Effects of NCLB Test-Driven Accountability on Students

Great Public Schools for Every Student

There is no consensus among researchers that NCLB's test-driven accountability system has led to increased growth in student performance or closed achievement gaps.

- Analyses of scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) do not show any clear trend in improved student growth after the implementation of NCLB. Instead, research has found mixed results depending on the subject (reading or math) and grade level (fourth grade or eighth grade). In some cases there were improved rates of growth, but in others rates decreased and/or achievement gaps grew.[1]
- Furthermore, a multivariate analysis of state NAEP scores from 1990-2009 established that any improved growth in NAEP scores observed after NCLB was associated with state investments in education as measured by student-teacher ratios and teacher salaries, not with the implementation of test-based accountability. The same holds true for what led to any observed narrowing of achievement gaps, although only the student-teacher ratio, not teacher *salaries*, was associated with improvement in this area.[2]

Test-driven accountability pressures have led some schools to narrow the curriculum to focus on tested subjects, leaving little time for other subjects and learning activities.

- Within five years of implementation of NCLB, 58% of school districts had increased the instructional time in elementary schools dedicated to English language arts (ELA), and 45% had increased the amount of time dedicated to math.
    - The average increase in instructional time for ELA was 141 minutes per week, with 54% of districts adding 150 minutes or more per week.
    - The average increase in instructional time for math was 89 minutes per week, with 19% of districts adding 150 minutes or more per week.
- In exchange, many districts reduced the amount of instructional time spent on other subjects. Over two-thirds (36%) of districts reduced the amount of time spent on social studies, with an average reduction of 76 minutes per week. Almost three in 10 districts reduced the time spent on science, with an average reduction of 75 minutes. Smaller numbers of districts reported reducing the time for recess (20%), art and music (16%), physical education (9%), and lunch (5%).[3]

Test-driven accountability systems can affect the allocation of teachers in ways that systematically disadvantage some groups of students.

- Studies conducted in Florida and North Carolina suggest that some school administrators are responding to test-driven accountability pressures by assigning their strongest teachers to the grades that are tested in order to boost their schools' performance. The North Carolina study found that differences in teacher quality in Grades K-2 vs. Grades 3-5 widened after the introduction of NCLB, as schools moved their weaker teachers down to the lower grades – a critical period which the researchers argue has lasting effects on children's development and later outcomes.[4]

Despite the lack of clear evidence that NCLB's emphasis on testing and accountability has increased student learning, teachers spend a significant portion of their instructional time preparing for tests (even though few believe that this actually benefits their students).

- NEA's own nationwide survey found that teachers who taught classes where students took a state standardized test spent, on average, 29% of their work time on tasks related to that testing. The vast majority of that time was spent preparing students to take tests; very little time was spent using test results to improve instruction.[5]
- Only 14% of surveyed teachers reported that the emphasis on improving standardized test scores had a positive impact on their classrooms – instead, 41% reported a negative impact.[6]

Test-driven accountability pressures have led some schools to try to improve their test scores through manipulation rather than by improving education for all students.

- Studies show that some schools have shifted attention and resources to students who score just below proficiency targets, at the expense of low-achieving students who have little chance of reaching proficiency or high-achievers who would likely meet the target anyway.[7]
- Test-driven accountability pressures have led some schools to manipulate the population of students tested to improve performance rankings by increasing special education placements, retaining students, targeting testing exemptions to low-performing Black and Hispanic students, encouraging absences, and suspending low-performing students during testing windows.[8]

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[6] *Ibid*.

[7] Neal, D., & Schanzenbach, D. W. (2010, May). Left behind by design: Proficiency counts and test-based accountability. *Review of Economics & Statistics, 92*, 263-283. doi:10.1162/rest.2010.12318 Retrieved February 12, 2015 from http://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/abs/10.1162/rest.2010.12318?journalCode=rest&#.VNz0sNg5DAU;
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