

Education and the 2000 elections: Texas miracle debunked

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US Republican presidential candidate George W. Bush is fiercely fighting for the mantle of education reform in the 2000 election campaign. During their speeches at the Republican convention both Bush and his wife Laura claimed that Texas was making dramatic improvements in public education. The so-called Texas miracle has become the backdrop for Republican presidential candidate George W. Bush's education rhetoric in the campaign.

The convention floor claim was largely based on selected statistics culled from a recent study by the RAND Corporation. The California-based think tank looked at test scores of US schoolchildren on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) between 1990 and 1996. The NAEP is administered to a sample of students in each state. It samples about 500 out of 2 million Texas students each year.

There are many challengers to the claims of miracles in the Lone Star State. Linda McNeil of Rice University's Center for Education in Houston, Texas told the *Houston Chronicle*, "The RAND numbers could easily distract people from dealing with the really serious problems that remain in the schools and, by many other sources of data, are only getting worse." She pointed to statistics showing about 67,000 Texas students drop out of school each year and 30 percent of graduates take remedial classes to get into college.

Texas high schools continue to fall at the bottom of state rankings on national Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT) scores. The SAT is one of two exam options used as entrance criteria for freshman students by US colleges and universities. Furthermore, during the last 10 years, the time period of the alleged revolution in Texas education, there has been no improvement in SAT scores for college-bound Texas students.

Extensive research conducted by Professor Walt Haney of Boston College shows that the improvements claimed for Texas public schools are often based on pure myth. A former Texas native, Haney is now a researcher at the Center for the Study of Testing, Evaluation and Educational Policy at Boston College in Massachusetts. He provided key testimony in a lawsuit filed last year by the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF) against the Texas Education Agency and the Texas State Board of Education.

The MALDEF lawsuit alleged that the Texas Assessment of

Academic Skills (TAAS) discriminates against Latino and African-American youth. In order to graduate, Texas high school students must pass a TAAS high school exit test administered in the 10th grade.

In a paper entitled *The Myth of the Texas Miracle*, presented by Haney in April to a meeting of the American Educational Research Association, he showed that the real story of Texas schools is far different from the one Bush has been telling. Haney told the *Washington Post* earlier this year: "What is happening in Texas seems to me to be not just an illusion, but from an educational point of view, an outright fraud."

TAAS test scores determine whether a Texas school will be given financial rewards for student test score achievement or be subject to a state takeover if scores are low. Educators charge that such high stakes testing adversely impacts students and schools as a whole. It causes a narrowing of school curriculum, teaching to the test, test coaching and even cases of outright cheating by teachers and administrators.

Nevertheless, both Republicans and Democrats have pointed to the Texas model as a lesson in bipartisanship. The reforms have their origin in a 1984 special commission on education chaired by Texas billionaire H. Ross Perot. Former Democratic governor Mark White is credited with legislation that supported the reforms. Though Bush became governor only six years ago, he claims credit for continuing the spirit of the commission's decisions.

As a result of the commission's report, Texas mandated a new statewide curriculum and minimum skills test. Teachers had to pass a proficiency test and students who did not pass the tests were failed for the course. Those who failed were also excluded from varsity sports. TAAS was born in 1991 when further changes shifted the focus of the state-standardized test from minimum skills to academic skills in selected subjects.

After two years of research on the Texas schools Haney concluded that the direct result of the high-stakes TAAS was that over a five-year period an additional 100,000 black and Hispanic students did not graduate from the state's high schools. He found that the graduation rate for black and Latino students in the state actually fell from 60 percent to 50 percent after TAAS was imposed in 1991.

In the 1999 trial, MALDEF lawyers presented over 40

witnesses and almost 1,000 exhibits focusing on the negative effects of the TAAS test on Hispanic and African-American students. Despite the testimony, federal Judge Edward C. Prado ruled in January 2000 against the students and organizations named in the suit.

Al Kauffman, lead counsel for MALDEF, commented on the judge's decision: "Minority students are the ones left holding the bag after this opinion. The judge agreed with the plaintiffs that the test has a significant adverse impact on minority students, yet he accepted the State's assurances that the test is for the good of the educational system."

The language in the ruling has serious implications for students throughout the United States. A standards and accountability mania based on high-stakes tests has become the norm for the nation. To date more than 20 US states have established similar graduation tests in core subjects. Other states have provided incentives such as cash rewards for students performing adequately on standardized tests, and there are initiatives to tie merit pay for teachers to student test scores.

MALDEF decided not to appeal the ruling but is looking at the effect of tests on minority and disadvantaged students in other states. Nationwide, the average dropout rate for Hispanic Americans already stands at a staggering 30 percent, nearly four times that of white students. The rate for African-Americans was 12.6 percent and US Department of Education figures indicate that 13 percent of children from low-income families are likely to drop out of school before graduation. For all students, the national dropout rate for 16 to 24 year-olds averaged 11.5 percent in 1996.

Haney's research begins to uncover some of the dark underside of the "tough love" testing market. Based upon articles he has written and studies of the comparative dropout rates of states with and without a state exit test, Haney testified at the TAAS trial that there is a causal relationship between the implementation of the exit test and the decrease in high school completion rates among Texas minorities.

The increased dropout rates actually have the effect of raising test scores. High retention rates also lead to higher reported test scores. In Texas, retention rates are unusually high. Nearly 18 percent of public school students in the 1996-97 school year were repeating a grade. Students are required to take the TAAS in the 10th grade, and holding back 9th grade students that are considered not likely to get a good score on the tests effectively raises the overall 10th grade scores.

This has come to be known as "the ninth grade pile-up." The social stigma of being held back, as well as the need of poorer families for the income a working child can provide, put pressure on "over-age" children to drop out of school altogether. Other exclusionary factors have affected test scores, such as a doubling of students classified as special education and thus excluded from the test pool. The state has plans in the near future to tie promotion in the lower grades to TAAS scores as well.

The very use of one test to determine graduation violates the 1999 Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing, and recommendations of the National Academy of Sciences. The policies they outline caution that important characterizations of students or decisions about their educational options should not be made on the basis of a single test score.

The bipartisan nature of education reform is evident by the response of the Democratic Party presidential campaign staff to the Bushes' comments on education. The Democrats boast that the Texas education programs such as early childhood intervention and smaller class sizes in the elementary grades are Democratic Party initiatives. More importantly the high stakes testing model, which finds its worst incarnation in Texas education policy, is also a key part of Gore's education policy for the nation.

High stakes testing is part of a well worked-out strategy for dismantling public education. Bush plans to use such tests to gut the federal funds that provide money for schools with large numbers of low-income students. Federal money to schools determined as failing would be slashed and parents given vouchers to cover a part of tuition costs at private or religious schools. Under this plan, most disadvantaged children would remain in crumbling public schools or be forced out of school altogether.

Several states, including Texas, have already used publicly funded charter schools to drain state and local money from the public school system. Both Bush and Gore call for an expansion of charter schools. Charter schools have become a major conduit relied on by for-profit education companies to develop an education market and to make profit from government funds intended for education.

In a 1986 overview of testing trends in the US, Haney responded to conclusions concerning US education contained in a 1980s publication entitled *The 21st Century Report*. Another example of corporate influence on US education policy was the infamous 1983 report *A Nation at Risk*. Falling test scores in the 70s and 80s were used to justify reaction in education policy.

Haney emphasized that the authors of these types of reports never considered non-school factors that affect education. The number of children living in poverty climbed from about 15 percent in 1970 to over 20 percent today. Many educators have pointed to this growing poverty and hunger among US children as having a severely detrimental effect on educational achievement.

Dr. Haney's report, *The Myth of the Texas Miracle* can be found at: <http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v8n41/>



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