Growing opposition to "high-stakes" testing in US schools

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Teachers unions and state education officials are voicing opposition to the standardized testing component of the Bush administration-sponsored education legislation working its way through Congress. Union and education administrators are coming under pressure from growing numbers of teachers and parents who see the emphasis on testing adversely affecting the quality of education and making it increasingly difficult to recruit, train and retain public school teachers.

The House and Senate have passed similar versions of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which allocates most of the federal funding for education from kindergarten through high school. Congress is expected to present a final version of the legislation in September, after reaching a compromise on the level of federal funding: the Senate version allocates $33 billion while the House proposes only $24 billion.

Both versions, however, mandate annual testing of students in math and reading in grades three through eight and one time in high school. Parents of students at those schools where scores don't improve could use federal money for tutoring or transportation to another public school. "Failing schools" could also be threatened with closure. The legislation stops short of allowing federal money to be used for vouchers for private or religious schools, although "tutoring" could take place at parochial or other private institutions.

Standardized testing has not been invented by the Bush administration. "High-stakes" testing—the results of which can determine whether students are promoted or graduate—are in place in most states, having been developed over the last decade. Twenty-nine states currently conduct tests of high school students to determine whether they should be granted diplomas. Legislation passed under the Clinton administration in 1994 ordered all states to develop standards to measure math and reading ability.

The majority of testing in schools across the country takes place in May, just prior to the end of the school year. In many districts, teachers are pressured to abandon virtually all instruction that does not specifically prepare students for the standardized tests. Teachers in Houston have complained that music and art instruction have been sacrificed during this test preparation period. In Pittsburgh, teachers report that field trips and advanced writing classes have been canceled in order to make time to drill students for state tests.

"High-stakes" testing has been touted by advocates as a way to raise educational standards in school districts comprised mainly of poor and minority and immigrant students, but it has been shown to adversely affect the quality of education in these schools. In Texas, where George W. Bush oversaw the implementation of a statewide testing program as governor, critics say that pressure to raise test scores in poorer school districts leads teachers to spend more class time drilling students in preparation for the tests, often at the expense of the substance of the curriculum.

Test standards also vary dramatically from state to state, as shown when state results are compared to results on established federal tests such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). For example, 26 percent of Tennessee fourth graders were rated "proficient" or better on state-administered reading tests in 1998. A similar number of these Tennessee students were rated proficient on the reading segment of the NAEP test. But in Texas that same year, 89 percent of fourth graders were rated proficient on the state's reading test, while only 29 percent scored proficient on the federal NAEP test.

Results on state tests are also used to determine whether schools are in need of improvement and qualify for special funding for their disadvantaged students. On this basis only 1 percent of Texas schools have been judged in need of improvement, while in Michigan 76 percent have been designated as needing improvement, an implausible disparity.

The nationwide companies that administer the tests have also been plagued by problems in recent years, with inaccurate results wreaking havoc on numerous school systems. Over the last three years NCS Pearson, one of the large testing companies, provided a flawed answer key that incorrectly lowered multiple-choice scores for 12,000 Arizona students, produced incorrect essay test scores for Michigan students and was compelled to re-score 204,000 essay tests in Washington state.

In one of the largest testing errors, nearly 9,000 New York City students were mistakenly assigned to summer school in 1999. In 1997 in Kentucky, $2 million in achievement awards was denied to schools later deemed designated as deserving of the funds.

The new legislation mandating states to administer tests annually in grades three through eight is certain to exacerbate the problems already posed by the testing. Currently, only 15 states carry out such yearly tests. It will also be left to the states to develop their own tests and standards to judge proficiency. State education officials say the cost of developing, administrating and scoring the new tests will cost far more than Congress proposes to spend. The Senate version of the bill allocates only $400 million for the federally mandated increases in testing.

Montana currently spends $282,000 a year for tests in three grades. State education officials estimate that costs to expand testing to meet the new federal guidelines would skyrocket to $9 million. In Vermont, the state education commissioner estimates that the annual testing budget would rise from $500,000 to more than $7 million. Montana and Vermont are among the least populous states, and increased testing costs are expected to be much higher in states such as New

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York and California. Expanding state testing budgets would cut into other education funds, including programs to recruit and train teachers and reduce class sizes.

Many school districts—especially those in low-income, urban areas—are already hard-pressed to recruit and train qualified teachers. In New York City, the Board of Education still needs to hire 3,300 teachers before schools reopen in September. The board has conducted an $8 million ad campaign this summer to recruit new teachers, and only 56 percent of these 4,700 new teachers are certified. More than 7,000 teachers are expected to leave the city's schools next year.

Nationwide, more than half of all teachers leave the profession before they reach five years on the job. Teachers are paid less than other degreed professionals, with the average national teacher's salary for 1999-2000 estimated at $41,820. The average beginning 1999-2000 salary for a teacher was about $28,000. Starting teachers in North Dakota receive the lowest starting salaries, beginning at just over $20,000. By contrast, the starting salary of an engineering graduate is about $44,000 and business administration graduates are offered on average $37,000.

Difficult working conditions for teachers in many school districts—including severely overcrowded classrooms and a lack of resources—will only be exacerbated by pressure on teachers to achieve passing scores from their students on the annual standardized tests. Teachers will be forced to abandon instruction in areas of the curriculum in order to concentrate on preparing students for the testing.

Roy Romer, superintendent of schools in Los Angeles, said that the testing and accountability measures in the new education legislation ignore the problems facings large urban school districts. The bills' requirement that students be allowed to transfer out of so-called failing schools would be meaningless in the severely overcrowded LA school system. There would be nowhere for such students to go. Romer also said local school authorities would be tempted to skew proficiency results to avoid sanctions affecting federal aid.

Delaine Eastin, California state superintendent of public instruction, commented, "Just testing is not the magic. The magic is in a powerful curriculum, and in giving teachers the time and the training." But the single-minded emphasis on testing proposed by the Bush administration—with little additional federal funding earmarked for teacher training and curriculum development—will intensify the crisis in education under conditions where disillusioned teachers are leaving the public schools and districts are finding it increasingly difficult to attract new recruits.

Teachers are leaving public school classrooms as a direct result of the pressures of standardized testing. The *Washington Post* reports the case of Loudoun County, Virginia teacher Bruce Snyder, a mathematics teacher who left the public school system to teach at a private school in Washington, DC. A well-liked and respected teacher, he was a nominee for Loudoun teacher of the year and his calculus students regularly scored exceptionally high on Advanced Placement tests.

Snyder cited the district's preoccupation with the Virginia Standards of Learning (SOL) tests as his reason for leaving the public school system. "It was SOL this, SOL that," he said. "It was not about 'How are you doing today?' or 'Let's learn something interesting and exciting'.... It was just not a healthy environment."

In states where testing is conducted mainly in the fourth grade, a substantial number of teachers have asked to be transferred to another grade, or to a subject which is not tested, to avoid the test-preparation frenzy.

This past May teachers, parents and students organized protests against the testing in a number of states, including Arizona, Maine, Michigan, Nevada, New York, Ohio, Texas, Virginia, Washington, California, Massachusetts and Florida. In Massachusetts, parents massed on the Boston Common to protest a new round of state tests. In the affluent suburb of Scarsdale, New York, 200 eighth graders, 60 percent of that grade's students, boycotted more than 13 hours of state-ordered tests.

The mounting anger among teachers was expressed at the convention of the National Education Association, the largest US teachers union with 2.6 million members. Delegates voted July 6 to support legislation that would give parents the ability to let their children skip the standardized tests. The resolution directs NEA lobbyists to oppose mandatory testing on a federal level, although it doesn't call for state branches to lobby for laws to allow parents to opt out of testing.

Similar sentiments were expressed at the convention of the American Federation of Teachers, which numbers more than a million teachers and other school workers, mainly in the largest US cities. AFT President Sandra Feldman sought to play to these feelings in a speech to the convention condemning the advocates of testing because they were not providing teachers with the texts and teaching materials necessary for successful test performance.

This is hardly the point, however. Feldman expressed no opposition to the most pernicious feature of the testing mania, the perversion of the education process itself as teachers are increasingly compelled to substitute test preparation for actual learning: what is known as "teaching to the test." And both the NEA and AFT have been fervent supporters of the Clinton administration and the Democratic Party, who fostered the one-sided emphasis on testing before it was embraced by Bush and the Republicans.

The unions have also not opposed the implementation of merit pay systems in the schools, where teachers are punished or rewarded on the basis of their students' performance on the tests. In California, for example, raises and bonuses for teachers and principals are determined in large measure by test results.

What is needed in the public schools is a massive infusion of funds to reduce class sizes, increase teachers salaries and expand and enrich the curriculum, but the teachers' unions haven't fought for this. Instead, they have accepted a situation where cash-starved schools have been punished when students fail to achieve on state tests.

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