



Policy Brief

High-Stakes Testing

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The Middle Level Education Research Special Interest Group represents the major organized voice for researchers committed to the middle level movement. With this honor comes the responsibility of setting forth policy statements on educational issues of public concern. One such issue is the ever-widening use of high-stakes testing and assessment procedures. Testing that is viewed to have such high stakes often determines the allocation of resources and the direction for curriculum development and pedagogy in our middle level schools. Scores of individuals and groups of middle school students are being used as “carrots” or “sticks” for systemic issues well beyond the purview of any individual or group of early adolescents or their teachers for that matter!

Paris and his colleagues (Paris, Lawton, Turner, & Roth, 1991) noted that striving for psychometric and political soundness without psychological soundness is not an educationally justifiable decision. Psychological soundness requires us to critically examine students’ perceptions of testing and the attendant questions of “Why?” and “What for?”

Researchers operating within the motivational contextual perspective (e.g., Roeser & Lau, 2002) make clear that perceptions of competence and control change markedly for students in high stakes testing environments with early adolescents being most susceptible to these “high stakes” environments. Young children have optimistic “personal effort” based views of competence. However, as we move into the middle grades, tracking, report card grades, and test scores become the indicators of competence. Locus of control also undergoes rather profound changes. Young children tend to be internals and believe that success is a function of their own hard work. Early adolescents in these high-stakes environments become externals and attribute success to ability, luck, and the wishes of other people (Paris et al., 1991). Feeling powerless to control their own fate, early adolescents begin to lose interest in their school work and take short cuts with an “ends justify the means” mentality. Additionally, there is an alarming growth of research regarding the maladaptive behaviors being employed/displayed by early adolescents in testing situations. The “three general growth trends are growing disillusionment about tests, decreasing motivation to give genuine effort and increasing use of inappropriate strategies” (Paris et al., p. 14)

To this list it is reasonable to add a fourth that would be characterized as “avoiding things you are hit with.” This avoidance may be temporary such as being

absent on test days, more permanent as in dropping out of school, or in the extreme case, suicide.

The middle schools our young adolescents need are those where instruction and assessment are designed to emphasize “improve-ability” of students’ knowledge and skills rather than students “proving their ability” relative to the others in their classrooms and schools (Roeser & Lau, 2002).

To ensure the learning environments that early adolescents deserve, we make the following policy recommendations regarding testing and assessment (see AERA, 2003: Anfara & Lipka, 2003; Paris et al., 1991).

Recommendation #1: DUE DILLIGENCE MUST BE UNDERTAKEN TO PROTECT OUR MIDDLE LEVEL STUDENTS, TEACHERS, AND ADMINISTRATORS FROM HIGH-STAKES DECISIONS BASED ON A SINGLE TEST.

Multiple measures and triangulation of measurement must become part of the vernacular and practice of all whose lives are touched by early adolescents. Preservice, inservice, and parent education programs must emphasize the psychological findings that learning, motivation, and achievement are interactive processes. These programs must also emphasize the fact that teaching to a test negates pupil-teacher planning and generally narrows pedagogy to a didactic approach. Further, the high stakes nature of testing can lead to issues of malpractice such as a pre-test, post-test design where norms established during Fall testing are used for both times of testing.

Recommendation #2: ADEQUATE RESOURCES AND OPPORTUNITY TO LEARN MUST CHARACTERIZE THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT.

Once decisions, with student input, are made about what is important to know and value, the resources (persons, places, and things) must be in place within settings that facilitate academically engaged time. Assigning clock hours, vis-a-vis block and other scheduling procedures, in no way ensures the developmentally appropriate practices necessary to engage students in the learning process.

Recommendation #3: TESTING/ASSESSMENT SHOULD BE LONGITUDINAL IN NATURE.

“Improvability” implies change within the individual over time. Single test scores cannot adequately address change over time. What is needed are charts and profiles of academic growth upon which may be mapped the other events/experiences (e.g., loss of parent, dramatic changes in economic status) in the life of the student. These results should inform the student as to where he/she is in the striving for personal mastery goals. The format for results should reinforce the student perception that learning involves the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and attitudes over time and that early learning serves as building blocks for later learning.

Recommendation #4: TESTING/ASSESSMENT DECISIONS SHOULD REFLECT THE HIGHEST LEVEL OF COLLABORATION.

Students are the primary stake holders, and their teachers are a close second, in the testing process. As such they must be invited into the discussions involving criteria, form and substance of outcomes, and the nature of the recommendations and courses of action that can be made from testing. “Ownership” is a key motivational element within the desire to do good work.

References

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- Roeser, R.W., & Lau, S. (2002). On academic identity formations in middle school settings during early adolescence: A motivational-contextual perspective. In T.M. Brinthaupt and R.P. Lipka (Eds.), *Understanding Early Adolescent Self and Identity: Applications and Interventions* (pp 91-131). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

The Middle Level Education Research Special Interest Group (MLER SIG) is an affiliate of the American Educational Research Association (AERA). Its membership includes more than 200 middle-level researchers from across the United States. The SIG’s mission is to improve, promote, and disseminate educational research reflecting young adolescence and middle-level education. This policy brief is officially endorsed by all MLER members. For more information about the MLER SIG please visit

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