

VIEWPOINTS

TAAS Terror

High-stakes test unfair to minorities

If we have learned one important lesson throughout U.S. history, it is that politics and testing policy — like oil and water — don't mix very well. In their efforts to protect the quality of societal institutions, politicians often have demonstrated an uncanny ability for using the science of testing to create public policy that reflects their own personal anxieties. That is especially true when those anxieties have to do with



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groups the politicians consider threatening or undesirable, such as African-Americans, Hispanics and the foreign-born.

The Texas Assessment of Academic Skills is just another reincarnation of this political paranoia that often is used as a "scientific" basis for justifying the systematic denial of educational opportunities to such groups.

Like their predecessors, Texas politicians apparently are prepared to pursue their missionary zeal for quality public schools at any human cost.

The casualties of the TAAS accountability system probably are less known to the public than all the hype about TAAS pep rallies and passing rates. It is estimated from court records in a recent lawsuit against the state that more than 100,000 students have been denied a high school diploma as a result of not passing the exam.

Perhaps that statistic failed to get much public reaction because the vast majority of those students are Hispanics and African-Americans — students who many thought "deserved" this punishment. But the Texas Education Agency predicts that the introduction of TAAS II in the near future will produce massive failure rates and broaden the casualty list to include many white students as well.

Ironically, longstanding laws that guarantee access to a free public education for all U.S. citizens are being undermined by this testing policy that effectively transforms a student's 12 years of public schooling into a meaningless experience,

even for those who satisfactorily completed their required schoolwork.

Since its inception, the TAAS accountability system has escalated high school dropout rates, led to numerous instances of cheating, angered teachers who are devoting more instructional time to TAAS preparation and effectively ended the college aspirations of many Hispanic and African-American children.

The TAAS testing policy hasn't been without its beneficiaries. Test developers have become wealthier each year, thanks to the state's continued reliance on such tests. The fast-food industry also has enjoyed a steady stream of job applicants since the inception of the testing policy. Indeed, without a high school diploma, students are forced into low-skilled, low-paying jobs that limit their lifetime earnings and opportunities. A college education is even further removed from their reality.

Did those students "deserve" such a harsh punishment? According to the folksy wisdom of some Texas politicians, of course they did. Doesn't the high school diploma now have more meaning? And wouldn't it amount to "soft bigotry" to expect less of these underachievers who can't pass such a simple test? More important, the politicians readily point to the increasing TAAS pass rates as evidence of continuing improvements in the quality of schools.

Nonetheless, recent studies by the National Academy of Sciences and the Rand Corporation concluded that (a) it is a violation of professional testing practices to base a high-stakes decision on the results of just one test, (b) the high TAAS passing rates have been artificially inflated by test sponsors through the systematic exclusion of students with lower test scores, (c) the tests have a documented weak relationship to actual school grades, and (d) political

Don't blame others for our accepting failure

The Boy Who Cried Wolf was the one nursery tale that haunted me as a child — not because I had nightmares of hungry wolves hovering nearby but because the intended lesson was so obvious.

Whenever I was caught whining or complaining too much, my mother would begin, "Do you remember what happened...?"

I didn't have to hear the rest of the question to know she was referring to the boy who carried his cries to such extremes that no one paid attention to him when there really was an attack.

These days, I am reminded of the tale — more than I would like to admit — by some of my fellow Latinos. They are upset with the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills because they believe the test has a built-in bias against Hispanics.

On a recent talk-radio program about the TAAS, a listener called in and asked the guest, who was an elementary school principal and a Latina, if she thought the test discriminated against Hispanics. She was adamant in her assertion that it didn't.

In fact, many of my friends who are teachers and administrators share her sentiment.

So, if that is the case, why do so many of my comrades insistently cry out that the TAAS is biased and intended to fail our children?

The real failure lies within ourselves. Instead of crying over unfair tests, we should be crying out for fundamental changes in the schools and our communities.

No one cries for changes in the poor expectations that some teachers and administrators have of our children. Because of such assumptions, an inordinate number of Latino children are kept in lower-level classes, and they rarely are encouraged to enroll in

advanced-placement or honors classes. No one cries over the fact that many Hispanic parents don't feel welcome in their own children's schools.

No one cries to make our parents accountable for their children's educational needs. Forget the argument that parents work several jobs and are too tired — everybody's parents work to make ends meet. There still are children who, though they may be latchkey kids, stay in school, do their homework and succeed. How? Parents care enough about their *familia* to look at their children's work, ask questions and make it a priority to know the whereabouts of their kids.

No one cries over the fact that Latinas have the highest dropout rate of any other racial or ethnic group. Girls as young as 12 are getting pregnant, skipping school and looking at a future subsidized with minimum-wage jobs or, worse, welfare.

No one cries over the fact that we now have reached majority status and that, if trends continue, we will be the worst educated of all ethnic groups. In other words, the majority of *la raza* will be relegated to low-paying jobs that require few skills.

No cries for change can be heard from our Latino leaders over such atrocities. No, they would rather focus their energy on chastising the president of the University of Texas at Austin for saying there weren't more Hispanic administrators at UT because there was a shortage of qualified applicants.

The sad point is that it is true. Yet, instead of crying out about the shameful fact that there aren't more Hispanics with Ph.D.s eligible to be hired at the university level, those representatives chose to cry out that something about it.

Pretty soon, people will tire of hearing the cries of bruised feelings and will ignore the real cries — the ones for help.

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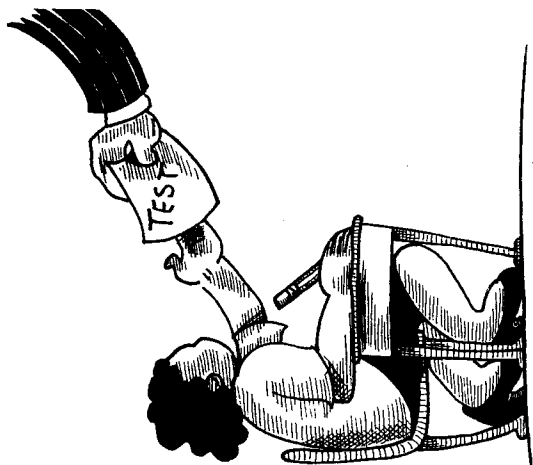
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agendas, not school quality, drive the setting of the testing standards. Unfortunately, parents have been blinded by their misplaced confidence in politicians who are willing to compromise their children's educational future for an ill-conceived political agenda that assumes it is more efficient to eliminate the low-performing students than to teach them.

In order to restore some sanity to the TAAS accountability system, perhaps what is needed is a grass-roots effort similar to Mothers Against Drunk Driving, an organization that demonstrated the power of women to radically change the legislative inertia surrounding drunken driving.

Parents will need to lead the battle in the Texas Legislature for testing policy reform that places more emphasis on effective teaching than on the state's endless preoccupation with devising new ways to punish Texas schoolchildren with tests like the TAAS.

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