

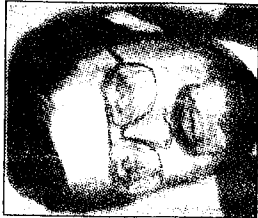
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TAAS plan shows bias against Hispanics

The history of psychological testing in America provides numerous examples of public officials trying to control the level and racial mix of immigration through the use of "intelligence" tests.

It hardly was a coincidence that undesirable immigrants were found to test lower on these measures of "intelligence" and subsequently denied participation in the American dream.

History appears to be repeating itself as Gov. George W. Bush promises to end social promotions in public schools by requiring passing scores on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills. Through such a policy, Mr. Bush is prepared to fail thousands of students by substituting TAAS scores for school grades.



EDWARD RINCON

Although thinly veiled as an effort to ensure "excellence in education," the policy's implications for Hispanics are evidenced by the disparate TAAS pass rates for the 1998 senior class: 41 percent of Hispanic seniors failed the TAAS, compared to only 15 percent of whites.

If successful in expanding the TAAS passing requirement to the lower grades, Mr. Bush shouldn't expect letters of appreciation from Hispanics for the many opportunities he will be creating in such low-paying occupations as fast food and construction.

Mr. Bush should keep in mind that academic excellence is a direct result of good teaching and learning environments that are available to all children, not just a privileged few.

There is sufficient reason to believe that his ill-conceived policy won't achieve its intended outcome and will come at a significant cost to the state's human resources:

- TAAS failures include students who are doing well in school course work. For example, a 1993 Texas Education Agency analysis of math performance showed that while most white students who passed their math course (86 percent) also passed the TAAS math test (72 percent), only 44 percent of Hispanic students passed the TAAS math test even though 75 percent had passed their math course.

- Hispanic students don't have the same opportunity to learn the skills measured by the TAAS as white students. Schools with predominantly Hispanic students are more likely to employ teachers who aren't certified to teach in their fields. Why penalize students for a problem that is beyond their control?

- TAAS scores are inadequate substitutes for school grades. No test has been shown to accurately predict success in life. Decades of academic research confirm that a student's high school grade average is the best predictor of

college performance.

- Remediation efforts aren't likely to lead to significant improvements in TAAS passing rates. The reason is simple: Students probably will receive remediation from the same or similarly qualified teachers, who aren't likely to teach them anything substantially new to improve their TAAS performance.

- Retention inevitably will lead to increased dropout rates. As Hispanic students are held back and become older than other students in the same grade, they likely will drop out of school out of frustration and seek other alternatives. With a Hispanic dropout rate already approaching 50 percent and an overcrowded prison system, it is apparent that our political leaders have been myopic in evaluating the long-term consequences of the social promotions policy.

In summary, I would recommend the following to Mr. Bush:

- Abandon expanding the use of the TAAS in social promotions until there is sufficient evidence that it measures the same skills among Hispanic and white students.

- TAAS scores shouldn't be compared among schools where students' exposure

to the state-mandated curriculum clearly is different.

- All students should have equal access to teachers who are certified to teach in their fields.

- Any student with A or B grades should be promoted or allowed to graduate, regardless of his or her TAAS scores.

- Redirect the tax dollars being spent on TAAS testing to better pay for teachers and improved learning environments for students.

- Abandon any efforts to require grade promotion based on TAAS scores until there are concrete suggestions about how to provide remediation to overaged students who fail the TAAS.

- Teachers should spend their school time teaching the required curriculum to students, not preparing students for the TAAS. Rather, test preparation services should be retained for that task.

We all should be suspicious when politicians advocate public policies that limit the opportunities of vulnerable groups like Hispanics. Mr. Bush should keep in mind that academic excellence is a direct result of good teaching and learning environments that are available to all children, not just a privileged few.

Politicians would do well to spend less time thinking of creative ways of punishing students to further their political agendas.

Edward T. Rincon is president of Rincon & Associates, a Dallas market research company that specializes in ethnic markets.