

VIEWPOINTS

Texas emphasis on tests is irresponsible

Negligent marketing is a new legal term used to describe companies that act irresponsibly in the sale of harmful products, such as the firearms manufacturers that were held liable for the deaths caused by the careless distribution of guns.

A recent study, initiated at the request of Congress, suggests that Texas legislators are coming dan-

gerously close to their own form of negligent marketing by expanding the use of the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills test despite overwhelming evidence of its harmful effects on Hispanic and African-American students.

A panel of testing experts representing the National Academy of Sciences recently reported its findings on using minimum competency tests to retain students in their current grades or to deny them high school diplomas. In its report, entitled "High Stakes Testing for Tracking, Promotion and Graduation," the panel found:

- On average, children who were retained were worse off, in terms of both personal adjustment and academics, than their promoted

counterparts.

- Students who repeated a grade were significantly more likely to drop out of high school than students who weren't repeating a grade.

- Failing a minimum competency graduation test significantly increased the likelihood that a student would leave school, especially for minority and/or bilingual students with good grades.

- There is little evidence that graduation exit exams have been properly validated against the defined curriculum and actual instruction.

Whether through negligence or indifference, the public has been misled into thinking that student achievement would improve substantially as a result of the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills. On the contrary, there are substantial reasons to believe that Hispanic and African-American schoolchildren will continue to suffer great harm from the expansion of a testing policy with unproven benefits.

The Texas Education Agency found that, from 1993 to 1997, nearly 70 percent of all the students held back in Texas' public schools were Hispanic or African-American. The agency provided no evidence to confirm that those students actually benefited from the decision to retain them. Texas lawmakers seem not to care, either.

Remedial instruction isn't likely

to help students who are unable to pass high-stakes tests like the TAAS. The Texas Assessment Skills Program was another brainstorm by legislators who believed that a college degree would have more meaning if students were required to pass a test before they could continue their college studies.

Although remediation programs were provided to the many students who failed the Texas Assessment Skills Program, 40 percent of the students still failed the reading portion of the test, 30 percent couldn't pass the writing portion, and 58 percent failed the math portion. The reasons for the dismal results were clear:

Remedial class instructors were poorly trained, remedial programs were poorly coordinated, and courses rarely were evaluated.

Test score improvements don't necessarily reflect better teaching. While advocates of TAAS frequently boast about TAAS score improvements, test score gains are artificially "inflated" by the creative exclusion of low TAAS scores for the thousands of students who drop out of school or decide to obtain a GED.

The curriculum provided to students in urban schools isn't related to the curriculum defined by the TAAS. The Texas Education Agency found that 39 percent of the students who earned an "A" in their math course failed the math portion of the TAAS, while another 56 percent of the students earning a "B"

grade also failed.

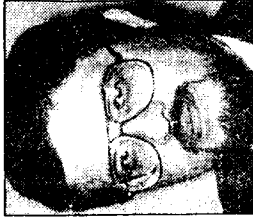
The increasing pressure to pass these tests, coupled with lax security, increases the probability of cheating. Thirty-three Texas schools recently were named in a statewide investigation of possible tampering on the TAAS.

Minority parents may unknowingly agree to retain their child with the expectation that it is a better educational option than promotion. Unfamiliar with the language of testing or the problems associated with the TAAS, Hispanic and black parents aren't likely to challenge a school staff recommendation to retain a child.

All of these findings should be considered a wake-up call for Hispanic and African-American parents to contact their legislators and demand to know why their children are being placed at greater risk, against the advice of a congressionally mandated panel of testing experts.

The "High Stakes" report should be required reading for all Texas legislators who apparently need to raise their standards as well in the area of fair testing practices.

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