States must hold all public elementary and secondary school students to the same challenging academic content and student achievement standards . . . all children are expected to achieve to the same high levels of learning.


America will not succeed in the 21st century unless we do a far better job of educating our sons and daughters. . . . And the race starts today. I am issuing a challenge to our nation’s governors and school boards, principals and teachers, businesses and non-profits, parents and students: if you set and enforce rigorous and challenging standards and assessments; if you put outstanding teachers at the front of the classroom; if you turn around failing schools—your state can win a Race to the Top grant that will not only help students outcompete workers around the world, but let them fulfill their God-given potential.

—Barack Obama, July 24, 2009

Ten years ago at this time, we were both finishing up our doctoral studies (Lisa was teaching high school English as well), and with the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation being implemented, one question loomed in our minds: What would the future hold for K–12 students and teachers and for us as teacher educators? A decade later, we have learned some of the answers.

NCLB, or the 2001 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Schools Act (ESEA), stood on four basic premises: stronger accountability for schools and teachers; increased flexibility and local control over federal funds; greater schooling options for parents; and a focus on proven, research-based teaching methods. Two aspects of the law had the greatest and most immediate impact on literacy teachers: increased accountability and research-based instruction. Under NCLB students were to be tested
annually in reading (and math) in grades 3 through 8 and once between grades 10 and 12. In addition, teachers were expected to use “new” and “right” instructional techniques to teach literacy. These initiatives were put in place with the best of intentions, but they produced, unfortunately, negative results. As George Wood predicted in 2004: “NCLB cannot, will not, and perhaps was even not intended to deliver on its promises” (p. xi). In this editorial, we explore the unanticipated—although, perhaps, inevitable—results of NCLB for teachers and students.

**Increased Accountability**

*Under No Child Left Behind, states are working to close the achievement gap and make sure all students, including those who are disadvantaged, achieve academic proficiency. Annual state and school district report cards inform parents and communities about state and school progress. Schools that do not make progress must provide supplemental services, such as free tutoring or after-school assistance; take corrective actions; and, if still not making adequate yearly progress after five years, make dramatic changes to the way the school is run.*

—http://ed.gov/nclb/overview/intro/4pillars.html

We are all familiar with the face of increased accountability produced by NCLB. States were required to develop and implement annual testing, and schools were sanctioned if their students did not meet the requirements of adequate yearly progress. Weeks of instructional time were sacrificed to prepare students to take tests and then more time was sacrificed for the actual testing. Accusations of cheating on these high-stakes tests are now rampant, which was perhaps to have been anticipated due to the impact of test scores on buildings and on individual teachers. In some cases, teachers’ names and their students’ test scores were published in newspapers, with devastating results.

**Increased Testing Time = Decreased Learning Time**

It shouldn’t surprise anyone in education to deduce that increased accountability leads to more time focused on test preparation, which paradoxically takes away from high-quality teaching (how this escaped, and continues to escape, politicians baffles us). What we could not have imagined, even knowing there would be annual testing in grades 3 through 8, is just how much instructional time has been lost. According to one Texas legislator, 45 days per year are allotted for testing (Bonnen, 2011). As one middle school teacher in Arizona blogged so eloquently (see fig. 1), his students nearly lose one instructional quarter per year for test-related activities.
As teacher educators, we see this reduction in instructional time firsthand; our students spend weeks of their residency semesters—when they should be focusing on the best possible instructional methods, when they should be learning the ins and outs of working with students to improve their understanding of the word and the world (Freire, 1970)—preparing for standardized tests, proctoring standardized tests, and then giving make-up tests to students who missed the first round. That this is not the best use of time is obvious; what is not so obvious to us is why this waste of instructional time continues without much in the way of backlash from students, parents, teachers, or administrators. The recent Save Our Schools march (http://www.saveourschoolsmarch.org/) in Washington, DC, raised the issue of the impact of standardized tests on teachers and students, but relatively little media attention was given to this rally. Perhaps this disregard of the problematic nature of standardized testing is because most critics of education have swallowed the idea that the best way to measure students’ progress is through the use of a high-stakes test.

When I consider my school district’s week-long Galileo pre-assessment and quarterly assessments alongside the state-mandated AIMS test, it becomes apparent that students spend almost 17% of the school year taking standardized tests. When added to the standardized-style multiple choice tests at the site level (which have become fairly common), I find that students will easily spend 28% of the school year taking multiple choice tests. Now, assuming teachers try and avoid test prep (two days before each test) and wasted days (a few before breaks and on the last few days of school), students will easily experience quality instruction for less than 60% of the school year. In other words, they might as well ditch the second quarter.


Figure 1. Testing Insanity: Number of Days Spent Testing
Fallacies of High-Stakes Testing

In their book *Collateral Damage: How High-Stakes Testing Corrupts America’s Schools* (2007) Sharon L. Nichols and David C. Berliner present a list of flawed arguments put forward by NCLB supporters. We present some of them here:

1. Students work harder and learn more when they have to take high-stakes tests.

2. Students will be motivated to do their best and score well on high-stakes tests.

3. Scoring well on high-stakes tests leads to feelings of success by students, while doing poorly on such tests leads to increased effort to learn.

4. Students and teachers need high-stakes tests to know what is important to teach and to learn.

5. Teachers need to be held accountable through high-stakes tests to motivate them to teach better and to push the lazy ones to work harder.

6. The high-stakes tests associated with NCLB are good measures of the curricula taught in schools.

7. The high-stakes tests provide a kind of level playing field, an equal opportunity for all students to demonstrate their knowledge and skill.

8. Teachers use the results of high-stakes tests to help provide better instruction to students.

While high-quality formative assessments can provide teachers and students with information to aid teaching and learning, high-stakes testing such as that associated with NCLB detracts from authentic teaching and learning and leads to what is known as “Campbell’s Law”: “the more any quantitative social indicator is used for social decision-making, the more subject it will be to corruption pressures and the more apt it will be to distort and corrupt the social processes it was intended to monitor” (cited in Nichols & Berliner, 2007, pp. 26–27). In short, when test scores become the weightiest factor, then schools and/or teachers might go to excessive lengths to ensure that those scores are good (Nichols & Berliner, 2007). Accusations of cheating—from teachers helping students during the test, to teachers/administrators changing students’ answers after the test, to principals mislabeling dropouts as earning GEDs to not have their scores count at all—have occurred in numerous states.
Opening the Conversation

Raising this point does not mean that we are metaphorically shaking our fingers in the faces of teachers and administrators. Leslie remembers well, as the English department head in her rural Texas high school, being told by a superintendent that “those test scores had better come up, or some people are going to be out of a job.” Instead, we see that teachers—and students—who are given the tools they need to educate students can do almost miraculous things. We believe in teachers, and we want more for them and their students than can be made possible through high-stakes testing.

Humiliating Teachers to Do Better

When it comes to using tests to “motivate” teachers to do better, there’s been an analogy floating around for quite a while that we like. Take the worst professional football team in the country. To encourage them to win more games next season, take away their protective gear, team doctors, and nice practice facility. When they have to play games against better outfitted teams, it will inspire them to win. Sound ridiculous? No more ridiculous than thinking that humiliating teachers will inspire them to teach better or that taking away schools’ resources will result in higher test scores.

The increased accountability associated with NCLB has created a system that relies on the one test as indicator of success. Last year, in a widely published story, the Los Angeles Times came under attack when an elementary school teacher committed suicide after his students’ scores were printed in the paper. The newspaper used a value-added model (which, in itself, has come under scrutiny for being flawed) to compare and report teachers’ effectiveness. Below is part of the story from the Times:

Yet year after year, one fifth-grade class learns far more than the other down the hall. The difference has almost nothing to do with the size of the class, the students or their parents.

It’s their teachers.

With Miguel Aguilar, students consistently have made striking gains on state standardized tests, many of them vaulting from the bottom third of students in Los Angeles schools to well above average, according to a Times analysis. John Smith’s pupils next door have started out slightly ahead of Aguilar’s but by the end of the year have been far behind.

In Los Angeles and across the country, education officials have long known of the often huge disparities among teachers. They’ve seen the indelible effects, for good and ill, on children. But rather than analyze and address these disparities, they have opted mostly to ignore them. (Felch, Song, & Smith, 2010)

We wonder if the way Mr. Smith was portrayed motivated him to be a “better” teacher.
The Proof Is in the Testing

Unfortunately, these testing and accountability mandates have had little impact on closing the achievement gap—one of the pillars of NCLB. In their analyses of NAEP scores Dee and Jacob (2010) did not find any data that NCLB accountability had any influence on reading achievement among fourth or eighth graders (p. 56). Perhaps this is because the testing regime has not taken into account the impact of poverty and oppression on educational achievement: “At a time when the percentage of Americans living in severe poverty has reached a thirty-two-year high, NCLB seeks to improve the schools poor students attend through threats and sanctions rather than the serious investments in education and welfare such an effort truly requires” (Darling-Hammond, 2007, para. 9).

Janet D. Johnson shows the effects conditions like this have on preservice teachers. In her article (this issue) “A Rainforest in Front of a Bulldozer: The Literacy Practices of Teachers Committed to Social Justice,” she tells the stories of two teacher candidates at Riverbend High School placed “in difficult conditions, including a lack of adequate resources, an unresponsive administration, and students who were often underprepared for the expectations of NCLB and the state” (p. 159). Until the national, state, and local administrators and policymakers begin to take seriously the effects of poverty and oppression on the educational achievement of children, we will continue to see teachers scapegoated and held to unachievable standards.

Proven, Research-Based Teaching Methods

The second of the four NCLB foci we would like to address is the insistence on scientifically proven, research-based teaching methods. On the surface, perhaps, this sounds like an important effort to ensure that students are taught with only those methods that have been shown by educational researchers to be useful for particular populations. When the National Reading Panel (NRP) was formed in 1997 (as the result of a request from the U.S. Congress to the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development), it was given the charge of assessing the research on approaches used to teach children to read. In doing so, the panel chose to disregard research that used qualitative, descriptive, observational, or correlational models. Although the members of the National Reading Panel did suggest that future reviews should incorporate these forms of research, their findings—limited as they were by the narrowing of research chosen—have been justly criticized. Nevertheless, the findings of the NRP were used to craft Reading First, which subsequently came under fire for cronyism at worst and ineffectiveness at best: “However,
the building blocks of instruction were often addressed utilizing only certain instructional materials (assessments, textbooks, workbooks, etc.), some of which seemed to profit Reading First authors themselves” (Grunwald, 2006).

The focus on systematic phonics in Reading First schools—and it should be noted that in order to qualify as a Reading First school, the children who attend that school must have a certain proportion below the poverty line—has not only meant that entire classroom libraries and curricula were abandoned but that a narrow range of texts was recommended.

The mission of the National Right to Read Foundation (NRRF), since its inception in 1993, has been to return scientifically based reading instruction and what it deems good literature to every elementary school in the United States. Still active and influencing literacy instruction nationally, NRRF was involved in reauthorizing NCLB and the Reading First law in 2007. What does the right to read entail, according to the NRRF? Additional phonics instruction until cumulative progress indicators are successfully completed. The bottom line? If approved reading texts must be 80% decodable, children’s literature is effectively removed from the classroom equation; a book like *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (Carle, 1969) is not decodable based on those formulas. (Lehr, 2010, pp. 27–28)

The removal of children’s literature and of student choice from classrooms goes directly against what literacy researchers have long found important for not only teaching children to read but also teaching them to comprehend and to be lifelong readers. Duke and Pearson (2002) recommend that supportive classroom contexts for literacy include the following features, in addition to “facility in the accurate and automatic decoding of words” (p. 208):

› a great deal of time spent reading real texts in a range of text genres, for real reasons;
› an environment rich in vocabulary and concept development, discussion of words and word meanings;
› time spent writing texts for others to comprehend; and
› an environment rich in high-quality talk about text (p. 208).

It seems to us that these features should be found in all K–12 classrooms, but perhaps more than anywhere else in English language arts classrooms. In addition, the limiting of literacy instruction for those students from poor backgrounds produced more, rather than less, inequity. According to Cummins (2007), the interpretation of phonics instruction in government policy has exacerbated the already existing pattern of differentiated instruction across socioeconomic groups. Lower-income students are more likely to
be taught in classroom environments where there is less opportunity to read extensively and less encouragement to engage in inquiry-oriented learning than was the case before the implementation of the 2001 No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation. (p. 564)

Funding for Reading First has been slashed, but many schools are still using the materials and methods that were advocated for, and even required, through that federal program.

**What Do the Next 10 Years Hold?**

Ten years ago it was NCLB; now it is the Common Core State Standards and Race to the Top. As of now, more than 40 states and the District of Columbia have adopted the standards and two consortia have received federal funding of close to $350 million to develop assessments aligned with the standards (Porter, McMaken, Hwang, & Yang, 2011). Porter et al. (2011) offer several rationales why a national curriculum would benefit the country: shared expectations for all students, more focused standards, efficiency, and quality assessments (i.e., computer-based testing). For psychometricians, efficiency and computer-based testing might make sense, but literacy teachers and learners are not so sure.

If our reading and analyses of current educational politics is accurate, then the next 10 years look no better for our nation’s schools and students than the past 10, and the trouble starts even earlier for students. Before, with NCLB, testing began in grade 3. Now, there is money tied to prekindergarten students. As *Education Week* reported in July 2011 (Gewertz, 2011), to win a grant in the Race to the Top competition for early-childhood education assistance, states would have to create rating systems for their programs, construct standards and tests for young children, and establish clear expectations for what teachers should know.

Later that same month, a guide regarding the Common Core Standards for English Language Arts began circulating around the Internet. Coauthors David Coleman and Susan Pimentel—with funding by the Gates Foundation—created a set of “publishers criteria” that highlight “the key ideas of the standards and describing the qualities of instructional materials they consider a faithful reflection of them” (Gewertz, 2011). The approach to teaching is faithful to the New Critical approach; building off a text (i.e., deviating) in classroom discussions is seen as negative. As Certo, Apol, Wibbens, and Hawkins (this issue) point out, the Common Core State Standards favor poetry reading over poetry writing. They claim that
Opening the Conversation

Preservice teachers have limited experience reading and writing poetry, and that if they are to teach poetry in meaningful ways to their future students, they need to have compelling experiences with poetry in teacher education—ones that take into account their former experiences and incoming dispositions and that invite them to begin to live “the life of a poet.” (p. 102)

As with NCLB, it appears that many outsiders with little or no classroom teaching experience are dictating what will be published and what teachers will be forced (either through the publishing monopoly or legislative pressure) to follow and implement. Pimentel is touted online as an expert in English language arts curriculum and standards reform (and serves in this capacity through several groups and governing boards)—despite not appearing to have any training or actual teaching experience in the field. Every website we went to offers the same cryptic background on Coleman: Mr. Coleman was a lecturer at the University of London before going to work in the pro bono education area of McKinsey and Company; he is a Rhodes Scholar and a Yale University graduate (as well as the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge).2

This newest round of external standards and testing is upon us; what are we going to do about it? In their keynote talks at the 2011 CEE Summer Conference at Fordham University, adapted for this issue’s Extending the Conversation section, John S. Mayher and Robert P. Yagelski challenge us to revisit, rethink, and reshape what we do and how we do it. We close with their powerful calls.

Time is short, I think, because the pressure of the common core and the tests that will soon accompany it will mean that literacy education, not English education, will be the defining paradigm, and effective literacy education will have to serve all students. Preparing teachers to succeed in Common Core classrooms will require more than simply changing our name or adding a phrase or two to our definition. It will require, I think, a fundamental paradigm shift through which we build university programs that integrate levels, perspectives, and accommodation to all students’ needs in active partnership with K–12 teachers and a wide range of higher education colleagues in arts and sciences as well as education. (Mayher, p. 186)

So let us challenge the current discourses of education reform and literacy instruction, which focus on “standards” and economic competitiveness. Let us reshape these conversations to emphasize the humanness of schooling and the capacity of writing to help us live our lives more fully and mindfully and to seek well-being. We English educators are in a uniquely important position to take up this challenge, for we are charged
with helping to prepare the next generation of English teachers. And what we teach them about writing can ripple through the lives of the many thousands of students whom our students will teach. (Yagelski, p. 202)

Notes
2. If you want to learn more about the direction of the CCSS and the influence of publishers and “think tanks,” do a Web search for Ms. Pimentel and/or Mr. Coleman. Links to their publishing guide can be found online as well.

References
Opening the Conversation


Roberts, S. K., & Killingsworth, E. K. (2010). The literary legacy of books that were left behind: The role of children’s literature and the concept of free reading in NCLB. *Childhood Education, 87*(1), 17–24.


Recommended Resources


TYCA Fame Award Nominations

The Two-Year College English Association is accepting nominations for the 2012 TYCA Fame Award. Nominations should be representations of two-year students and faculty that reflect truthfully on the community college at its best. The mentions or portrayals of two-year colleges must have been made publicly between March 2011 and March 2012 and in verifiable form—a news story, magazine reference, movie scene, or TV remark. The winner for the 2012 award will be decided during the 2012 CCCC Convention, to be held in March in St. Louis. Submit nominations online by March 12, 2012, at http://www.ncte.org/tyca/awards/fame, or by mail to Sterling Warner, TYCA Fame Award, Evergreen Valley College, 5095 Yerba Buena Road, San Jose, CA 95155.