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The Impact of High-Stakes Testing: Recommendations for Professional School Counselors and Other Support Personnel

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Historical Perspectives of Accountability

The use of tests to grade students began in the early 1900's with tests such as Rice's spelling test, Stone's arithmetic test, Thorndike's handwriting scale, and the Hillegas' composition scale (Grant, 2004). The development of intellectual and achievement tests came about during the era of World I and World War II (Grant) and became the basis for more sophisticated test development and testing procedures.

The American Psychological Association instituted a project in 1948 for the purpose of classifying educational objectives. Their intent was to classify "student behavior that represented the intended outcomes of the educational process" (Cherryholmes, 1999, 12), and this development was significant to the evaluation and assessment of the current educational accountability system.

Testing intensified during the late 1950's as an indirect result of the discovery of the Soviet's space program (Grant, 2004). Congress passed the National Defense Education Act for the purpose of promoting the defense of the nation, and many view this Act as the beginning of modern school counseling programs. The NDEA provided funds for school counseling services in all high schools and for developing school counselor preparation programs (Lambie and Williamson, 2004). As defined by this legislation, the role of school counselors was to identify and foster the development of high school students who showed promise in the subjects of math and science. The act created a surge of national testing and reform in education. The testing movement used "large-scale, standardized achievement tests to assess student achievement (and school accountability), grew in popularity" (Grant, 6). The 1970s ushered in an era of declining school enrollment and budgetary cuts that had an impact on the role and functions of school counselors (Lambie and Williamson). Several important milestones within the arena of educational reform occurred during this decade. First, in March of 1970 President Nixon gave his "Message on Education Reform" which is credited with "having ushered in a new era of accountability" (Hansen, 1993, 13). During that same year, nationwide testing began for the first National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).

In the early 1980s, the crisis situation of public education came to the forefront of public awareness, generating dialogue about the need for school reform. According to Schwallie-Giddis, ter Maat, and Pak (2003), *A Nation at Risk* "became the most quoted and read national publication, not only by educators, but by business and community people from the private and public sector as well" (p. 170). In 1989 President George H. W. Bush organized the Governor's Education Summit which "led to a new wave of education reform driven by accountability and undergirded by a set of general educational goals for the nation" (Hansen, 1993, 15). Testing continued to intensify throughout the nation and "by the mid 1980's, 33 states had mandated some form of minimum competency testing" (Grant, 2004, 6) for high school graduation.

The 21st century ushered in the No Child Left Behind Act (2001), the platform of George W. Bush. The

main goal of this law was closing the achievement gap between minority and disadvantaged youth and their peers. The focus shifted from “input” to “outcome,” rendering all school personnel responsible for student achievement. The No Child Left Behind Act affected stakeholders in all states with mandates and guidelines for implementing programs that would promote educational change. This law solidified high-stakes testing use, and failure to comply with its guidelines became directly connected to funding.

Positive and Negative Consequences of High-Stakes Testing

The positive and negative effects of high-stakes testing are well-documented (Gratz, 2000; Heubert and Hauser, 1999). The development of an accountability system that is based on the results of students’ tests has intensified the pressure to perform for students and schools (Gratz). Many policy decisions and often the promotion of students are determined by these test results – hence the term “high-stakes testing” (Heubert and Hauser). Because of the high stakes involved, pressure for improving scores has an impact on teachers and their practices (Heubert and Hauser; Merrow, 2002).

The positive effects of accountability include providing students better information about their own knowledge and skills and motivating them to work harder in school (Stecher, 2002). In addition, other positive effects include clarification for students on what material to study and helping students associate personal effort with rewards. Positive effects for teachers include a stronger understanding of individual student needs and areas of strength and weakness. As with students, teachers also benefit from knowing what material to teach and often align their instruction with standards. School counselors have suggested that some positive impacts of high-stakes testing include increased parental contact, a standardized curriculum, and a school-wide common goal (Brown, Galassi, and Akos, 2004).

In contrast, Stecher (2002) noted that high-stakes testing affect student morale and motivation. The negative effects of high-stakes testing for students can include frustration and discouragement, competitiveness, and the devaluing of grades and school assessments (Stecher). McNeil (2000) discussed the issues surrounding an educational system that uses high-stakes testing for decision making such as promotion and high school graduation. This researcher described one of the negative effects of standardization as “silencing of two voices most important...the teachers and the children” (p. xxi-xxii), concluding this type of system devalues the concept of whole child development and “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” (p. 733). Tested material and objectives are taught at the expense of objectives that are not tested (Darling-Hammond, 1991, 1985), objectives such as interpersonal and intrapersonal learning. Darling-Hammond and Wise pointed out that teachers perceive testing as causes for narrowed curriculum and teaching to the test, diminishing teachers’ sense of professional worth (Stecher). Professional school counselors are also negatively impacted by high-stakes testing, especially those who serve as testing coordinators. School counselors report that testing has strained their relationships with teachers and students and has placed them in a “bad guy” role (Brown, Galassi, and Akos, 2004). Brown, Galassi, and Akos found that counselors had decreased morale and feelings of resentment about high-stakes testing.

Implications and Recommendations for School Counselors and other Support Personnel

It is important for professional school counselors to understand the history of high-stakes testing and its effects on teachers, students, and themselves. Using the framework of the Transforming School

Counseling Initiative, the following recommendations are made for school counselors and other support personnel for their involvement in high-stakes testing.

Be a Leader:

1. Be positive. Understand that testing does affect the morale of the school and that it can strain a school counselor's relationship with teachers and students, especially if the school counselor is also the testing coordinator (Brown, Galassi, and Akos, 2004).
2. Be a coach and a comforter. Triplett and Barksdale (2005) suggest that having a coach can increase students' self-confidence and help them feel in control. Also, having a comforter can help children feel more supported and decrease feelings of isolation and alienation. School counselors can affect the motivation and attitude of students (Thorn and Mulvenon, 2002).
3. Promote, plan, and implement school-wide programs that address high-stakes testing issues (e.g., relaxation techniques, testing tips, administration and scoring procedures, etc.).

Be an Advocate:

1. Advocate to change the culture of testing. Help your teachers and students feel in control. High-stakes testing can be overwhelming and often teachers and students feel like something is being done to them rather than feeling like they are doing something. Testing administration procedures are often very prescribed and regulated. The teachers and students cannot control the test, but there are aspects of testing they can control. Triplett and Barksdale (2005) found that even small changes, such as allowing students to remove their shoes, chewing gum, and reading help students feel less angry, isolated, and nervous.
2. Advocate for other measures of achievement to be used in conjunction to high-stakes testing results.

Be a Collaborator:

1. Collaborate with school and community teams to focus on rewards, incentives, and support for students during high-stakes testing.
2. Collaborate within school to develop staff training on team responses to students' testing needs. Knowledge is the key. Conduct educational workshops and inservices for teachers and parents that help them understand students' needs and responses to testing. Even if the information you present is a "review" it can be reassuring and it can help the different groups feel more in control of the process.

Counsel and Coordinate:

1. Be a key liaison working with students and school staff to set and support high aspirations for all students.
2. Coordinate staff training initiatives to address students' testing needs.

Be an Assessor:

1. Be proactive. Assess school conditions that may impede students' testing success and work for

change.

2. Interpret student data from high-stakes testing for use in school-wide planning for change.

Conclusion

Stecher (2002) questioned the validity of large testing because “without monitoring such changes in behavior, we will not know the extent to which gains in scores are due to real improvement in achievement rather than differences in testing conditions or other factors” (p. 81). Several potential effects of high-stakes testing are possible, both positive and negative. All stakeholders feel these effects, including professional school counselors. High-stakes testing using the method of objective based evaluation has created an impact on education and on its stakeholders, including professional school counselors and other support personnel.

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