



Using High Stakes Tests to Raise Achievement

Based on Remarks by Dr. John Bishop¹⁵

There is increasing agreement that the standards conversation has had a tremendous positive impact on the equity conversation. The standards are not negotiable for anyone. The battle, rather, is finding the levers to make the system work for all kids.

—Peter McWalters¹⁶

High Achievement Is Thwarted by Peer Culture

Educational reformers and most of the American public think that teachers ask too little of their pupils. These low expectations, they believe, result in watered-down curricula and a tolerance of mediocre teaching and inappropriate student behavior. The prophecy of low achievement thus becomes self-fulfilling. (Bishop and Mane, 1998) Students themselves, responding to a 1997 survey, said they do not perceive that they are working very hard and that, if more was required of them, they would try harder. (Johnson and Farkas, 1997) Several factors account for these low standards and the failure of schools to deliver challenging curricula. First, adolescent peer culture in America demeans academic success and scorns students who try to do well in school. (Steinberg, Brown and Dornbush, 1996) Further, student avoidance of challenging courses in favor of getting higher grades in the less demanding courses is often supported, even encouraged, by parents and sometimes teachers as well. In addition, teachers find themselves in a difficult double bind when they try to combine the role of mentor with the role of final judge. Sometimes the role conflict is resolved by lowering expectations. Other times the choice of high standards means close, supportive relationships with students are sacrificed. (Bishop, Unpublished)

Trying Hard Academically Lacks Peer Rewards

Peer norms matter a lot in terms of what kids choose to do and how they choose to spend their time. A survey of approximately 36,000 students in 135 schools from five northeastern states shows that about 10 percent of kids are insulted, teased, and made fun of to their face almost every day.¹⁷ While most just grin and bear it, some react by switching to the anti-intellectual norm rather than behaving in ways teachers would like.

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¹⁶ Peter McWalters is the Commissioner of Education in Rhode Island.

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A focus on kids who demonstrate an effort to do well in school—the “nerds,” who are then rewarded by becoming outcasts among their peers—shows the impact of peer norms on effort in school. Looking at traits ascribed by sixth and seventh graders in the survey to popular kids shows the expected responses, such as “cool clothes” and “attractive.” But, also among the data was the finding that “attentive in class” was a trait describing the most popular crowd only 24 percent of the time, compared to “not attentive in class” at 28 percent. This data from middle schools is especially relevant because this is where the peer norms that have holding power over time seem to be established.

At the 10th grade less than half the respondents said, “It’s annoying when students try to get the teacher off track” and 35 percent disagreed with the proposition, “My friends think it’s important for me to do well in English.”

Research findings that show a lack of support among students for hard study have been reported in research across the nation since the early 1960s. A 1960 study of a Jewish High School in New York City found kids rated the athletes who were brilliant, but not studious, as the most popular. Consequently, the norm within student culture appears to be not that it is bad to be smart, but simply that it is bad to be studious. James Coleman’s work in 1961 also found the athlete held great status and concluded this was because the athlete was doing something for the school, leading the team to victory, whereas the outstanding student, by contrast, has few, if any ways, to bring glory to the school. Further, the victories of the studious are often at the expense of his or her classmates who must work harder to keep up.

Curriculum-Based External Exit Exams Put Teachers and Students on the Same Team

Curriculum-based external exit exams (CBEEEs) are subject specific. The responsibilities for preparing students for a particular exam lay within that department and are not a generic responsibility of all teachers in the school. The exams may be taken at various instances across the students’ career in school. Most of Europe and Asia use some type of curriculum-based external exam to signal a student’s achievement and success. This is not the case in the United States, except for New York where the Regents Exams, curriculum-based external exit exams, are given. The role of the teacher in these other countries is to help students prepare for an external judgment and, much like a sports coach, in the process can be very demanding and give lots of feedback about how the students are doing. This allows a stronger sense of trust to build between the teacher and student and between the teacher and parents because the teacher is the essential ingredient for achieving against the external goal.

¹⁷ States included in the research are Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York, Connecticut, and Massachusetts. See Bishop, Unpublished.

Winning: A Group Effort and A Group Reward

"Except for my family, no other group of people has loved me, held me accountable and expected the best from me as my boat mates and coach." From a letter defending crew to the Wall Street Journal, June 3, 1999.

The coach in this experience is like the theater director, preparing the students for an external demonstration of their competence and achievement. The final judgement of success is made by others; it's external.

In crew, a highly interdependent sport, the performance of each student or participant is visible to everyone else and screwing up or slaking off can make the team lose the race very quickly. Coordination is essential. Everyone holds everyone else accountable.

As told by Dr. John H. Bishop during the Institute

Class rank and teacher grades mark student achievement and success in most U.S. schools. In a typical class if the students are able to slow the class down and get the teacher off track, that simply lowers the total amount that is taught and therefore, the amount that is on the exam, and the class is better off. In environments with external exams, this behavior works against the interest of all the students and it is annoying. It also means that students are more likely to think it is important that their friends do well in a particular class since they are not being evaluated in comparison to each other.

Impact on Peer Culture

A look at comparative differences among the states in the northeastern survey provides an opportunity to contrast attitudes relevant to student effort and the impact of a curriculum-based external exit exam, as is used in New York, on student behavior, schools, teachers, the costs of education, and student achievement. New York is the only state in the study with a curriculum-based external exit exam, the Regents exam. Minimum competency exams, like the one used in New Jersey, are not likely to have as big an effect as a curriculum-based external exit exam, because responsibility for how well kids perform on the exam is more diffused across the teachers and is not part of the final course grade. The Regents exam is part of the final grade in a course along with other exams.¹⁸ A comparative look at the states in the study shows that students in New York were more engaged in their classes, completed more of the assigned homework, spent more hours outside of school studying, selected more of their leaders from among good students, and expected to complete more years of schooling.

¹⁸ The northeastern study was conducted prior to implementation of the requirement that all students in New York take Regents exams.

