Do new standardized-testing policies limit a teacher’s ability to educate students properly?

By Laban Carrick Hill

Illustrations by Wesley Bedrosian
WE ARE A COUNTRY OBSESSED WITH MEASURING. IF WE CAN’T QUANTIFY it, then a value cannot be placed on it. In a market economy, something without a specific value cannot be put up for sale and cannot be bought. In short, it cannot be a part of the economy. The way President Bush’s 2001 “No Child Left Behind” (NCLB) Act is designed seemed to be based on these simple truths, which also suggests why it has received unprecedented support.

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ation exams, which suggests a real belief that schools are not performing. Beginning with the Nation at Risk report nearly 20 years ago, there has been a vigorous national debate over how to improve our nation’s schools and our children’s achievement.

The belief that our schools have failed in teaching our kids what they need to know has been increasing in recent years. Accord-

ing to the U.S. Department of Education, 88 percent of the United States public supports raising standards and requiring graduation exams, which suggests a real belief that schools are not performing. Beginning with the Nation at Risk report nearly 20 years ago, there has been a vigorous national debate over how to improve our nation’s schools and our children’s achievement.

The NCLB Act responds to these concerns by attempting to give schools and districts greater flexibility and control, to require only scientifically proven teaching methods, and to hold schools accountable for results. NCLB is the largest education law passed in more than 35 years, when Congress passed President Lyndon John-

son’s Elementary and Secondary Education Act. The NCLB law increased education spending to more than $22.1 billion—a 27 percent increase over 2001 and a 49 percent increase over 2000 levels. “These reforms express my deep belief in our public schools and their mission to build the mind and character of every child, from every background, in every part of America,” President Bush said during his first week in office in January 2001.

At the center of the law is a big stick called “Adequate Yearly Progress” (AYP), an ambitious program set up to hold school districts and schools accountable for their students’ performance in the core content subjects of reading, math and science. While AYP does not tell states what standards their students must meet, it does insist that states create clear guidelines that students, teachers, parents and administrators can measure for academic achievement.

No amount of certification requirements will help children learn if no teachers are available to do the job. Myers suspects the tough new teacher standards are simply a new way to avoid funding education at the levels necessary to attract good teachers. “Paying for testing is a lot cheaper than actually spending the money needed to im-
prove schools,” says Myers. If a school cannot find a certified teacher because there are none, the best standards in the world will do no good.

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happening in the classroom could not com-
pete. Most issues I dealt with in the class-
room were social, not academic. At Meigs,
the other hand, there have been no prob-
lems like that. The parents are involved and
focused on preparing their kids at home for
school. The kids are ready and willing to
work hard to achieve success. The pressure at
Meigs is focused on learning.”

Myers uses the example of his wife, who
taught first grade, to illustrate another prob-
lem: standardized testing cannot adequately
assess learning because it measures only
surface skills. “It’s just additive, like beads on a
string.” You’re just adding another bead. “For
in reality, the majority of
failing students have dropped out because
t hey have a new challenge in
the standard graduation exam. In this case the
standardized test functions to discourage
students from staying in school. Again, My-
er’s sees a lack of funding beyond creating
and administering the standardized tests.
His fear is that preparing students to pass
these tests will become the primary educa-
tional goal, not the retention of those students
falling behind.

When it comes to what happens in
the classroom, Carolyn Evertson, professor of
education in the Department of Teaching
and Learning at Peabody College, has spent
her career working with teachers on class-
room management. Her work is concerned
with creating conditions in which children
can learn. Over the years she has seen new
programs come and go with varying degrees

of success. “I’ve seen this happen so many
times that teachers can get overwhelmed by
the sheer amount of work it takes to make
learning a priority,” she explains. “These
new programs may last a couple of years and
then something new comes along. Some teachers
manage to work new trends into the classroom
the best they can. Other teachers just have to start from scratch and
restructure, and still others may ignore it.”

If we add a new element,” Evertson wor-
rries, “the assumption of policymakers is that
it’s just additive, like beads on a string. You’re
just adding another bead. In reality it’s
much more complicated. A new mandate can add a gnat-sized complexity to teach-
ing, especially if teachers are trying to create
a classroom in which students have owner-
dship in what they do, or if some children
have different educational plans from other
students. I’m thinking particularly of spe-
cial-needs kids as well as gifted kids. We’ve
known for a long time that for all students
to succeed, we have to differentiate so
that children have access to learning in the ways
they learn best.”

Anne Marie Ellis, M’d’95 (Peabody),
a sixth-grade teacher at Isaac Young Middle
School in Hendersonville, Tenn., knows ex-
actly what she has to sacrifice because of in-
creased standardized testing. “I’m a litera-
ture teacher,” she says. “If a child is going
to keep hearing that what I need to be doing
is teaching skills and essentially bore them
to death.” Ellis is a proponent of the Accel-
erated Reading Program in her school, which
provides real incentives for reading. She
worries, however, that this successful
program is being crowded out of the cur-
rriculum because it is not measured on a test.
She argues that a love for reading is a skill
that will enrich students for their entire
lives, rather than for a short-term goal like a
test. For her this is the kind of sacrifice edu-
cation is making for higher test scores.

Evertson explains that at the end of the
year, standardized test scores provide the ba-
sis of her evaluation as a teacher. Whether
her students gained an enthusiasm for read-
ing that will carry them through life, whether
children read Greek mythology, is not important
to the way she is measured. Evertson
tries to put the potential trou-
bles into perspective. “Suppose you’re a
teacher who has worked out a way for those
who need more help in reading to get that
help, and the kids who need more help in
math to get that help. And suppose you’ve
also put together groups of students work-
ing together to help each other, along with
a gifted teacher with vast amounts of experience
who is teaching kids how to teach
some direct teaching. All of this is orches-
trated throughout the day through a system
of procedures that have become routine.
Then there’s a new mandate in which the
focus is for all students to have high scores on
achievement tests. This new emphasis
doesn’t just add a bead to the string. It adds
a higher level of complexity that has to be
sorted through in all those different ways in
which each class functions.”

Evertson’s concern arises out of years of
working with and observing teachers in
the classroom. She cannot over emphasize how
complex it is first to try to meet the needs of
children who are much more diverse than in
the past and then to do justice to a mandate
no matter how wise or how needed it is.” It’s
just an organizational complexity that is
very hard for teachers,” explains Evertson.

She uses an example of a friend who had
integrated a new reading strategy mandate
into her classroom in the middle of the
school year. “By the time the new policy
came down, she already had each child on a
reading level matching both where they
were and where they needed to go. She
had managed to individualize her whole class
for reading, which is extraordinary. The stu-
dents were doing well and enjoyed reading,
and they could move to different books. Each
child had his or her own plan.

Then the directive came down that each
teacher must create three reading groups in
the classroom. This teacher just decided to
divide the kids up in three groups while still
utilizing their own plans so that when
someone came to see if the directive was im-
plemented, what he saw was three groups.”

Though the new mandate may have been
smart policy, to ask this teacher to abandon
a strategy that was obviously working in order
to conform to the new mandate did not sim-
ply mean more work for the teacher, but also
potential harm to her students learning. It
categorically dismissed her classroom deci-
sions and attempted to impose a new order
upon the students without taking their
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Business management consultants John
Maleyeff, an associate professor at Rensse-
laer Polytechnic Institute in the Lally School
of Management and Technology, and Frank
C. Kaminsky, professor emeritus in the Col-
lege of Engineering at the University of
Massachusetts–Amherst, echoed Evertson’s
concerns recently in an editorial in the Hartfort Courant. Like Evertson and most
every other educator, they support the use
of standardized testing in schools.

Maleyeff and Kaminsky, however, “have
serious concerns about the way tests are be-
ing implemented and the way the results are
being interpreted.” They worry about the three
important rules of effective quality management
that must be adhered to if the testing is to be
effective. “First, always use statistical methods
to distinguish between random variation in
performance outcomes and real changes that
may occur. Second, always use performance
outcomes to understand and improve the
system. Third, use performance outcomes to
set goals for which rewards or punishment
should be given to individuals.”

They stress that management by
fear encourages teachers to find ways to
beat the system, and they suggest that programs
like “Adequate Yearly Progress” are setting
themselves up for disaster because they em-
phasize rewards and penalties without giving
any real power to the teacher who is ulti-
mately rewarded or punished.

“Consider the case in which the annual bonus of a teacher is based on the perform-
ance of students on standardized annual tests,” they write. “On the surface, the policy
appears to be a good idea. But this policy vi-
olates key rules of quality management. That
teacher has no control over the quality
and makeup of the incoming class, no con-
trol over whether the current year’s test is
similar to the previous year’s test, and no
control over random statistical variations.”

The consequence of this kind of quality
management is a system that rewards
“teachers and administrators who divert their
resources from improving the test to get an in-
ordinate amount of time teaching to the
class.” Maleyeff and Kaminsky conclude
that relying on this system is no better than
rewarding teachers and schools on the basis of
a coin toss.

Peabody graduate and schoolteacher Al-
cia Ford likes to make the distinction be-	ween constructive uses of statistics and
punitive abuses. She cites a recent article
in the Tennessee newspaper that listed all the
scores of local schools and broke down the
schools into economic class and ethnicity of
their students. “The problem I had with that
article was that it made certain schools and
teachers appear bad. Statistics are helpful to
informed educators because they can use the
information to respond to those who are not
doing well. But to simply label a school

According to Myers, one of the other
problems that standardized testing does not
address is that many students who fall
behind do not catch up in high school. Instead, they drop out.

In fact, the pressure of these tests can help to
push these students out even faster.

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or teacher bad is not helpful at all." Recent graduate Elizabeth Amy Bantly, BS’02 (Peabody), who teaches sixth grade at H.G. Hill Middle School in Nashville, feels this public accounting is good for schools and communities. "We have to demonstrate quality to the outside world," she explains. "The public is not with us every day, and they don’t know what we’re teaching and how the other kids are learning, so [standardized testing provides] an outside indicator of these things." In her first year of teaching, she has not felt a lot of pressure to completely change the curriculum. She remains optimistic, saying, "I think they want us to do what’s best for the kids.”

Still, Everton worries because a standardized test doesn’t measure everything a school teacher needs. "People who believe achievement tests are valueless really miss the point," she explains. "It's truly important, for example, that third graders have certain basic skills such as number sense, word recognition and vocabulary, and testing can serve a purpose in determining this. But, conversely, not performing well on the test doesn’t necessarily mean that students are not going to do well in school. Other things come into play. It’s just that kids who don’t do well on tests, but learn through different modalities, may not have the opportunity to use those modalities on the test. Let’s say I understand a concept if I see it represented in pictures. If I am tested with words, I may not do very well even though I know the basic concept. I won’t be able to show my understanding in a text-based mode."

"Tests are useful, but limited, tools for assessing what students know. They typically cover a pretty narrow range of skills. And if they are given the proper weight in the larger picture of student assessment, they provide important information (when combined with other tools)," Everton says. "Other teachers understand what needs to be taught or taught. But not all students are able to show what they know through formal testing. It’s when the tests become high stakes that it becomes a problem. Even the [college-level] GRE and SAT exams make allowances for taking the tests orally; I haven’t heard about much of that kind of accommodation [in the AYP program]. The assumption is that kids should be able to take these tests.”

Bantley contends that Everton’s concerns are valid. ‘For some students testing is a good representation of their abilities, but with others not so. I have some students who have learning and attention difficulties, and I know they are a lot smarter than the tests. They might test on a third-grade level, but I know they can read on a sixth-grade level.”

"It’s not just the tests themselves; it’s also the way schools and teachers are teaching and learning at Peabody College and now at Columbia University, finds the insistence on one kind of assessment troubling. ‘There are lots of ways to assess,’ he says. ‘Teachers assess when they grade homework. Teachers assess when they see people on the playground sitting by themselves and not interacting with other kids. If they’re not社会化 into the classroom, they’re not learning as well as they could. So there are lots of different kinds of assessments going on, including standardized. They’re all around, learning and teaching. What people forget is that there are lots of goals and needs for assessment, such as the needs for a school board that is going to be ordering textbooks. The kinds of scores and information they need is different in some ways than what the classroom teacher needs to know for the next day’s lesson. So there are different needs of assessment across the educational endeavor. The concern I have is that the act doesn’t deal as much with teaching as it does with assessing. If we start putting a limited pie of resources into additional assessment, then some of the good things that could be happening in terms of instructional change will go away.” Though Kinzer admits it is too early to tell if this will actually happen, he feels strongly that these issues must be raised early.

"So much of what you hear in the popular press—and that’s where perceptions get formed on the part of parents—is that we’re going to do state tests and we’re going to do national tests and we’re going to make sure that no child is left behind because we’ll be able to figure out who is not learning.” Kinzer says. "But there is very little in the act that addresses what to do once we figure out who’s not learning. We already know that in fourth grade, we have this tail-off. Some children do really well in the second grade and third grade, but when they hit the content areas, they don’t learn as well as they could. That transition from ‘learning to read’ to ‘reading to learn’ gets stalled. They have learned to read stories OK, but when they get hit with textbooks, they tail off. The NCLB Act is good at identifying effective early reading strategies, but when kids hit the fourth grade and fifth grade, the act provides no direction. It can’t be more of the same stuff. That obviously didn’t work. All the act does at this point is test to see who’s reading in fourth and fifth grade. What if they’re not? Then what?”

Myers suggests that teachers and schools already know who is not performing and that standardized tests, therefore, provide redundant information. He sees the increased testing as an unnecessary and inadequate effort to improve student learning. “These tests are really good at assigning blame, but not particularly successful at solving the problem.” He would like to see more of these funds diverted into solutions.

One bright spot in the NCLB Act is the work that Lynn Fuchs, professor of special education at Peabody College, has done for the “Reading First” program. Reading First is a $120 million state grant program that promotes the development of scientifically based research to provide high-quality reading instruction for grades K–3. “I served on the reading assessment committee for developing guidelines to examine the technical features of reading tests,” explains Fuchs of her work for the U.S. Department of Education. “That process is one that states need to use as they incorporate assessments into their Reading First program. You can’t base testing on one mini-study or one mini-study or one mini-study.”

I was also on the assessment and instruction committees for Early Reading First, a program for preschoolers. These committees are shaping what states need to do as they develop their applications for Reading First money.”

Fuchs, who is also a research-program director in Vanderbilt’s John F. Kennedy Center for Research on Human Development, is excited about the work she has done because this program will give school districts the kind of information they need to make good choices. “School districts can look at the available methods out there that they can invest their resources in, and have the information about which of those procedures produce which kinds of effects and which of those procedures there’s just no in-