

Draining the School-to-Prison Pipeline

SUPPORT
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"Draining the School-to-Prison Pipeline" is a monthly publication addressing issues of community school reintegration, sharing practical recommendations to support returning students, tracking relevant public policy and legislation, and addressing racial and other inequities in Pennsylvania's educational system.

Testing Kids Into the School-to-Prison Pipeline

Prior to 2002, standardized testing in schools was used only on a state-by-state basis to assess student academic proficiency. That changed with the enactment of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), which passed Congress with bipartisan support and the backing of civil rights activists as well as business interests (1). NCLB paved the way for schools to be held accountable for the success or failure of their students by tying federal education funding to the scores of a school's student body on standardized tests in reading and math. Higher-performing schools received increased federal dollars, while lower-performing schools risked losing funding (1).

Although much attention has been paid to the impact of widespread standardized testing on school funding, a lesser-known consequence of such testing across the country is the way that it contributes to the school-to-prison pipeline. In the United States, 80% of incarcerated adults did not complete high school (2). Any element of education that increases school pushout or drop-out is therefore a concern.

Standardized testing contributes to school pushout or drop-out in several ways. It forces instruction to focus more on teaching students how to take a test rather than developing the interests of students or unlocking their creative potential (1). Research has shown that such "test-prep teaching" bores and alienates students and creates a pipeline for disengagement among students leading to higher dropout rates, and behavior problems in school (2). Additionally, students who perform lower on testing were also found to be given longer out-of-school suspensions compared to their higher-performing peers, contributing to academic pushout (2).

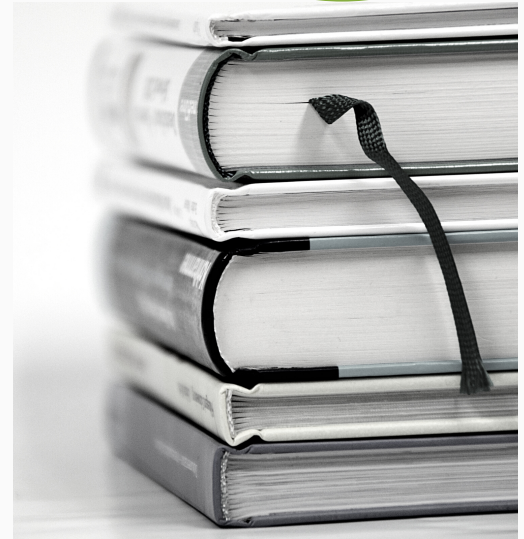


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#BeyondTheBubble is a national campaign organized and supported by the National Education Association (NEA) with the mission of ending standardized testing in the United States, especially during the pandemic. As part of the campaign, NEA brought together over 118,000 students, parents, civil rights activists, and educators to ask the U.S. Department of Education to stop high-stakes testing during the pandemic. The NEA seeks to work with educators and likeminded experts from across the United States to examine the impacts of high-stakes testing on students and schools, and develop alternatives to standardized testing. The primary goal of this convening is to design an assessment that puts equity first and centers students interests and abilities over generic testing. #BeyondTheBubble challenges the U.S. Department of Education and the Secretary of Education, Miguel Cardona, to rethink how our nation assess the abilities of our students, and advocates for authentic and well-rounded assessments of students that are created by educators. You can check out the letter they sent to the Department of Education below. Our students are so much more than their ability to take a test; we need to uplift all the unique and creative talents of our students starting with #BeyondTheBubble.

<https://www.nea.org/sites/default/files/2021-05/BeyondTheBubble.pdf>

From Policy to Practice

As educators prepare for a much-deserved winter break, it is important to be mindful of youth who will not be celebrating the holidays in traditional ways. On any given day in the United States, nearly 424,000 children are in foster care, and many others placed in residential settings through the juvenile justice or behavioral health systems. Keeping the needs of these students in mind, here are some tips to keep in mind over the holidays:

- Remember that the holidays can be especially difficult for students in residential or out-of-home settings. Students may feel the absence of their family and community even more strongly during times that many families are experiencing holiday festivities and joy, especially while schools are closed and students aren't interacting with supportive staff or friends.

- In your own homes, be mindful of giving gifts from "Santa." Not every family can afford expensive tablets, phones, and gaming systems, leaving some kids to wonder why Santa gave their friends expensive electronics and not them. Instead, ask families to take ownership of the expensive gifts they buy and maybe give Santa credit for the less-expensive gifts under the tree.

- Gift-giving during winter holidays is a tradition that many families participate in, but not all do. Students who spend the holidays outside of their families or communities may not have the opportunity to give or receive gifts. Therefore, when students return to school, steer clear of partaking in activities or classroom discussion that ask "What did you get for the holidays?" or commenting on new possessions or clothes that students display. Instead, ask questions like: "What was your favorite part of the winter break?" or "Tell us your favorite holiday tradition or food."

The Road from Our Reality to Our Responsibility

Every issue of this digest addresses issues of racial disparity and other inequities in the systems of education, juvenile justice, child welfare, and behavioral health by identifying systemic barriers, introducing evidenced-based research for dismantling current practice, and creating a blueprint for structural change and empowerment.

Standardized Testing and Racial Bias: Laying Out Problems and Suggested Solutions

A primary aim of NCLB was to close the achievement gap between low-income students of color and their more privileged peers (1). But in some respects the law has had the opposite effect. Schools in low-income communities have been hit the hardest by negative impacts of high stakes testing (1). Because of historical and ongoing racially discriminatory housing policies and practices, students of color are more likely to be concentrated in insufficiently-resourced schools (2). Research shows that standardized testing is an unreliable and inaccurate measurements of student's learning ability, and is tainted by both explicit and implicit bias (3). For example, standardized testing:

- Leaves opportunity for racial basis in school admissions programs (4);
- Creates psychological barriers for students of color by emphasizing unrealistic achievement requirements (5); and
- Disadvantages students in low-wealth areas, which have fewer resources and opportunities to prepare students for high stakes testing, leading to gaps in educational outcomes (6).

Advocates of the anti-standardized-testing movement propose the development of a more reliable measurement of student achievement. They support creating more authentic student assessment measures that include skills like creativity, critical thinking, leadership, and the ability to collaborate (7). Though these attributes may be difficult to measure, they are the most beneficial to students in higher education and post high school life.

Advocates also recommend removing the race/ethnicity identifier on exams in order to minimize the opportunity to use race as a predictor or indicator of test scores (4).

Finally, advocates suggest expanding and increasing access to quality instruction and career opportunities in schools located in low-wealth areas. Students deserve the same quality education regardless of their race, income, or tax bracket. In order to test students on a universal measure, all students need the same quality education.

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