakes testing. In order to present the positive and negative consequences, the author has attempted to synthesize findings from 13 research articles. The purpose of this study is to present a systematic review of the available evidence-based literature concerning the research question. The research question investigated is: Is high-stakes testing helping to improve the education system in the United States? Additionally, the author attempts a better understanding by reviewing experiences by current educators in the field.

### **Consequences of High-Stakes Testing**

In 2002, President George W. Bush signed the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act into law. Like many legislative decisions passed before this, the goal of this act was to improve the education system in the United States. It's focus was to "close the gap" by providing all children the opportunity to obtain a high-quality education. Due to this law, educators are required to test students in grades 3-8, and again in high school. These tests, also known as high-stakes tests, are nothing new to education, but are being questioned by many people across the country. There seem to be negative and positive consequences to this type of assessment, which children are experiencing all over the United States.

High-stakes testing was selected as an assessment tool as a way to look at student outcomes, as well as measure school improvement, and then used to determine schools' progress in achieving. According to Ysseldyke et al. (2001), "state systems are considered high stakes when consequences to individual students (e.g., grade retention/promotion or withholding diplomas) are evident" (p. 76). Many students from state to state are being held back, or not graduating because they are unable to meet state standards on one test. Since there are such high stakes, teachers are finding that they themselves "teach to the test." Meek argues (2006), "in recent years No Child Left Behind (NCLB) has focused the educational lens on testing children rather than on teaching them" (p. 293). This is a worry, and leaves many people wondering if the gap is actually closing.

Berliner (2011) states, "the NCLB act was supposed to reduce the achievement gap between poor and wealthy students, but data supporting that claim is in dispute" (p. 287). He goes on to say, "if the gap is actually closing, it is only by the smallest of

amounts” (p. 288). Statistics show that even after five years of high-stakes testing, many US schools were still failing to meet their targeted goals (Berliner, 2006). It was also estimated by the US Secretary of Education that more than 80% of all us public schools would fail to reach their targets for the next school year (Berliner, 2006). Again, if the point of NCLB was to close the gap, and statistics show that even after 10 years it’s not happening, why are we still choosing this route? Berliner believes “it is quite clear that the rate of achievement gains in the US was greater before high stakes testing became national policy” (p. 288). It is believed to have the opposite effect, and actually slowed the growth. Of course many educators know that the gap has little to do with what goes on in schools and a lot to do with social and cultural factors (Berliner, 2006). The issue at hand is not closing the gap, but really looking into school conditions, which is the stem of most of the problems.

Schools around the country are facing tremendous consequences for not meeting their achievement goals. The schools that are most affected by this are schools in poverty stricken areas. According to Watson, Johanson, Loder, and Dankiw (2014), “socio-economic status and ethnic culture are variables that can have enormous effects on each individual student’s performance, and consequently student stress levels. Students attending schools where the majority of the population comes from a background of poverty, are often presented with the most intense conditions and are penalized heavily for poor individual and school performance on high-stakes tests” (p. 3). This type of testing has been said to negate students as “individuals and as cultural beings with distinct experiences, needs, and desires that accompany their differences” (Valenzuela, 2000, p. 2). Wright (2002) reports, “the findings reveal that standardized testing has not

resulted in higher quality teaching and learning in this school; rather it has resulted in a narrowed curriculum and harmful effects on both teachers and students” (p. 1).

Regardless of what type of school it is, administrators, teachers, and schools are still held accountable.

Holding teachers accountable for their teaching is appropriate, but many factors exist that call into question whether or not it is fair. Test scores are required to be made public, so every person in the community is aware of how well their students are being taught. Every person involved in high-stakes testing feels the stress, including the educators. Watson et al. (2014) report, “in one study, teachers expressed that their teaching morale has been lowered and that they felt “anxious, pressured, guilty, and even embarrassed at times” (p. 2). It is reported that some teachers are even leaving the field of education due to their negative experiences (Watson et al., 2014). It seems that since everyone involved with these high stakes tests are so concerned with the consequences attached to student scores, the instruction in schools is now changing according to what will be on the test.

Many findings show that classroom instruction, student motivation, and curriculum have had a significant impact (Watson et al., 2014). Watson et al., argues (2014) “the type of instructional strategies utilized in the classroom to communicate content has moved from engaging activities involving higher-level thinking toward a focus on more repetitive, rote practices specifically intended to raise student scores on multiple choice tests” (p. 2). Many teachers have lost their independence and ability to create lesson plans of their choice. Thompson and Allen (2012) state “many teachers are now required to use curricula and teaching guides that tell them what to do, how to do it,

and how much time to spend on each activity (p. 220). Ysseldyke et al. (2004) states “some researches empathetically believe that students are failing to develop higher-order thinking skills as a result of drill-and practices teaching methods that hope to improve student performance on high-stakes exams” (p. 84). The content that is actually being taught in schools seems to be narrowly targeted towards what teachers know will be tested, which is not doing any students any favors (Wright, 2002). There is also the issue that many subjects in schools that students are interested in have now been eliminated (Thompson & Allen, 2012). Furthermore, “the “scripted,” “prepackaged” curriculum and “regimented” instructional practices only produced rote memorization rather than authentic learning experiences” (p. 220). In many states, districts are also required to take down all decorations and materials off their walls. Watson et al. (2014) states “A classroom is changed overnight from a normal, colorful, and comfortable...classroom to an environment reminiscent of a school room scene from *Little House on the Prairie*” (p. 2). This can be a distraction, and add to the anxiety some students and teachers are already feeling.

Now let’s look at the test, and the characteristics of the test itself. According to Kern (2013) “assessment systems in today’s education accountability movement require that students demonstrate learning of important content that is found on internationally accepted standards and that assessment systems are established to let the local, state and national public know how schools and students are ranked” (p. 96). These tests are designed to measure a specific body of content, mostly made up of multiple choice and short answer questions on material that is found in nationally-used textbooks, but not the local curriculum (Kern, 2013). Teachers must sign documents before administering a test

promising not to reproduce it (Meek, 2006). Meek (2006) states “this has an unfortunate impact on public awareness, because parents and the general public would be astounded by the physical appearance of the exam given to elementary school children” (p. 295).

The reading in a high-stakes test is overwhelming, especially for a student who struggles with reading. Reports show that the passages alone were above grade level, sometimes by three or more years (Meek, 2006). The duration of the test is outside the bounds of what we should expect for a general education student, let alone a special education student, especially if breaks and extra time is included. Meek reports, “the total time children in California are being tested is almost twice as long as the time needed to complete the Graduate Record Exam” (p. 296). Many students may feel confident going into the test, but soon give up and start marking random answers. The goal simply becomes to finish the test.

After discussing the test itself, we can look into the negative consequences that have been reported due to high-stakes testing. Looking into where the testing begins, students will first be tested starting in grade three. The first consequence is test stress and anxiety. Ysseldyke et al. (2004) reports “some newspaper articles have highlighted student anxiety as severely compromising test performance for some students” (p. 89). Due to this, some districts have hired relaxation therapists in order to help students with their anxiety (Ysseldyke et al., 2004). Watson et al. (2014) reports, “some of the students who wrote about their anxiety were concerned about the unknown material in the test. Students in third grade were experiencing high stakes testing at this level for the first time, so there was fear and anxiety of the unknown (p. 5). There were also many physical illnesses described. Watson et al. (2014) states, “the range of symptoms included various

types of physical pain, exhaustion, and nausea” (p. 6). Many students were exhausted; stating that they were sleepy before the test even began (Watson et al., 2014). Students were unable to sleep the night before the test because they were so anxious about what it would entail. Aside from anxiety, and physical illness, students feel fear and powerlessness. A third grader described that they were just little kids, and shouldn’t have to go through taking the test (Watson et al., 2014). Watson et al. states “studies reporting a negative impact of high-stakes testing have outnumbered studies indicating positive effects nine to one” (p. 2).

Another large consequence of high-stakes testing is higher failure and dropout rates. Ysseldyke et al. (2004) quotes a local education official “that the net effect of the diploma sanction has been an increase in dropout rates, especially for minority, urban, special education, and bilingual students” (p. 86). He goes on to say that “students are just not going to play the game and are self-selecting out of the process” (2004). In a high school in Providence, 1,300 students, 60% of the class, may not earn a diploma due to high-stakes testing (Kern, 2013). Many of these students protested and dressed up as zombies stating: “We’re zombies because this policy will kill us... If we don’t get a diploma, we’ll end up in dead-end jobs” (Kern, 2013, p. 97). Kern (2013) found that by using these high-stakes tests as a high school diploma requirement “shows quite clearly that Blacks and Latinos (and English Language Learners) are disproportionately failing them, whether enrolled in Texas, New York, California, or Minnesota” (p. 97). She goes on to say that students who don’t score well on these exams “are viewed as the problem, they are retained, tracked, or denied graduation” (p. 97). Then the fact arises that “They are held solely responsible for their grades, when in fact, they may not have had equal

chance of learning because of the unequal resources and opportunities at their disposal at their school site” (p. 97). According to Defur (2002) “many researchers and authors have challenged the assumption that high-stakes reform efforts benefit all students and that the degree of unintended consequences many counteract and positive benefits that may occur” (p. 208).

Specifically, we can then look at the consequences for minority students. Many of these students don't graduate from high school, and move through the system without basic skills required to read or write (Thompson & Allen, 2012). Thompson and Allen (2012) report that “among the “millions of students” referred to are African Americans, a group who has historically been underserved and even harmed through low expectations, culturally irrelevant instructional practices, unfair discipline practices, underrepresentation in gifted classes, and overrepresentation in special education classes by the U.S. public school system” (p. 219). They account for a large number of students in our school districts, and these problems still need to be addressed in many areas. Researchers believe that the high-stakes test movement has harmed African American students in many areas. Thompson and Allen (2012) tell us “researchers at the Advancement Project found that fewer than 7 out of every 10 students graduate from high school” (p. 219). It is believed that graduation rates may improve, but the graduation gap between White males and Black males may actually increase (Thompson and Allen, 2012). They conclude with explaining, “NAEP data and dropout rates indicate that while the Black-White achievement gap has narrowed over time and achievement scores have increased, NCLB has not resulted in a widespread improvement in the quality of

education that African American students receive” (p. 220). There are still too many African Americans and minority groups who are receiving a less than quality education.

Before NCLB, the focus for special education students was on educational access and equality for all students (Defur, 2002). Now, we are looking at a very different picture. Students with disabilities are required to take the same high-stakes test that a general education student does. Some researchers wonder if this is fair. Ysseldyke et al. (2004) states “the effect of high-stakes assessment for students with disabilities has resulted in both positive and negative consequences being reported anecdotally in the media” (p. 77). Meek (2006) states “students with mild to moderate disabilities, deserve a closer look when the question of one-size-fits-all testing policies is raised” (p. 294). Some children are capable of high cognitive functioning, and others are not. Some students are not able to master reading. Meek goes on to say “those who don’t must wrestle each and every word to the ground, each and every day. Like gladiators they struggle to sweat to extract meaning, morpheme by morpheme. For them, time is the enemy, and the high-stakes test is the Grand Inquisitor” (p.295). Children in special education are different from those in general education. She goes on to say “though this diversity does not warrant exclusion from exposure to mainstream curricula and high expectations and in no way excuses these children from making strong, measurable academic progress, we do need to sample and document their progress in a more humane and valid way” (p. 295). Though these students could meet grade-level statistics show something different. According to Meek (2006), “statistics gleaned from a number of states over time reveal that less than one third of learning disabled students can be expected to pass high school competency exams. Among this same group are learners

who make good-to-adequate progress but are not at grade level” (p. 295). These are students those with mild disabilities that may meet or come close to meeting grade-level standards. Last there is the group of students whose disabilities are more severe. Meek (2006) explains, “These students – dare I even say it? – will in all probability never come close to meeting the stringent standards on which NCLB exams are based” (p. 295). However, these students are not so developmentally delayed to qualify for an alternative assessment, which is now at only 2% (Meek 2006).

Meek (2006) believes more than 3% of our learning- disabled children should be considered for an alternative approach to testing. The current NCLB exams are simply too densely written, too long in duration, and too difficult in terms of readability and required level of conceptual understanding to warrant their indiscriminate administration, even with such common accommodations as extra time and extra breaks. (p.295)

Many educators and administrators agree that the experience of a high-stakes exam can be harmful to a child’s motivation to succeed as well as their self-concept (Meek 2006). Schools are also concerned about these new mandates, given the historically poor performances of special education students on these assessments (Katsiyannis, Zhang, Ryan, & Jones, 2007). Katsiyannis et al. (2007) reports “in Mobile County, for example, the state Department of Education (DOE) reported that the high failure rate of special education students on MCEs was the cause for the majority of its school failures to meet AYP” (p. 161). They would have otherwise passed if they did not have to include the scores of special education students (Katsiyannis et al., 2007).

Though there have been many negative affects reported by teachers, administrators, and students, it would be unfair to say that there have not also been some positive affects reported. Ysseldyke et al. (2004) reports “the effect of high-stakes assessment for students with disabilities has resulted in both positive and negative consequences being reported anecdotally in the media” (p. 77). Among these positive affects are “delineated curricular alignment, increased student motivation, and educational equity for undeserved groups” (Ysseldyke et al., 2004, p. 77). According to Ysseldyke et al. (2004) these outcomes also include “raised expectations, increased skill development, improved test scores, less exclusion in test participation, and better postsecondary outcomes” (p. 78).

If we look at participation, and performance especially in regards to special education, it would appear that they both have improved. According to Ysseldyke et al. (2004), “the move to test all special education students in New York appeared to result in improved student performance” (p. 78). When looking at a few other states, they have seen similar consequences. Ysseldyke et al. (2004) explains “at the individual state level, it was found that the move by New York to test all special education students “quadrupled” the passing rates for students with disabilities, and led some educators to realize that many of the students had even been misclassified” (p. 78). It was also found that Colorado and Maine reported improved performance of students with disabilities.

Another positive consequence being reported is higher standards, and expectations, again particularly with students with disabilities. Ysseldyke et al. (2004) tells us that in an electronic survey, “West Virginia educators indicated that special education teachers now get the teacher’s guide for textbooks because administrators

believe their students may need to be tested and thus taught” (p. 81). Some parents are in agreement with this push as well. One parent commented, according to Ysseldyke et al. (2004) “Yes, I believe special education students should be treated the same as other students. The school system and teachers should be held responsible for all their children, not just typical children” (p. 81). One parent even pushed for her son to take the regular state exam even against the advice of her son’s teachers (Ysseldyke et al., 2004). Parents are now seeing that they have options for their children and want to be more involved.

Reports have also been made that some students are beginning to have a growing confidence with these exams. According to Watson et al. (2014) “although much of the findings reflect a growing negative feeling toward the testing across the process, there were many students who were satisfied and happy” (p. 6). A common theme in the beginning was mixed emotions; including fear, nervousness, and worry. Watson et al. (2014) explains “some of their expressed reasoning behind these feelings were fear of getting questions incorrect and failing. Others mentioned that it was their first day of testing and they did not know what to expect” (p. 6). After the first day of testing, students began to develop a different attitude. Watson et al. (2014) concludes “as the testing progressed, many students who were originally uncomfortable with the testing process adjusted and displayed more positive and confident statements” (p. 7). Many students expressed their feelings through drawings and diagrams that expressed their confidence about how they performed on the exam.

Teachers play a significant role in student attitudes when it comes to high-stakes testing. According to Watson et al. (2014) “several teachers seem to have had a significant impact on the demeanor with which students approached and navigated the

test process. Some students in specific classroom groups discussed various feelings towards the testing using common language or similar references. Statements such as “I feel happy today and ready for the test” and “I will do great today I know it” were frequent answers from many students” (p. 8). It became very evident that each classroom felt differently about the high-stakes exam, which can be attributed to the teacher’s influence. In one particular classroom, a teacher responded daily to her students’ journals in regards to the exam. Watson et al. (2014) explains that “she expressed pride in the students’ hard work and attitudes toward the test, confidence that they would do well, and encouragement to stay calm and to their best” (p.8). She also offered helpful tips on how to do better the next day. This positive reinforcement made a big difference in how students were feeling about the exam.

Access to general education has also been a positive consequence of high-stakes testing. According to Ysseldyke et al. (2014) “a number of studies report increased access to the general education curriculum” (p. 83). He goes on to state, “fourteen states reported more students with disabilities are accessing the general curriculum, and accessibility is also occurring through increased opportunities to learn the material” (p. 83). Many students with special needs who weren’t thought of as needing certain material are all beginning to be taught the same curriculum. Nelson (2002) found “content such as direct reading skills not traditionally taught at the high school level were now explicitly being taught by reading specialists (p. 44). He goes on to say “Both special education staff and parents have noted in the past... they (students with disabilities) weren’t being exposed to some of the curriculum that they maybe would have needed” (p. 44). This changed school districts in that they weren’t just meeting the

terms of the law anymore in simply allowing students with disabilities to participate, but now looking at the level and extent of exposure for students with disabilities.

Parents being more aware and understanding of what is going on in their child's education has been a reported positive consequence. After conducting a "massive training" for school personnel and parents on their options for participation, Ysseldyke et al. (2014) reports "Oregon officials indicated that parents are beginning to understand the options and, more important, the accommodations involved" (p. 89). A similar report was made in Minnesota stating "parents and special educators also noted increased communication with parents about their student's progress (p. 89). Parents are more aware of their child's test scores in each area, and how to help them in each area of need. Ysseldyke et al. (2014) concludes, "there is very little research to demonstrate this is a consequence that is occurring for many states" (p. 90).

After reviewing the positive and negative affects of high-stakes testing, and all that surrounds it, what do we need to know? Ysseldyke et al. (2014) believe "we need to know much more than we know about the actual consequences of implementing large-scale high-stakes assessment and accountability systems" (p. 90). He goes on to say "it is *assumed* that holding schools responsible for improved outcomes for all students, including students with disabilities, will lead to increased instructional effort, improve instructional effort, improved instruction, and better outcomes" (p. 90).

In 2002, the world of education changed, and is still doing so to this day. Change is nothing new in the world of education, as the goal is to always improve the education system in the United States. The No Child Left Behind Act, and the required high-stakes exams that followed aimed to "close the gap" providing every child with the same

opportunity regarding education. We have discussed the many positive, and negative consequences of these exams. Everyone involved in the world of education, whether it be parents, teachers, or administrators have commented on their experiences with high-stakes testing, and the question remains as to whether or not these exams are doing what they set out to do.

### **Consequences of High-Stakes Testing**

Since the No Child Left Behind Act was signed into law in 2002, educators around the country are required to test students in grades 3-8, and again in high school. These tests, also known as high-stakes tests, are nothing new to educators, but are being questioned by many across the country. Students, teachers, parents, and administrators have expressed both the positive and negative consequences of this type of assessment. In this research study, both sides will be discussed. The purpose of researching both the negative and positive consequences is to find out what is best for our students and educators, and if high-stakes tests are in fact helping to “close the gap” and improve the education system in the United States.

In the research study, I sent out an anonymous survey to approximately 70 teachers at a school in upstate New York. The survey had a total of 13 questions regarding high-stakes testing and how long they had been in the field of education. The survey included both multiple choice questions, and written response to get a better idea of the educator’s beliefs about high-stakes testing.

My role in this study was to look at the data collected from the responses to the survey. I needed to look at each question with a critical eye, and without bias to determine the consequences, both negative and positive; that they were experiencing in

their school. After looking at each response carefully and thinking about how each educator responded, I used the data to form my own stance on whether or not high-stakes assessments are best for our children, and more importantly if they are improving education in the United States.

### **Researcher Stance**

My role in this study was as an interviewer. I formed a survey and sent it to teachers and administrators in one school district. Through this survey, I analyzed the similarities and differences of the opinions of these teachers on high-stakes testing, if they felt it was a useful tool to gauge where students are academically, and what types of positive and negative consequences they have seen in their experiences.

I am currently certified in Elementary Education, grades 1-6 and Early Childhood Education, grades B-2. I am presently enrolled in a program working towards earning a Master's of Science in Special Education. While I am working towards this certification, I am also employed as a substitute teacher in various districts in the area.

### **Design & Data Collection**

Utilizing an Internet application called "Qualtrics," an anonymous survey was sent to approximately 70 staff members at a rural elementary school in Upstate New York; after reception of approval from the Instructional Review Board (IRB). Due to the timing being near the end of the school year, which is a very busy time for teachers, it was ideal to utilize an electronic manner in which to collect responses. This way, teachers and administrators were able to submit responses on computers or cell phones at their own convenience.

### **Participant Population**

One school in a small rural school district, grades pre-k-6, was chosen to participate in completion of this survey. The school consists of approximately 70 respondents with different job titles and roles within the building. The school staff was sent e-mail over the Internet with a request to complete the anonymous survey. The researcher had access to staff e-mail for all employees from the school website. Since it was an anonymous survey, consent was not needed. Out of the 70 possible respondents, the survey was closed after a random 10 staff members responded to the survey.

### **Data Analysis**

Given the fact that there were different types of questions asked on the survey, the data was analyzed in different manners depending on the question. Common categorical themes were reviewed for questions that required a written response. When common themes were found within an answer, categories were created and tallied according to each respondent's answer. For scale questions, percentages were looked at. The data analysis process was completed with a critical eye of the researcher.

For question 1, out of the 10 respondents, 90% reported that they were teachers, and 10% reported "other" meaning they were a paraprofessional, teacher's assistant, etc. No administrators responded to the survey. This could have been for many reasons. Administration may have not wanted to comment on their views about high-stakes testing during such a controversial time, even though it was anonymous. It is likely more teachers may have responded if it wasn't during such a busy time of year.

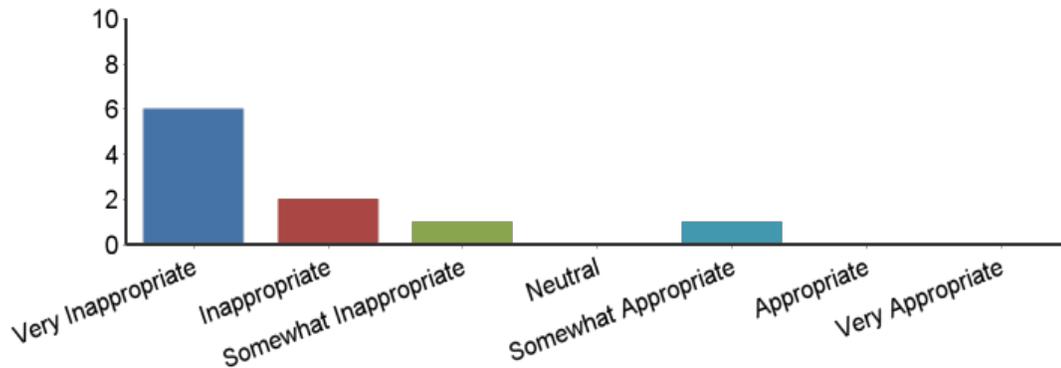
The results for question 2 varied. Of the respondents, 30% reported they had been in the field of education for 1-3 years, 0% for 3-5 years, 20% for 5-10 years, and 50%

have been teaching or in the field for 10+ years. This means that the majority of respondents have been in the field for at least 5 years, and are experienced teachers. It is likely they have a good grasp on high-stakes testing, and have had many experiences with this type of assessment up until this point. Based on these experiences, they were able to provide helpful feedback and opinions from their perspective.

For question 3, 100% responded that they were familiar with the term “high-stakes testing.” This means they are able to provide valuable feedback, and understand the questions asked and terms being used. It would have been surprising if any respondent responded with being unfamiliar with the term, and would tell me that they may not be up-to-date on current educational trends and issues.

The results for question 4 were mixed, as shown in the graph below, but with most respondents feeling high-stakes testing is an inappropriate assessment tool for all students. Out of the respondents, 60% thought it very inappropriate, 20% inappropriate, 10% somewhat inappropriate, and 10% thought it to be somewhat appropriate. This means that the majority of the respondents are in agreement that high-stakes testing is an inappropriate way to look at student outcomes, and then measure schools’ progress. It is possible that the respondent who believed it to be somewhat appropriate is the respondent who was the TA or paraprofessional, or someone who has not been in the field for very long. A TA or paraprofessional doesn’t always necessarily have direct experience with planning instruction, preparing for a high-stakes exam, or what happens if the results aren’t meeting state standards. This could be true for someone in the beginning years of teaching, too. It is also possible this particular person may believe it is somewhat

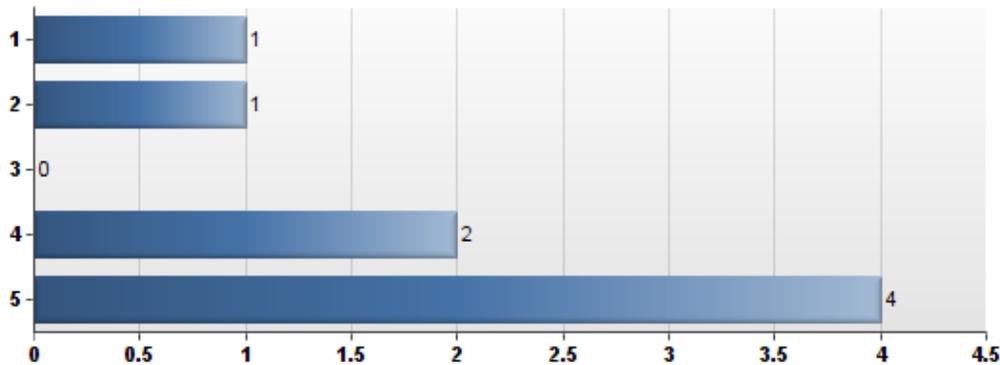
appropriate because the data is important, but could be used or implemented in a different way.



When looking at the results for question 5, the answers were very similar as to whether or not high-stakes testing has been effective in closing the achievement gap. Four out of 10 respondents felt it has been very ineffective, and the other six felt it has been ineffective since The No Child Left Behind Act was passed. Data supporting that it is in fact reducing the achievement gap is in dispute. Even after 10 years, statistics show that it is not happening, even according to Berliner, the rate of achievement gains in the US was greater before high-stakes testing became a policy nationwide. Many educators are also aware of the fact that closing the gap has little to do with what is going on in schools and a lot to do with social and cultural factors. The respondents likely agree with this.

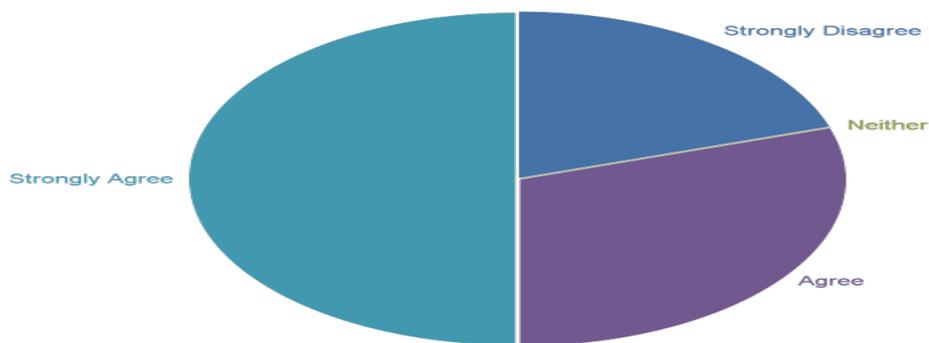
As shown below, for question 6, out of the 10 respondents, on a scale of one to five with five being strongly agree and one being strongly disagree, one respondent noted they strongly disagreed with the idea that the NCLB act has focused the educational lens on testing children rather than teaching them, one responded that they disagreed, two respondents agreed, four respondents strongly agreed, and two did not respond. Though

the majority of respondents that answered this question believed that testing has become the focus over teaching children, it is possible that the respondents in general have not researched other areas and high-stakes testing. They are likely focused on what is going on in their own district, and not the bigger picture. Many teachers who are really feeling the heat and feeling like they need to teach to the test are those in urban, high poverty areas. This particular district is not labeled as either of these. It is also possible that the administrators in this district are not pressuring the teachers “teach to the test” and make sure their students are prepared to take to the test in order to make sure the school’s progress in achieving is meeting the correct standards.



The responses to question 7 varied, as noted below. When asked if teaching and learning is affected when preparing for a high-stakes test, 20% strongly disagreed, 30% agreed that it is affected, and 50% strongly agreed. Many findings show that classroom instruction and curriculum have had a considerable impact when preparing for this type

of assessment. Teachers have reported that the focus has toward repetitive, rote practices according to Watson. These practices are intended to raise student scores on multiple-choice tests, like a high-stakes assessment, so the school is meeting state standards. Many teachers are forced to teach what they know will be on the test instead of all of the important content that should be taught over the span of a school year. It is possible that the 20% who strongly disagreed are not in charge of preparing students for exams, or are new to the education world. They may not feel the rush of trying to get through all of the important material while still making sure students are ready for these state assessments. It could also be probable that they feel they are preparing for the tests throughout the year and not hurrying through the content that will be on the exam a few weeks before. This is less stressful and places less pressure on the students.



Question 8 asked how the respondents prepare students for high-stakes tests. The responses were all very similar. The first respondent stated that different test booklets were worked on throughout the year in order to prepare. The second respondent said that a lot of time was spent on preparing for how to take the test. They said that even though students might actually know the material, the specific way they are required to answer for each particular test could make a huge difference in how their knowledge is

conveyed. The third response stated they review basic skills and take practice tests. The fourth respondent replied that it was virtually impossible to prepare as the teaching professionals are completely excluded from the creation of, and execution of, the assessment. The fifth respondent said they tell students to relax, get a rest the night before, and to eat a good breakfast on the day of the test. For the sixth response, they prepare students by practice, practice, and practice. The seventh respondent stated that they try not to stop teaching to prepare for state tests, but that it is very hard not to because of the high necessity of review. They went on to say that most of the teachers have not even gotten through the material that is supposed to be taught before the test. Lessons are therefore hurried, combined, or skipped to make up ground and cover more. They don't believe this is the way to teach, but because teachers' scores depend on it, they feel like they're caught in the middle between knowing what is best and feeling forced to cover everything. The eighth respondent tells us that they prepare by practicing with state exam questions from previous years, following module lessons closely, and explicitly teaching test-taking strategies. Next, the ninth respondent stated they prepare in a variety of ways; typically focusing on preparing them for what the test will "feel" like. They also go over strategies that will help them figure out the unknowns on the test. Last, the 10<sup>th</sup> respondent said that they prepare for high-stakes exams throughout the year, in hopes that when April comes they are prepared for the tests.

Though the responses were all very similar, they were categorized in four different ways; practice, preparing for what the test might "feel like," telling students to relax, and then the idea that they cannot be prepared for. The first category, practicing and using test booklets throughout the year seemed to be the most common response.

Many teachers try to stay somewhere in the middle of reviewing and preparing for the test while still sticking to what needs to be taught from the curriculum. Although educators would like to say they aren't worried about these tests that they obviously don't need this one standardized test to tell them how their students are doing - the fact is that teachers' scores depend on students doing well. If scores show that students aren't meeting state standards, it is on the teacher, so unfortunately there is a need to review and practice as much as possible.

The second category, preparing for what the test might "feel" like seemed to be a common response as well. As reported before, the length of the assessment is outside the bounds for a general education student, let alone a special education student. The test is also comprised of multiple choice and short answer questions of content that isn't even on the local curriculum. Students aren't used to being tested in this way, and in many cases lose points for not showing all of their work. Students must also appropriately mark their answer on the scantron sheet, and if it's not perfectly filled in, points are lost. Teachers understand this, and it's unfortunate so much time is taken simply on "how" to take a test.

The third category, telling students to relax, get a good night's sleep, and to eat a good breakfast is the category that should be happening in all classrooms. It is possible all teachers are telling their students the same thing, but it was not the first thought that came to mind with the other respondents. As reported before, research shows that the way a teacher presents these tests, and discusses them reflects in how a student feels about them. If they are presented in a positive way, it's shown students reflect confidence and a positive feeling, but when presented in a negative way, students show this. A teacher's

attitude can make the world of difference when testing does come around. The last category, with only one response, was that they are impossible to prepare for. It's possible this teacher has a lot of experience with high-stakes testing and has been able to see many different examples of the test. Many times, there are questions that have nothing to do with what was went over throughout the year, and really shouldn't even be on the test. Also, teachers are not involved in the process of forming these exams. People who have never even stepped in a school let alone a classroom create questions. So in many ways, it's difficult to prepare for something that, aside from the format, changes from year to year according to what officials "feel" students should know regardless of what is on the curriculum.

There was a common theme among the answers to question 9 as to whether or not the respondents believed high-stakes testing causes negative or positive consequences. Out of the 10 respondents, 90% believe that it does cause negative consequences for students, and 10% believe it doesn't cause a negative or positive consequence. The respondents were also asked to explain their answer. The first respondent stated that students are stressed, and do not want to be apart of these exams. Next, the second respondent says that students express feelings of stress, worry and frustration. They are old enough to be very aware of the fact that these exams have no transfer into "real life" and feel that their time is being wasted. They are motivated to learn and love doing engaging activities that help them develop their skills, which is the opposite of high-stakes tests and the required test prep. They are losing valuable learning time, as well as being forced to put their thinking "in the box" rather than using creative thinking and actually expressing their true abilities. The testing also puts stress on educators, creating

an all around less positive atmosphere for our children. The third respondent states that students are tested too much. Also, their results on any given day can be affected by many other factors including the stress caused by these tests. Respondent four said we have created a generation of students who are marginally good at test taking, but severely lack the tools needed to socially interact, think creatively, and access information that is pertinent to their cause. The fifth response was that students with disabilities are tested like all the others, which is stressful. The sixth respondent said that the kids are tested out. There is much media hype around these state tests and now parents in some cases are teaching their kids that the tests don't matter. They actually tell their kids that it's a test to see if the teacher is doing a good job and that it doesn't matter for the child. This creates a bad situation for teachers. We're sunk before we even start in many cases.

Also, kids today seem to lack the attention and focus to engage in high level thinking to the degree being asked of them. Their home lives and models do not support or enrich their educational goals and parents do very little about it today. The next respondent states that more students are stressed or anxious about testing, and more students are labeled as a result of the test. The eighth respondent states that it causes anxiety that is not needed. Next, they state that students become very stressed about having to take these exams. Last, the respondent who was in the middle said that it causes both positive and negative consequences. It's stressful, but there are other high stakes tests in life. For this question, four different categories were used to look at the responses; test stress, social and media hype, other high-stakes tests in life, and the last being that kids now lack creative thinking skills. Although the responses varied, the most common theme among them was that these tests cause stress, anxiety and frustration. As reported,

students have expressed stress because of the unknown material on the test. Some students feel physically ill, while others never slept the night before because of anxiety.

The second category, social and media hype, was described mainly by one respondent, but is very valid. Parents are wrongly informed by the media, therefore incorrectly telling their children not to care about this test, and that it's on the teachers. It's possible this could be the school's fault for not giving parents the correct information regarding these assessments. It's also true that it depends on what district you're in, whether or not they agree or disagree with these exams, or if they're on board with opting out or not.

The third category, that there are other high-stakes assessments in life. This is true – there seem to be high-stakes assessments even after high school and college depending on what type of career you want. The difference is being an adult versus being a child. Adults have better ways of coping with stress, and preparing for these exams. These exams as an adult are also more meaningful compared to a test given to a child to make sure they're meeting state standards.

The last category, that children lack creative thinking skills, is a concern to many educators and was discussed more than once in the responses to this question. Unfortunately, in many schools, educators are being forced to “teach to the test.” They are given guidelines that tell them what to do, how to do it, and how much time to spend on each activity. The curriculum is being narrowed to teach what will be on the test. For that reason, as Ysseldyke et al. (2014) previously stated, students are failing to develop higher-order thinking skills as a result.

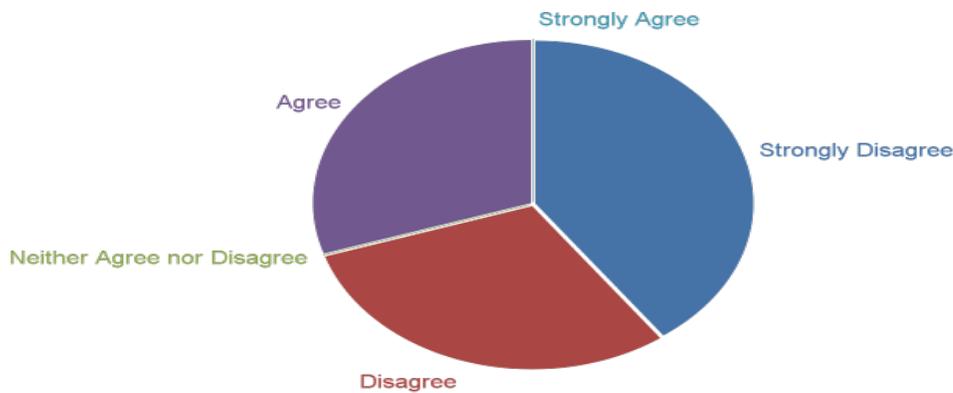
For question 10, the respondents all agreed that the consequences for teachers and

schools attached to test scores are not fair. Out of the responses, 50% said it was unfair, with the other 50% saying it was very unfair. Holding teachers accountable for their teaching is appropriate, but the extent it has become is not fair. Many schools are losing educators simply because of the bad experiences they've had with testing. Morale is lowered because of the results being made public, and teachers too feel stressed and anxious about the test. Though the schools that feel the most frustration tend to be urban, high-poverty schools, most educators would agree that everyone is feeling the consequences.

The responses to question 11 were very comparable. When asked if they believed high-stakes exams were grade-level appropriate, 10% said they were very inappropriate, 40% inappropriate, 30% somewhat inappropriate, and 20% were neutral in regard to this question. The responses to this question were not too surprising. Perhaps these assessments are appropriate for students that are at or above grade level, but for students who are below grade level, and especially special education students, the tests have been reported to be inappropriate. Meek (2006) reported that passages were not only above grade level, sometimes by three or more years. The reading is also overwhelming, especially for a struggling reader. Some of these students are behind before they even begin, simply because the test is not appropriate for all students. It is possible that the two respondents who believed the test to be neither inappropriate nor appropriate haven't had a lot of experience with this type of exam.

Question number 12 asked the respondents if they thought students with disabilities should be required to take high-stakes exams. As shown below, out of the 10 respondents, four strongly disagreed, three disagreed, and three agreed that students with

disabilities should take the test. The majority of the respondents believe that students with disabilities should not be required to take this type of assessment.



Before NCLB, the focus for special education students was on educational access and equality for all. Now, it is much different. Educators are taught to differentiate, and teach to the learning styles of each student, yet when it comes to high-stakes assessments, it is a one-size-fits-all policy. Some students with disabilities are capable of high cognitive functioning while others are not. Some of these students struggle daily with reading sentences or even words. All educators know that children in special education have different needs than those in general education. As stated, it is unlikely that many of these students will ever meet the standards that NCLB exams are based on. It was surprising to see the three respondents who agreed that they should take the same exams as every other student. It is possible that they believe, as many parents believe, that students with disabilities should be given the same opportunity and have to meet the same standards as every other student. The problem with this though is that the curriculum is differentiated in order to meet their needs on a daily basis so that they can meet state standards. It is the idea that they playing field is leveled, and the test itself is not. It is unrealistic to expect the same scores.

The last question asked the respondents to describe their overall feelings about high-stakes testing and the responses are as follows. The first respondent said that high-stakes tests are a waste of time and resources. The data they produce is statistically invalid and cannot be used to inform instruction. Our students deserve to spend their time in school learning, not preparing to be tested. High-stakes testing does nothing to improve the quality of life of our students or make them more likely to experience success. They go on to say that even for a great many of the most capable students, it gives feelings of inadequacy. The second respondent said that while they agree that there needs to be some way to measure what a student is able to do, high-stakes tests are not a one size fits all method. These tests are fine for a very small population of students. There should be more choices for a student to show they are ready to graduate. Next, they say that high-stakes testing is yet another “one size fits all” educational “solution” that has done nothing but generate excessive amounts of money for testing companies, some of which aren’t even located in our country, and dehumanized the educational profession to mirror our corporations. Fourth, they responded that assessments are needed for all, but it needs to be appropriate. Too much funding is linked to tests that lump together all students together. Next, the respondent said that high-stakes tests are a reality. They have always been with us. You need a bar, something to compare students and schools with. How accurate and valuable are they? Who knows? I try not to put too much stock in high-stakes testing, but on the other hand, I don’t ignore it. The sixth response stated that they do not like high-stakes testing. Kids are living beings with free will. Unlike a carpenter that uses boards to build, boards that do not have free will. Kids can do anything they want on these tests and the instructional periods leading up to the tests. If

they are having a bad day, that will impact the test scores... if they are mad at the teacher or another person, they can do whatever they want on the test... if their parent talks down about the tests, the kids will not care very much about the results... Probably most frustrating is the lack of work ethic and perseverance in kids today on a day-to-day basis. They expect more for less and are not willing to work hard most of the time. Of course, there are always expectations in every classroom, but the majority of kids in each class are not getting the most out of their education due to their own lack of effort and willingness to put everything they've got into their work. There are some districts with very large populations of high functioning families/kids and they tend to get the accolades. It may not mean the teachers were better, but in fact, they had more supportive and role model-like families. The results of high-stakes testing do not reflect all of these factors; they just point fingers at low performing teachers and districts unfairly.

On the flip side, there are some terrible teachers out there, but every profession has bad employees. Let's figure out a single one-chance test to rate the success of all these other professions using like measures. The next respondent states that any test is just one measure of a student's progress at a particular time. A high-stakes test should not be the only way student success is measured. Respondent eight feels that high-stakes testing has nothing to do with the assessment, evaluation, formation or procedures of helping students learn more effectively. Good testing is prescriptive and allows plans to be made to help each student reach their high goal. The last response says that they disagree with high-stakes testing for students and believes there are many other ways to see where they're currently at and if they're meeting state standards. The 10<sup>th</sup> respondent chose not to describe their feelings.

The biggest theme throughout these responses is that high-stakes testing is a one-size-fits-all method. As earlier stated, though educators are expected to differentiate and meet the needs of all students, high-stakes testing is a complete different story. Each student, no matter what their needs are, if they're a student with disability, if they struggle with reading, are expected to take the same test. It hardly seems practical. Assessments are there to collect data, and then choose instruction based on that data in order for the student to successfully meet their goals. A high-stakes test is just one small snapshot, yet it can determine the near future of a student, teacher, and district. Another commonality throughout these responses was that it is a waste of time and money. Too much time is spent on reviewing for the test, preparing for what the test is going to be like, and stressing over it. As far as money, it seems that a lot of funding is given to testing companies to create high-stakes assessments. Most educators are aware that the people making the exams have had little to do with teaching or for some have ever stepped foot in a school. It seems like this money could be better spent. The last topic among the responses that was similar is that many educators feel there is a need for assessments, but not in this way. Educators need to have some way to measure a student's progress throughout the year, but there are many different ways to assess a student. A simple observation can be extremely valuable information if only the state trusted its teachers enough to decide what is best.

### **Discussion**

From this study, I have learned that teaching is a difficult profession, especially when adding high-stakes testing to the picture. Teachers are given a difficult task, and are really being put in the middle of what they know to be best, and what officials believe to be

best. They are asked to teach the curriculum, but also to make sure their students score well on high-stakes tests, even though they all already know where their students are in each content being taught. For the most part, most of the educators were in agreement that high-stakes testing is not the direction we should be going. They are all aware that students need to be assessed in some way throughout the year, but these tests aren't the way to do it. Unfortunately, poor scores not only show teachers in a negative light, but also the school and district as a whole. It seems like teachers are in a lose-lose situation no matter how great of a teacher they may really be.

Students too are affected negatively from high-stakes testing. The majority of the data showed that students are stressed, and anxious, and show frustration about testing, proving it has negative consequences. They are aware that these exams have little to do with what goes on in the real world, and feel like their time is being wasted. As teachers we are asked to make sure students are developing critical thinking skills, yet these exams ask students to think “inside the box” versus outside of it. Therefore, students are losing out on engaging activities that help with these skills because they must prepare and review for a high-stakes test. The students are lacking all of the skills needed to apply to the real world, though it is believed this movement is to make sure children are career and college ready. We seem to be missing a key aspect here, and that is what is best for each child as an individual, not as a group.

The strategies used to prepare for high-stakes assessments are not the fault of the teachers, but the fault of the people driving the consequences for educators not meeting standards. Though the respondents clearly stated that they prepare throughout the year, with test booklets and review, they all still feel the need to review, and then review some

more. They are somewhere stuck in the middle of wanting to please those in charge, and as I said earlier, doing what's best for their students. The reality is this national policy has in fact caused educators to "teach to the test." When you're preparing your students simply how to take a test, there seems to be something very wrong with this picture. Though they simply want them to be successful, and make sure they're familiar with the test, teachers shouldn't have to take time out of an already busy day to teach a child how to take a test.

The implications for high-stakes testing are high. With me being elementary certified, and soon in special education as well, I too will see the many consequences of this assessment. Special education students seem to be getting the short end of the stick in this situation, and the data shows that it is even more stressful for these students. They are stressed enough about having to take an assessment in science, let alone one with such a long duration. It is true that many of these students are offered breaks, and more time but the last thing these students want is to have to spend more time taking a test that is already causing them stress and anxiety.

The larger context, when thinking about schools/schooling is the same. Teachers are not the only ones who receive negative consequences for students scoring poorly. If enough students don't do well, then it in turn affects the school and the district. From there, schools don't receive proper aid and are looked at poorly by the state and community. It's a constant worry for everyone involved, and causes administrators to place pressure on their teachers because they too are feeling the heat for not adequately meeting state standards. Parents tend to then feel negatively toward the school, and wonder if they're child's teacher is even an effective teacher. Everyone involved is

looked down upon because of test scores.

For my own practice, I believe I'll be in the same place all of these educators are until high-stakes assessments are eliminated or are differentiated. I believe that I will also be reviewing throughout the year, and try not to place pressure on my students to do well because I need them to. In the long run, we all know that they are just numbers, and have nothing to do with measuring a student's success. It is unfortunate that such consequences are placed on these simple numbers, but until something changes, we too are just a number to the policy-makers.

If this group of teachers is all feeling the same, and having the same experiences related to high-stakes testing, then there are many more all around the nation. I wonder if/when something is going to change, because it is clearly not the best practice for our students. If enough educators fight back and stand their ground, something has to give.

### **Conclusion**

After reviewing the various positive and negative consequences, and data from various educators, I believe that high-stakes testing is not best for our students and more importantly has not proved to improve our education system in the United States. As the research has shown, as well as various experiences from the respondents, high-stakes testing is causing more harm than good. As many of our educators have stated, high-stakes testing is not the best answer. The negative consequences for our educators, students, and schools throughout the nation is proving to have detrimental effects that cannot be fixed or turned around anytime soon.

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