

The American Counseling Association (ACA) Position Statement on High Stakes Testing

Continuing national concern over the effectiveness of the American educational system and some related legislation, especially the *No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001*, has contributed to an increased use of “high stakes” assessment of academic achievement. High stakes testing carries with it serious consequences for students and/or others in the educational community (e.g., whether or not a student receives a high school diploma or is promoted to the next grade, whether or not a school or school district receives rewards or sanctions based upon student performance). An important goal of high stakes testing is to improve academic achievement and opportunities for all students. Schools are also held accountable for effective learning and instruction by making sure that all students are making progress toward mastery of the curriculum standards. The American Counseling Association (ACA) supports the use of testing and accountability in education. This position statement pertains to high stakes testing as defined by *NCLB* and applied in public school education. It is intended to promote principles that ensure accuracy, equity, and fairness in how high stakes tests are developed, administered, interpreted, and used in decision-making.

Rigorous testing is a necessary and welcomed process for strengthening learning and instruction. It is an important part of assessing how well students, educators, schools, and school systems are performing. The appropriate consequences of high stakes testing include presentation of high standards and attainment of higher achievement by all students, improved teaching and instruction, and increased access to a quality educational experience for all students. High stakes testing should increase, not decrease, opportunities for students, be designed to reflect the complexity of learning, and be used to improve instruction.

High stakes testing can be of significant assistance to educators and policy-makers at district and state levels, identifying which schools and school districts most need increased financial, material, and professional resources to achieve parity in the educational opportunities provided to diverse communities. Such test results can also indicate whether the educational system is providing a fair opportunity to learn regardless of students’ socioeconomic status, racial or ethnic heritage, gender, or English language fluency. Essentially, high stakes testing should contribute to motivation and implementation of student learning, instructional effectiveness, and effective policy decisions about distribution of resources.

Recommended Principles

Several basic principles derived from sound testing theory, ethics, and educational practice underlie the following recommended guidelines.

1. *Alignment.* High stakes testing, along with other pertinent information, can be used to assess and improve the educational system in a state or district. Alignment of assessment with agreed-upon academic standards, curriculum and instruction is critical. Standards, objectives, instructional strategies and procedures, and assessment techniques should be continuously reviewed to improve both testing and instruction. Properly implemented high stakes testing can be viewed as an indicator of program progress and collective student achievement.

2. *Multiple Measures.* No decision about student educational status or future opportunities, or any teacher, school, or school system should be based on a single high stakes test score. Decision-makers should use multiple assessment measures from multiple respondent sources to inform educational decisions. For individual students, these could include teacher-made exams, portfolios of student work, grades, formative and summative assessments, classroom-based assessments, and other performance measures.

3. *Impact.* The impact of test decisions based on high stakes testing results must be closely monitored to identify and minimize detrimental consequences on individuals or groups of students.

4. *Opportunity to Learn.* All students must have an equitable opportunity to learn the material to be assessed using high stakes testing. This is especially important for racial and ethnic minorities, students with disabilities, students with limited English proficiency, and students from economically disadvantaged environments. High stakes tests should measure student achievement, and every effort should be made to help all students reach the desired level of achievement by improving influences on student academic success, such as the quality of instruction, availability of school resources, and level of parental involvement.

5. *Availability of Remediation.* High stakes tests should allow educators to understand a student's strengths and weaknesses to better deliver effective instruction to that student to enhance learning. Students should be given the opportunity to demonstrate mastery of content measured by high stakes tests several times and students who fall below required levels of performance on high stakes tests should be identified and provided remedial assistance (i.e. after school programs, summer school, tutoring).

6. *Resources.* High stakes testing procedures that demand individual and systemic accountability must be coupled with the necessary resources. When high stakes tests identify consistent deficiencies, educational institutions need to make sufficient resources available to ameliorate problems.

7. *Development of Tests.* High stakes tests must be of very high quality. Such tests must be technically sound, free of gender, racial, and cultural bias and produce reliable, valid scores. High stakes tests should be constructed using a variety of formats and facilitate demonstration of a range of cognition, including depth of knowledge.

8. *Usefulness.* A useful high stakes test can be interpreted with ease by educators and the results readily understood by parents and students. Parents and students should also be well aware of the purposes and consequences of high stakes testing.

9. *Validity of Scores for Diverse Populations.* A high stakes test should adhere to the principles of universal design, including having questions that are concise and readable. The questions should measure what they are intended to measure, be sensitive of the diverse nature of student populations, and have a clear, easily understandable format and stimuli. If possible, high stakes tests should be administered in a language the student readily understands. If not, reasonable

accommodations, modifications and alternative assessments must be provided across all testing situations for students with limited English proficiency. Test developers must provide guidance on approved accommodations and study the efficacy of those accommodations through field tests.

10. *Policies and Applications.* Policy makers at the state and federal levels are responsible for creating a fair, just, and accurate high stakes testing process. Ongoing research should include, but not be limited to: studying the consequences of such testing, both intended and unintended; methods for improvement of the testing process and actual improvement to assessment models; the effects on graduation rates, dropout rates, student anxiety and mental health; the impact on referral for special education services; and the effect of high stakes testing on instructional practices and course content.

Policy makers should further insure that high stakes testing is an open process so that all persons affected understand what will be expected of them, what is to be measured, the implications of test results, and what future steps are required for academic improvement where needed. All technical information concerning the development, uses, criteria, and results of the test should be available for public inspection. State departments of education should develop, publish and distribute information on the purposes of high stakes testing, including cautions and limitations regarding its use.

Teachers, school administrators and students should be involved in all phases of assessment program development. Teachers should be involved in external evaluation procedures, including review of questions for various considerations, such as whether or not a question measures what it is intended to measure. Parents, school administrators, and the community at large should be given opportunities to review technical information and test interpretation information.

For the results of high stakes tests to be accurate and meaningful, all those involved must adhere scrupulously to program policies and procedures. In addition, due process procedures for contesting decisions based upon high stakes testing, such as appeals, waivers, and integrating other sources of information about the student's academic achievement, must be formalized, specific, and disseminated. Finally, student identities must be protected, with scores revealed only to those with a clear right to know as determined by the academic needs of the student.

Conclusion

High stakes testing can be used to support accountability in education and to identify segments of an educational system that need assistance. The focus of high stakes testing should be to improve the nation's educational system, and thus improve educational achievement and opportunities for all. In order to provide adequate safeguards, ACA encourages its members, educators and policy makers to become knowledgeable of and use the guidelines outlined in this position statement, the American School Counselor Association position statement (ASCA, 2004), the *Standards for Educational and Psychological Tests* (AERA, APA & NCME, 1999), *Code of Fair Testing Practices in Education* (JCTP, 2004), *Responsibilities of Users of Standardized Tests* (AAACE, 2003), and *Rights and Responsibilities of Test Takers* (JCTP, 2000).

Adherence to these principles will lead to more accurate decisions about individual students, teachers and schools through the proper use of high stakes testing. The American Counseling Association advocates the appropriate use of high quality and fair high stakes tests used to improve the education services delivered to children and youth. In the end, the goal of high stakes testing should be to assure that students are able to benefit from rigorous educational programs delivered by highly qualified teachers, and graduate from high school with the educational foundation to access all of the opportunities offered by society.

References

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