

High-stakes for Low Scores? Is This Improving the Quality of Teaching and Learning By: Joanie James, MetLife Fellow, TNLI Wyoming

“Eliminating curriculum that is not on the standardized test? Resorting to one-size-fits-all instruction? I can’t believe you are telling me this! That is *not* how teachers are supposed to be responding to No Child Left Behind (NCLB) accountability mandates.” That was the response of Dr. Johnson, a Department of Education accountability and standardized testing specialist, after Mrs. James shared her research results with him.

“I’m not saying that I condone this response to NCLB mandates,” Mrs. James, a fourth and fifth grade teacher at a university laboratory school, defended meekly. “I’m just telling you what our state’s elementary teachers have told me.”

“The act’s intent is to fix our schools to provide incentives so teachers will work harder to provide a high-quality education for all students to assure that all students reach proficiency on challenging academic standards. What’s going on?” Dr. Johnson asked in dismay as he pierced Mrs. James with an icy glare.

Mrs. James took a deep breath and tried to explain, “My research results indicate that the pressure to raise test scores or face very unpleasant and embarrassing sanctions is having a largely negative influence on teaching and learning.”

Background

Mrs. James had been a public school teacher for 31 years and has had experience teaching in a variety of elementary grades as both a regular and special educator. During the past five years, she pursued a Ph.D. at a local university. Experiencing NCLB mandates firsthand in her role as a teacher, Mrs. James decided to focus her dissertation research on NCLB and high-stakes standardized testing. She surveyed 142 first- through sixth-grade teachers throughout the state on their perceptions of how NCLB high-stakes accountability mandates had influenced their curriculum and instructional practices and ultimately the learning of their students. Now she was looking for an audience for these teacher voices (James, 2007).

Fearing that there was little chance that her concerns would ever be heard, Mrs. James took a deep breath and blurted, “Dr. Johnson, would it be possible to set up a meeting inviting Department of Education officials, school board members, school district administrators, and teachers to openly discuss NCLB?” She hurried to explain, “Awareness of the perspectives of all these stakeholders would be helpful in informing future educational policy decisions and would likely result in an improvement in both teaching and learning.”

Dr. Johnson had been the state’s accountability and standardized testing specialist for ten years. He’d been frustrated for years by the public school trend of social promotion and lack of academic rigor. In his opinion, teachers and schools were doing an inadequate job of educating a large proportion of the student population. Too many were receiving high school diplomas without mastering even the rudimentary skills necessary to succeed in college or a job. Given this experience, Dr. Johnson thought such a meeting might be a good idea and told Mrs. James to go ahead.

The Meeting

When Mrs. James entered the meeting room, she was pleased to see that a diverse group of stakeholders had gathered around the conference table. Three teachers were grouped together on one side of the table while two administrators and a school-board member occupied the other

side. There was tenseness in the air and conversation was stilted and formal. Following a whispered comment to a trusted colleague, quiet laughter could be occasionally heard.

Mrs. James cleared her throat and looked briefly at each of the meetings' participants. All conversation stopped as they looked up at her. Serious expressions were the order of the day. When she had everyone's attention, she opened the meeting by announcing, "As you know, we're here to discuss the NCLB accountability plan and the influence it is having on teaching and learning. The purpose of this meeting is to find out what is and what is not working so that changes can be made that will improve teaching and learning in our public schools. You are encouraged to be candid and frank in stating your opinions, insights, and ideas. The discussion will be focused around this question: 'How has NCLB influenced teaching and learning in our public schools?'"

Dr. Johnson began by stating emphatically, "I think NCLB has made it clear to teachers that it is no longer acceptable to let any student fall behind academically. Teachers are now required to do their best to provide a quality education for all students. There are no longer any loopholes or excuses to hide behind."

"I agree. It is simply *not* okay anymore to let any child slip through the cracks," contended assistant superintendent, Dr. Matthews. Dr. Matthews had been a teacher for many years and had become an administrator in an effort to make a positive difference in schools and the education of children. He continued, "The sanctions for low test scores, for not meeting adequate yearly progress (AYP) goals, motivate teachers and schools to provide a high-quality educational experience for all."

"Part of what you are saying is right," agreed fourth-grade teacher, Mr. Holmes. "NCLB has made schools and teachers more aware of raising the academic achievement of the lower-functioning students." Mr. Holmes taught in a Title I school located on the state's Indian reservation. This school served a population consisting of 98% Native American students with 63% of them from low socioeconomic status homes. This school had failed to meet AYP goals every year since the implementation of NCLB. Despite sanctions and school improvement efforts, test scores remained dismally low. Mr. Holmes continued, "We are aware that we must do more to raise the achievement of these kids, but no matter what we do, they just aren't learning at a fast enough pace to catch up to grade level and pass the standardized test."

"There must be something you can do to make them successful," insisted Dr. Matthews, the administrator.

Mr. Holmes sighed in frustration. "Let me explain," he started. "Many of the students in my school start kindergarten at a disadvantage. Their families are very poor and struggling day to day to keep food on the table and a roof over their heads. They just don't have the resources or the energy to provide enriching preschool experiences for their children. Many of these children have never even been read to or have never seen a book before they start school. Many are also suffering from nutritional deficits or health issues simply because their parents can't afford good food or health care." After a pause to choke back his irritation, Mr. Holmes continued. "It's frustrating because we're expected to somehow magically overcome all these issues and prove our effectiveness with proficient test scores. Although the kids are learning, the test doesn't show this academic growth. It only shows that they are below grade level. Basically, it's an impossible task."

Dr. Matthews had heard enough. "Excuses for the lack of adequate teaching have been made for far too long," he stated firmly. "We can place the blame on the family and on society in

general, but that only adds to our complacency. Instead of making excuses, we need to make the needed changes in our teaching to raise the achievement of these students.”

“Don’t get me wrong,” responded Mr. Holmes with a tinge of defeat in his voice. “I’m all for improving the achievement of the lower level students and we’re working hard to do just that. I’m only saying that it’s not as easy and straight-forward as it sounds.”

“No, it’s not easy,” agreed Miss Vernon, a first-grade teacher at a Title I school serving a 46% population of low socioeconomic status students with 25% learning English as a second language. “For too long, we’ve put the education of the struggling learners on the back burner. Instead of working to remediate their difficulties, we’ve given them mindless tasks or put a special education label on them and sent them off to the resource room to play games and complete low-level disengaging tasks. It’s about time that we get serious about raising the achievement of these students and bringing them up to the level of the higher-level students!”

Mrs. Teale, an experienced sixth-grade teacher in a non-Title I school that had always met AYP goals interrupted, “Maybe we’re putting too much effort into raising the achievement of the lower-functioning students in an effort to avoid the punitive sanctions for low test scores. I’ve talked with some teachers who basically ignore their higher-functioning students to make more time to work with the kids who are struggling academically.”

“That’s ridiculous! Why would any teacher allow that to happen!” rasped Dr. Johnson in an irritated voice. “A good teacher should be able to meet the academic needs of each and every student and would never think of leaving the higher-level learners to fend for themselves!”

“Teachers are confident that the students who already function at grade level or above will score at the proficient or advanced level on the standardized test regardless of the instruction they receive. Because of this, the teachers are putting more of their efforts toward raising the skills of the low-level students,” explained Mr. Holmes. “As a result, the gifted learners are the ones being left behind.”

“The pressure to raise the lower functioning students’ test scores is just too great,” added Mrs. Teale. “With the threat of punitive sanctions for low test scores, teachers and schools are managing to close the achievement gap. The academic skills of the lower-level learners are improving while the learning of the higher-level students is remaining stagnant or even decreasing.”

“I’m sure this wasn’t the intent of NCLB, but it does seem to be an unintended consequence of the punitive consequences attached to low test scores,” contended Mr. Holmes.

“Interestingly, 79% of the elementary teachers responding to my survey indicated that the punitive sanctions were negatively impacting teaching and learning,” inserted Mrs. James.

“A big problem is that teachers are afraid of looking bad in the public’s eye because of their students’ standardized test scores . . . they are afraid of being publicly labeled as a failing teacher . . . and, they are afraid of the punitive consequences – some think they will be fired if their test scores are below AYP goals. They’ll do anything to raise the test scores so they won’t be embarrassed or ridiculed, even if it means teaching a watered-down, one-size-fits-all curriculum to raise the level of the lower-functioning students,” explained Mr. Holmes.

“That fits with my research results,” began Mrs. James. “Because the threat of negative sanctions for low test scores is overpowering, teachers I’ve surveyed expressed feeling disempowered to make the teaching decisions that they feel are best for their students.”

“I think I’m getting the picture,” responded school-board member, Mr. Valdez, who had been listening intently to the heated discussion. “Since the standardized test score is basically the

only measure of accountability that matters in meeting NCLB mandates and since teachers and schools are required to get an ever-increasing percentage of their students to the proficient level as measured by the standardized test or face punitive sanctions, they are responding by focusing exclusively on the lower-functioning students.”

“Yes! That’s it in a nutshell,” agreed Mr. Holmes.

A Discussion Concerning NCLB-Influenced Curriculum

“I agree,” commented Mr. Holmes. “Just last week, our school district adopted a Reading First curriculum for the schools that have not been meeting AYP goals. Such a curriculum is a one-size-fits-all approach to teaching. The teacher is required to follow the scripted lessons with fidelity, keeping all kids on the same page at the same time regardless of their individual and unique academic needs. Many teachers tried to explain to the school board that these reading programs were not differentiated to meet student needs and would be mainly successful in turning kids off to reading rather than being helpful in raising their reading achievement. Sadly, the teachers’ comments fell on deaf ears.”

“But the Reading First curriculum came highly recommended by the district’s administrators,” defended Mr. Valdez. “I voted to adopt the curriculum because I don’t feel it’s my place to second guess their recommendation.”

“Yes, it is true that these scripted programs are research-based and are designed to make sure that the children have no holes in their learning,” defended Dr. Matthews, his neck and ears reddening.

“I think these core reading programs are an excellent way of assuring that teachers will teach the right things at the right time,” assured Miss Vernon. “They provide a very structured pacing guide and explicit lessons for the teachers and assure that the essential skills are taught to all kids in a timely fashion.”

Mrs. Teale countered, “I don’t have a problem with a pacing guide that is implemented with flexibility so that the differentiated needs of students can be addressed by the teacher. I do think, however, that a one-size-fits-all scripted curriculum and other ways many schools and teachers have responded to NCLB mandates have created more holes in students’ learning.” Mrs. Teale continued, “In fact, since our current focus is mainly on raising test scores to avoid negative sanctions, many teachers are spending an inordinate amount of time on fragmented basic skill instruction and test preparation activities in the classroom.”

Mrs. James jumped in, “Forty-four percent of the teachers responding to my survey indicated that since the advent of NCLB they have spent a great deal of time in test preparation. The majority of these teachers indicated that, while this test preparation emphasis was successful in raising test scores, they felt it did not necessarily result in improved or deeper level learning for the students.”

Mr. Holmes sighed deeply and added with resignation in his voice, “I have to admit that I’m one of those teachers. I no longer offer a well-rounded education to my students. More time is spent in teaching to the test. That is not what the students need to be a success in life.”

“I’d have to agree,” added Mrs. Teale. “Actually, I have become a better ‘test-teaching teacher,’ but certainly not as fun or memorable as I once was. My students’ test scores are improving, but I don’t think an improvement in test scores means they are learning more or learning better.”

Mr. Holmes chimed in, “Teachers have resorted to more superficial coverage of isolated facts in their effort to raise the test scores and avoid the punitive sanctions. Deep-level

understanding of concepts is no longer emphasized. In fact, it seems like the curriculum has become a mile wide and an inch deep.”

“While all of this memorable, activity-based, field trip instruction sounds like a lot of fun,” asserted Dr. Matthews, “fun isn’t our goal. These activities are obviously not the most efficient ways of delivering essential content.”

“Efficiency is important since there is so much to teach in a relatively short amount of time. But finding ways to teach that are engaging, interesting, meaningful, and fun for the students is essential. Otherwise, kids lose their motivation for school and for learning,” contended Miss Vernon.

Dr. Johnson drew a breath and said, “Teachers have allowed way too many interruptions to take precedence over essential learning activities. Keeping the students focused on the task at hand is so important and I applaud the renewed emphasis on keeping the students focused. It will help them learn optimally as well as perform better on the standardized test.”

“I’ve heard that curriculum that is not tested is being eliminated or de-emphasized. Is that true?” asked Mr. Valdez.

“Yes, that’s true,” agreed Mr. Holmes. “Now our kids score better on the standardized test, but other areas, not addressed by the test, are given a minimal amount of attention or are not taught at all.”

“Am I hearing this right? Subjects that are not assessed by the standardized test are no longer being taught? What about social studies? What about art, music, and P.E.? Recess is still around, isn’t it?” questioned Dr. Johnson incredulously.

“Actually,” Mrs. James responded, “thirty percent of the teachers responding to my survey indicated that curriculum that is not included on the standardized test has been de-emphasized or eliminated all together.”

“Indeed, we have encouraged our principals to eliminate many of the arts and even recess so that more time can be spent on teaching the subjects that are tested,” admitted Dr. Matthews coughing into his hand. “These teachers are right; the test scores have become the overriding focus for our schools and nothing seems to matter as much as improving the test scores. We, school district administrators, are being pressured by the federal government and we, in turn, transfer this pressure to the principals and teachers.”

“It isn’t about learning anymore. It’s all about test scores,” uttered Mrs. Teale in a dejected tone.

“I had no idea that there were so many complex issues related to the NCLB accountability mandates,” Mr. Valdez intoned. “On paper, the plan seems so solid, and simple to implement.”

Arriving at Conclusions

Realizing that the meeting time was almost over, Mrs. James began summing up the discussion. “I think we’ve become aware of some of the issues related to NCLB,” she began. “The punitive sanctions for low test scores are influencing schools and teachers to focus their attention on raising the test scores of the low-level learners. They aren’t worried about the higher-level learners because their test scores will most likely be adequate no matter what is taught. This encourages a one-size-fits-all, non-differentiated curriculum where the higher-level students are not challenged.”

“Even though many lower-functioning students are making good academic progress, the test has no way of measuring their progress,” added Mr. Holmes. “It can only determine if students are or are not at grade level.”

“Teachers are spending so much time on test-preparation activities in an effort to raise the test scores and avoid the punitive sanctions that they are eliminating or de-emphasizing curriculum that is not on the test such as social studies, art, music, P.E., teachable moments, project-based student-centered learning, field trips, etc.,” added Dr. Johnson. “Even though test scores may improve, meaningful and challenging learning experiences seem to be decreasing.”

Dr. Matthews explained further, “And all this emphasis on raising the test scores is encouraging more superficial, fragmented learning experiences, and seems to be turning kids off to learning, not to mention the negative effect it is having on the motivation of teachers. That’s just not acceptable.”

Brainstorming Solutions for Complex Issues

The meeting time was nearing the end, but interest was so high concerning these issues that participants took a few minutes to plan another meeting. The next meeting would be devoted to brainstorming solutions to these complex and convoluted issues. Mrs. James wrote the following questions on the white board for the group to consider at their next meeting and think about in the interim:

- 1) Are punitive sanctions necessary to motivate teachers to provide a high-quality education for all students?
- 2) Is the goal of closing the achievement gap feasible? Does this goal keep all students learning optimally?
- 3) How can NCLB policy in general, and standardized testing in particular, be adjusted to encourage teachers to keep all students learning optimally?
- 4) How can NCLB policy be adjusted to keep curriculum that is not assessed on the standardized test from being de-emphasized or eliminated?

References

James, J. K. (2007). *The influence of No Child Left Behind and The Wyoming Comprehensive Assessment System on curriculum and instruction: Perceptions of Wyoming’s elementary teachers, dissertation in press.*