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## This Issue

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# This Issue

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**H**IGH-STAKES TESTING IS a hearty perennial in the hothouse of educational reform efforts in the United States. Policy makers mandate a test to gather information about student attainment and then use that information to hold students, educators, schools, or school systems accountable. While the tests keep changing, the consequences attached to the results remain the same (e.g., promotion or graduation decisions for students, cash rewards for teachers, accreditation decisions for schools, and operating autonomy or funding for districts or programs). It is these highly consequential decisions that make the tests “high stakes.”

For more than a decade, state-mandated testing programs have dominated the K-12 high-stakes testing landscape. Part of the standards-based reform movement, these tests are usually linked to state-approved standards in different subject areas and are used to monitor how well students are learning the standards and whether improvement is taking place over time. Depending on the state, scores may also be used to make high-stakes decisions about students or, when aggregated, teachers, schools, or districts. The 2001 passage of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act further increases the accountability uses of these tests’ results by requiring states to bring all student groups to the “proficiency” level on state reading and mathematics tests by 2014, and holding schools and school districts responsible for making adequate yearly progress toward this goal.

While the extent and consequential nature of state testing programs is on the rise, there is still debate as to whether they actually improve teaching and learning. For example, while some have ascribed improved scores on these tests to increased student learning (Grissmer, Flanagan, Kawata, & Williamson, 2000), others charge that there is a cost in real knowledge because students focus on learning what will be tested rather than the broader knowledge laid out in the state standards (Amrein & Berliner, 2002). In addition, while proponents point to a reduced score gap between student groups on some state tests, others note the negative impact on minority, special education, and Limited English Proficiency students, particularly when promotion or graduation decisions are attached to the results (Orfield & Kornhaber, 2001). The strong relationship between test-based rankings of schools and students’ socioeconomic status also raises the question of whether the scores reflect students’ hard work or the increased learning opportunities that wealth affords (Cooley, 1993).

Other issues have been raised in regard to the impact these tests have on teachers and schools. While the tests, especially when aligned with rigorous standards, can encourage educators to improve the quality of their curriculum and instruction, the pressure to raise scores can lead to teaching to the test (Madaus, West, Harmon, Lomax, & Viator, 1992) and to cheating scandals. Some also question the use of these tests to make highly conse-

quential decisions about students while teachers' judgment and school-based measures of student competency are ignored.

In other words, the jury is still out as to the effect these tests have on students, teachers, and schools and whether they are an appropriate vehicle for the excellence and equity goals of standards-based reform. Teachers are important participants in this conversation, not only because they must prepare students to take the tests, but also because their identity as professionals is at stake. With this in mind, this issue of *Theory Into Practice* looks at what is known about the impact of high-stakes testing programs on teaching and learning, and delineates some implications for the teaching profession. The articles by Goertz and Duffy, and Sloane and Kelly provide an introduction to the topic, with the former describing the types of state testing and accountability policies that were in place at the time the NCLB Act was signed into law, and the latter outlining some issues at the heart of the debate over these testing programs. The articles by Abrams, Pedulla, and Madaus; Gulek; and Gunzenhauser focus on the impact of these tests on teachers' beliefs and practices, while Horn describes the effects of state-mandated promotion and graduation tests on students. The articles by Hombo, Gregory and Clarke, and Chudowsky and Pellegrino deal with broader testing issues. Hombo examines the potential effects of NCLB on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the only nationally representative, continuing, and—until now—low-stakes assessment of what U.S. students know and can do in various subject areas. Gregory and Clarke provide some lessons from abroad by exploring the structure and effects of high-stakes testing practices in England and Singapore. Looking toward the future, Chudowsky and Pellegrino describe new findings in the cognitive sciences, measurement, and technology, and discuss their implications for the creation of large-scale and classroom assessments that can capture the complexity of student learning.

Reflecting the body of research in this area (e.g., Hamilton, Stecher, & Klein, 2002; Mehrens, 1998), these articles suggest that high-stakes testing programs can have both positive and negative

effects on teaching and learning. Factors that will determine whether the ultimate effects of these policies are positive or negative include finding ways to bridge the gap between assessment and instruction, determining the optimal mix of rewards and sanctions, balancing student and adult accountability, and providing appropriate amounts of capacity building and professional development. As states begin to work toward the NCLB goal of proficiency for all, it is more important than ever that they consider the effects of the accountability uses of their test results on students, teachers, and schools, and find ways to maximize the positive effects while minimizing the negative ones. Teachers, with their practical experience and theoretical knowledge, have an important role to play in this process. We hope that the articles in this issue will serve as a resource for them in this task.

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**Guest Editors**

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