To understand how politics affects high-stakes testing, principals need to examine its impact from three perspectives.

Joseph Casbarro
You don’t reform schools with neatly printed curriculum guides in three-ring binders, or with high-gloss posters of academic standards hung on classroom walls. The way you reform schools is by what you test. Educators have to teach to the tests. So, make the tests longer and more rigorous. Make certain that the results of the testing are used to promote students to the next grade or as a requirement for graduation. In this way you will not only reform the schools, but achieve greater long-term accountability.

That sobering statement, made by a politician at a recent education symposium, reflects a troubling reality in today’s political climate. Many political leaders believe that the best way to change schools is through an “end of a gun barrel” approach, rather than by building consensus.

IN BRIEF
The author breaks down the debate over high-stakes testing into three politically charged issues: how test scores are used as a means to reform schools; whether test designs and passing scores truly reflect students’ abilities; and how public perception of schools can be unfairly based on test results alone.
Accountability, as prescribed by No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and its corollary regulations at state levels, clearly supports this approach. Standardized tests are administered to students at designated grade levels. If the students do not perform to expectations, there are consequences not only to them (i.e., grade retention, failure to graduate) but also to their schools (i.e., loss of funding, labeling for poor performance). In fact, these high-stakes tests have as much, if not more, to do with evaluating schools as they do with evaluating student progress.

You may ask, “What’s the difference?” After all, if students perform well the school must be successful. But that depends on your assumptions. If you assume performance on a standardized test is attributable only to what teachers teach, and that all students come to school equally ready to learn, then a school’s success would be directly tied to its students’ performance. However, if you believe that success on standardized tests has a lot to do with prior knowledge and family support, as well as the extent to which students vary in ability, readiness, and rate of learning, then the correlation between a school’s success and its students’ performance may not be so closely linked.

For example, do we really expect schools with a high proportion of English Language Learners or special education students to perform as well as others? Do we expect the test results of high school students to perform as well as others? Do we expect the test results of students who are labeled as “similar” or “like” schools? The politically correct answer is “Of course!” Politicians say we must compare schools with those of schools in affluent suburbs? The politically correct answer is “Of course!” Politicians say we must compare schools with those of schools in affluent suburbs. However, if you believe that success on standardized tests has a lot to do with prior knowledge and family support, as well as the extent to which students vary in ability, readiness, and rate of learning, then the correlation between a school’s success and its students’ performance may not be so closely linked.

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The Politics of Coercion

The belief that schools can best be reformed through positive and/or negative coercion is one of the most powerful approaches being used today. Financial incentives and public recognition are tools to reward schools that produce high test scores and to punish those that do not. Add to this the concept of awarding principals and teachers bonuses for higher test results, or of tying their evaluations to test results, and you see great potential for dishonesty or cheating.

When the primary assessment of our schools’ success is reduced to test results, we are pressured to turn our classes into test prep centers, hire principals who have a record of achieving high test scores, and evaluate teachers on how well their students perform on high-stakes tests. But what if test scores don’t go up each year? What if more ELL students are enrolled? What if this year’s state-mandated tests are harder than last year’s? If you live by the test, you can die by it, too!

These “what ifs” are often viewed by politicians as simply excuses for poor performance. After all, they argue, scores will always be measured against “similar” or “like” schools. So, in order to exert positive or negative coercion, performance data becomes essential. How it is collected and interpreted creates another layer of political debate.

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The Politics of Performance

In order for state education departments to manage the volume of standardized testing results, new bureaucracies have emerged to develop and analyze the tests, establish targets for annual yearly progress, and compile the comparative data upon which school districts are judged. This shifts the issue from rewarding or punishing schools to a more sophisticated one: what constitutes a “good score” or “meets standards.” This involves setting targets not only for school districts but for subgroups whose data must be disaggregated by ethnicity, disability, or language.

The uncertainty about how targets are set makes everyone a bit uneasy when a new test is first introduced. Educators know the new test sets a baseline for students to be measured against, not only the first year but in subsequent years. Test developers know that a test’s success depends on its ability to maintain an equivalent level of difficulty from year to year. Failure to achieve this balance can be disastrous. For example, the New York State Education Department experienced considerable political fallout when its 2003 Math A Regents Exam had such a high failure rate that many high school seniors across the state were in danger of not graduating. It was later determined that the test was flawed and the ensuing political aftermath led to creation of a panel to re-examine the state’s testing program. Similar concerns about the design and structure of high-stakes tests have led some school districts to provide safety nets or lower scoring expectations. How tests are created, the way test questions are formulated, as well as the type and level of difficulty all play a critical role in the results.

The Politics of Perception

Since many federal and state political leaders have come to believe that positive and negative coercion, based on test results, is the only way to improve our public schools, their political campaigns focus on this theme. As a result, the public is bombarded with the notion that the true success of a
school is measured primarily through its test scores. Though it’s a very simplistic perception, for the most part high-stakes tests are viewed by the public as accurate measures of a student’s ability and skills. The higher the score, the smarter the student. The higher the aggregate scores of a given school, the “better” the school.

In some communities, the frenzy that ensues when test scores are released is sometimes overwhelming. In fact, states often embargo test results or delay public release to give school boards, superintendents, and principals time to analyze the results and prepare their responses, especially if aggregate scores are lower than the previous year.

The Principal as Politician

So, what does this all mean to principals trying to keep test scores in perspective? How do they make their case that high-stakes tests should not be the sole measure in determining the success of their schools?

First, they should inform their parents and communities that performance trends over time are much more reliable and dependable than any one year’s results. They shouldn’t celebrate too much when scores go up nor become too depressed when scores go down. Instead, they should look at the trends, compare test results from year to year, and collect feedback from teachers and students.

Second, principals must emphasize that state-mandated tests are only a snapshot in time and cannot totally reflect the depth and breadth of a 10-month academic program. They should point out that teachers use a variety of other assessments, such as quizzes, homework, projects, and portfolios, not only to measure ongoing progress but to diagnose their own classroom performance.

Third, principals must do a better job explaining what test scores really mean. If students did poorly, was it a result of change in the test design? Was it a more difficult test than expected? Was the school’s instruction not aligned with the new test? And yes, you must ask: Were your students poorly prepared? Even if your students performed well, perhaps they did so because the test was easy or because the teachers did nothing else but drill on facts and teach to the test.

Finally, remember that the value of a school is based on multiple assessments, not just test scores, and that the quality of a school is also defined by such aspects as its safety, its culture of caring, and its arts and physical education programs.

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High-stakes testing is a politically charged issue that has had a tremendous impact on the way our schools operate. But principals must not be afraid to keep their perspective. They must encourage a healthy, honest dialogue about the role of testing and, most importantly, engage in the political debate. Their students deserve nothing less.

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WEB RESOURCES

The National Center for Fair & Open Testing strongly advocates “eliminating the racial, class, gender, and cultural barriers to equal opportunity posed by standardized tests.”
www.fairtest.org

The American Educational Research Association posts its statement on high-stakes testing, outlining conditions that such testing should meet.
www.aera.net/about/policy/stakes.htm

The International Reading Association provides a summary of its position on high-stakes testing, with recommendations for teachers, parents, child advocacy groups, and policymakers.
www.reading.org/resources/issues/positions_high_stakes.html

The National Association of School Psychologists has a position statement and an extensive file of documents related to high-stakes testing.
www.nasponline.org

The American Psychological Association examines the “Appropriate Use of High-Stakes Testing in Our Nation’s Schools.”
www.apa.org/pubinfo/testing.html

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Joseph Casbarro is the author of the recently published Test Anxiety & What You Can Do About It, available from the NAESP National Principals Resource Center. 800-386-2377.