



## The Effects of High Stakes Testing in Low- and High-Performing Schools

by John Diamond and James Spillane

High stakes testing, or linking student performance on examinations to consequences for schools, has received widespread attention and debate. Proponents argue that testing offers an objective source of information for decision-making, and thus will reduce subjective assessments that contribute to stratification. Critics, in contrast, argue that these policies can marginalize low-performing students by focusing on those performing near national norms, whose success can raise the school over the threshold. In addition, they argue, high-stakes testing can limit teaching to only the material covered on standardized tests.

John Diamond and James Spillane, in their IPR working paper, "High Stakes Accountability in Urban Elementary Schools," offer an in-depth look at how four public elementary schools in Chicago—two high-performing and two low-performing schools—responded to high-stakes testing. They find that advocates' claims are best met in the high-performing schools while critics' warnings play out more often in the low-performing schools. These results, in turn, may further cement the educational stratification that occurs in many urban school systems. Family background shapes where one lives, and where a family lives, in turn, affects where their children go to school, and ultimately their educational opportunities.

### Study Background

Chicago represents one of the first urban school districts to adopt high-stakes testing, with its 1996 reforms that make schools accountable for their performance. Consistently low-performing schools, as measured by students' standardized test scores, are put on "probation" and threatened with reconstitution if they do not improve. The low-performing schools in Diamond and Spillane's study were on probation, while the high-performing schools were not.

The authors draw on interview and observation data from the four Chicago elementary schools from September 1999 to June 2000. The schools were predominately minority (African American and Hispanic), and they were stratified economically; the high-performing schools had more middle-income and white students.

All four of the schools, both high- and low-performing, responded in broadly similar ways to the accountability measures by paying more attention to exams and seeking explicit improvement in students' outcomes. However, the implementation of the accountability measures varied greatly between the high- and low-performing schools.

### School-wide Accountability Goals

Administrators in schools on probation focused, quite naturally, on getting off probation. They attempted to motivate teachers with both carrots and sticks, and they worked hard to control the impressions of external observers assigned to monitor their progress. However, the changes were often cosmetic, from stressing classroom management at the expense of instruction to changing school décor.

High-performing schools faced less clear-cut incentives, given that probation was not a direct threat. As a result, they took a different approach to accountability by working to reinforce pride in the schools' academic performance and urging teachers not to rest on their laurels. The administrators of these schools took great pains to repackage standardized test data in ways that captured teachers' attention, transforming massive spreadsheets into relatively easy-to-read charts. To maintain a focus on constant improvement, they created a template that connected teachers' daily lesson plans to the material tested, district standards, and the level of mastery for each student.

### Use of Test Data

High-performing schools invested much effort in data interpretation, analyzing movement of students between performance quartiles for the entire school and for specific grade levels. Data were also disaggregated to pinpoint trouble areas within a subject. In math, for example, tests scores were broken down into problem-solving, concepts and estimation, and computation. Weaknesses in any one area were then addressed. In schools on probation, in contrast, much less was done with the data. The data were used in the form in which they arrived from the district and were not further parsed to specific purposes.

### Focus on Instruction

Low-performing schools targeted students, grade levels, and subjects based on testing parameters. Teachers, for example, were encouraged to focus on students in the benchmark grades who were scheduled to be tested that year. Particular students were also targeted. One school identified those students who were close to reaching national norms and provided them with additional help. Thus, most effort was expended on those students who were close to making the cut-off for the probation requirement, and often at the expense of the lowest performing students in the school.

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High-performing schools, in contrast, sought to enhance learning opportunities for all. Test score data were used to diagnose the effectiveness of certain teaching approaches. In one school, for example, the data showed that instruction had likely focused in the prior year on the middle range of students, potentially missing the needs of the lowest- and highest-performing students. As a result, teaching was redirected to “teach high and then re-teach to the middle and lower” performers in the classroom.

The high-performing schools, in other words, were more likely to use high-stakes testing in ways that were consistent with arguments put forth by proponents. The test results were used objectively to define students’ specific instructional needs and provide a basis for school-level instructional decision-making. In contrast, probation schools had a less systematic strategy for turning test results into useful infor-

mation, and relied more on managing the impressions of external stakeholders. They were also more likely to target interventions to specific students and grade levels.

### Policy Implications

Policy implementation is very much a local process, and understanding the variation in context even within districts is critical. The findings from this study, for example, suggest that the effectiveness of high-stakes testing may depend on the status of the school.

In low-performing schools, such testing can lead to practices that increase, rather than decrease, gatekeeping. Students identified as near the national norm, for example, can be targeted for intense instruction at the expense of other students. Improved academics in schools on probation may only apply to a subset of students and within the subset of topics tested.

From a broader perspective, accountability may work against increased educational equality. There are several types of schools in contemporary urban school systems, from private schools, to magnet schools (often considered the “elite” public schools), to neighborhood schools, which can be further divided by low- and high-performing schools. Social class and race are important factors in determining which school a child attends, with the better schools often more available to middle-class children and less available to low-income African American students. As the authors show, the different types of public schools are likely to implement the testing policy differently.

In other words, policies could unwittingly exacerbate, rather than challenge, educational stratification between high- and low-performing schools—and by extension, lower and middle-income schools. If policymakers fail to attend to these issues, middle-income schools (and those serving fewer students of color) are likely to benefit more, further sharpening the divide between poor and wealthier schools.

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