

## **Journal of Educational Research & Policy Studies**

- Vocational Education and the Great Divide: Have Student Needs  
Been Overlooked? 1  
*Robert M. Reynolds*
- College Choice in Context: Toward a K-16 Education Policy  
Approach to College Choice for All 15  
*Paul E. Pitre*
- Reforming Professional Development at the School Site: New  
Standards and New Practices 27  
*Jennifer Good, Vikki Miller, & Cathy Gassenheimer*
- Parents Satisfaction with Educational Experiences: Implications  
for School Counselors and Administrators 47  
*Sang Min Lee, M. Harry Daniels,  
Daniel B. Kissinger, & Rebecca A. Newgent*
- Focussing on Second Chance Education: High School Completion  
Among Dropouts 59  
*Suhyun Suh & Jingyo Suh*
- Parent's Perceptions of Standardized Testing: Its Relationship and  
Effect on Student Achievement 75  
*Monica Z. Osburn, Charles Stegman, Laura D. Suitt, & Gary Ritter*

## *From the Editor's Desk*

Our effort to produce each issue of the *Journal* in timely fashion continues--not always successfully! Notwithstanding, this latest (albeit late) issue offers a diverse potpourri of articles and studies we hope will be of interest to our readers.

Robert M. Reynolds, a high school science teacher and currently a doctoral student at the University of South Florida, analyzes what he characterizes as a "great divide" separating two quite different high school curricular sequences. On the one hand is a curricular track designed to facilitate a student's preparation for postsecondary education. This option tends to capture the best and academically brightest students, those whose intention to attend college has been made plain years before and can be taken more or less for granted. On the other is the vocational track, a curricular option typically lacking adequate funding and the requisite social prestige needed to attract able students. Contemporary culture, Reynolds maintains, pressures students to choose the academic curricular track, even though they do not aspire to earn a college degree and might be in many cases much better served had they elected to explore a vocational rather than an academic option.

High school students, he alleges, may be divided into three categories. Those in the "upper" echelon are the academically talented who are groomed to attend college upon graduation from secondary school. A "lower" class of students is comprised by those who require "special" programs and placements in order to succeed. In between are those who constitute a sort of amorphous "middle" category. They are the "ghosts" for whom no particular programs or curricula are provided. They are, ultimately, what Reynolds terms "the forgotten majority" among high school students today.

Schools, he further argues, have an obligation to help all students succeed in their chosen career paths. Ultimately, this will require a special commitment on the part of education stakeholders to ensure that all students are valued and their intentions honored, whether they are bound for college, planning for immediate entry into the job market, or preparing to seek further technical training.

Paul Pitre of Auburn University offers a somewhat different perspective on secondary curricula and the challenge of helping students manage the transition from high school to college. The urgent need today, he asserts, is for a better understanding of students' "college choice behaviors" and for programs that more effectively assist graduating high-school seniors to navigate their way through the process leading to collegiate admission.

Because high-school counselors are already woefully overburdened, it is not likely they can be expected to assume additional responsibilities in this respect. Rather, information on the college choice process, Pitre insists, must be integrated within the high school curriculum itself. Again, he concludes, better models or "conceptual maps" to explain the dynamics of the transition from high school to college remain an unfulfilled need.

Ask most elementary and secondary teachers to describe typical professional development activities and they will cite such traditional practices as attending off-site conferences, sitting through workshops with outside consultants in charge, or attending system-wide planned workshops during inservice days. Less often--if at all--might faculty members mention such possibilities as observing a peer's model lesson on a given topic, or participation in a study group devoted to topics selected by the group's own members, or analyzing students' work with other teachers, and so on.

Jennifer Good of Auburn University, together with Vikki Miller and Cathy Gassenheimer of the Alabama Best Practices Center report on a program entitled "Powerful Conversations in Professional Development," an initiative derived from the professional development mandates of No Child Left Behind federal legislation. Their study, involving over two dozen separate school sites, was undertaken to reflect and to exhibit responsiveness to the National Staff Development Council's (NSDC) 2001 revision of standards for professional development, standards that would be more research-based, data driven, on-going, and job-embedded. Eschewing the usual workshops, courses, and presentations by experts, the NSDC's vision called for collaborative faculty efforts based on students' actual needs and efforts to effect systemic change, as needed, within school learning communities.

Professional development "conversations" were conducted by Good, Miller and Gassenheimer at 32 different school sites. Approximately six months to a year later, surveys were administered to ascertain whether and how non-traditional development practices had taken hold at selected sites. Their reported findings carry interesting and significant implications for the process of implementing professional development practices within schools otherwise marked by allegiance to traditional practices and activities.

Sang Min Lee, Daniel Kissinger and Rebecca Newgent of the University of Arkansas together with M. Harry Daniels of the University of Florida, utilized the National Household Education Survey (NHES) database to identify factors influencing parents' satisfaction with their children's schools.

Hierarchical multiple regression analysis indicated that parent satisfaction tends to be linked most closely with the degree to which each school is successful in informing parents about how their child is doing in school. Factors contributing to parental satisfaction with a school, it is suggested, involves teachers, academic standards, and order and discipline, as well as the school itself. “Results,” they note, “suggest that the main component of parent satisfaction appears to be how well schools are committed to actively communicate with them.” They conclude their report with a brief discussion of possible implications for school administrators and school counselors in facilitating school communication with parents.

Suhyun Suh and Jingyo Suh, of Auburn University and Tuskegee, respectively, have utilized the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988 to analyze data on high school credentials acquired by drop-outs subsequent to their leaving school. Academic performance, socioeconomic status and grade level, they determined, are all significant variables affecting eventual school completion.

Finally, Monica Osburn of the University of North Carolina at Pembroke, together with Charles Stegman, Laura Suitt and Gary Ritter of the University of Arkansas, offer a revealing take on parents’ views of standardized testing and student performance outcomes. Among their findings: Parents polled in their sample did not indicate great anxiety over the use of standardized testing and, furthermore, reportedly felt their children were not experiencing any high level of stress either. On the contrary, parents showed support for standardized testing and affirmed its value in the academic process.

There you have it--a rather diverse array of contributions to this issue of the Journal. Enjoy. Needless to add, we hope sooner or later that you too will feel moved to share your own research with our readers. We look forward to hearing from you!

---Christopher J. Lucas



## **Vocational Education and the Great Divide: Have Student Needs Been Overlooked?**

*Robert M. Reynolds*  
*University of South Florida*

### *Abstract*

*This paper is an examination of the divide that exists between academic and vocational curricula in American public high schools. This divide is a separation of the two curricular pathways which induces students and others to see vocational education as an inferior curriculum. Due to this perception many students may choose the academic curriculum route even though they have no aspirations of earning a college degree. The history of this divide is explored in a literature review to give some insight as to its origin. The effect the current split in the curriculum has on high school students in their quest for a bright and fulfilling future is examined. A review of the literature implied that this separation was probably initiated in an attempt to correct a perceived failure of the school system in the area of math and science. The gap was further widened with the advent of standardized curriculum to preclude yet another imagined failure in the education system. The net effect on school systems was a separation of the curriculum that made the vocational curriculum subordinate to the academic curriculum. In the final analysis there are many possible means of bridging or narrowing this separation of the curricular. One of these many possibilities is discussed in this paper.*

Vocational preparation has taken a back seat to college preparation for many years. Here the divide that currently exists between the vocational and academic high school curricula is explored along with one possible bridge between the two. The background of this split is examined to discover its beginnings. A look at the current condition of education suggests how this split has been perpetuated. Finally one possible avenue to bridge this divide is discussed. Mullen and Kohan (2002) claim the school system has inherited a legacy of dualism that splits academic and vocational education.

What is the purpose of a high school education? Each student is looking for something different from high school and each must be allowed to be successful in his or her quest for a prosperous future. Many educators, students and parents would agree that high school is mainly about controlling teenagers and keeping them off the streets. Some may say high schools should teach students to be good citizens. Other students, parents and educators would claim that the purpose of high schools is to prepare our young ones for success in post secondary education. A few may hasten to point out that high school opens a doorway to a future career. Shapiro, Benjamin, and Hunt (1995) make this point, "Beset by conflicting and changing purposes and demands by the American Society and unclear about our educational aims and goals, schools often lack focus" (p. 75).

Must high school be limited to one specific purpose? Can high schools teach students to be good citizens, prepare some for a post secondary education, and show others that a future awaits that does not require a 4-year college degree? Ansell (2004) points out that federal legislation has stressed the standardization of student learning. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) is an excellent example of this. This standardization is also evident from the implementation of standardized test that contain only academic questions and the failure of the federal or state government to provide adequate funding for vocational programs. Researchers continue to debate several aspects of the high school experience.

## **The Great Divide**

Bill, Joe, and Sally are three typical high school juniors; each is interested in having fun now but wants to be a "success" in the future. The three have similar but separate stories.

### ***Bill***

Bill was reared in an upper middle class family. He plays football and baseball for his high school and other students see him around school with the "in" crowd. All of Bill's teachers know he is planning to go to college and become an engineer. They are happy when they see he is enrolled in one of their classes since he is such a "good" student and always makes an "A" or "B" on his report cards. Bill always completes his assignments and engages his teachers in opinionated conversation about the subject at hand. When Bill has a problem with scheduling classes the counselor readily fixes the

problem and ensures he gets just the right classes to prepare him for college.

### ***Sally***

Sally is the daughter of a single mother who works two jobs to pay the bills and take care of Sally and her two siblings. Now eighteen, Sally has been working after school and on weekends since she was sixteen. There is never enough money for luxuries, but always enough for the necessities. Sally does not have time for extracurricular activities because she needs to work to help with the bills. At school other students do not seem to notice her as she walks from class to class. In class the teachers assume she will not have her homework done even though it is completed and turned in on time. Questions asked of Sally by her teachers are limited to those that can be answered with a yes or no and never involve the opinions Sally may have. Grades are important to Sally and she usually makes either a "B" or "C" in every class by working on homework late into the night after work. Sally dreams of becoming a cosmetologist but no one seems to know or care. When it comes to class schedules Sally often learns that classes are full and that she will just have to take whatever is available. Sally tries to tell her counselors what her dream is, but their standard answer is that there is no program available for training in that area. However, if she wants to go to college they can help.

### ***Joe***

Joe, whose dad is a construction supervisor and mom a secretary for a local real estate company, attends the same school. By all accounts his is a normal middle class family. One problem plagues their otherwise seemingly idyllic existence. Joe is a "slow learner." This "disability" was identified while he was in middle school and Joe was placed in special classes to accommodate his disability. At school Joe tends to "hang" with the kids in his special classes and is usually ignored by the other students. In class, especially in "regular" classes, Joe never gets called on to answer questions. Teachers seem to think that because it takes Joe a little longer to catch on he is wasting their time and the time of the students who are going to "make something" of themselves. Despite this Joe has managed to make average grades on all his report cards and on occasion has brought home a few above average ones. Joe's dream is to one day be a diesel mechanic and work on the "big-rigs" he sees at the truck stop near his home. In the past he tried to talk with counselors about his dream but they did not seem to want to listen. Their response was usually that

there was no program available to help him in that area but, if he wanted to go to college there may be a program.

Not all students are looking for a 4-year college program. Their only interest is doing something that is interesting and enjoyable for them. For these students a vocational training program may be just what they are looking for to ensure them a bright future.

### **Current Conditions in Education**

Each school day, more than 14 million students report to public high school classrooms across the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 2004). The reason for each student's attendance varies. Some attend simply because the law mandates attendance. Others see high school as a social event to be used to make contacts and friendships. For many, high school is the only way to meet the requirements for acceptance into a post secondary institution. For a few, high school is the first step along a path to a successful career. The students who are of concern here are those who are not necessarily going to college.

Students who are not going to college deserve as much attention and assistance as do those bound for college. But, it is precisely those students who are most often forgotten. They sometimes go off to college where the vast majority will not succeed because they are not adequately prepared. Some will try finding a job in the professional ranks only to discover they have not been prepared for the workforce. Others will find a job as an unskilled laborer and may spend their entire adult life wondering if they could have made a better choice in their career path. This decision will not only impact their lives but also the lives of their children. Perhaps this decision was not entirely theirs but was forced on them by an educational system that was not responsive to their needs. Blank and Scaglione (1992) state that even a casual observer will notice the separation between the vocational and academic programs in our modern high schools. Perhaps this separation is partially at fault for the system not being responsive to their needs.

We can easily divide high school students into three categories, upper, middle and lower academic levels using criteria similar to what Gray and Herr (2000) used in their classification of students. It is easy to see where our three students mentioned above fall. Bill would be considered by most to be in the upper academic classification. The upper academic class can easily be seen around school. They are the ones who every teacher wants in their

class because they are known to be good hardworking students. These students can be seen on campus because they are athletes or the academically "gifted" students who almost everyone wants to be like. Some may see them as the "social elite" in school, belonging to the "in" crowd. These upper academic level students will have the grades and the standardized test scores to back up their position in the hierarchy. Teachers and counselors will do all within their power to ensure these students receive the very best the school has to offer. These students are ensured a place in a 4-year college and will probably be successful in their academic endeavors unlike most of those in the academic middle.

The students in the academic middle are the "ghosts" on campus; seen but yet not seen. These students rarely get involved in extracurricular activities preferring to watch rather than participate. They may have excellent grades on report cards and adequate scores on standardized test but no one seems to care. These students do not belong to the "in" crowd and they do not "hang" with any particular group. In fact they may even be loners when it comes to their social life. Some of these students take "college-prep" courses while others are found in the "regular" classes and some in the "vocational" areas. Most of these students have no interest in a 4-year college degree (Gray & Herr, 2000). They may have interest in being trained to do a specific job and probably know what career they are most interested in pursuing. Sally knew what she wanted from her high school experience but could not get anyone to help.

The lower level academic students are not necessarily the ones with the lowest potential for grades or test scores. In fact they are very much like the middle level academic students in areas such as extracurricular activities and social interaction. The major difference is that they have been identified as being low performing and as such are entitled to some "special" programs in education. Unfortunately according to Shapiro et al. (1995) students placed in lower ability tracks will usually learn less than they would if placed in other tracks. They may have specially trained teachers or be located in classrooms reserved solely for students with their needs. These students can also be found in "regular" classrooms where they have special accommodations made for them to ensure they have an "equal" chance to succeed.

The fact that these three groups exist is not the problem - the problem arises in what we do for each group. Special curricular programs are in place

to assist those in the lower academic levels to succeed and flourish after high school. This includes special curricular, specially trained instructors and in some cases specially trained tutors to assist them. Students in the upper academic levels also have special curricula to ensure they will succeed in college. Included here would be the college-prep curriculum taught by teachers with special qualifications. The education system seems to have forgotten the students in the academic middle.

Students in the academic middle have no special programs or curricula to ensure their success. In fact many consider students in the academic middle to be the forgotten majority of academia (Gray & Herr, 2000; Parnell, 1986). Students in the academic middle have been left to choose to exist in the forgotten middle or to try to move into the upper level arena. Over the years this migration of the academic middle into the college preparatory classes has resulted in a bifurcation of the college preparatory curriculum partially to ensure the upper level academics are challenged in their high school curriculum (Gray & Herr, 2000).

These students hear from family, friends, teachers, and career counselors that in order to ensure a bright future in a high paying job they must go to college and get at least a bachelor's degree. This is clearly disputed by Gray and Herr (2000) when they point out that 43% of college graduates will not find work commensurate with their education. The monthly labor review expects 5 million job openings annually from 1996 to 2006. Only 24% of these will require a 4-year degree or higher (Gray & Herr, 2000). These two facts by themselves are enough to cause many to reconsider the need for a college degree except for those who intend to enter a profession that requires a degree.

### **Background Issues Affecting Americans' View of Public Education**

On October 4, 1957 Russia launched Sputnik I. Americans were told that the Russians had beaten them into space because our school system was failing. Prior to the launch of Sputnik education was in the business of meeting the needs of every student. Vocational programs were plentiful and students were taught the skills necessary to succeed in life. After Sputnik the school system went through a tremendous reform as a result of the National Defense Education Act of 1958 (NDEA).

Math and science were the focal point of education due to the NDEA (1958). Money was taken away from other areas of schooling and concentrated in the math and sciences. Teachers were invited to attend seminars to improve their

ability to teach math and science and paid a stipend for attending. The general belief was that the United States had to catch up with the Russians and the way to do that was to improve our educational system. To improve the present system it was thought that math and science needed to be the focal point and all other areas were secondary.

I remember when I was a high school student. In the mid-1960s, there was a "railroad" building at my school where students were trained for a career working for the railroad. Several of my school companions took advantage of this curriculum and continued on to have successful careers in the railroad industry. They retired after thirty years with a pension large enough to live comfortably for the remainder of their years. This practice was stopped, at least partially, because of the shift in concentration away from vocational training and toward academics.

This shift came about because the government thought its money and teacher resources could better be utilized on math, science and other academics rather than vocational programs. The general impression of many Americans was that the Russians were ahead of us and to catch up and surpass the Russians in the "space race" we must improve in the academics especially math and science. The NDEA (1958) allocated millions of dollars towards student loans for those studying science, engineering, and foreign language, and for the purchases of scientific equipment for schools.

In April 1983, The National Commission on Excellence in Education (NCEE, 1983) released its findings in *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*. This again placed the importance of academic programs before many vocational programs. The NCEE (1983) made the following recommendations for high school graduation requirements:

“We recommend that State and local high school graduation requirements be strengthened and that, at a minimum, all students seeking a diploma be required to lay the foundations in the Five New Basics by taking the following curriculum during their four years of high school: (a) four years of English; (b) three years of mathematics; (c) three years of science; (d) three years of social studies; and (e) one-half year of computer science. For the college-bound, two years of foreign language in high school are strongly recommended in addition to those taken earlier” (NCEE, 1983, para 5).

Again one easily sees from the commission's report that vocational training has taken a "back seat" to academics. This appears to be a step by the federal

government to eliminate vocational training. High school graduation requirements have not changed even in the face of the eighteen-hour high school graduation program now in effect in Florida. This program appears to have been originally designed to get students out of high school and into college earlier. There is a "vocational" track; however the requirements for graduation are the same math, science, and other academic courses. The only difference seems to be the allowance for career and technical education electives (Florida K-20 Education Code, 2003). The design of both tracks allows students to complete their high school education in three years instead of the current four required years.

### **Forces that Widen the Vocational-Academic Gap in Curriculum**

Floridians are now seeing the beginning of a new imperative from state and federal government. This new message is that all students will attend post secondary education institutions (Florida K-20 Education Code, 2004). This has effectively crippled many vocations programs. The government advocates an emphasis on academic training and the continuation of education beyond high school; not training for a career or profession. Yes there are short lived vocational programs like school-to-work and tech-prep, but these programs are only funded for a short period then are expected to continue without funding. The Florida public education system is even referred to in state law as a K-20 education system with the emphasis on students continuing to community college and beyond after high school graduation (Florida K-20 Education Code, 2004). This is again evident with the early graduation program currently in place in Florida.

The U.S. government is not the only organization to help eliminate vocational training in high schools. With funds dwindling, local school districts must choose which parts of the curriculum to fund. True the amount of money spent per student constantly rises but at the same time so too does the expense, or only at a faster rate. Florida instituted the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT, 2004a) which requires a passing score prior to graduation for each student and a passing grade for the school (Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test, 2004b). This in itself is not a bad idea. However, it also takes money away from struggling schools and redistributes funds to high performing schools. This test only covers reading, writing, and math. The federal government has started checking adequate yearly progress using the scores from the FCAT (No Child Left Behind, 2001). If a school

fails to make adequate yearly progress again the school loses money from their Title I funds. With the state and federal government pushing for academic performance it is not a hard choice for many administrators. Vocational training must take a "back-seat" to academics.

Americans are experiencing institutionalized failure of our students in the academic middle. Parents, teachers, counselors, administrators, and peers are attempting to convince them the only way they can be successful in life is to have a 4-year college degree. This propaganda campaign starts when the student first enters school and continues even after high school graduation. They hear it from every source with which they come into contact.

Since the end of World War II, when many ex-service men and women were able to attend college using the GI Bill, there has been an increase in the desire of Americans to receive a college degree. This desire has led to pushing many students into the college ranks with little regard for their preparation. Parents, teachers, administrators, counselors, and peers have "brain washed" students into believing the only way they can be successful is to receive a college degree.

My own son was no exception. He heard from teachers, counselors, and peers that a college degree was an essential part of growing up. After high school graduation in 2002, Marcus went to the US Coast Guard Academy. After a year he was diagnosed with a debilitating disease and returned home a disabled American Veteran. One year later, he is employed by the state Corrections Department, going to Corrections Officer School, and making a good salary with a bright future and terrific benefits. This push toward a college degree has always been done with the best interest of the student at heart. However, as has been pointed out, this is not always what is truly best for everyone. My son has made a career for himself without the need for a 4-year college degree. Gray and Herr (2000) make the point that 40 percent of all jobs today can be learned in two weeks. With apparent disregard for this, many students are being guided toward college degrees without much obvious concern for their own desire.

This insistence on a college degree has come from several sources according to Gray and Herr (2000). Parents want their children to have a better life than they did, so they advocate going to college with the idea that with a college degree a successful future is assured. Public school teachers and administrators throughout the nation can be heard telling students that in order to ensure a bright future they must attend college. Students can also be heard touting

the advantages of going to college in an attempt to convince their friends to join them in their quest for a secure and successful future.

Post secondary institutions need to convince students to go to college. The United States has an overabundance of baccalaureate degree granting colleges mainly due to the increasing numbers of institutions between 1980 and 1990 (Gray & Herr, 2000). This growth period has left most colleges and universities in the position of having to fill seats left empty due to a decrease in the number of high school graduates in the same time period. Therefore, there has been an outreach to high school students and their parents to encourage post secondary education.

One final group that is assisting in perpetuating this idea of going to college is the money lenders. They want everyone to go to college and take out loans to pay for this education. These money lenders take no risk. They can lend money to every student in college with the federal government guaranteeing the loan. When a student leaves college, with a degree or not, the lender will get back the principle loaned and interest either from the student or the government. This is a win-win situation for money lenders. With the number of students graduating high school and entering college each year the money lender has an almost unlimited supply of customers. The United States graduates about 71 percent of our high school students (Greene, 2002). This insistence, that a college degree is vital to success in life, has been so effective that almost three fourths of high school graduates will attend college even if they are not adequately prepared for success. Of those about half will leave college before they complete their degree (Gray & Herr, 2000). Most of these students find themselves in debt and looking for a job. They look without any special job training, training that could help to improve their chances of finding a higher paying job. A quality career preparation program would offer these students an alternative to college that would result in many students being successful in their search for the secure future all seek.

### **Recommendations for the Future Education of Our Students**

The future of vocational education is not only that of an educational curriculum. It is in some ways a mirror of the future of the United States in general. As a nation we are constantly in a battle to keep up with other countries in many areas such as industrial manufacturing and technical/computer development. Parnell (1986) defines career education as being a delivery system which helps students develop competencies that are required to function in real-life roles. Without a trained workforce this battle is all but lost before it has begun. This workforce

will depend little on the 4-year college graduate and greatly on the well trained "blue collar" worker.

To ensure a well trained workforce, there are a few steps that must be taken with each individual. One major point of contention is the need to cease looking at students as a group to be molded into what is perceived by some to be best for all and look at each individual to determine his/her strength, weakness, and desires. As a parent and teacher I encourage young people to find what they like to do and concentrate on that area. If you are going to commit your life and livelihood to a career, it should be one you get joy from, not one that was decided for you. A program used to assist a student select his or her future can not be a short-lived and ill-conceived affair. It must be well thought out and revisited on a regular basis.

Teachers from middle school through high school receive training in the procedures and requirements of any program if it is to be successful. During the students' sixth and seventh grade years they receive exposure to a variety of occupations on numerous occasions. This exposure ideally will come in the form of guest speakers from area business of all types, government offices, technical/trade schools, and colleges. In addition to visits from area professionals the students will also receive exposure to occupations outside the local area by whatever means are available to each school. Students will receive encouragement to seek information on each career that interests them then share that information with classmates and faculty members.

During the students' eighth-grade year, career counselors hold conferences with the student, parents, and teachers. These conferences are designed to help the student make a preliminary career choice based on interest and past academic history. These choices are preliminary and are in no way binding to the student. These conferences may be informal in the beginning. However, they will culminate with the beginning of the student's Individual Career Plan (ICP), which will follow the student throughout the remainder of his or her career training. The ICP is a working document, which will undergo many changes as the student matures and interests change. The ICP, a planning tool, should not to be used as filler in the student's cumulative academic folder but should be reviewed and updated often. This review and update must always include the student, parents, teachers, and counselors.

Upon entering high school the ICP will take on a much more important roll as a planning tool for the student's academic future. Students receive assistance in exploring various career paths and exposed to actual on-site experiences when

possible. All students will take the same standard curriculum in the ninth and tenth grades. Specialized curricula will not start until the beginning of the eleventh grade year. In order for students to participate in a special curriculum path they must be in the eleventh grade and have passed the FCAT, in Florida, or other standardized test as required. School systems need at least three curriculum paths from which the student may choose or be guided toward. Based on exhibited interest and future plans the student, parent, guidance counselor, and teachers will develop a curriculum path for the student.

One of these career paths may lead to the college preparatory curriculum. Ideal for Bill since he knows he wants to study engineering. This curriculum is designed to prepare the student for success in a community or 4-year college curriculum. With the cooperation of colleges this curriculum is designed to ensure students will meet all prerequisites for acceptance into their institutions. This curriculum path will not have much modification from what exists now in many high schools except that it will be concentrated in the last two years and not the entire high school experience. Current "dual enrollment" programs can be modified to allow a more diversified class offering. The major difference with this and existing college preparatory curricula is that now selected local colleges have guaranteed acceptance to any student who completes this curriculum. This curriculum is modified for the individual student based on their chosen field of study after high school and in-depth and ongoing consultations with parents, teachers and counselors.

The second of the new curricula pathways is the career preparatory curriculum. Parnell (1986) points out that career education is a learner-centered bridge to help individuals cope with modern life. This will be the most involved and demanding to setup and continue. A survey must be done of local industries, businesses, technical/trade training centers and possibly community colleges. Training centers such as those for real estate and insurance will also have to be surveyed. The local school system and each of these centers will have to work collaboratively to establish a curriculum that will meet the requirements for entering students. Local business and industry should be persuaded to establish an on-the-job training program that students can participate in as part-time employees. These positions may be paid positions but will also serve as a means to earn high school credit toward graduation requirements much the same as the current diversified cooperative education program. Post graduation job offers are the primary concern for all involved. The guarantee of a post graduation job offer is at the forefront of negotiations between the school system and the private organization.

In addition to developing a curriculum that will ensure students have met the necessary prerequisites for entry upon high school graduation, training centers and community colleges work with the local school system to establish "dual enrollment" classes where appropriate.

Training centers that prepare candidates for special certification test are also involved in the career preparation curriculum. These centers could work out an agreement with the school system to offer classes for students and help in their preparation for certification. This pathway is ideal for students like Sally who know their careers will require some sort of certification.

The final curriculum pathway discussed is the standard or "regular" curriculum. This path way is designed for those students who, for one reason or another, can not or will not make a choice concerning their future. This pathway concentrates on ensuring each student receives a well-rounded education in their final two years of high school. This education ensures they have the basic knowledge to make wise choices in their future. While these students may not have chosen a career path the school system must continue to bring to their attention various careers that may interest them.

High school students deserve the opportunity to succeed in their chosen career paths. High schools and school systems have an obligation, if not a mandate, to ensure students succeed. Assuming these two statements are, in essence, true, why are so many students being forced into a curriculum path they do not desire? It is possible the answer is as simple as "money." The answer, however, may be so complicated as to defy explanation at this time. The purpose of this paper was not to answer this question but to offer one possible alternative to forcing students into pathways they may not wish to take. Presently, many students are routed into curriculum pathways simply because no viable alternative exist. By establishing the curriculum pathways mentioned in the paper, more students would have the opportunity to make guided decisions that would impact them well into their futures.

Although forgotten, overlooked, or deemphasized by events, the basis for these pathways currently exists in the public school system. The commitment and cooperation of all stakeholders is needed to ensure all students are valued whether they are bound for college education, career education, or another alternative in their future. With this commitment a program can be developed and continued that will ensure each student receives an education tailored to his or her specific needs and desires.

## References

- Ansell, S. (2004, June 23). High school reform. *EdWeek.org*. Retrieved June 30, 2004, from <http://www.edweek.org>
- Blank, W., & Scaglione, J. (1992). *Integrating academic and vocational education: Implementation guide*. [grant report]. Tampa, FL: University of South Florida. [State of Florida/Department of Education/Tallahassee, Florida].
- Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test. Retrieved July 20, 2004a, from [www.firn.edu/doe/sas/fcat.htm](http://www.firn.edu/doe/sas/fcat.htm)
- Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test, Title XLVII, Florida Statutes §§ 1003.22, (2004b)
- Florida K-20 Education Code, Title XLVII, Florida Statutes §§ 1003.429, (2004)
- Gray, K., & Herr, E. L. (2000). *Other ways to win*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press. (Original work published 1998)
- Greene, J. P. (2002). *High school graduation rates in the United States*. Retrieved July 22, 2004, from [http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/cr\\_baeo.htm#15](http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/cr_baeo.htm#15)
- Mullen, C. A., & Kohan, A. R. (2002). Beyond dualism, splits, and schisms: Social justice for a renewal of vocational-academic education. *Journal of School Leadership, 12*, 640-662.
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2004). The Condition of Education, 2004. Retrieved July 11, 2004, from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2004077>
- National Commission on Excellence in Education. (1983, April 26). A Nation at Risk. Retrieved July 12, 2004, from <http://www.ed.gov/pubs/NatAtRisk/recomm.html>
- National Defense Education Act. (1958, Sept 2). U S Code Title 20 Chapter 15, P.L. 85-864.
- No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. (2002, Jan 8). U S Code Title 20 Chapter 6301, P.L. 107-110.
- Parnell, D. (1986). *The neglected majority*. Washington, DC: The Community College Press.
- Shapiro, A., Benjamin, W., & Hunt, J. (1995). *Curriculum and schooling: A practitioner's guide*. Palm Springs, CA: ETC Publications.



## **College Choice in Context: Toward a K-16 Education Policy Approach to College for All**

*Paul E. Pitre*  
*Auburn University*

### *Abstract*

*The changing demographic and economic structures in the United States dictate that policy makers at the federal, state, and organizational levels of education pay closer attention to college recruitment and enrollment trends. These trends point to the need for an aggressive approach to moving the educational system into the 21st century by building stronger connections between K-12 systems and colleges. The college choice literature provides a means for gaining a better understanding of how students experience the transition from high school to college. The purpose of this paper is to show that research on college choice can be leveraged to develop a concentrated focus on P-16 education policy which brings schools and colleges in closer alliance with the primary focus of creating future benefits for students. By adopting a college for all policy approach, schools and colleges can begin to work together to meet the college access needs of all students while preparing these students to meet the demands of and be successful in the 21st century economy.*

Education has played an important role in the history, politics, and economics of American society. Over time, the college degree has developed into a type of currency and has become a key to individual economic prosperity. According to Judy and D'Amico (1997) in the late 1980's and throughout the 1990's, the college degree served as "the ticket to the middle class" (p. 137). In contemporary times, education has been directly linked to personal income earning power of Americans (National Commission on the High School Senior Year, 2001). Though a college degree does not guarantee its recipients a secure income once they enter the workforce, high school graduates who choose to go on to college and complete the bachelor's degree

are more likely to earn a higher salary than their peers who only complete the high school diploma.

As the modern day workforce preparation equivalent of the high school diploma of the 1950s and 1960s, the bachelor's degree provides individuals a greater opportunity to compete in the labor market. An example of the economic advantage that comes with the completion of the bachelor's degree is illustrated by Henschel, Kirshstein, O'Malley, and Rhodes (2000). They report that in 1998 individuals who held a bachelor's degree earned an average of \$43,782 yearly, while their peers with only a high school diploma earned approximately \$23,594. In this example, the average salary of the college graduate is close to double the salary of the high school graduate.

While the role a college education plays in personal economics is well known, the issues surrounding the role of a college education as it relates to the future of the national economy has not been fully realized. The Supreme Court's 2003 ruling that affirmative action in college admissions is of compelling national interest speaks to the importance of broadened college access (Gratz, et al v. Bollenger, et al., 2003). Further, the ruling demonstrates that the issues surrounding access to college are still a major concern in the 21st century.

The nuances of college access are much easier to understand and interpret in the year 2005 because of the research that has been done in the area of college choice. Studies related to college choice provide background information on how students decide whether or not to go to college, what type of college would best suit them, and what college they will actually attend (Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Litten, 1982; Manski & Wise, 1983). The knowledge gained through analysis of high school students' decision making behaviors can be successfully leveraged to help broaden the spectrum of students that are prepared for college attendance.

Through new and innovative policy focused on college preparation and recruitment of students from ethnic minority and economically disadvantaged backgrounds, expanded access can be achieved. The first step in expanded access is insuring student preparation for success in college. The focus on college preparation is not meant to diminish the role that a positive college experience plays in preparing students to command a larger role in the national economy, but to enhance it . This paper argues that through the knowledge gained from the current body of research on college choice there can be value added by starting with a focus on the input -- a well prepared student

transitioning through the K-12 system and into college -- which will likely have a positive effect on the output: the college educated wage earner. Gaining a better understanding of the college choice behaviors of students and utilizing newly acquired knowledge to implement policy that will be effective in broadening the spectrum of students who are prepared for college is important to the success of K-12 and college level administrators and teachers, policymakers, students and families, and the American public as a whole.

The findings of college choice related studies provide the groundwork for programmatic approaches to helping students navigate the K-12 system and make a smooth transition to college. Additionally, college choice research can lead to new and innovative policy regarding school/college partnerships - P-16 education-and the development of new college choice theory related to how ethnic minority and economically disadvantaged students experience the transition from high school to college.

Starting with a national focus, this paper discusses economic and demographic trends that speak to the need for an aggressive approach to moving the educational system into the 21st century by building stronger connections between K-12 systems and colleges. Then, key aspects of the college choice process are described. Finally, this paper concludes by providing policy recommendations for consideration. The recommendations center on implementing P-16 education policy that focuses on a college for all approach for preparing K-12 students in the 21st century. The college for all policy focus includes tightening existing structures and relationships that exist between K-12 systems and colleges in order to facilitate more effective college preparation, smoother college transitions, and a general improvement in access to college for all students.

### **Considerations of National Significance**

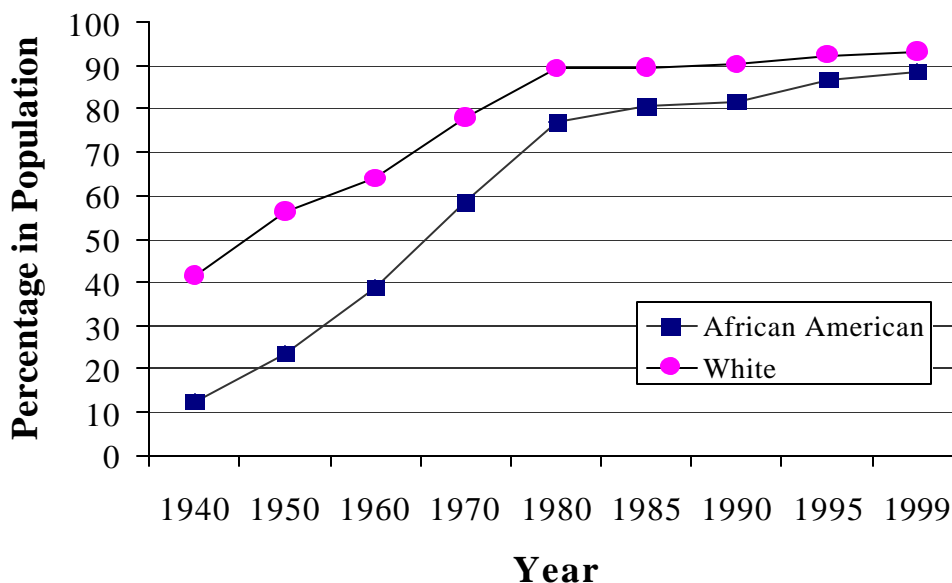
The issues related to gaining access to college are of great significance to policy makers, educators, the business community, and the broader community for two primary reasons. First, both the workforce and the economy in the United States are in transition. Workers in the new economy need more education and training than ever before due to growth in the skilled labor market (Judy & D'Amico, 1997). While blue collar and low-skilled employment will still command a share of the labor force in the next decade, there will be an expansion in the availability of employment in the skilled labor market (National Commission on the High School Senior Year, 2001).

This expansion has already begun and a shortage of skilled labor exists (Judy & D'Amico, 1997; National Commission on the High School Senior Year, 2001). According to the National Commission on the High School Senior Year (2001), an even greater shortage in skilled labor is projected. The commission states: "One report from the Massachusetts Institute for Social and Economic Research projected that 385,000 jobs demanding high levels of skill would be created by 2010 and that the existing workforce probably could not do them" (p. 5).

The findings of this report demonstrate that the future growth in jobs will require employees to have training beyond the high school level of education to compete in the new economy.

In order for students to prepare for the current challenges presented by the new information-based global economy and the requirements of a high-skilled labor market, education beyond the high school diploma is almost mandatory. The low-skill/high-wage labor jobs that were once a staple in the United States labor market are not only decreasing in availability, these jobs now require workers to have the same high school curricular background as those students who intend to go on to college (Orfield & Paul, 1994).

A second issue related to changes in the economy and the new requirements for the entry-level job market is the increase in African American student high school graduation rates that are now similar to those of Caucasian students (see Figure 1). With African American high school graduation rates increasing-



*Figure 1.* Percentage of African American and Caucasian completing high school education or higher 1940-1999 Data source from the U.S. Department of Education, Digest of Education Statistics 2000.

seemingly creating larger pools of college recruits, it would seem logical that African American college enrollments would increase at a similar rate. However, this is not the case. While college enrollment figures for African Americans as well as Hispanics, and Native Americans have increased overall since the 1960s, the rates of African American students attending college still trail those of Caucasian and Asian students. Heller (1999) reports that in 1996, the proportion of the African American college age population who actually attended college lagged behind the proportion of the White college age population, who actually attended college, at a rate of 12%. The difference in the college attendance rate between African American and Caucasian students in 1996 was similar to the 1967 rate of attendance. In 1967, the proportion of the African American college age population, who actually attended college, lagged behind the Caucasian college age population, who actually attended college, by 14% (Heller, 1999). The new figures suggest that after more than 30 years there has only been about a 2% change in African American student college-going rates when compared to Caucasian students.

The population of students most likely to attend college seems to be students of Asian descent. In a more recent report, Akerhielm, Berger, Hooke, and Wise (1998) state, "While 79 percent of Asians attend [postsecondary education], 66 percent of Whites, 53 percent of Hispanics, 52 percent of [African American], and 38 percent of Native Americans attend [postsecondary education]" (p. ES-2). The gap between African Americans and Caucasians in college age student enrollments in this instance is 14%, again providing evidence that African American college age students have not significantly increased their college enrollment rate in proportion to their caucasian counterparts since 1967. It has been noted that the substantial gains in African American and Hispanic college age student college enrollments made in the 1960s and 1970s declined in the 1980s and 1990s (Heller, 1999).

Due to the aforementioned changes in the demographic and economic picture in the United States, policy makers at the federal, state, and organizational levels of education must pay closer attention to college recruitment and enrollment. On June 23, 2003, the United States Supreme Court ruled that it is in the best interest of the country to continue to move forward with affirmative action policies and to provide the additional types of assistance necessary to help racial and ethnic minority and economically disadvantaged students make their way to college (Gratz et al. v. Bollenger et al., 2003).

The response to this call seems to be slow. The changes in demographics and economics speak volumes about the challenges that lie ahead of the United States as a country. It is up to the leaders in the educational policy arena to move these important issues to the forefront of the national educational policy agenda. In doing so, the players in the policy process must consider two important college access related trends-enrollment management and college choice. This paper is concerned with the latter, college choice, and its' potential to inform policy related to college access and the P-16 education policy approach.

### **Understanding College Choice: A Key to Broadening Access**

College choice has been defined as the process a student experiences as she or he makes the transition from high school to college (Hossler, Braxton, & Coopersmith, 1989; Hossler & Gallagher, 1987; Litten, 1982; Paulsen, 1990). Theory related to the college choice process provides a means for understanding how students experience the transition from high school to college. Given the demographic changes taking place in the college age student population, student college decision making processes are fast becoming an important policy concern.

Three theoretical approaches to college choice have been widely used: econometric, sociological and combined. Econometric models explain the college choice process in monetary terms, as rates of return on educational investment (Hossler et al., 1989; Manski & Wise, 1983; McDonough, 1997). Sociological models of college choice focus on the influence of schools, parents, peers, and teachers (McDonough, 1997). In a combined approach, researchers utilize the most viable variables in the two approaches to facilitate more accurate predictions (Hossler et al., 1989).

Hossler et al. (1989) conducted a comprehensive analysis of college choice models utilizing the Hossler and Gallagher combined model of college choice as a framework for organizing their discussion. The three stages of the model are predisposition, search, and choice. Hossler and colleagues (1989) showed that the Hossler and Gallagher model was effective at encompassing a great deal of the research on issues related to college choice.

Organized into stages of college preparation processes, models of college choice provide a conceptual map for tracing how students navigate the process of transitioning from high school to college. Models of college choice also provide researchers a framework for examining the processes by which

students make decisions concerning college attendance (Bateman, 1990; Hossler et al., 1989; Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999; Litten, 1982; Manski & Wise, 1983). These models facilitate identification of specific variables that may have an impact on a student's decision-making processes. Research suggests that students navigating the college choice process are in need of different types of information, assistance, and support at each stage.

### **Moving Toward a P-16 College for All Policy**

Given the changes taking place in the economy, the demographics of the national population, and the growing significance of college related education and training, there is a need for an increased focus on providing the opportunity for college education to a broader spectrum of the population. Some might refer to this focus as a P-16 college for all education policy.

Oakes, Rogers, Lipton, and Morrell (2002) suggest that such a policy might be difficult to implement because the social and political climate surrounding access to college has been dominated by those individuals and families considered advantaged socially and economically. The authors further contend that these families will always seek to update and differentiate their students, educationally, in order to maintain an advantage over those students and families that have fewer resources. This type of approach to college access could pose a problem in the short run because those individuals in possession of social and economic advantage will leverage that advantage to gain access to higher education. However, the aim of the P-16 education college for all policy focus will standardize college access and move the entire educational system toward equalization of opportunities for all students. Implementation of the P-16 college for all education policy must be embraced at the state-level and implemented at the school system level.

In order to implement a college for all policy, curriculum mechanisms must be examined and aligned in order to integrate college choice information in a standardized fashion. The school curriculum can be a valuable tool for providing students much needed information on college choice. According to Mintrop, Machellan, and Pitre (2001) students sought out teachers first when they were interested in getting information related to college choice. These teachers often lacked current knowledge of information related to college attendance (Mintrop et al., 2001) which could be detrimental to those students who are in need of assistance in navigating the college choice process. Correspondingly, research has shown that counselors are overburdened with

excessive student counseling loads (McDonough, 1997; Mintrop et al.). This is a problem for ethnic minority and economically disadvantaged students who may not be familiar with timing and other key college choice related activities. The current K-12 college preparation system is structured so that the counselor is responsible for knowing each student in their particular caseload and meeting each one of those students' post high school needs. Given the large caseloads that these counselors maintain, this may be a difficult task. In the long run, some students may not get the help they need to fulfill their college aspirations.

The P-16 education approach to developing college for all policy proposes that instead of relying on overloaded counselors, the school classroom can be leveraged to provide an opportunity to integrate the high school curriculum with information on the college choice process. Schools would then be able to call upon colleges to help develop course materials that will assist students in making the connection between the courses they are studying and college. In keeping with the education reform efforts of the 1990s which asked the question "What should a high school graduate look like?" the P-16 education college for all policy approach answers that question: "A high school graduate should look like a college student." Such a policy can only be effective if schools are open to new and innovative ideas and approaches.

To effectively provide all students the opportunity to make clear choices regarding their educational futures, it may be necessary for schools to revise current curriculum practices. Schools and colleges must work together to assist students by providing them with the resources to successfully move through the college choice process. Arming students with information on what college is, how much it costs, the requirements for attending, the benefits of attending, and what college is like is an important strategy in increasing the college choices of African American students, other racial and ethnic minority students, and students in the general population. By utilizing the research on college choice, leveraging the resources of college admissions offices, and bringing those resources together in the school context, the P-16 education approach to a college for all policy can prosper and foster aspirations for college and future prosperity in all students.

## **Conclusion**

Broadened access to college continues to be an issue of national importance. Much of the debate surrounding affirmative action and its role in access to higher education may stem, in part, from the notion that a college degree can

positively influence personal economics. However, there are broader sweeping issues related to college access. Changes taking place in the economy and workforce, coupled with the changing demographics in the United States calls for a rethinking of our national priorities. There is an increasing need for a clearer focus on how to further our efforts in developing an educated citizenry. In order to gain that focus we must first realize that the bachelor's degree of today is equivalent to the high school diploma of the past. Without postsecondary education or training the high school graduate of 2005 and beyond will meet with struggles in our current workforce and economy.

To gain a better understanding of students and how they make decisions with regards to their lives beyond high school, the college choice literature must be considered. The college choice literature must also be expanded to provide information that is more relevant to racial and ethnic minority and economically disadvantaged student populations, as these populations begin to command a larger share of the of college-going student pool.

The existing college choice literature points to the need for a more concentrated focus on P-16 policy which brings schools and colleges in closer alliance with the primary focus of creating future benefits for students. By adopting a college for all policy approach, schools and colleges can begin to work together to meet the college access needs of all students. Colleges can assist school districts in leveraging the classroom as a resource for integrating the high school curriculum with information on the college choice process. Enhancing P-16 education relationships through partnerships that focus on improving college choice processes can be of mutual benefit to students, schools, colleges, and subsequently, the broader community and the national economy.

## References

- Akerhielm, K., Berger, J., Hooke, M., & Wise, D. (1998). *Factors related to college enrollment: Final report*. (Mathematica Publication No. 3360-028) Washington, DC: Department of Education.
- Alexander, K., & Cook, M. (1979). The motivational relevance of educational plans: Questioning the conventional wisdom. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 43, 202-213.
- Bateman, M. (1990). *Correlates of black and white student predisposition to pursue postsecondary education*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Indiana University, Bloomington.

- Bateman, M., & Hossler, D. (1996). Exploring the development of postsecondary education plans among African American and white students. *College and University*, 72(1) 2-9.
- Campbell, R. T. (1983). Status attainment research: End of the beginning or beginning of the end? *Sociology of Education*, 56, 47-62.
- Carter, D. F. (2001, April). *The aspirations achievement paradox: A partial explanation*. Paper presented at the meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Seattle, WA.
- Chapman, D. W. (1981). A model of student college choice process. *Journal of Higher Education*, 10(5), 490-505.
- Freeman, K. (1997). Increasing African American participation in higher education: African American students' high school perspectives. *Journal of Higher Education*, 68(5) 523-550.
- Gratz et al. v. Bollinger et al. 539 U.S. 244 (2003) LEXIS 4801
- Henschel, G., Kirshstein, R., O'Malley, A., & Rhodes, D. (2000) *Managing the cost of college: A handbook for students and families*. Retrieved August 22, 2004, from the U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Educational Sciences Website: <http://www.ed.gov/pubs/collegecosts/index.html>
- Heller, D. (1999, Fall). Racial equity in college participation: African American students in the United States. *Review of African American Education*, 1(1) 5-29.
- Hossler, D., Braxton, J., & Coopersmith, G. (1989). Understanding student college choice. In J. Smart (Ed.) *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research*. New York: Agathon.
- Hossler, D., & Gallagher, K. (1987). Studying college choice: A three phase model and the implication for policy makers. *College and University*, 2, 207-221.
- Hossler, D., Schmit, J., & Vesper, N. (1999). *How social, economic, and educational factors influence the decisions students make*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins.
- Judy, R. W., & D'Amico, C. (1997). *Workforce 2020: Work and workers in the 21st Century*. Indianapolis: Hudson Institute.
- Kao, G., & Tienda, M. (1998). Educational aspirations of minority youth. *American Journal of Education*, 106(3), 349-386.

- Kerchoff, A., & Cambell, R. (1977). Race and status differences in the explanation of educational ambition. *Social Forces*, 55, 701-714
- Litten, L. (1982). Different strokes in the applicant pool: Some refinements in a model of student college choice. *Journal of Higher Education*, 53, 383-402.
- Manski, C. F., & Wise, D.A. (1983). *College choice in America*. Cambridge: Harvard Press.
- McDonough, P. M. (1997). *Choosing colleges: How social class and schools structure opportunity*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Mintrop, H., MacLellan, A., & Pitre, P. E. (2001). *The Bridge Project: Strengthening K-16 transition policies: Student, parent and school responses*. College Park: University of Maryland Center for Education Policy and Leadership.
- National Commission on the High School Senior Year. (2001). *The lost opportunity of senior year: Finding a better way*. Preliminary Report. Department of Education.
- Orfield, G., & Paul, F. (1994). *High hopes, long odds: A major report on Hoosier teens and the American Dream*. Indiana: Lilly Foundation. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED378463).
- Paulsen, M. (1990). *College choice: Understanding student enrollment behavior*. Washington, DC: ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education and George Washington University.
- Perna, L. W. (2000). Differences in the decision to attend college among African Americans, Hispanics, and Whites. *Journal of Higher Education*, 71(2), 117-141.
- Sewell, W. (1971). Inequality of opportunity for higher education. *American Sociological Review*, 36, 793-809.
- Smith-Maddox, R. (1999). The social networks and resources of African American eighth graders: Evidence from the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988. *Adolescence*, 34(133), 169-184.
- Terenzini, P. T., Cabrera, A. F., & Bernal, E. M. (2001). *Swimming against the tide: The poor in American higher education*. New York: The College Board, Research Report No. 2001-1.
- Tuttle, R. (1981). *A path analytical model of the college-going decision*. Boone, N.C: Appalachian State University.





## **Reforming Professional Development at the School Site: New Standards and New Practices**

*Jennifer Good*  
*Auburn University*

*Vikki Miller & Cathy Gassenheimer*  
*Alabama Best Practices Center*

### *Abstract*

*Professional development practices in schools have been changing recently, particularly with the mandates regarding professional development through No Child Left Behind. In 2001, the National Staff Development Council revised its standards of professional development to shift thinking in this area and reflect the changing needs of schools, students, faculty, and administrators. The purpose of this study is to provide an overview of a program based on the revised standards that acts as a catalyst for improving professional development practices at school sites, entitled Powerful Conversations in Professional Development, and to provide evaluation data that documents the program's effectiveness. Conversations were conducted at 32 school sites, selected to represent a variety of demographics. Approximately six months to one year after the conversations, depending on the cohort, surveys capturing professional development practices were sent to participating and comparison schools. In addition, participating schools were asked to revisit the self-assessment instruments to track change in practices over time. The following is a summary of the evaluation findings: (a) participating schools use more nontraditional practices that align with current standards of professional development than their comparison counterparts; (b) participating schools use more data-driven and research-based methods of professional development than their comparison counterparts; and (c) greater change in practices occurred over time, with the first cohort of schools making more significant gains in reforming professional development than the second cohort.*

Professional development is an essential component of retaining high quality teachers. Current legislation as stated in *No Child Left Behind* emphasizes this premise (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Although professional development opportunities have been abundant for decades, educators recognize the need for a closer look at standards and criteria for effective professional development in order to increase the possibility of having programming impact teacher behaviors and, thus, student achievement. According to Hiebert, Gallimore, and Stigler (2002), current research indicates that effective professional development needs to be "long-term, school-based, collaborative, focused on students' learning, and linked to curricula" (p. 3). In response to efforts to revitalize the context, process, and content of professional development offerings to address some of these changes, the National Staff Development Council (NSDC) revised its standards of professional development in 2001 to encourage educators to program opportunities that were research-based, data-driven, job-embedded, and ongoing.

The National Staff Development Council (2001) states that although "staff development has been synonymous with workshops, courses, and presentations by 'experts,' . . . today we know that professional learning can take many forms" (p. 2). Hilliard (1997) argues that teachers need to be more empowered to demand structures and practices in professional development that deviate from the standard routines. No longer are single-session workshops seen as a productive or effective means of professional development; rather, professional development should be an ongoing collaborative effort among faculty members, with emphasis on student needs and learning as the driving focus (Hord, 1997). Sparks and Hirsh (1997) argue that major shifts in the beliefs and processes of professional development must take place in order to shape and impact school reform.

Collective learning by an entire faculty that promotes change among the school community is essential (Lambert, 1998). Abdal-Haqq (1996) argues that this can be achieved by allowing members of a faculty the opportunity to share, interact, and collaborate with each other. Collegiality and inquiry become important in teachers' learning processes as they form professional learning communities (Wald & Castleberry, 2000). Professional development experiences that build upon the expertise of the teachers and allow them to use site-based management to collectively decide upon direction and school goals is highly recommended to increase the possibility of programming effectiveness.

Although most school-based staff development coordinators and administrators recognize the benefits of intensive school-based professional development, changes in format or processes recommended by the revised standards can present challenges. Traditionally, due to cost and convenience, administrators have selected single-session workshops as the primary mode of delivery or instruction. This traditional format is diametrically opposed to the recommendation of NSDC. The transition to actually adopting new standards of professional development and learning how to implement these standards at the school site can be a difficult process. Self-assessment conversations at the school site are recommended as a catalyst to initiate reform and move schools toward adopting rigorous standards of professional development.

### **Program Description: Powerful Conversations About Professional Development**

In Spring 2002, the Teacher Quality Enhancement Project of the Alabama State Department of Education and the Alabama Best Practices Center combined efforts to create and present a program entitled "Powerful Conversations About Professional Development." Using trained facilitators to prompt honest discussions of current practices at a school site, program creators committed to promoting a *process* of professional development at the school site, which was more in keeping with the NSDC standards. Through conversation, two external facilitators urged school administrators and lead teachers to assess their current practices in professional development within their school communities, using a self-assessment tool and rubric developed by experts as the primary mechanisms for discussion. It is important to note that self-assessment conversations responses were not shared with any external agencies for measurement purposes. In other words, the data was collected for use at the school site only, prompting an honest exchange of ideas.

The self-assessment instrument (see Appendix) was based on NSDC standards. The actual instrument assisted in educating faculties on the newly revised standards, initiating discussion about professional development practices, and guiding the overall self-assessment conversations. Based on the fact that the full extensive self-assessment instrument, covering all 12 standards presented by NSDC, was too consuming and cumbersome to manage in a single session with teacher leaders, the program creators opted to focus a second shortened version of the instrument on the following four strands of

professional development: Data-Driven, Research-Based, Quality Teaching, and Learning Communities, as was recommended through the data collected during an evaluation of the pilot program (Good, Miller, & Gassenheimer, 2003). The driving concept behind the self-assessment conversation was to improve the texture and offerings of professional development at the school site, by increasing awareness of effective standards-based programs. Effective professional development would then lead to enhanced teaching and, ultimately, to improved student achievement.

Prior to the actual conversation and visitation with program facilitators, a program administrator called the school principal to request if an interest in participating in the self-assessment conversation existed at the school site. At that time, the program administrator discussed the procedures and purpose of the visit and asked the principal to select a team of teacher leaders to be involved. The number of teachers involved in the conversation varied, typically representing faculty members from a variety of grade levels and content areas. Groups ranged in size from seven to fifteen individuals. Copies of the self-assessment instrument, rating rubric, and a glossary of professional development terminology were sent in advance of the conversations to promote thinking and reflection among the teachers regarding current practices at the school site.

Upon first visiting the school, members of the school faculty led the conversation facilitators through a guided tour of the facility. The actual self-assessment conversation then followed, typically spanning a 2-hour time frame. The self-assessment conversations were scheduled both during the actual school day and during after-school sessions, at the convenience and recommendation of the principal. Either a principal or assistant principal was present during the sessions. During the actual conversation, program facilitators led the school leaders through a series of items defined within the four-scale self-assessment instrument. The faculty members relied upon the provided rubric for guidance on accurately rating their school's professional development program. Facilitators encouraged discussion of standards and an authentic assessment of the school's current professional development practices.

Referencing the descriptions provided by the rubric, faculty members rated their school's current professional development practices on a scale of 0 to 4 (4 being the most favorable rating of *exemplary*) based on the aforementioned standards: data-driven, research-based, quality teaching, and learning

communities. The faculty members would use finger ratings to provide their assessments of the scales, and the session facilitators averaged and recorded these individual ratings. Variance in ratings among participants often sparked discussion about definitions of terms and provision of examples of the scale at the school site, potentially deepening the participants' understanding of the professional development standards.

At the end of the conversation, the lead facilitator would spend an additional 15 to 20 minutes of summary, recommending and discussing potential follow-up to the conversation at the school site. In addition, three key leaders from participating schools were invited to statewide quarterly meetings to network and share standards-based professional development activities with other schools with similar grade-level configurations and demographics.

## **Evaluation Method**

The 32 total schools involved, including schools from the pilot program (Cohort I) and schools from the first full year of program implementation (Cohort II), were selected to represent varying demographics. Schools represented a mix of size, grade level, location (rural versus urban versus suburban), and systems with varying socio-economic community bases. Unlike other professional development programs that focus on a specific content area or avenue of student achievement, the "Powerful Conversations in Professional Development" program intends to make an impact on the process of professional development, not a specific byproduct of professional development. Thus, a change in the actual types of professional development practices parallels the program's objective, making that the primary essential measure of program success.

Cohort I schools ( $N = 16$ ) participated in the conversations in the spring of 2002. After the completion of a pilot evaluation, Cohort II schools ( $N = 16$ ) participated in conversations during the following academic year. Two primary layers of evaluation were used to determine if the conversations were having an impact in professional development practices at the school site: (a) a survey was used to compare professional development practices at participating and non-participating schools; and (b) participating schools were asked to revisit the self-assessment rubric to track changes in perceptions of practices at the school site over time.

The first component of the evaluation consisted of sending surveys to a total of 48 schools, including all participating schools and a group of nonparticipating schools. Using a 5-point Likert-type scale, the majority of the survey used for the comparison component of the evaluation is comprised of 15 items regarding professional development practices. The 15 items can be broken into two primary subgroups, representing traditional professional development practices (5 items) and nontraditional practices (7 items) as defined by NSDC. The final three items of the survey define practices based on the standards that are emphasized during the conversation, asking respondents to indicate the degree to which their current professional development practices are driven by student achievement data, based on current research, and embedded as part of teachers' regular workdays. The survey concludes with two open-ended items, requesting a listing of strengths and recommendations for changes in professional development practices at the school site.

The comparison group was selected using a combined method of matched and random sampling. Because external variables that could possibly affect professional development practices are too numerous to list (i.e., philosophy of school system, leadership of principal, faculty size, student population, grade-level configuration, socio-economic status, additional state and federal support to practices, etc.), a pure matched sampling was an impossibility based on the number of available schools. Hence, it was determined that two primary criteria would be used for matching purposes—the same school systems and grade level configurations of the participating schools. After matching occurred on these levels, comparison schools were selected on a random basis from a master list of possibilities.

Surveys were sent to the entire faculties of the Cohort I and II schools as well as the comparison group. Even though the initial conversations involved only a small select group of teachers per school site, survey responses were requested of all faculty members in order to garner a more accurate picture of professional development practices at the school site, rather than one that could be biased by involving only the teachers made knowledgeable of the standards of professional development during the conversation. If the conversations truly initiated change in practices at the grass roots level, then the entire faculty's input became essential at each school site. The response rate from Cohort I, Cohort II, and comparison schools were 81%, 56%, and 56%, respectively.

The second component of the evaluation involved capturing the teacher leaders' perspectives on their current practices of professional development and their growth in their perceptions of changing practices at the school site, six months to a year after the initial conversation. To accomplish this, the self-assessment instrument and rubric were mailed to all 32 participating schools, requesting that the same team of teachers and administrators who had originally met with a self-assessment conversation facilitator meet again to revisit the rubric independently. Because the teacher leaders and administrators were already familiar with the rubric, a facilitator's presence was not necessary, as the participants were already comfortable with the concepts presented in the instrument. Ten of the first cohort of pilot schools (63%) responded to the second set of self-assessment instruments, while eight of the second cohort (50%) returned the completed second set of ratings.

Unlike the initial conversation, however, each team member responded individually to the self-assessment, unaware of the responses of others, rather than discussing perspectives in a group. Whereas a score would not be recorded until consensus was reached through dialoguing during the actual facilitated conversations, for this iteration of the self-assessment the participants responded to the instrument independently. The evaluator recorded the numerical average score of the participants' ratings per school site. This variation on the original method makes the scores look slightly different than the original self-assessment ratings, as true numerical averages were more defined. In some cases, during the pilot round of conversations, principals mentioned during follow-up interviews that they were concerned about the honesty of responses from their faculties, causing either rating inflation or deflation, depending on the circumstances. This was not a consideration on the second self-assessment ratings. By having the participants respond to the self-assessment rating individually, potential biases were avoided.

## **Results**

### ***Comparison of Survey Responses***

As indicated earlier in the study, the majority of the items on the survey can be categorized into two predominant areas: traditional practices of professional development (i.e., "attending off-site conferences;" "attending workshops with outside consultants;" or "attending system-wide planned workshops during inservice days") and nontraditional practices (i.e.,

"observing model lessons of other teachers at our school;" "participating in study groups with teachers at the school" or "discussing and analyzing student work with other teachers"). When separate items were collapsed into these two categories, sufficient reliabilities, or measures of internal consistency (traditional alpha = .69; nontraditional alpha = .84), were obtained, making an analysis of data from the survey more manageable.

The guiding question that leads this layer of the evaluation is as follows: Do schools that have participated in these conversations approach professional development practices in a different way than schools that have not been involved in the conversation? Table 1 provides the mean scores per cohort and comparison group of survey respondents regarding traditional and nontraditional practices. Because the scale per survey item progresses from a response of 1, indicating that teachers *Always* engage in particular practices to a response of 5, indicating that teachers *Never* participate in particular practices, lower numeric values on the mean scores actually indicate a greater frequency in participating in certain kinds of professional development practices, making lower mean scores the more favorable responses in the comparison.

**Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations per Group for Traditional and Nontraditional Practices in Professional Development**

Group	<i>n</i>	Traditional		Nontraditional	
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Cohort I (Pilot)	354	2.41	.61	2.71	.75
Cohort II	262	2.42	.61	2.75	.71
Comparison	230	2.50	.68	2.94	.85

An observation of means suggests that traditional practices are similar among the three groups, whereas nontraditional practices vary, particularly for the comparison group. An analysis of variance (ANOVA) reveals that no significant difference exists among the three groups regarding traditional practices,  $F = 1.52$ ,  $\alpha = .22$ . In other words, all three groups appear to engage in the same frequency of traditional practices of professional development. In contrast, regarding nontraditional practices, those practices that are clearly in keeping with the standards of effective professional development as defined by NSDC, an ANOVA reveals that a significant difference does exist between group means  $F = 6.42$ ,  $p = .00$ . It appears as though the self-assessment conversations have

impacted the process or approach that schools use for professional development practices.

A post-hoc analysis, the test of least significant difference, indicates that Cohort I's mean scores differ significantly from the comparison group at the .00 level, while Cohort II's mean rating differ significantly from the comparison group at the .01 level. Both groups that were involved in the professional development conversations have significantly different mean scores than the comparison group, suggesting that these two groups use more nontraditional professional development practices at their schools than the comparison group. Specifically, the means per group reveal that the comparison group ( $M = 2.94$ ) does not participate in as many nontraditional professional development practices as Cohort I ( $M = 2.71$ ) and Cohort II ( $M = 2.75$ ) schools that had the advantage of participating in the self-assessment conversations.

Based on the mean scores, it appears as though schools that have participated in the conversation have expanded their repertoire of professional development practices, causing a difference in their approach to or process of professional development at the school site. Interestingly, participation in the conversations does not suggest an abandonment of traditional professional development practices, as there is no significant difference between mean scores for those activities. Rather, participation intimates that these school faculties have adopted nontraditional practices in professional development while maintaining the same frequency of traditional practices.

The three final items reveal if professional development practices at a school site are data-driven, research-based, and job-embedded--three important standards or criteria for effective practice. Item 13 asks how often practices are determined by student achievement data, while Item 14 asks

**Table 2. Mean Scores per Group for Standards of Professional Development**

Surevey Item	Cohort I	Cohort II	Comparison	<i>p</i>
Data-driven	2.01	2.07	2.34*	.00
Research-based	1.75	1.74	1.97*	.00
Job-embedded	1.89*	2.04	2.18	.00

*Note:* An asterisk (\*) indicates that the post-hoc test (Least Significant Difference) revealed a significant difference between noted mean score and other two groups.

how often sessions are based on current research, and Item 15 asks how often professional development is part of the regular teaching day. An analysis of variance (ANOVA) again indicates that a significant difference in mean scores exists for these three groups on every single item. The test of least significant difference reveals some interesting information. Regarding data-driven professional development, Cohorts I and II more regularly base professional development topics on student achievement data as compared to the comparison group. The same is true of research-based practices; again, Cohort I and II more often seek a research base to inform their professional development practices than does the comparison group.

The data regarding Item 15 illustrates a surprising circumstance. Regarding Item 15, job-embedded professional development, Cohort II's mean score ( $M = 2.04$ ) is not significantly different from the comparison group ( $M = 2.18$ ). Rather, Cohort I alone practices more job-embedded professional development than the other two groups, as the post-hoc test yielded information revealing that only Cohort I respondents yield a mean score that is significantly different than the other two groups. This is the one instance where both groups that participated in the self-assessment conversations did not produce similar favorable mean scores. Instead, only the pilot group that had an extra year of opportunity for program reform adopted job-embedded practices. Because planning of job-embedded professional development requires scheduling flexibility, alternate scheduling, and, often, additional financial resources, Cohort I was possibly the only group that had the time to make such radical changes to their overall process and philosophy of professional development, whereas Cohort II did not have the opportunity to actively change their practices after the conversation which occurred as little as six months prior to the study.

In general, however, the results of the analysis on the three emphasized standards of professional development (data-driven, research-based, and job-embedded) indicate that the schools that have participated in self-assessment conversations engage in activities that are more in keeping with the revised standards of professional development.

Two open-ended items concluded the survey. The first item solicited the strengths of the various professional development activities at the school site, while the second item asked the respondents to list avenues of change in their school-based professional development programs. A content analysis, organized by group category (Cohort I, II, and comparison) was completed on each of these two items.

Responses to the first item indicated that data-driven practices, teacher collaboration, and relevant and needs-based sessions are listed as top strengths for all three groups, regardless of participation in the self-assessment conversations. In fact, the patterns of responses and top five strengths as listed by respondents from Cohort I and Cohort II schools are highly similar, with the exception of research-based programming emerging as a top strength for Cohort I schools only. Within the comparison group, two completely different categories are listed as strengths, frequency of sessions and basing sessions on current trends and issues, whereas those are not listed as top strengths by either participating cohort. The patterns of responses among the comparison group appear notably different than the schools that were involved in the conversations. Schools that have participated in self-assessment conversations appear to evaluate the process of professional development programming along different criteria, recognizing strengths of the process that are more similar to those acknowledged by the standards set forth by NSDC.

In response to the second item, all three groups, regardless of participation in the self-assessment conversations, listed the opportunity to visit schools and more content-specific sessions as two top priorities for changes to professional development practices. Otherwise, many interesting differences have developed among the responses to this query. Rather than recommending changes to their programs, respondents from Cohort I and II schools requested that no changes be made at all to their professional development practices. However, among the comparison group, only two respondents listed similar favorable reactions. This finding intimates that the conversation participants are pleased with the new practices that have been adopted at their schools sites. One respondent in Cohort I described the professional development practices at the school as "wonderful," while another indicated that he or she was "pleased" with programming. Another said, "I would not change anything, nothing," and another stated, "I believe our professional development has grown over the past year and is excellent." Cohort II participants made similar comments stating that the school professional development program does an "excellent job" and described their school's program as "the best system I have worked in." In contrast, respondents from the comparison group were not as effusive in their compliments of the programs, nor as interested in maintaining the status quo.

Respondents from Cohort I and II listed scheduling as an area that needed more focus. Specifically, they did not enjoy being pulled from classes to attend professional development sessions or meetings, requesting that professional development not be offered during after school times when they are trying to work with students or during the regular workday. Although it appears as though administrators may be attempting to offer more job-embedded training, pulling the teachers away from instructional time on a regular basis appears to be causing some tension and anxiety among teachers in Cohort I and II.

In general, it can be observed from the responses that individuals at schools that participated in the self-assessment conversations approach and critique professional development differently than those that did not participate, suggesting that there is a different depth and understanding of professional development theory which in turn initiates new vocabulary and sparks new ideas for improvement.

### **Revisiting the Self-Assessment Rubric**

The second component of the evaluation involved revisiting the self-assessment rubric by the same teacher leader and administrator teams. Table 3 provides the self-assessment initial ratings and follow-up ratings per each of the four primary strands of professional development, as well as the level of significance, based on a paired samples t test, between mean scores. Because internal consistency or reliability measures were strong for each of the strands, both pre- and post-ratings (range .81 to .97), the twelve separate items on the instrument could be collapsed into the four primary standards to make the analysis more meaningful. The self-assessment rubric progressed on a scale of 0 to 4 (4 being the most favorable rating of *Exemplary*). Thus, higher ratings on various components indicate that the respondents felt as though the practices were being met more favorably than the lower ratings. Table 3 provides the breakdown of initial self-rating scores and post-intervention scores for both the first and the second cohort of participating schools.

When looking at the mean scores yielded from the ratings of the Cohort I participants, each of the four standards increases, indicating that the respondents feel as though professional development practices have improved in all four areas. In fact, the increases in mean scores are significant at the .05 level in both the data-driven and quality-teaching areas. In contrast, the Cohort II schools have an extremely different pattern of mean scores than the Cohort

I schools. Although there was visible improvement for the data-driven and research-based strands among the Cohort II mean scores, the increase was not significant in these areas. In spite of the lack of significance, it can be observed that the two weakest targeted areas from the initial conversation of Cohort II were the only two areas that showed growth or improvement. The mean scores for the other two strands, quality teaching and learning communities, decreased from the initial conversation to six months after the intervention.

**Table 3. Pre- and Post-Conversation Mean Scores for Cohort I and Cohort II Schools**

Scale	Cohort I			Cohort II		
	Pre	Post	<i>p</i>	Pre	Post	<i>p</i>
Data-driven	2.1	2.8	.01	2.8	2.9	.86
Research-based	2.2	2.6	.07	2.0	2.5	.27
Quality teaching	2.6	3.0	.03	3.5	3.1	.12
Learning Communities	2.4	2.5	.33	3.3	3.0	.10

What could potentially cause this unusual pattern for the Cohort II schools? If the need for time to actually reform professional development practices is truly necessary, then it can be surmised that more notable improvement in self-ratings for the Cohort I will occur, as they have had an entire year to reform professional development at their school site as opposed to only six months or less that was available to Cohort II. Such was the case. In addition, because the self-assessment conversation could have enhanced awareness of effective standards of professional development, the participants may have been more rigorous in their ratings on the second iteration. Also, because the second ratings were completed independently, the respondents may not have felt pressured to compromise their views for consensus, causing possible rating deflation, or in other cases, inflation. Methodological limitations, such as those listed earlier in this paragraph, could have impacted the outcomes; however, it is important to recognize that the overall pattern of ratings for Cohort II schools did not change radically. In other words, quality teaching and learning communities still remained as the considered strengths of professional development practices overall for the Cohort II schools. Instead, the targeted weaknesses experienced observable improvement, a potential sign of positive program impact.

The conversations intended to increase self-awareness of participants at the school site in order to promote effective practices in professional development programming. The revisiting of the self-assessment rubric suggests that the conversations accomplished exactly that. Self-assessment ratings on the majority of the strands have now improved observably during the six-month to one-year interim following implementation.

## **Conclusions**

It has been accepted that quality teachers make the difference in student achievement. It has also been accepted that quality teaching cannot be maintained without high quality, standard-driven professional development (Gallimore & Stigler, 2002; Hiebert et al.). How then can professional development practices be elevated at the school site to attain the quality desired? Does more professional development mean better professional development? No. Teachers and administrators must be informed about the look and shape of quality professional development programming. They require a better understanding of standards of professional development, and open conversations and self-assessments among faculty provide that needed catalyst for change.

The "Powerful Conversations in Professional Development" program set out to impact the actual processes of professional development engaged in by various teachers and administrators at the school site. The program successfully accomplished just that. According to respondents at the schools that have participated in the program, practices at their school are more data-driven, research-based, and among the first cohort of participants, more job-embedded than nonparticipating schools. Teachers at these schools approach, critique, and evaluate professional development practices differently, applauding some of the nontraditional processes that have been adopted at the school site. The self-assessment conversations have impacted the ways and means by which schools approach professional development. A structured opportunity to assess a school's practices among teacher leaders, become aware of deficits, and plan on improving their standards based on their newly-acquired knowledge provides an effective mechanism for initiating reform.

The improvements were most notable among the Cohort I schools, which had an entire year to introduce new programming at the school site, as opposed to the Cohort II schools, which had only four to six months to actually change practices. It also appears as though the self-assessment conversations were successful in improving the focus of professional development efforts by

targeting areas of programming weaknesses and demonstrating growth in those areas, particularly data-driven and research-based programming. In general, professional development practices at participating school sites align more directly with the standards presented by NSDC.

What can be learned regarding reform efforts in professional development practices? A couple of salient points can be discerned. First, it appears as though the adoption and implementation of new standards of professional development practice at the school site simply take time. Cohort I schools have progressed farther in this journey than have Cohort II schools, although changes and differences are still apparent among both groups. Educational reform that radically changes practices requires time to implement, digest, and reflect. In spite of the need for time to truly impact behavior in practices, the initial changes at the school site have met with general acceptance among the participating cohorts, as they recognize and appreciate the majority of the revisions that have taken place in the processes of professional development.

To further this study, it would be beneficial to explore if the professional development process and approach employed by a school site has the positive impact on student achievement, as research predicts. Fortunately, the first layer of analysis, focusing on changes in actual practices, has suggested positive growth due to the Powerful Conversations in Professional Development program. Thus, the relationship between changing teacher behaviors and practices has been initiated, opening the door for improving student achievement.

## References

- Abdal-Haqq, I. (1996). Making time for teacher professional development. Washington, D.C.: ERIC Clearinghouse on Teaching and Teacher Education. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED383451)
- Good, J., Miller, V., & Gassenheimer, C. (2003, April). *Overhauling professional development: Self-assessment conversations to initiate reform*. Paper presented at the meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago, IL.
- Heibert, J., Gallimore, R., & Stigler, J. W. (2002). A knowledge base for the teaching profession: What would it look like and how can we get one? *Educational Researcher*, 31, 3-15.
- Hilliard, A. (1997). The structure of valid staff development. *Journal of Staff Development*, 18(2), 28-34.

- Hord, S. (1997). *Professional learning communities: Communities of continuous inquiry and improvement*. Austin, TX: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.
- Lambert, L. (1998). *Building leadership capacities in schools*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- National Staff Development Council. (2001). *Standards for staff development* (Rev. ed.). Oxford, OH.
- Sparks, D., & Hirsch, S. (1997). *A new vision for staff development*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development and National Staff Development Council.
- U.S. Department of Education (2002, January). Summary and Overview of the No Child Left Behind Act. [On-line]. Available: <http://www.ed.gov/offices/OESE/esea/summary.html>
- Wald, P.J., & Castleberry, M.S. (Eds.). (2000). *Educators as learners: Creating a professional learning community in your school*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

## Appendix

### *Self-Assessment Instrument*

## **Self-Assessment of Your School's Professional Development: Rubric for A Powerful Conversation**

*Adapted from the NSDC Standards for Staff Development  
by the  
Alabama Best Practices Center and  
The Title II Teacher Quality Enhancement Project*

### **Definition of rubric terms:**

Use the following indicators to assess your school's progress in meeting each of the staff development standards on the attached self-assessment rubric.

#### **0 – Not Addressed:**

- At this time, this standard has not been addressed.
- No evidence that would verify a beginning level of implementation.

#### **1 – Beginning:**

- Making initial steps, such as gathering information, analyzing data, and organizing resources to address this standard, and
- Arranging schedules, allotting time, and beginning to implement the standard on a limited basis. This is defined as at least 20% of the teachers at the school addressing the standard as a part of their regular (daily, weekly) practice.

#### **2 – Basic:**

- Implementing this standard on a more wide-spread basis. This is defined as at least 60% of the teachers throughout the school who address the standard as a part of their regular (daily, weekly) practice, and
- Implementing this standard with great understanding and proficiency by a core group of experts within the school. A "core group of experts" is defined as at least 20% of the teachers who regularly demonstrate this standard at a level that could serve as a model for others and who could provide training and/or coaching to others working to meet the standard.

#### **3 – Proficient:**

- Implementing this standard in-depth, with great understanding and proficiency, by at least 80% of the teachers within the school, and
- Beginning to show linkage between implementation of this standard and improved student achievement using a variety of assessments.

#### **4 – Exemplary: All of the following**

- Implementing this standard at a highly proficient level on a routine basis throughout the school.
- Using data from ongoing student assessments to continuously modify and improve decisions and actions that address this standard.
- Assimilating this standard into the "culture of the school" so that newly-hired personnel develop the capacity (knowledge, skills, and dispositions) to meet the standard with their colleagues. The "culture of the school" is defined as the common values and beliefs of a group that are so deeply embedded that group members routinely act in accordance with them and automatically assimilate newcomers into their belief system.

**\*\*NOTE:** The scale on this instrument has been modified from the National Staff Development Council's original 6-point, agree-disagree scale listed in the back of the NSDC Standards for Staff Development – Revised, 2001. In this modified version, a 5-point scale indicating level of implementation of the standards appears in a rubric form. The purpose for this change is to provide greater specificity to the self-assessment conversation. Only four of the twelve NSDC Standards have been targeted for discussion in this rubric.

## Self-Assessment of Your School's Professional Development: Rubric for A Powerful Conversation

*Adapted from the NSDC Standards for Staff Development*  
by the  
**Alabama Best Practices Center and**  
**The Title II Teacher Quality Enhancement Project**

School: \_\_\_\_\_ Contact Person: \_\_\_\_\_

<b>DATA-DRIVEN:</b> Staff development that improves the learning of all students uses disaggregated student data to determine adult learning priorities, monitor progress, and help sustain continuous improvement.					
Evidences:	Not Addressed	Beginning	Basic	Proficient	Exemplary
1. In this school, data on student learning provide the focus for staff development efforts.	0	1	2	3	4
2. In this school, teachers gather data frequently in their classrooms to determine the effects of their staff development on their students.	0	1	2	3	4
3. In this school, data are disaggregated to determine the needs of all students, including subgroups, so that the data informs staff development.	0	1	2	3	4

<b>RESEARCH-BASED:</b> Staff development that improves the learning of all students prepares educators to apply research to decision making.					
Evidences:	Not Addressed	Beginning	Basic	Proficient	Exemplary
4. In this school, staff development prepares educators to be skillful users of educational research.	0	1	2	3	4
5. In this school, teams of teachers and administrators methodically study research before adopting improvement strategies.	0	1	2	3	4
6. In this school, pilot studies and action research are used when appropriate to test the effectiveness of new approaches when research is contradictory or does not exist.	0	1	2	3	4

<b>QUALITY TEACHING:</b> Staff development that improves the learning of all students deepens educators' content knowledge, provides them with research-based instructional strategies to assist students in meeting rigorous academic standards, and prepares them to use various types of classroom assessments appropriately.					
<b>Evidences:</b>	<b>Not Addressed</b>	<b>Beginning</b>	<b>Basic</b>	<b>Proficient</b>	<b>Exemplary</b>
7. In this school, staff development deepens teachers' knowledge of their content.	0	1	2	3	4
8. In this school, staff development expands teachers' instructional methods appropriate to specific content areas.	0	1	2	3	4
9. In this school, staff development teaches classroom assessment skills that allow teachers to frequently monitor gains in student learning.	0	1	2	3	4
<b>LEARNING COMMUNITIES:</b> Staff development that improves the learning of all students organizes adults into learning communities whose goals are aligned with those of the school and district.					
<b>Evidences:</b>	<b>Not Addressed</b>	<b>Beginning</b>	<b>Basic</b>	<b>Proficient</b>	<b>Exemplary</b>
10. In this school, small learning teams are a primary component of the staff development plan.	0	1	2	3	4
11. In this school, all teachers are part of ongoing, school-based learning teams that meet several times a week to plan instruction, examine student work, and/or solve problems.	0	1	2	3	4
12. In this school, faculties and learning teams focus on school and district goals.	0	1	2	3	4

**DIRECTIONS:** Use the summary below to record your scores for the evidences under each standard. Average your scores, rounding off to the nearest tenth, to determine an overall score for the entire standard.

<b>PROCESS STANDARD:</b>	<b>PROCESS STANDARD:</b>
<b>Data-Driven</b>	<b>Research-Based</b>
1. _____	4. _____
2. _____	5. _____
3. _____	6. _____
Average: _____	Average: _____

<b>CONTENT STANDARD:</b>	<b>CONTEXT STANDARD:</b>
<b>Quality Teaching</b>	<b>Learning Communities</b>
7. _____	10. _____
8. _____	11. _____
9. _____	12. _____
Average: _____	Average: _____





## **Parents' Satisfaction with Educational Experiences: Implications for School Counselors and Administrators**

*Sang Min Lee*  
*University of Arkansas*

*M. Harry Daniels*  
*University of Florida*

*Daniel B. Kissinger & Rebecca A. Newgent*  
*University of Arkansas*

### *Abstract*

*Using the National Household Education Survey (NHES) database (a large, nationally representative database), this study investigated the factors influencing parents' satisfaction with their child's school. The results of hierarchical multiple regression analysis indicated that the school commitment action variable was significantly related to parent satisfaction and was able to account for a significant proportion of variance in parent satisfaction with school. Implications for school counselors and administrators are presented.*

Parents play a significant role in the educational process (Plevyak & Heaston, 2001). Several studies demonstrate that children whose parents are engaged in school events have fewer behavior problems, greater academic successes, and lower dropout rates (Aronson, 1996; Bauch & Goldring, 1995; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995; Reynolds, 1992). Schools should play a central role in working with students more efficiently by reaching out to parents who are disconnected from their children's education.

One of the most important factors influencing the relationship between schools and families is the parents' attitude toward their child's school. For instance, administrators and evaluators associated with many types of programs have undertaken the measurement of client satisfaction with their

services (Ostroff, 1992). These efforts have significantly increased in number as government funded projects more frequently require the inclusion of client satisfaction as an outcome and as consumer organizations have become more vocal. This trend has also been present among programs that deliver counseling services and in the movement toward managed care (Corcoran & Vandiver, 1996). Applied to schools, it would seem that parents may be more likely to search for alternatives - - that is, engage in choice programs -- if they are dissatisfied with their child's present school (Goldring, & Shapira, 1993). Consumer satisfaction may help schools become more open to learning about the desires and needs of the parent (client), thus helping to ensure parents have a role in the school process (Chubb & Moe, 1990).

Smedley (1995) reported that parents who were dissatisfied with their children's schools were more likely to decide on another school. The finding of Milwaukee Public Schools' Parental Choice Program, which allows students from low-income families to attend any participating private schools at district expense, indicates that parents who chose the new school for their children in this program tended to be less satisfied with their children's previous schools than parents who did not choose a new school (Witte, Bailey, & Thom, 1993). Currently, while most research focuses on parent involvement, much less attention has been paid to parent satisfaction with their child's school involvement. Analyses of parental satisfaction with their child's school are necessary to understand why some parents are dissatisfied, some are barely satisfied, and still others are satisfied with the school system.

Through interviews with parents whose children were due to be transferred to other schools, West, David, Hailes, and Ribbens (1995) found that one out of five parents claimed that the reason they chose another school was that they knew that new school well. Providing and updating parents on school-related information (e.g., school climate, class schedule, policy for student advancement, and school facilities) are crucial components for enhancing family connections and for developing more effective parent programs (Tatar, 1998). Eccles and Harold (1993) reported a strong positive relationship between the degree to which parents are informed about school events and the parents' attitudes toward the school. Furthermore, Tatar (1998) stated that "the extent of information that parents hold about their children's school is one of the main regulators of the

frequency and focus of their involvement with the educational institution" (p. 104).

One of the critical links to involving parents in the school is the school counselor (Fred, 2000). School counselors initiate communication and establish an environment which leads to collaboration between groups (Keys & Bemak, 1997). The information that parents possess regarding schools plays an important role of influencing parent behavior and attitudes toward the school and the education system. Therefore, school counselors can be facilitators of parent and school partnerships by conveying information about the children. In addition, it is the administrator's responsibility to develop or support policies to inform parents about the school. Administrators are encouraged to help school counselors successfully involve parents by coordinating, managing, supporting, funding, and recognizing the school guidance program.

The purpose of this study is to examine the factors influencing parent satisfaction with their child(ren)'s educational experience using the National Household Education Survey (NHES) database (a large, nationally representative database). Specifically, this study focuses on examining the effects of child characteristics (i.e., child gender, child grade point, and parents' income), school demographics (i.e., school type and school size), and school commitment actions (e.g., providing school information to parents) on the overall parental satisfaction with their child(ren)'s educational experience. The researchers hypothesize that parent satisfaction with educational experience, which involves satisfaction with school, teacher, academic standards, and order/discipline, is related to child characteristics, school demographics, and school commitment actions.

## **Method**

### ***Sampling Procedure***

The data analyzed in this study were derived from the National Center for Education Statistics' 1999 National Household Education Survey (NHES; National Center for Education Statistics, 1999), which is a telephone survey of the noninstitutionalized civilian population of the United States. Households are selected for the survey using random

digit dialing methods. Data are collected using computer assisted telephone interviewing procedures.

In the 1999 NHES, parents of 20,792 children aged 3 through 20 and in 12<sup>th</sup> grade or below were asked about the following four dimensions of their children's schools: (a) communication with teachers or other school personnel, (b) school practices to involve parents, (c) their children's homework and behavior, and (d) learning activities with children outside of school (National Center for Education Statistics, 1999). Additional information collected in this survey pertained to student experiences, children's personal and demographic characteristics, household characteristics, and children's health and disability statuses. The current sample included those parents who had complete data on the criterion variable (parent satisfaction with educational experience). These filters produced a sample of 13,060 parents.

### ***Participants***

The age of the 13,060 participants' children ranged from 3 to 20, with a mean of 9.70 ( $SD = 4.74$ ). Fifty-one percent were male and 49% were female. The ethnic distribution of the participants included White (61%), Latino/Hispanic (18%), African American (16%), Asian/Pacific Islander (3%), Native American (1%), , and others (1%). Most of the participants' children (88%) go to public schools and most parents (88%) reported that their children get mostly above B grades across all subjects. The average number of students enrolled in school was 367.

### ***Criterion Variables***

General parent satisfaction was assessed by using a variable termed overall parent satisfaction with educational experience. This variable was constructed from responses to four questions and measured by using a 4-point Likert-type scale as follows: Would you say that you are very satisfied, somewhat satisfied, somewhat dissatisfied, or very dissatisfied with (a) the school your child attends this year, (b) the teachers your child has this year, (c) with the academic standards of the school, and (d) the order and discipline at the school. The Cronbach alpha coefficient obtained for the scores on this measure was .85, which suggests that the measure is useful for exploratory purposes.

### ***Predictor Variables***

The first set of predictor variables included in the analyses involved the children's personal characteristics: child gender, child grade point and parents'

income. The second set of predictor variables, school demographics, included the number of students enrolled in the school and whether the school was public or private. Finally, the structural features of the school commitment action variable was measured on a 3-point Likert-type scales (Does not do it at all; Just O.K; Does it very well). The following five items related to the school commitment action variable were applied: (a) how well the school helps you understand what children at your child's age are like, (b) how well the school let you know how your child is doing in school, (c) how well the school provides information about community services to help your child or your family, (d) how well the school informs you of chances to volunteer at school, and (e) how well the school provides workshop materials or advice about how to help your child learn at school. The Cronbach alpha coefficient obtained for the scores on this measure was .80, which suggests that the measure is useful for exploratory purposes.

### ***Data Analysis***

Hierarchical multiple regression was used to examine the factors that influenced parental satisfaction with their child's educational experience. Each analysis was conducted with the predictor variables entered in a backward elimination fashion. Interpretation of ordinary least squares regression coefficients is straightforward: the coefficients represent the change in the criterion variable associated with a unit change in the predictor variables. In all analyses, adjustments were made to the standard errors and significance levels of the coefficients using design weights that corrected for the cluster sampling used in the NHES (National Center for Education Statistics, 1999).

### **Results**

The means and standard deviations of the research variables are presented in Table 1. Participants reported being satisfied overall with educational experience ( $M = 3.44$ ;  $SD = .63$ ). Regarding the school commitment action variable, participants indicated that current schools provide moderate levels of information to the parents ( $M = 2.23$ ;  $SD = .58$ ). In addition, with a mean rating of 2.56 ( $SD = .63$ ), participants indicated that the school informing them of how their child is doing was the strongest school commitment action variable. Participants indicated that the weakest school commitment action variable was in helping parents understand child development ( $M = 2.03$ ;  $SD = .83$ ).

Bivariate correlations of research variables are presented in Table 2. A significant positive correlation was found between parent satisfaction and the school commitment action ( $r = .55, p = .00$ ). The criterion variable, parent satisfaction, was also significantly correlated with the child grade point ( $r = .27, p = .00$ ), school type ( $r = .19, p = .00$ ), and school size ( $r = .10, p = .00$ ).

The result of a hierarchical multiple regression (backward elimination option) produced three different models (see Table 3), all of which were significant. As can be seen in Model 1, a significant effect is shown for the child's grade point average, school type (public/private), and school commitment action variables. No significant effects are shown for gender, parent incomes, and school size. As seen in the satisfaction level shown in

**Table 1. Mean and Standard Deviation of Research Variables**

Factor	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Overall parents' satisfaction with educational experience <sup>(1)</sup>	3.44	.63
Parents' satisfaction with school	3.41	.75
Parents' satisfaction with teachers	3.48	.69
Parents' satisfaction with academic standard	3.46	.74
Parents' satisfaction with order and discipline	3.43	.82
Overall school commitment action <sup>(2)</sup>	2.23	.58
School let the parents know how their child is doing in school	2.56	.65
School helps the parents understand their child's development	2.03	.83
School makes use of opportunities to volunteer at school	2.41	.76
School provides the parents workshop materials or advice about how to help their child learn at school	2.09	.83
School provides the parents information about community services to help their child/their family	2.05	.82

*Note:*  $N = 3,060$ . <sup>(1)</sup> Parents' Satisfaction was rated on a 4-point scale (1 = very dissatisfied, 2 = somewhat dissatisfied, 3 = somewhat satisfied, 4 = very satisfied). <sup>(2)</sup> School Commitment Actions were rated on a 3-point scale (1 = Does not do it at all, 2 = Just O.K., 3 = Does it well).

**Table 2. Intercorrelations of Research Variables**

Variables	I	II	III	IV	V
Overall satisfaction with educational experience	1	.19**	-.10**	.27**	.55**
Child is attending public or private school	-	1	-.22**	.10**	.11**
Number of students	-	-	1	-.09*	-.06*
Child's grade across all subjects	-	-	-	1	.16**
Overall school	-	-	-	-	1

Note: \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ . I = Overall satisfaction with educational experience; II = Child is attending public or private school; III = Number of students enrolled in the school; IV = Child's grade across all subjects; V = Overall school commitment action.

**Table 3. Regression Analysis Predicting Parents' Overall Satisfaction with Educational Experience**

Model and Predictor Variable	$R^2$	$\Delta R^2$	$B$	$SE$	$\beta$	$T$
Model 1	.340**					
Child Characteristics						
Child's Gender			.01	.01	.01	.90
Child's Grade Point			.10	.00	.15	20.04**
Parent's Income			.00	.00	.01	1.47
School Demographics						
Public/Private			.22	.01	.10	13.67**
School Size			-.01	.00	-.01	-1.05
School Commitment Action			.54	.01	.50	64.57**
Model 2	.316**	-.024*				
School Demographics						
Public/Private			.22	.01	.11	14.65**
School Size			-.01	.00	-.03	-2.15*
School Commitment Action			.56	.01	.51	70.50**
Model 3	.302**	-.014*				
School Commitment Action			.58	.01	.52	74.59**

Note: \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ .

Model 2, removal of the child characteristics variables decreased the explained variance ( $DR^2 = -.024$ ) by a statistically significant amount. School commitment variables as well as two school demographic variables (school type and size) were significant. In Model 3, removal of the school demographics decreased the explained variance ( $DR^2 = -.014$ ) by a statistically significant amount. Model 3 indicated that 30% of the variance ( $R^2 = .302$ ) in overall parent satisfaction with educational experience was accounted by variance in the school commitment action variable.

## Discussion

In the present study, information from a national database was analyzed to determine the effects of child characteristics (i.e., child gender, child grade point, and parents' income), school demographics (school type and school size), and school commitment actions (i.e., providing school information to parents) on overall parental satisfaction with their child's educational experience. Initial results suggest that parents' are satisfied with their children's educational experience ( $M = 3.44$ ,  $SD = .63$ ) in relation to the school, teachers, academic standards, and order and discipline. Additionally, parents perceived school commitment action to be "Just O.K." This result indicates room for improvement on the part of schools in relation to communicating information to parents.

Results of the bivariate correlational analysis indicate parents are satisfied with their child's school and their child's grades across all subjects accounting for approximately 3% and 7% of the variance, respectively. Results also indicate that parents are more satisfied with their child's educational experience when there are fewer students enrolled in the school. While this result is statistically significant, the relationship lacks power, accounting for less than 1% of the variance. Further, a significant relationship between parent satisfaction and school commitment to share information accounts for approximately 30% of the variance. This indicates that parents are satisfied when they perceive school commitment action to be strong. Overall, these results indicate that parents are satisfied with their child's school experience when they are satisfied with their child's grades and communication by the school, regardless of whether they attend public or private school.

Finally, results of the hierarchical multiple regression indicate that a model including the variables of child's grade point, type of school (public or private), and school commitment predict parents' satisfaction with their education

experience over and above school commitment action only ( $DR^2 = -.038$ ). While their child's grade point and type of school (public or private) are significant in the model, this result provides further confirmation of the importance of the school commitment action variable in relation to parents' satisfaction with their child's school experience.

### **Implications for School Counselors and Administrators**

The findings from this study provide a new aspect to the school counselor's and administrator's roles in increasing parent satisfaction with their child's educational experience. The results suggest that the main component of parent satisfaction appears to be how well schools are committed to actively communicate with them. These results are consistent with prior studies on constructive relationships between parents and schools (i.e., Coleman et al., 1966; Epstein & McPartland, 1979; Leichter, 1974; Lightfoot, 1978; Marjoribanks, 1979; McDil & Rigsby, 1973). Parents want to know how well their child is doing in school, they want to understand their child's development, they want schools to make use of volunteer opportunities, they want schools to provide them with information about how to help their child learn, and they want schools to provide information on community services. Thus, parental satisfaction depends on the the school's commitment to providing information to parents about their children.

Informed parents can properly assess the extent to which they are capable and motivated to support their children's academic development. Being informed can contribute to parents' awareness of the beneficial effort that their active participation in school holds for their child's academic development. Epstein (1987) noted that, despite the importance of providing information to parents, surprisingly large numbers of parents are excluded from some of the most common, traditional communications from schools and that more than two-thirds of the parents never talked with a teacher during the year.

School counselors can be used as a tool to facilitate the parent-school relationship. The role of the school counselor affords them the position of understanding the multitude of issues impacting the child's academic and psychosocial development. As such, enhancing the relationship between school counselors and parents can offer a beneficial communication channel to increase positive parental perceptions toward schools. School counselors are trained to facilitate many of the school commitment action components.

For example, school counselors can help develop effective communication channels by engaging parents in discourse relevant to helping them ascertain the status of their child's academic, career, and social/personal development within the context of their school experience.

Administrators can also help facilitate effective communication between the schools and parents through their use of school counselors. Many curriculum plans, placement issues, or changes to school policy are initiated by school administrators. If administrators increase school counselor access to them, the school counselor would be able to increase their ability to understand and related school policy information.

Collaborative efforts, therefore, between administrators and school counselors could ultimately provide parents with additional opportunities to receive communication on issues facing their children. For example, a school administrator who, in a reaction to increased violence on school ground chooses to implement an anti-violence program absent any discourse with parents as to the content of the program. Although parents had previously suggested such a program, the actual content of the program, which some parents find objectionable, causes discord between the administrator and parents who thought their voices were not heard regarding the terms of such a group. In this situation, the administrator can collaborate with the school counselor in regard to the justification of the program content. Then, the school counselor can provide a workshop to parents to help them understand the rationale for the program and serve as a conduit between parents and the school in order to keep parents informed of the progress of the program. Thus, school counselors can offer school administrators an excellent recourse for facilitating positive parent-school relationships, enhancing the overall school commitment action variable.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The current study overcomes many of the limitations of previous research due to using a large nationally representative sample ( $N = 13,060$ ). Nevertheless, a very large sample number could cause bias in terms of statistically significant results. That is, there is statistically significant result due to large sample size, but it could be a clinically meaningless output. In this study, therefore, the researchers also used other indices (e.g., variance;  $R^2$ ) when interpreting statistically significant results. Secondly, when using an existing database such as NHES, items available for specific variables are

limited. For example, the items for the parental satisfaction variable only reflect the general parent satisfaction with school and teachers. These items of the parental satisfaction variable did not reflect parent satisfaction with other educators such as school counselors in school system, an aspect that could have aided this study. Finally, in this study, the researchers chose to collapse race and ethnicity data into one category. Therefore, future study to expand the current research exploring the impact of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds of parents' satisfaction with their child's school experience is recommended.

## References

- Aronson, J. Z. (1996). How schools can recruit hard-to-reach parents. *Educational Leadership*, 53, 58-60.
- Bauch, P. A., & Goldring, E. B. (1995). Parent involvement and school responsiveness: Facilitating the home-school connection in school of choice. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 17, 1-21.
- Chubb, J. E., & Moe, T. M. (1990). *Politics, markets, and America's schools*. Washington, DC: Brookings.
- Coleman, J. S., Campbell, E. Q., Hobson, C. J., McPartland, J. M. Mood, A., Weinfield, F. D., & York, R. L. (1996). *Equal educational opportunity*. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office.
- Comer, J. P., & Haynes, N. M. (1991). Parent involvement in schools: An ecological approach. *The Elementary School Journal*, 91, 271-277.
- Corcoran, K., & Vandiver, V. (1996). *Maneuvering the maze of managed care: Skills for mental health practitioners*. New York: The Free Press.
- Eccles, J. S., & Harold, R. D. (1993). Parent-school involvement during the early adolescent years. *Teachers College Record*, 94, 568-587.
- Epstein, J. L. (1987). Parent involvement: What research says to administrators. *Education and Urban Society*, 19, 199-136.
- Epstein, J. L., & McPartland, H. J. (1979). Authority structure. In H. Walberg (Ed.), *Educational Environments and Effects*. Berkley: McCutcheon.
- Fred, B. (2000). Transforming the role of the counselor to provide leadership in educational reform through collaboration. *Professional School Counseling*, 3, 323-332.
- Goldring, E. B., & Shapira, R. (1993). Choice, empowerment, and involvement: What satisfies parents? *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 15, 396-409.

- Hoover-Dempsey, K. V., & Sandler, H. M. (1995). Parent involvement in children's education: Why does it make a difference? *Teachers College Record*, 97, 310-331.
- Keys, S. G., & Bemak, F. (1997). School-family-community linked services: A school counseling role for changing times. *The School Counselor*, 44, 255-263.
- Leichter, H. J. (1974). *The family as educator*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Lightfoot, S. L. (1978). *World apart: Relationship between families and schools*. New York: Basic Books.
- Marjoribanks, K. (1979). *Families and their learning environments: An empirical analysis*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- McDil, E. L., & Rigsby, L. (1973). *Structure and process in secondary schools: The academic impact of educational climate*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.
- National Center for Education Statistics (1999). *National Household Education Survey of 1999: Data file user's manual*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- Ostroff, C. (1992). The relationship between satisfaction, attitudes, and performance: An organizational level analysis. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 77, 963-974.
- Plevyak, L. H., & Heaston, A. (2001). The communications triangle of parents, school, administrators, and teachers: A workshop model. *Education*, 121, 768-773.
- Reynolds, A. J. (1992). Comparing measures of parental involvement and their effects on academic achievement. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 7, 441-462.
- Smedley, D. (1995). Marketing secondary school to parents: Some lessons from the research on parent choice. *Educational Management and Administration*, 23, 96-103.
- Tatar, M. (1998). Extent and source of parents' school related information. *Journal of Educational Research*, 92, 101-107.
- West, A., David, M., Hailes, J., & Ribbens, J. (1995). Parents and the process of choosing secondary schools: Implications for schools. *Educational Management and Administration*, 23, 28-38.
- Witte, J. F., Bailey, A. B., & Thom, C. A. (1993). *Third-year report: Milwaukee Parental Choice Program*. WI: Department of Political Science and The Robert La Follette Institute of Public Affairs.



## **Focusing on Second Chance Education: High School Completion among Dropouts**

*Suhyun Suh*  
*Auburn University*

*Jingyo Suh*  
*Tuskegee University*

### *Abstract*

*This article discusses factors related to eventual high school credentials among dropouts. Using the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS:88/00), the current study found that approximately two-thirds of the sample of high school dropouts eventually attained some form of high school credentials within eight years of their class graduation. Results of multiple logistic regression analysis confirm that academic performance, socioeconomic status, and the grade level at the time of dropout were significantly related to eventual school completion among dropouts. Unique features of this study are regional differences in the rates of eventual high school completers among dropouts and the impact of hours spent doing homework and hours spent watching TV on degree attainment among dropouts. This study suggests that the dropout event should be understood as a part of normal life process for some students, instead of the end of an educational pursuit. These findings also serve to highlight the policy and research significance of the ultimate high school completion of dropouts in addition to existing prevention efforts.*

Reducing the high school dropout rate and enhancing the graduation rate has become the focal point of educators, government officials, and parents for the last thirty years. The high dropout rate made public education reformation one of the most important educational issues in the 1980s and 1990s (Kominski, 1987; National Collaboration for Youth, 1989; Rumberger & Larson, 1998). In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in

Education called for a reform of the nation's educational system and a renewal of the nation's commitment to high-quality education (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). Despite the attention and efforts after the Commission's report, the data show limited gains in improving the high school completion rate over the past quarter of century (National Center for Education Statistics, 1993; U.S. Bureau of Census, 2000).

Dropout rates are calculated in a wide variety of ways. Calculating an accurate overall dropout rate is almost impossible, since definitions and counting methods vary. States and school districts, for example, use different grade levels or age groups for baseline population and at different time frames. Students' irregular patterns of enrollment such as frequent dropping out and returning to school make the calculation even more difficult. Some dropout students come back to school and successfully complete high school while some others get a General Educational Development (GED) certificate; a high school equivalency. As will be discussed, more than 65% of the initial dropouts completed high school either by means of returning to school or obtaining a GED. Though graduation from high school without interruption may be the best form of academic progress, it is equally important for youths, policy makers, and educators to find ways for these students to complete their high school education even after the initial drop out. Dropping out of school is not a permanent status but a revocable action. National samples indicated that about one in five high school students dropped out of school at least once, that the majority (68%) of dropouts had completed high school or were working on a degree, and less than one-third (32%) of dropouts had no credentials and were not pursuing any further education (Berkthold, Geis, & Kaufman, 1998). Despite leaving school, 85% of the dropouts planned to attain at least a high school education (U.S. Department of Education, 1999).

The vast majority of the dropout research, however, focuses on the characteristics of dropouts without considering possible return of these initial dropouts. While the findings of these studies are helpful, they provide little indication of what should be done to attain high school credentials after youths drop out of school. In dealing with problems and solutions for dropout issues, researchers need to consider not only staying or dropping out of high school, but the flexibility allowed to students who try to complete a high school education even after their initial dropping out. Study of late completers of high school among dropouts could be an effective tool in reducing the final dropout rate, but unfortunately, only a handful of studies (i.e., Kaufman, 1988;

Tyler, 2003; Wayman, 2001) have been done in this area. It is worthwhile to investigate how some dropouts successfully complete a high school education while others do not.

There is disagreement with regards to factors related to school completion among dropouts (Berkold et al., 1998; Wayman, 2002). These included ethnicity, gender, and family factors. Few studies (i.e., Fulk, 2003; Reith & Polsgrove, 1994) have investigated the relationship between hours spent studying everyday and eventual degree attainment among dropouts. Furthermore, none of the studies considered the longitudinal survey period for a sufficient length of time to provide a complete picture of dropouts' educational attainment. Most of returning dropout studies had used the time span of two years after the rest of the cohort had graduated high school (e.g., Berkold et al.; Wayman, 2002). This time period seems inadequate since the average age of GED takers is 25 years old, eight years after most of the cohort had completed high school (American Council on Education, 1996). Furthermore, the typical study of dropouts has been very limited in sample size and has often not been representative of the broader national population (e.g., Wayman, 2002).

### **Dropping Out and Eventual School Completion**

In national samples, a growing number of initial high school dropouts are reporting that they are obtaining a high school credential by earning the GED or diploma. The 1978 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY78), for example, showed about 33% of dropouts eventually received high school degrees. The percentage increased to 38% in the 1982 High School and Beyond (HS&B) survey and 45% in the 1994 survey of the NELS (NELS:88/94) (Berkold et al., 1998). Recent research reported that more than half of those who drop out later resume and successfully completed their education (Boesel, Alsalam, & Smith, 1998).

Those who study returning dropouts posit that the increase in high school completers among dropouts has been due to an increase in dropouts passing the GED (Tyler, 2003). Research on the GED has shed light on the economic benefits of obtaining the GED (U.S. Department of Education, 1998). Some studies have examined the difference in characteristics between dropouts who received GEDs and those who remain dropouts (Chuang, 1997; Kaufman, 1988; Tyler, 2003; Wayman, 2001). Factors identified include achievement test scores, socioeconomic status (SES), educational aspirations, and age at

dropout (Kaufman, 1988; Tyler, 2003). SES was strongly associated with completing high school among dropouts (Berkthold et al., 1998). Dropouts from families of high SES were more likely to complete high school, compared with dropouts whose families were of low SES. Academic performance before dropping out was a strong indicator of completing a diploma or GED among dropouts. In the NLES:88/94 study, for example, Berkthold et al. (1998) found that about 49% of dropouts whose high school transcripts indicated a C average or better completed a diploma or alternative credential, compared with 36% of dropouts who had a D or F average earned a diploma or alternative credential.

Motivation or educational aspiration is considered to be a likely characteristic of dropout differences between completers and non-completers (Finn & Rock, 1997). Motivational differences result in different levels of preparation for and participation in classwork while in school and different levels of educational aspiration after dropping out. Some researchers point out that employment patterns before dropping out distinguish students who later complete high school from those who do not (Cao, Stromsdorfer, & Weeks, 1996; Entwisle, Alexander, & Olson, 2004). High school students who take a job outside of school might find that regular high school work is too difficult to be kept along with a job. They may drop out and enroll in a GED program, which in turn does not require strict attendance and everyday homework (Entwisle et al., 2004).

Years of high school education before dropping out were positively related to completing high school. Murnane, Willett and Boudett (1995) found that returning dropouts tend to have more years of high schooling than non-returning dropouts. This association between grade level at the time of dropping out and completion status is further demonstrated with respect to the number of credits earned in high school. Students who completed more than 15 credit hours were twice as likely to complete their high school education than youths who completed 10 or fewer credit hours (Berkthold et al., 1998).

The purpose of this study is to investigate the determinants of the attainment of a high school credential among dropouts and the significance of this finding with respect to raising the high school completion rate. In particular, this paper seeks to answer the following questions: How many dropouts returned and earned a high school credential and how many do not? What factors distinguish dropouts who ultimately receive a high school

credential and those who remain dropouts? Can gender and ethnic background distinguish a dropout who later attains a credential from one who does not receive a credential? In order to overcome the limitations of the sample size and time frame, the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS:88/00) was used for the analysis.

## **Method**

### ***Data***

Data from the NELS:88/00 database conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) in the Department of Education were used for the analysis. NELS:88 contains a nationally representative sample of U.S. students enrolled in eighth grade in 1988. Students were first interviewed in 1988, and then re-interviewed in 1990, 1992, 1994, and 2000. The sample also includes dropouts in 1990 (at the equivalent of 10th grade) and in 1992 (at the equivalent of 12th grade). Data from waves 1 - 5 of the NELS:88/00 contain 12,144 youths. There were 10,341 youths who have never dropped out of school and received their high school diploma by the end of 2000. There were 1,803 youths who dropped out of school at least once during the high school years. At the time the data were collected in 2000, 111 of these dropouts were either continuing to work on their high school diploma (20 youths), or pursuing a GED (91 youths). There were six youths whose status was unknown. The current research sample includes 1,686 dropouts, after excluding graduates who did not drop out, those who were working for the completion of high school or those who failed to answer. Among the 1,686 dropouts, 1,110 youths successfully completed high school education through either receiving a diploma (284 youths) or obtaining a GED (826 youths). The final dropouts (or permanent dropouts) are 576 youths who were neither working for nor ever attained a high school diploma or its equivalency. The total sample was composed of 822 males and 864 females. Among the dropouts, 998 were Caucasian, 225 were Black, 367 were Hispanic origin, 39 were American Indian or Alaskan Native, 37 were Asian or Pacific Islanders, and 20 were missing or more than one race.

### ***Procedure***

To identify common characteristics of high school completion among dropouts, a search over 180 possible variables on the NELS:88/00 was conducted and yielded seven statistically significant predictors ( $p < 0.05$ ).

The 180 variables considered represent student, family, community, and school factors suggested by previous research (e.g., Rosenthal, 1998; Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandez, 1989). In the predictor screening process, the forward selection procedure of the statistical package for social science (SPSS) was used to arrive at a parsimonious model (Tamhane & Dunlop, 2000). The criterion for the best subset of predictor variables was  $p < 0.05$ , and predictors were selected and arranged by their degree of predictive power.

The forward iteration procedure produced seven statistically significant predictors ( $p < 0.05$ ). They include: (a) GRADE (grade level at the time of dropout), (b) REGION (census region of the student's school), (c) SES (socioeconomic status composite index in base year), (d) HOMEWORK (number of hours spent on homework per week in base year), (e) GPA (grade point average in 8th grade), (f) TV (number of hours respondent watched TV on weekdays), and (g) MOVING (respondent's family moved to a new home in last two years). In addition to the seven predictors of school completion, gender and race variables were included in the analysis since the two were the source of controversy in the previous research (McMillen & Kaufman, 1994; Wayman, 2002).

Missing data causes problems in many longitudinal studies, since many participants often do not respond to all waves of the survey and any one variable missing forces researchers to discard the participant from the analysis unless missing information is made up properly. Typically, data with multiple waves of longitudinal survey result in a significant reduction of the sample size and loss of relevant information. There are several approaches for dealing with missing variables. The method used in this analysis is mean substitution. Mean substitution is one of the more widely used methods and replaces the missing values for a variable with the mean value of that variable (Hair, Anderson, Tatham, & Black, 1998).

## Results

Table 1 shows the number of initial dropouts and dropouts who attained a credential between the years 1990 and 2000. The number of dropouts reached a maximum of 1,445 in 1992 and gradually reduced to 576 adolescents in 2000 as dropouts resumed their education and completed high school through either receiving a diploma or obtaining a GED. Even though the number of youths who dropped out at least once was 1,898 (453 in 1990 and 1,445 in 1992) at the time when most of the cohort graduated, the number of dropouts

**Table 1. High School Completion and Dropout Rate along the Time Span (8<sup>th</sup> Grade Cohort in 1988)**

Year	1990 (10th Grade)	1992 (12th Grade)	1994 (2 years after graduation)	2000(8 years after graduation)
Total Students	12,144	12,144	12,144	12,144
# of Dropouts	453	1,445	627	576
In School or Working GED	11,050	10,592	457	117
Return to School	338	63		
Earn Diploma/GED			11,056	11,451
Completion Rate			91.10%	94.30%
Dropout Rate	3.80%	11.90%	5.40%	4.80%
Status Unknown	303	44	4	

working toward a degree was 457 and 117 in 1994 and 2000, respectively. The high school non-completion rate, the portion of non-degree holders who were not working on degree among the entire cohort, was 5.4% in 1994 and 4.8% in 2000. Using the NELS:88/94 survey, two years after most of the cohort graduated high school, NCES reported that 21% of the cohort dropped out at least once between 1988 and 1994 (NECS, 1994). The follow-up survey, however, in 2000 (NELS:88/00) shows that 818 dropouts returned to school or worked toward a GED during the 1992 and 1994 period and the number of high school completers increased from 11,056 in 1994 to 11,451 in 2000. The majority (66%) of dropouts eventually completed a high school education, with about 17% receiving a diploma and 49% obtaining a GED certificate.

Table 2 shows means and standard deviations the variables used in the analysis as well as Pearson correlation coefficients with the dependent variable

**Table 2. Mean, Standard Deviation, Pearson Correlation Coefficient, and Comparison Of Independent Variables Between Completers and Non-Completers**

Independent Variables	Mean	Std. Deviation	Pearson Correlation	Completers	Non-Completers
Completion	0.658	0.4740	1.000		
Grade	10.420	1.2700	0.406 **	10.790	9.700
Region	0.658	0.0711	-0.149 **	0.666	0.644
SES	-532.682	681.7260	0.226 **	-421.709	-746.538
Homework	5.140	4.5240	0.104 **	5.480	4.490
GPA	24.967	7.1250	0.172 **	25.851	23.264
TV	3.258	2.2340	-0.076 **	3.135	3.494
Moving	0.658	0.0548	0.116 **	0.666	0.650
Gender	0.488	0.5000	-0.030	0.480	0.510
Race	0.660	0.0450	0.101 **	0.664	0.654

Note: N=1,686; \*\*  $p < .05$ .

(COMPLETION). The last two columns of Table 2 indicate means of the variables for two separate group, completers and non-completers. In terms of Pearson correlation coefficients, GRADE had the highest correlation coefficient ( $r = .406$ ), followed by SES ( $r = .226$ ), GPA ( $r = .172$ ), and MOVING ( $r = .116$ ). All predictors had a significant correlation with the dependent variable (COMPLETION) at  $p < .05$  except GENDER ( $r = -.030$ ). Comparing the means of predictors between completers and non-completers can help determine who has a better chance to complete high school. The dropouts were more likely to complete high school when they dropped out in a later grade (10.79 vs. 9.70), were of high SES (-421.709 vs. -746.538), had a high GPA (25.851 vs. 23.264), spent more hours doing homework (3.135 vs. 3.494), were living in the Northeast or Midwest (.666 vs. .644), if their family had not moved in last two years (.666 vs. .650). The difference between completers and non-completers for GENDER was small and insignificant at  $p < .05$ .

Table 3 summarizes the values of regression coefficients, significance levels, and expected changes in the probability of dropping out of school with respect to one unit change in the predictor. Grade level at the time of dropout (GRADE) is strongly associated with the likelihood of having completed high school among dropouts. One more year of schooling before dropping out was predicted to increase the likelihood of completing high school by a factor of 1.242 (=2.242-1) or 124.2%. Thus, a student who

**Table 3. Logistic Regression Analysis on High School Completion among Dropouts**

Variable	$\beta$	S.E.	Wald	Sig.	Exp( $\beta$ )
Grade	.807	.057	201.707	.000	2.242
Region	6.574	.915	51.568	.000	715.956
SES	.000	.000	29.162	.000	1.000
Homework	.044	.014	9.277	.002	1.045
GPA	.032	.009	14.118	.000	1.033
TV	-.053	.027	3.973	.046	.948
Moving	-2.619	1.200	4.761	.029	.073
Gender	-.263	.122	4.853	.028	.765
Race	2.989	1.300	5.286	.021	19.867
Constant	-2.138	.367	33.905	.000	.118

*Note:*  $N = 1,686$ . Percentage correctly predicted = 74.9%. -2 Log likelihood = 1717.960. Nagelkerke  $R^2 = 0.322$ .

dropped out of school during 12th grade was 4.03 times ( $=2.242 \cdot 2^{-1}$ ) more likely to get a high school credential than a youth who dropped out during 10th grade. Census region of student's school (REGION) was strongly associated with a difference in the odds of high school completion. Dropouts who live in Northeast or Midwest region reported a significantly higher completion rate than those who lived in the South or West region. The actual completion rate was 66.6% in the Midwest, 64.0% in the Northeast, 60.5% in the West, and 59.7% in the South. Since the difference in the actual completion rate between the Midwest and the South was 6.9%, dropouts who live in the Midwest are more likely to return for a degree than those who live in the South by 57.4% ( $= 715.956 \cdot 0.069^{-1}$ ). Likewise, dropouts who live in the Midwest are more likely to return for a degree than those who live in the West by 49.3% and those in the Northeast by 18.6%.

Factors identified by previous research such as SES and academic performance (GPA) before dropping out were also significant predictors for completion of school among dropouts, while a 1 unit change in SES and GPA results in a small change in completion rate (0.001% and 3.3%, respectively). Moving to a new home and changing schools were found to be negatively associated with the completion of school, which is consistent with previous research (Rumberger & Larson, 1998).

Two student variables, number of hours spent on homework per week in base year (HOMEWORK) and hours watching TV (TV), are significantly associated with the likelihood of completing high school. If a student increases time spent on homework by one hour per week, the likelihood of degree attainment increases by 4.5% ( $=1.045 \cdot 1^{-1}$ ). The odds ratio increases by 11.6% when a student increases the homework hours by 0.5 hour per day (2.5 hours per week). On the other hand, frequent TV watching on weekdays reduces dropouts' chance of earning a degree. The likelihood of degree attainment increases by 5.5% ( $=0.948 \cdot 1^{-1}$ ) when TV watching is reduced by one hour per day.

Two commonly referenced demographic factors, race and gender, are associated with the likelihood of degree attainment among dropouts. Hispanic and Black dropouts were found to be less likely to gain a degree in a Southwestern regional study (e.g., Wayman, 2001), and this result was supported by the national data.

## Discussion

Students drop out of high school for various reasons. Characteristics of dropouts are well documented (Rumberger, 1987; Suh, Suh, & Houston, in press). Once students dropped out, their decision to complete a high school education afterwards was associated with factors different from dropout characteristics. Even when adolescents drop out for the same reason, the eventual educational outcome is not be the same. Using the NELS:88/00 survey, the present research found that commonly referenced factors such as grade level at the time of dropping out, academic test scores or GPA, socioeconomic status, and mobility are significant factors related to school completion among dropouts. Features unique to this study are measures of students' internal factors, such as time spent on homework, hours watching TV, and regional differences of school completion.

Among nine independent variables in the logistic regression model (Table 3), grade level at the time of dropping out was the most prominent predictor of school completion for dropouts. One more year in high school increases the likelihood of degree attainment by about 124%. It appears that an additional year at school forms academic resilience as well as academic ability necessary for eventual high school completion. This will be a warning sign for many dropouts who leave school for a GED credential. Entwisle et al. (2004) found that 45 % of dropouts reported that they left school because getting a GED was faster than earning the diploma. The actual outcome of this study did not support dropouts' reasoning and the average age of GED attainment is much higher than the average age of diploma attainment. Contrary to dropouts intention, early school leavers were associated with a significant decrease in completing a high school education. In future research, there is a need to expand this finding to investigate how grade level at the time of dropping out works differently between completers and non-completers.

In addition to the grade level at the time of dropout, region, socioeconomic status, grade point average, time spent on homework, hours watching TV, and mobility (family moving in last two years) were significant predictors for school completion. Regional differences in educational attainment among dropouts are an interesting subject, but little research has covered the issue because of statistical insignificance in many surveys (e.g., Boesel et al., 1998). Using the wave 1-5 survey of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth

(NLSY 96/01), Suh et al. (In Press) found that there were significant differences in dropout rates among regions and that region was a strong predictor of school completion. Further research needs to be performed to investigate the related factors that account for the regional differences.

Socioeconomic status and academic performance are long-accepted measures of school completion and proven to be statistically significant. Hours spent doing homework and watching TV are considered to be indicators for study habits or student attitudes towards education and thus, correctable through education when the student is motivated to do well in school. Longitudinal studies have even linked childhood learning behavior to academic, social, and mental health outcomes in late adolescence (e.g., Smokowski, Mann, Reynolds, & Fraser, 2004). The present study shows that acquiring good study habits and spending less time watching TV during weekdays while in school will significantly increase the attainment of high school degree after youths drop out of school.

Moving within two years before or after dropping out is significantly negatively associated with getting a high school degree. Previous research indicated that students who experienced frequent changes in their school environment showed the significantly low level of educational achievement, which was due to the teachers-student relationship changes (Feldlaufer, Midgley, & Eccles, 1988) or changes in self-esteem (Seidman, Allen, Aber, Mitchell, & Feinman, 1994). Rumberger and Larson (1998) found that school change between the eighth and twelfth grades was a symptom of disengagement and an important risk factor for high school dropout.

## **Conclusions and Implications**

As most of returning dropout studies posit, this research confirmed that academic achievement (GPA), socioeconomic status (SES), and the grade level students attended have a significant impact on dropouts' eventual completion of high school education. In addition, hours spent on homework and hours spent watching TV during weekdays were found to be significant predictors of school completion. In contrast to other factors such as SES and GPA, the two factors, HOMEWORK and TV, can be controlled and shaped by students themselves when appropriate education and supervision are provided. Developing good attitudes toward education and good study habits seem to be the attainable goal to increase the rate of high school education attainment among dropouts.

Another noteworthy finding is that grade level at the time of dropout is the most significant predictor of completing high school credentials. Youths who dropped out at 12th grade are more likely to complete school than students who left school at 10th grade. By staying in high school one more year dropouts can increase the likelihood of degree attainment significantly. It may be that students who see the opportunity to obtain a high school degree in a relatively short period of time are more likely to come back to school to finish their degree, or that students who completed higher grades may have higher academic capability than students dropped out at a lower grade level.

The present study also confirms Wayman's (2001) assertion that dropping out of school is not the termination of education for many dropouts. In the current study, the majority (66%) of dropouts successfully completed high school with approximately 17% receiving a diploma and 49% obtaining a GED certificate. The encouraging feature of the dropout phenomena is that, in fact, many initial dropouts go on to complete high school education. This renewed perspective suggests that the dropout event should be understood as a part of normal life process for some students and avoid stigmatizing them as failures. The shift of paradigm will enable a policy shift that underscores the completion of a high school education among dropouts as well as a case for dropout prevention. Accordingly, further research efforts should also be targeted to this population in identifying factors, both before and after dropout, that contribute to their completion of high school by attaining either a high school degree or a GED certificate. This assertion is in line with Lehr, Hansen, Sinclair, and Christenson (2003) and Wayman (2001) who stressed to increase efforts in promoting school completion among dropouts as the dropout prevention efforts.

Finally, this research suggests that further investigation should address regional differences in school completion rates. Dropouts who live in the Midwest or Northeast are consistently more likely to complete their high school education than those who live in the West or South. This result indicates the need for further studies investigating the factors contributing to regional differences in diploma attainment rates among dropouts. Restricted data series (e.g., NLSY97 Geocode Data) allow researchers to access a variety of statistics by county and individual student transcripts. Future research that combines the rich longitudinal records with the geographic variables assists in investigating factors influencing geographical differences in dropout rates and eventual school completion rates among dropouts.

## References

- American Council on Education. (1996). *Who took the GED? GED 1995 statistical report*. Baldwin. Washington, D.C.: Author.
- Berkold, J., Geis, S., & Kaufman, P. (1998). *Subsequent educational attainment of high school dropouts*. NCES 98-085. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.
- Boesel, D., Alsalam, N., & Smith, T. M. (1998). *Educational and labor market performance of GED recipients*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement.
- Cao, J., Stromsdorfer, E. W., & Weeks, G. (1996). The human capital effect of general education development certificates on low income women. *The Journal of Human Resources*, 31(1), 206-228.
- Chuang, H. (1997). High school youths' dropout and re-enrollment behavior. *Economics of Education Review*, 16(2), 171-86.
- Entwisle, D., Alexander, K., & Olson, L. (2004). Temporary as compared to permanent high school dropout. *Social Forces*, 82(3), 1181-1205.
- Feldlaufer, H., Midgley, C., & Eccles, J. S. (1988). Student, teacher, and observer perceptions of the classroom environment before and after transition to junior high school. *Journal of Early Adolescence*, 8(2), 133-156.
- Finn, J., & Rock, D. (1997). Academic success among students at risk for school failure. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 82(2), 221-234.
- Fulk, B. M. (2003). Concerns about ninth-grade students' poor academic performance: one school's action plan. *American Secondary Education*, 31(2), 8-26.
- Hair, J. F., Anderson, R. E., Tatham, R. L., & Black, W. C. (1998). *Multivariate data analysis*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- High School and Beyond (HS&B), 2003 [Data file]. Available from National Center for Education Statistics Website, <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/getpubcats.asp?sid=022>
- Kaufman, P. (1988). *High school dropouts who return to school*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Claremont Graduate School, Claremont, CA.
- Kominski, R. (1987). *Current population reports. Series P-20*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- Lehr, C., Hansen, A., Sinclair, M., & Christenson, S. (2003). Moving beyond dropout towards school completion: An integrative review of data-based interventions. *School Psychology Review*, 32(3), 342-364.

- McMillen, M., & Kaufman, P. (1994). *Dropout rates in the United States*. Washington, D.C: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics.
- Murnane, R. J., Willett, J. B., & Boudett, K. P. (1995). Do high school dropouts benefit from obtaining a GED? *Education and Policy Analysis, 17*(2), 133-147.
- National Center for Education Statistics. (1993). *Dropout rates in the United States: 1992* (NCES 93-464). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Government Printing Office.
- National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988, 1994 [Data file]. Available from National Center for Education Statistics Website, <http://nces.ed.gov/>
- National Collaboration for Youth. (1989). *Making the grade: A report card on American Youth*. Albany, NY: Boyd Printing Company.
- National Commission on Excellence in Education. (1983). *A nation at risk: The imperative for educational reform*. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office.
- National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS:88/00), 2000 [Data file]. Available from National Center for Education Statistics Website, <http://nces.ed.gov/>
- National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY78), 1998 [Data file]. Available from Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics Website, <http://www.nlsinfo.org/ordering/>
- National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY97), 2004 [Data file]. Available from Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics Website, <http://www.nlsinfo.org/ordering/>
- Reith, H. J. & Polsgrove, L. (1994). Curriculum and instructional issues in teaching secondary students with learning disabilities. *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice, 9*, 118-126.
- Rosenthal, B. S. (1998). Non-school correlates of dropout: An integrative review of the literature. *Children & Youth Services Review, 20*(5), 413-433.
- Rumberger, R. W. (1987). High school dropouts: A review of issues and evidence. *Review of Educational Research, 57*, 101-121.
- Rumberger, R. W., & Larson, K. A. (1998). Student mobility and the increased risk of high school dropout. *American Journal of Education, 107*, 1-35.
- Seidman, E., Allen, L., Aber, J., Mitchell, C., & Feinman, J. (1994). The impact of school transitions in early adolescence on the self-system and perceived social context of poor urban youth. *Child Development, 65*, 507-522.

- Smokowski, P. R., Mann, E. A., Reynolds, A. J., & Fraser, M. W. (2004). Childhood risk and protective factors and late adolescent adjustment in inner city minority youth. *Children and Youth Services Review, 26*(1), 63-91.
- Suh, S., Suh, J., & Houston, I. (in press). Predictors of categorical at-risk high school dropouts, *Journal of Counseling and Development*.
- Tamhane, A., & Dunlop, D. (2000). *Statistics and data analysis*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Tyler, J. H. (2003). Economic benefits of the GED: Lessons from recent research. *Review of Educational Research, 73*(3), 369-403.
- U.S. Bureau of Census (2000). *Current population survey*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Commerce.
- U.S. Department of Education. (1998). *Dropout rates in the United States: 1996* (NCES-98-250). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement.
- U.S. Department of Education. (1999). *Digest of education statistics 1999* (NCES 2000-031). Washington, DC: Author.
- Wayman, C. W. (2001, February 8). Factors influencing GED and diploma attainment of high school dropouts, *Education Policy Analysis Archives, 9*(4). Retrieved October 1, 2004, from <http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v9n4/>
- Wayman, C. W. (2002). The utility of educational resilience for studying degree attainment in school dropouts, *Review of Educational Research, 95*(3), 167-178.
- Wehlage, G. G., Rutter, R. A., Smith, G. A., Lesko, N., & Fernandez, R. R. (1989). *Reducing the risk: Schools as communities of support*. New York: Falmer.







## **Parents' Perceptions of Standardized Testing: Its Relationship And Effect on Student Achievement**

*Monica Z. Osburn*

*University of North Carolina at Pembroke*

*Charles Stegman, Laura D. Suitt, & Gary Ritter*

*University of Arkansas*

### *Abstract*

*Questions regarding the value of standardized testing have been raised by community and school leaders, as well as parents and members of the media. Some have expressed concern that children today are placed under such pressure to perform well on standardized tests that the anxiety adversely affects performance outcomes. This study examined the attitudes and perceptions of parents with respect to the importance of tests, the responsibility shared by parents and teachers for student performance on these tests, the testing climate surrounding these tests, and the stress and anxiety that may accompany these tests. Furthermore, the study investigated the relationship between parental views and children's performance on the exams. The sample of students examined here attend school in a high-achieving district in Northwest Arkansas. Parents of fifth-graders, who had just completed the SAT-9 test week, were surveyed. Overall, parents' responded that standardized testing is important to them and that it is not overly stressful for their children. They did, however, report a concern that the teachers are under pressure. With respect to student performance on the exams, the parents of students who did poorly on the exams did feel pressure to help their children do well.*

Standardized testing has been placed under significant scrutiny in recent years. For the better part of the past two decades, schools have implemented large scale standardized testing programs as a way to measure academic accountability (Bernauer & Cress, 1997). In addition, the No Child Left Behind legislation has increased the importance of standardized testing and accountability for schools and teachers. In response, administrators, teachers, and parents have questioned the value and worth of tests as a measure of academic achievement (Bernauer & Cress, 1997; Paris, 1992). Murray (1998) highlighted the unreasonable emphasis placed on standardized tests by "the gatekeepers of American Higher Education."

In another case for support against testing, Howard Gardner, famous for his work on multiple intelligences, stated he was unconcerned that American children were ranked last among the major industrial nations in the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (Murray, 1998). He reported that tests measure exposure to facts and skills not whether or not kids can think (Murray, 1998).

In many cases, test results are used to make decisions about teacher pay, school funding, and the promotion of children to higher grades (Kubiszyn & Borich, 2000). Given the "high stakes" that are put on these tests, and the vast amount of backlash surrounding standardized testing, it is not unlikely that a high level of concern and debate exists. The common concerns highlighted in the literature are that (a) teachers will teach "to the test" instead of focusing on established curricula (Jones, Jones, & Hardin, 1999); (b) students who do not respond well to standardized tests will be penalized (Etsey, 1997); and that (c) parents, teachers, and administrators can "influence" a child's performance through anxiety, pressure, and involvement. These concerns are compounded further when popular press articles, such as Testing Testing Testing, featured in Good Housekeeping (Cool, 2002), highlight standardized testing as stressful for parents, teachers, administrators, and students.

### ***Climate and Pressure***

The concerns raised regarding testing and achievement often are linked back to not only the validity of the measure, but also its effect on individuals involved with testing. Some researchers have examined overall school climate, including teacher anxiety, student pressure to succeed, and administrator's use of testing results, as possible predictors of academic achievement. In a study conducted by Campbell and Mandel (1990), lower levels of help, pressure, and

monitoring, together with higher levels of psychological support from parents was associated with higher academic achievement. Pang's (1991) study included a variable of parental support as part of climate and found that, when students perceived their parents as supportive, mathematics achievement increased. The literature, however, also supported the claim that testing environments were high anxiety and extremely stressful for students.

In North Carolina, one survey found that 61% of teachers perceived that their students felt more anxiety and less confidence due to testing (Jones et al., 1999). Some researchers have found that test anxiety starts as early as kindergarten and continues throughout the testing process (Fleege, Charlesworth, Burts, & Hart, 1992; Hill & Wingfield, 1984). This anxiety is often compounded with successive low-performing testing results (Crocker, Schmitt, & Tang, 1988). As anxiety increases, students may look to parents for increased support.

A recent survey sponsored by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development found that many parents are confused about standardized testing, do not feel informed about assessment procedures and do not believe they are equipped to assist their child in preparing for testing (Gleason, 2000). Dounay (2000) stated that parents in some states assert that high-stakes tests place undue pressure on young children and these parents have questioned the validity of assessment and accountability systems. Nowhere in the current literature was parental stress actually measured.

### ***Parental Involvement***

Research has indicated that parental involvement can be a significant factor in predicting academic success (Christenson, Rounds, & Gorney, 1992; Epstein, 1987; Keith, Troutman, Bickley, Trivette, & Singh, 1993). However, the construct of parental involvement has been measured in several different ways. Some early studies such as Morrison (1978), conceived parental involvement as the extent to which parents were involved in school activities.

More recent studies, however, have expanded the scope of the construct. Milne, Myers, Rosenthal, and Ginsburg (1986) used measures of whether parents helped with homework or attended parent-teacher conferences as variables to measure parental involvement. Fehrmann, Keith, and Reimers (1987) conceptualized a measure of parental involvement that included whether parents knew where their children were and what they were doing, whether parents influenced their children's plans after high school, and whether parents closely monitored how well their children were achieving in school.

Astone and McLanahan's (1991) study included a measure of general supervision and measures of whether the parents had high aspirations for their children, monitored school progress, and talked regularly with their children. Miller and Green (1992) used a structural equation model with parental involvement represented by measures of whether parents helped with homework, rewarded good grades, and communicated with teachers about school matters. Madigan (1994) examined the effects of 10 indicators of parental involvement associated with whether parents encourage and reward work on mathematics at home. Most of the previous studies employed multivariate regression analysis and estimated effects over and above family background factors such as socioeconomic status.

Not all studies on parental involvement indicated relationships that were positive. Milne et al. (1986) found a negative relationship between achievement and parental help with homework and suggested that this was attributable to the fact that parents helped more if their children were not doing well at school. Madigan (1994) found negative associations between parents helping with homework, insisting that their children do their homework, or rewarding their children for good grades and academic success. Nonetheless, both Milne et al. (1986) and Madigan (1994) found a positive relationship between parents' high expectations for their children and academic performance. Muller (1993) also reported negative relationships to achievement with parents monitoring their eighth graders' homework or providing more after school supervision. Significant negative effects for parents' frequent contact with school or participation in parent-teacher conferences were also found. Muller (1993) reported a link between parents discussing school experiences with their children and increased school performance. Astone and McLanahan (1991) found a positive correlation between parents' aspirations, monitoring their child's progress, and general supervision, with academic achievement. Fehrmann et al. (1987) found positive relationships with his parent involvement construct consisting of monitoring and supervision.

In summary, studies found that parents' high expectations for and general monitoring of their children's performance were positively related to academic achievement, whereas helping with homework and attending parent-teacher conferences have negative associations or no association with academic achievement. What this review suggests is that parent involvement is a multi-dimensional construct that can have many components. Some types of

involvement may well lend to better outcomes, while other types of involvement may well arise due to poor performance. Rarely in the literature was parent's perceptions of test value evaluated nor was the test climate factored into the research.

### ***Test Value***

Little research to date has studied parents' perceptions of achievement testing. Barber, Paris, Evans and Gadsden (1992) indicated that parents support achievement testing. However, too often parents are not informed of results, the results are not explained adequately, and the results are often difficult to interpret without assistance. Paris (1992) found that most states do not have formal policies for communicating test results to parents, and when surveyed, many teachers and administrators admitted being unable to interpret results.

If parents do not understand achievement testing, this may undermine their support. It is unclear if parents understand academic testing and it is also unknown whether this lack of understanding affects student performance. A parent may be involved, but if that involvement is negative toward achievement tests or promotes an unhealthy environment for test taking, how might that impact academic performance? The literature highlights types of parental involvement and perceptions of a stressful academic environment, but it has not systematically examined parents' perceptions of standardized testing as it relates to student achievement.

This study will help address questions related to parental perceptions of test value, their perceived role in testing, and how that is related to students' academic achievement. It is hypothesized that parental attitudes toward standardized tests and test climate are related to student academic performance. According to Astone and McLanahan (1991), a child's failure in school is partly the result of inadequate or ineffective parenting styles. Specifically, a child may be influenced through the parent's perceptions, and thus may or may not succeed academically. Astone and McLanahan (1991) found that several parental practices (such as parents' aspirations toward school, monitoring academic progress, general supervision, and talking with children) had significant effects on student grades, attitude toward school, and graduation rate. This paper seeks to add the factor of climate to the variables studied by Astone and McLanahan as well as focus on standardized assessments as a dependent variable. The questions guiding this study are the following: (a) Do parents believe that standardized testing is valuable and are parents interested in the performance

of their children on standardized tests ?; (b) Is there an "unhealthy" school climate due to testing ?; (c) Are parents concerned that standardized testing is overly stressful for their children or for the teachers of their children and do they feel pressure related to the performance of their children ?; and (d) Is there a relationship between student performance on standardized tests and any of the above attitudes and perceptions of the parents?

## **Methods**

### ***Participants***

Parents of children attending fifth-grade classes in a high-performing school district of Northwest Arkansas were selected to participate. This particular district ranked in the top 10% of all the districts in the state on most achievement tests. Further, the Northwest region of Arkansas is one of the most affluent in the state. The district has nine schools that serve fifth grade. Each school was similar with respect to diversity (predominately Caucasian). The individual schools exhibited some variability in socio-economic status and family structure. All parents were provided with a packet that contained an explanation of the study, a consent form, and a parent survey. A total of approximately 500 parents received surveys and 250 parents returned completed surveys. Of the 250 surveys returned, 190 could be matched with student achievement data.<sup>1</sup> These 190 surveys were from 9 different schools and 23 total classrooms. The drop off in matching was due to errors in test reporting and incomplete testing data, and there is no reason to believe that the respondents are systematically different from the non-respondents.

### ***Measures***

Data for this analysis were collected by means of a self-report survey completed by the parents and the student Stanford Achievement Test, Version 9 (SAT-9) scores. The SAT-9 tests were taken the same week the parent surveys were distributed and returned. The authors designed the self-report survey, Parent's Survey of Standardized Achievement Tests (see Appendix A). The survey consisted 19 items relating to perceptions of standardized testing,

---

<sup>1</sup>With a sample of 190, the authors will be able to detect, with statistical significance, a difference of approximately .4 effect sizes (using a 95 percent confidence level and 80 percent power). For example, on the Math portion of the SAT-9 exam, this design will allow for us to detect differences of approximately 15 scale points.

specifically, overall stress and anxiety, climate, and parental involvement. A five-point Likert-type scale was used to rate responses ranging from not at all (1) to an extreme amount (5). Survey items were categorized into three scales or constructs: Parental Involvement and Interest in Testing, Testing Climate, and Overall Stress and Anxiety.

The Parental Involvement and Interest in Testing construct included the following items: (a) The standardized testing program is important for the educational progress of my child; (b) I believe that standardized testing is a waste of time (This question is reverse coded to fit in with the construct); (c) I am interested in the results of my child's tests; and (d) I believe that parents have a responsibility to work with their children to improve their performance on standardized tests.

The Testing Climate construct included the following items: (a) The climate surrounding testing in this school is healthy; (b) I think the teachers genuinely want my child to do well on the test; (c) The principal works hard to help make the testing week as pleasant as possible for the students; and (d) The principal works hard to help make the testing week a positive experience for the students.

The Overall Stress and Anxiety construct items were: (a) The standardized testing program is stressful for my child; (b) The standardized testing program is stressful for teachers; (c) Teachers seem threatened by the testing program; and (d) I feel pressure to help my child score well on standardized tests.

For the construct of Parental Involvement and Interest in Testing, the item reliability was .70; the Testing Climate construct yielded a .79 item reliability; and the Overall Stress and Anxiety construct yielded a .71 item reliability. For each construct a mean score resulted between one and five, in which a score near one suggests a low score and a score near five means they scored high on that construct (for example, on the Testing climate construct, a score of one means that the parent felt the climate was not positive at all and a score of five means they felt the climate was extremely positive). To make sense of the construct scores, the authors grouped them into three categories such that the lowest grouping included scores nearest to one; the middle grouping included scores closest to two and three; and the highest grouping included scores nearest to four and five. The mean score for each construct was then used to classify each respondent as a low scorer (0 to 1.49 = did not agree at all), middle scorer (1.50 to 3.49 = some or moderate

agreement), or high scorer (3.5 to 5 = significant or extreme agreement) on that particular construct. The authors chose to categorize the scores into three groups instead of five so they would be easier to understand. This in no way changed the results. For example, if the results were significant on the 1 to 5 scale they were also significant when the scores were categorized and vice versa. The Stanford Achievement Test version 9 (SAT-9) was part of the standardized testing program required by the Arkansas Department of Education when this study was completed. The SAT-9 battery used consisted of three content areas, mathematics, reading, and language.

### ***Procedures***

Elementary school principals in the district were approached at the beginning of the academic year of 2000-2001 and approval was given to administer the survey to students, teachers, and parents in this district. The week prior to the administration of the SAT-9, all fifth-grade teachers were instructed to send home a permission slip for children to participate in a study on standardized tests. Attached to that permission slip was an informed consent as well as the Parent's Survey of Standardized Achievement Tests for parents to complete for participation in the study. Either parent could complete the survey, but the one who actually responded, needed to give informed consent and sign the permission slip for themselves and their child. The completed surveys, informed consent, and permission slips were then returned to the fifth grade teachers who then gave them to one of the researchers. All parents were given the same amount of time to complete the survey.

The teachers, counselors, and administrators of the school district administered the SAT-9 in the Fall of 2000. Each student's SAT-9 scores were matched to the parent's questionnaire by a unique number identifier. A further data check was also conducted by name of teacher and grade of student. All identifying data must have matched exactly to have been used in the study.

To address the research questions, several different procedures were used. First, the authors examined the item response by percentage of respondents to accurately address the scope of the problem. Next, to assess the relationship between the items and constructs and student achievement, a series of analyses of variance (ANOVA) were conducted.

## Results

### *Parental Involvement and Interest in Testing*

The vast majority of parents reported to be involved in and interested in their child's testing with a mean construct score of 3.94 on a five point scale (5 = extremely involved and 1 = not involved at all). Now using the categories described in the methods section, 83% of parents reported significant or extreme involvement and interest in their child's testing (see Figure 1).

The individual items do suggest that the parents surveyed reported that standardized testing is important. Fewer than 5% reported that it was not at all important, while 55% responded that it is significantly or extremely important. For a related survey question "I believe standardized testing is a waste of time," two out of three parents felt that testing was not a waste of time.

An overwhelming majority of parents surveyed were interested in the results of their child's test scores. Out of the 190 parent responses, 88% reported being significantly or extremely interested in their child's results. Only three parents reported not being interested at all in the results of the test. Parents surveyed also felt a responsibility to help their children. In response to the survey item "I believe that parents have a responsibility to work with their children to improve their performance on standardized tests," approximately 50% of the parents

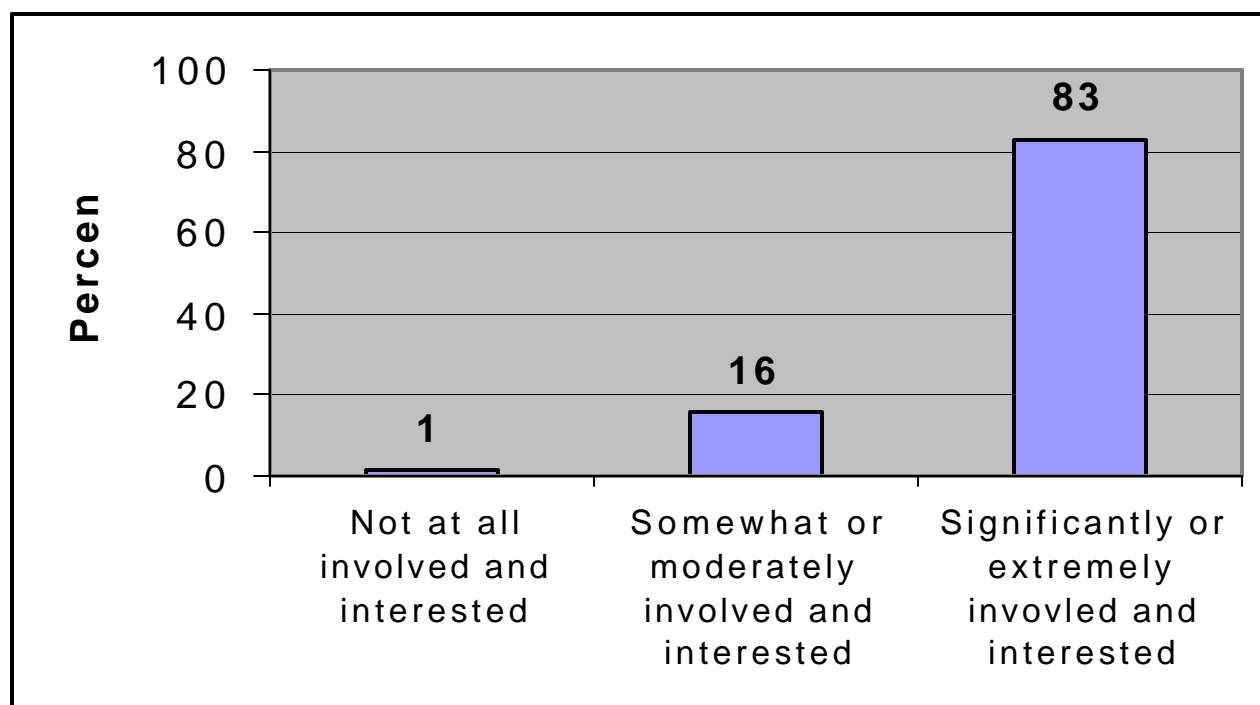


Figure 1. How Involved and Interested are the Parents? These figures are based on the four items from the Parental Involvement and Interest in Testing construct.

agreed strongly (significantly or extremely). In fact, fewer than 7% of the parents reported to have no responsibility for the child's performance.

Although these items were not included in the formal construct, there were some indications of negative outcomes related to parents and the testing process. One concern lies with the lack of communication between parents and school staff regarding test results. Supporting the findings of Barber et al. (1992), half of the parents reported that they had received only some or no explanation of the test score results by their child's teacher. One possibility was that the school counselor had undertaken the task of explaining these results. More than 90% of the parents, however, reported that they have received only some or no explanation of the test score results by the school counselor.

### *Testing Climate*

Most parents reported the testing climate as being relatively positive ( $M = 3.84$  on a five point scale, 5 = extremely positive and 1 = not positive at all). In fact, based on the construct, 75% of parents reported that they felt their child's testing environment was significantly or extremely positive (see Figure 2).

With respect to the individual items, a majority (59%) of the parents reported that the climate surrounding testing was healthy. Fewer than 4% of the parents reported that the testing climate was not at all healthy for their children. Likewise, approximately 86% of parents think that teachers want their child to

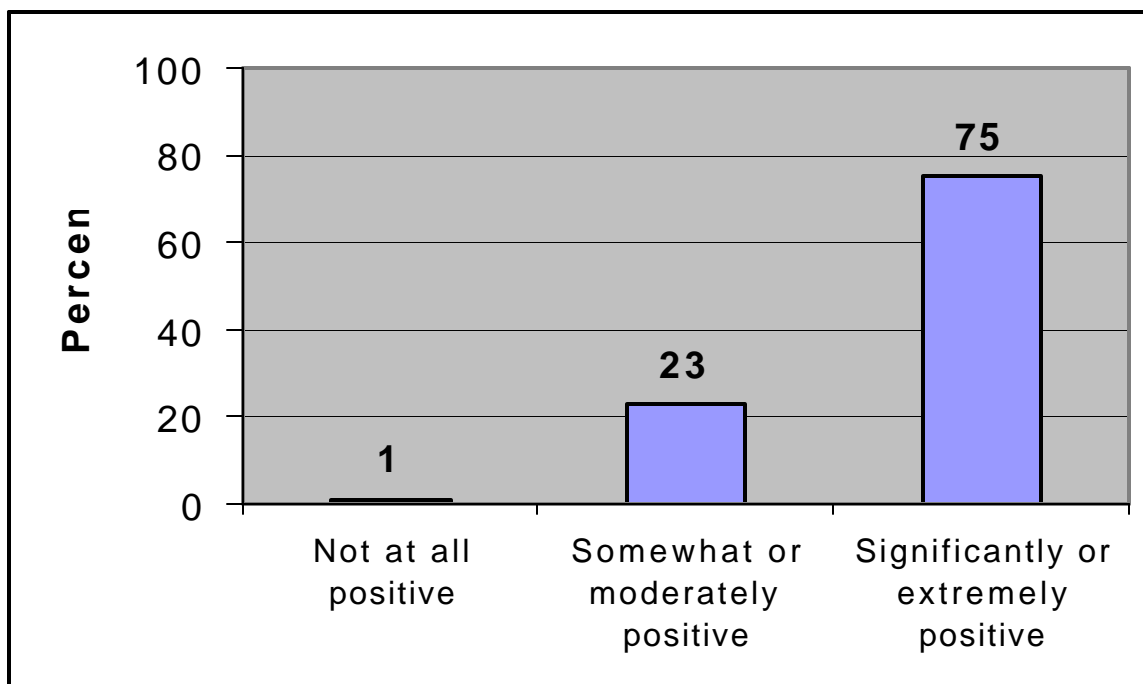


Figure 2. How Positive Is the Testing Climate? These figures are based on the four items from the Testing Climate construct. Two percent of the responses for this construct were reported as missing data.

do well on standardized tests. Moreover, the majority of parents (64%) reported that the principal of the school (in each of nine different schools) works hard to make the testing week a pleasant and positive experience for the students.

### ***Overall Stress and Anxiety***

Most parents reported that stress and anxiety was somewhat or moderately present ( $M = 2.41$  on a five point scale, 5 = extremely stressful and 1 = not stressful at all). Approximately 73% of parents reported the stress and anxiety level to be moderate (see Figure 3).

Regarding the individual items, the majority of parents expressed the belief that the testing program at the school is not overly stressful for their children. In response to the survey item "The standardized testing program is stressful for my child," only 24% responded that it is significantly or extremely stressful. In fact, 22% of the parents reported that it was not at all stressful for their children. With respect to the teachers, a roughly similar proportion of the parents believed that teachers are concerned about the pressure due to the standardized tests.

Just as most of the parents did not believe that the testing program is overly stressful for their children, the majority of parents reported that they did not feel pressure to help their children score well on the exams. In respect to the survey item "I feel pressure to help my child score well on standardized tests," only 13% reported significant or extreme pressure. In fact, 43% of the parents claimed to have felt no pressure at all.

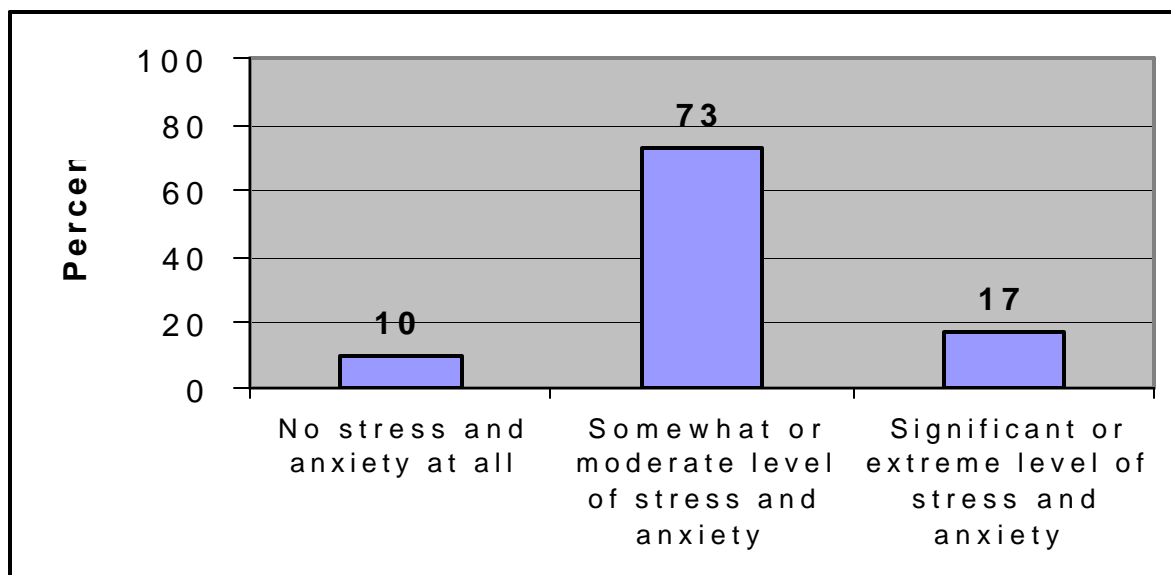


Figure 3. What is the Overall Stress and Anxiety Level? These figures are based on the four items from the Overall Stress and Anxiety Construct.

### ***Relationship Between Parental Attitudes and Student Achievement***

Not only did this study seek to understand the attitudes of parents toward standardized testing, but also to examine the relationship between parental attitudes and student performance on standardized tests. Relationships between each of the construct scores and student achievement were examined. Several specific items for relationships between parent responses and student achievement scores were also examined. An alpha level of 0.05 was used for all univariate analyses.

Results for the Parental Involvement construct indicated no significant difference in student achievement based on mathematics [ $F(2,187) = 1.00, p < 0.37$ ] or reading [ $F(2,187) = 1.98, p < 0.14$ ], but there was a significant difference for language [ $F(2,183) = 3.23, p < 0.04$ ]. Students of parents who were not interested or involved at all scored the highest on language with a mean score of 665 and parents who were moderately involved and interested had students who scored the lowest in language with a mean score of 636 (in the state of Arkansas the range of mean scores for language was 508 to 773, see Appendix D for more information). For the parents who were significantly or extremely involved and interested, their students had scores that fell in the middle range for the language section of the test with a mean score of 653.

There were no significant differences found on the Testing Climate construct for student achievement based on mathematics [ $F(2,183) = 1.11, p < 0.33$ ], reading [ $F(2,183) = 0.87, p < 0.42$ ] or language [ $F(2,179) = 0.39, p < 0.68$ ]. A significant difference was reported for student achievement based on mathematics [ $F(2,187) = 3.66, p < 0.03$ ] on the Overall Stress and Anxiety construct. There were no significant differences for student achievement based on reading [ $F(2,187) = 1.40, p < 0.25$ ] and language [ $F(2,183) = 2.03, p < 0.13$ ] for the Overall Stress and Anxiety construct. Students of parents who reported no stress or anxiety scored in the middle for mathematics with a mean score of 651 (in the state of Arkansas the range of mean scores for mathematics was 494 to 784, see Appendix D for more information). Parents who reported moderate levels of stress and anxiety had students who scored the highest in mathematics with a mean score of 658. For the parents who reported significant or extreme levels of stress and anxiety, their students had the lowest scores with a mean score of 636 on the mathematics section of the test.

While there were few significant parent results revealed in the construct above, some of the individual items were related to student achievement in interesting ways. For the item "I feel pressure to help my child score well," one-

way univariate ANOVA's indicated that there were significant differences between the parent groups based on responses to the amount of pressure and student achievement in mathematics ( $F(2, 186) = 7.39, p < 0.00$ ), reading ( $F(2,186) = 9.27, p < 0.00$ ), and language ( $F(2,182) = 9.78, p < 0.00$ ). One might have hypothesized that parents of students who performed poorly would feel a higher level of pressure, or that students with more "interested" parents would have performed better on exams. Data gathered suggested that parents who reported feeling pressure to help their children perform well on exams had children with the lowest average scaled scores (see Table 1).

**Table 1. Relationship between Parents' Pressure and Student Performance**

Parental Reports of "I feel pressure to help my child score well"	Math Scaled Score ( <i>M</i> )	Reading Scaled Score ( <i>M</i> )	Language Scaled Score ( <i>M</i> )
<i>Pressure: Not at All (n=78)</i>	660	675	656
<i>Pressure: Some or Moderate (n=88)</i>	655	667	652
<i>Pressure: Significant or Extreme (n=23)</i>	624	634	622
Overall Group Averages	653	666	650
ANOVA <i>F</i> -statistic Significance	.001	.000	.000

*Note:* Authors' analysis of parental survey data and SAT-9 test scores.

As Table 1 indicates, the students whose parents reported no pressure to improve student performance represented the highest scoring group on all three exams. For example, on the mathematics exam, children whose parents reported no pressure had an average score of 660, while students whose parents reported "some or moderate" pressure had an average score of 655 and the students of those parents who reported "significant or extreme" pressure had a much lower average scaled score of 624. This same pattern was evident for the reading and language portions of the SAT-9 exam as well.

No significant differences were found for the item "The standardized testing

program is stressful for my child" between the parent groups based on responses to the amount of pressure and student achievement in student achievement in mathematics [ $F(4,184) = 2.33, p < 0.06$ ], reading [ $F(4,184) = 1.26, p < 0.29$ ], and language [ $F(4,180) = 2.19, p < 0.07$ ]. Students who scored the lowest on the mathematics, reading, and language exams also had parents who reported that the tests were relatively stressful for their students. Whereas the students whose parents reported no stress for their children earned an average mathematics scaled score of 663, their counterparts, whose parents reported "significant or extreme" stress for their children, had an average score of only 635. This difference was somewhat modest and not statistically significant; however, it was still a difference worth noting.

For the item "The standardized testing program is important for the educational progress of my child," there was a difference between the parent groups based on responses to the amount of pressure and student achievement in mathematics [ $F(4,185) = 3.30, p < 0.01$ ], but not in relation to reading [ $F(4,185) = 2.15, p < 0.08$ ] or language [ $F(4,181) = 2.34, p < 0.06$ ]. An interesting pattern appeared in which the students whose parents expressed very strong views - on either the positive or negative side - about the importance of standardized testing were among the lowest performers on exams. Further, the parents of students who perform well did not report strong views on the support for standardized testing (see Table 2).

## Discussion

Academic testing is currently controversial in educational systems. The results of this study provide some additional information that should be useful. Despite what the popular press may imply, this study indicated that parents are not overly anxious about standardized testing, nor do they feel their children are. However, the district used in this study is a fairly high-performing district, with only a couple of low-performing schools. Parents from districts with primarily low-achieving schools may respond differently.

One interpretation of this interesting result is that parents of the lowest-performing students react in one of two ways: (1) they reveal a belief that these tests are not meaningful, perhaps because they do not think their children do very well, or, (2) they emphasize the importance of the exam due to the great concern they may have over the performance of their children. These results, however, should be viewed with caution as there is no hint of causation in either direction; that is, there is no evidence as to whether the student performance influenced parental views or vice versa.

**Table 2. Relationship between Parent Test Value and Student Performance**

Parental Reports of <i>"The standardized testing program is important for the educational progress of my child"</i>	Math Scaled Score ( <i>M</i> )	Reading Scaled Score ( <i>M</i> )	Language Scaled Score ( <i>M</i> )
Pressure: Not at All ( <i>n</i> =9)	637	668	648
Pressure: Some ( <i>n</i> =23)	642	662	640
Pressure: Moderate Amount ( <i>n</i> =54)	665	674	657
Pressure: Significant Amount ( <i>n</i> =80)	656	669	652
Pressure: Extreme Amount ( <i>n</i> =24)	635	645	635
Overall Group Averages (190)	653	666	650
ANOVA <i>F</i> -statistic Significance	.012	.076	.057

*Note:* Author's analysis of parental survey data and SAT-9 test scores.

With respect to the value of testing, these parents indicated that testing is important but that they are not getting the results explained to them. To make achievement testing more valued and beneficial to all involved, it should be a collaborative process between the school and the family. The results indicated a positive perception of school climate, which should support better communication to assist the student academically. The parents also indicated a sense of responsibility to help their child succeed academically. This can be seen as a willingness to become more involved in the testing process. This district may want to investigate how parent involvement can be beneficial in the testing process.

Overall, this study does not support the concept that parents are overly stressed about their children and standardized testing. To the contrary, it showed support for standardized testing and reaffirmed its value in the academic process. Future research needs to be conducted to assess if these results would be the

same in a district that is experiencing significantly lower testing scores and more pressure to improve current test results. One of the limitations to the study was that it only covered one specific region with a small degree of cultural or socioeconomic variation. The results may not reflect a wider population. For example, schools labeled "academically distressed" in Arkansas would be good sites for similar research in the future. Students in Northwest Arkansas generally score higher in academic performance than other parts of the state, and specifically this school district is under little state pressure to increase test scores. A broader study would examine what if any differences are apparent in other regions of the state.

Another limitation of the study was some of the unknown factors associated with parent involvement and perceptions. It is a highly interpretable concept that may be influenced by factors such as parental age, education level or family status. These variables were not accounted for in the study. The results presented here can be used as a springboard for future testing. Moderate levels of parental involvement coupled with parental interest and knowledge may assist in furthering the benefits of standardized testing.

## References

- Astone, N. M., & McLanahan, S. S. (1991). Family structure, parental practices and high school completion. *American Sociological Review*, *56*, 309-320.
- Barber, B. L., Paris, S. G., Evans, M., & Gadsden, V. (1992). Policies for reporting test results to parents. *Educational Measurement: Issues and Practice*, *11*, 15-20.
- Bernauer, J. A., & Cress, K. (1997). How school communities can help redefine accountability assessment. *Phi Delta Kappan*, *1*, 71-75.
- Campbell, J. R., & Mandel, F. (1990). Connecting math achievement to parental influence. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, *15*, 64-74.
- Christenson, S. L., Rounds, T., & Gorney, D. (1992). Family factors and student achievement: An avenue to increase students' success. *School Psychology Quarterly*, *7*, 178-206.
- Cool, L. C. (2002). Testing testing...testing...: Are standardized exams the strong medicine our schools need? Or will they turn kids off to learning? The bottom line on a raging debate. *Good Housekeeping*, August.
- Crocker, L., Schmitt, A., & Tang, L. (1988). Test anxiety and standardized achievement test performance in the middle school years. *Measurement and Evaluation in Counseling and Development*, *20*(4), 149-157.

- Dounay, J. (2000). High-stakes testing is high-stress too. *The Education Digest*, 65(9), 9-13.
- Epstein, J. L. (1987). Effects on student achievement of teachers' practices of parental involvement. In S. Silver (Ed.), *Literacy through family, community, and school interaction*. Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.
- Etsey, Y. K., (1997, March). *Teachers' and school administrators' perspectives and use of standardized achievement tests: A review of published research*. Paper presented at the meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago, IL.
- Fehrmann, P. G., Keith, T. Z., & Reimers, T. M. (1987). Home influence on school learning: Direct and indirect effects of parental involvement on high school grades. *Journal of Education Research*, 806, 330-337.
- Fleege, P. O., Charlesworth, R., Burts, D. C., & Hart, C. H. 1992. Stress begins in Kindergarten: A look at behavior during standardized testing. *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*, 7, 20-26.
- Gleason, B. (2000). *National survey gauges parent perceptions of state mandated standardized tests*. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development: Alexandria, VA.
- Hill, K., & Wingfield, A. (1984). Test anxiety: A major educational problem and what can be done about it. *The Elementary School Journal*, 85(1), 105-126.
- Jones, M. G., Jones, B., & Hardin, B. (1999). The impact of high-stakes testing on teachers and students in North Carolina. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 81, 199-203.
- Keith, T. Z., Troutman, G. C., Bickley, P. G., Trivette, P.S., & Singh, K. (1993). Does parental involvement affect eighth grade student achievement? Structural analysis of national data. *School Psychology Review*, 22, 474-496.
- Kubiszyn, T., & Borich, G. (2000). *Educational testing and measurement: Classroom application and practice* (6th ed.). New York: John Wiley.
- Madigan, J. (1994). *Parent involvement and school achievement*. Paper presented at the meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, LA.
- Miller, J. D., & Green, H. (1992). *The impact of parental and home resources on student achievement and career choice*. Paper presented at the meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, Chicago, IL.

Milne, A. M., Myers, D. E., Rosenthal, A. S., & Ginsburg, A. (1986). Single parents, working mothers, and the educational achievement of school children. *Sociology of Education*, 59, 125-139.

Morrison, G. S. (1978). *Parent involvement in the home, school, and community*. Columbus, OH: Charles E. Merrill.

Muller, C. (1993). Parent involvement and academic achievement: An analysis of family resources available to the child. In B. Schneider & J.S. Coleman (Eds.), *Parents, their children, and schools* (pp. 77-114). Boulder, CO: Westview.

Murray, D. W. (1998). *The war against testing*. Retrieved on March 10, 2004 from <http://www.stats.org/record.jsp?type=oped&ID=85>

Pang, V. O. (1991). The relationship of test anxiety and math achievement to parental values in Asian-American and European-American middle school students. *Journal of Research and Development in Education*, 24(4), 1-9.

Paris, S. G. (1992). Four perspectives on educational assessment. *International Journal of Disability, Development, and Education*, 39(2), 95-105.

<b>Appendix A</b> Parent's Survey of Standardized Achievement Tests							
		Not at all	Some	Moderate amount	Significant amount	Extreme amount	Total
1	The Standardized testing program is important for the educational progress of my child.	9	23	54	80	24	190
		4.70%	12.10%	28.40%	42.10%	12.60%	
2	The Standardized testing program is stressful for my child.	41	55	48	28	17	189
		21.70%	29.10%	25.40%	14.80%	9.00%	
3	The standardized testing program is stressful for teachers.	14	56	47	41	13	171
		8.20%	32.70%	27.50%	24.00%	7.60%	
4	Teachers seem threatened by the testing program.	59	49	36	20	4	168
		35.10%	29.20%	21.40%	11.90%	2.40%	
5	I feel pressure to help my child score well on standardized tests.	78	43	35	19	4	179
		43.60%	24.00%	19.60%	10.60%	2.20%	
6	I have had the results of my child's test explained to me by a teacher.	54	38	34	45	14	185
		29.20%	20.50%	18.40%	24.30%	7.60%	

(Appendix A continues)

*Appendix A (continued)*

7	I have had the results of my child's test explained to me by a counselor.	164	8	2	5	7	186
		88.20%	4.30%	1.10%	2.70%	3.80%	
8	The climate surrounding testing in this school is healthy.	7	18	49	76	31	181
		3.90%	9.90%	27.10%	42.00%	17.10%	
9	I am interested in the results of my child's tests.	3	3	17	44	123	190
		1.60%	1.60%	8.90%	23.20%	64.70%	
10	I believe that standardized testing is a waste of time.	126	29	21	5	6	187
		67.40%	15.50%	11.20%	2.70%	3.20%	
11	I think the teachers genuinely want my child to do well on the test.	1	6	18	67	93	185
		0.50%	3.20%	9.70%	36.20%	50.30%	
12	I think the teachers are concerned about the test results impacting their job security.	39	44	45	30	18	176
		22.20%	25.00%	25.60%	17.00%	10.20%	
13	I think teachers are concerned about the pressure that could be placed on them by the principal if their classes' test	33	51	38	32	21	175
		18.90%	29.10%	21.70%	18.30%	12.00%	
14	I believe the teacher is responsible for working with my child to improve his/her performance on standardized tests.	14	48	49	58	20	189
		7.40%	25.40%	25.90%	30.70%	10.60%	

*(Appendix A continues)*

**Appendix A (continued)**

15	I believe that parents have a responsibility to work with their children to improve their performance on standardized tests.	13	29	53	52	41	188
		6.90%	15.40%	28.20%	27.70%	21.80%	
16	My child likes the testing week because he/she has less homework and less instruction in the class.	50	41	52	23	20	186
		26.90%	22.00%	28.00%	12.40%	10.80%	
17	My child tries to do well on the tests.	0	4	23	85	77	189
		0.00%	2.10%	12.20%	45.00%	40.70%	
18	The principal works hard to help make the testing week as pleasant as possible for the students.	4	18	48	63	43	176
		2.30%	10.20%	27.30%	35.80%	24.40%	
19	The principal works hard to help make the testing week a positive experience for the students.	4	18	41	70	42	175
		2.30%	10.30%	23.40%	40.00%	24.00%	

**Appendix B****Table 3. Descriptives of the Testing Variables**

Variable Name	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Min.	Max.
SAT-9 Reading scaled score	190	666.37	42.02	546	776
SAT-9 Mathematics scaled score	190	653.52	41.81	508	762
SAT-9 Language scaled score	190	650	34.59	548	750

**Appendix C****Table 4.** *Descriptives of the Constructs*

Variable Name	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Min.	Max.
<b>Parental Involvement</b>					
Construct	190	3.36	0.70	1.00	5.00
<b>Testing Climate</b>					
Construct	186	3.84	0.78	1.00	5.00
<b>Overall Stress and Anxiety Construct</b>					
Construct	190	2.41	0.88	1.00	4.75

**Appendix D****Table 5.** *Descriptives of the Testing Variables for the state of Arkansas and Nationally*

Variable Name	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Min.	Max.
<b>Arkansas</b>				
SAT-9 Reading scaled score	643.54	43.89	488	799
SAT-9 Mathematics scaled score	629.09	39.53	494	784
SAT-9 Language scaled score	631.37	38.30	508	773
<b>Nationally</b>				
SAT-9 Reading scaled score	648.5	43.8		
SAT-9 Mathematics scaled score	635.7	37.8		
SAT-9 Language scaled score	637.6	37.3		



# Call for Papers

## **An invitation... a professional opportunity,**

The *Journal of Educational Research & Policy Studies* (formerly the *Arkansas Educational Research & Policy Studies Journal*), now a national, refereed scholarly publication, seeks quality manuscripts for consideration and possible inclusion in forthcoming issues. The *Journal* is published twice yearly at the University of Arkansas-Fayetteville.

The *Journal's* purpose is to furnish a national interdisciplinary forum for the consideration of major education research initiatives and policy analyses. Topics of interest – from pre-K to collegiate levels – encompass teaching and learning, child development, charter schools, federal and state education policies, accountability measures, home schooling, student achievement assessment, and innovative school reforms, among others. With its expansion from a state to a national medium, the *Journal* aspires to serve as a juried source for the latest empirical research on current issues in education as well as significant policy developments and trends in American schooling. Of special interest are articles that are critical and interpretive in character rather than simply descriptive. Both quantitative and qualitative research paradigms are honored.

## **Instructions for Contributors**

A submission should consist of no less than ten (10) nor more than thirty (30) double-spaced, word-processed pages (12-point text font), including acknowledgments, references, notes, tables, figure captions, an abstract, and other ancillary material. Two-inch margins are strongly preferred.

**APA** guidelines (5<sup>th</sup> edition) should be followed consistently throughout for all citations. Notes and acknowledgments should appear at the end of text, preceding the References section.

All section heads (plain text) should be centered, using both upper and lower cases. Sub-heads should be placed flush left and *italicized*.

A **cover page** should be appended bearing the full title of the article, author(s)' name(s) and institutional affiliation(s), as well as the name, address, business phone, fax number and e-mail address of the person to whom inquiries regarding the manuscript should be directed. To facilitate anonymous review, the author(s)' name(s) should appear on the cover page only. A single-paragraph **abstract of 100 to 500 words** should precede the main body of the text.

The primary author of a manuscript is considered responsible for securing prior permission to reprint or adapt a table or figure, or to utilize a quotation of 500 words or more in contravention of "fair usage." A **cover letter** to accompany the manuscript should confirm that (1) the manuscript consists of original material that has not appeared previously in print elsewhere; (2) that non-exclusive world rights for the use of non-original materials have been obtained; and (3) that the submission as a whole is not under review for possible publication by any other journal.

Receipt of a manuscript submitted for possible publication will be promptly acknowledged. Each submission is sent out for independent review. Once a manuscript is accepted, the author or authors are asked to send an electronic copy of the text, *preferably* in **Word Perfect**. Placement of figures or tables should be noted within the text as follows: [Insert Table X here]. Tables should be typeset within the word processing program and figures contained within the body of a text must be camera-ready. The primary contact author is responsible for securing co-authors' approval of any manuscript revisions or alterations requested by Journal staff. Submission of a manuscript is understood to authorize Journal staff to make non-substantive or stylistic textual alterations as deemed necessary.

Question? Contact Apryl Okoroafor, Editorial Assistant, at (479)575-5593 or [aprylo@uark.edu](mailto:aprylo@uark.edu). Submissions should be sent to the following address:

Editor, Journal of Educational Research and Policy Studies  
246 North West Avenue, 302 WAAX  
University of Arkansas-Fayetteville  
Fayetteville, AR 72701