Taking Back Our Classrooms!

The United Struggle of Teachers, Students, and Parents in North Carolina Against High-Stakes Testing

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Advancement Project is a next generation, multi-racial civil rights organization. We tackle inequity with innovative strategies and strong community alliances. With a national office in Washington, DC, and two offices in California, we combine law, communications, policy, and technology to create workable solutions and achieve systemic change. We aim to inspire and strengthen movements that expand opportunity for all.

Advocates for Children’s Services (ACS) is a statewide project of Legal Aid of North Carolina. ACS specializes in education justice and ending the school-to-prison pipeline through legal advocacy, community education, and collaboration.

The North Carolina NAACP’s mission has remained constant for its first century: to ensure the political, educational, social, and economic equality of rights of all persons and to eliminate racial hatred and racial discrimination. It advances its mission through the press, through non-violent mass petitioning for redress of grievances; through the ballot, through lobbying and through the courts.

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Executive Summary

Taking Back Our Classrooms! The United Struggle of Teachers, Students, and Parents in North Carolina Against High-Stakes Testing incorporates the experiences of more than 100 teachers, students, and parents across five counties—Wake, Durham, Buncombe, Mecklenburg, and Guilford—and a statewide survey of more than 600 teachers and offers their collective recommendations for structuring an accountability system which reflects the realities of classrooms across the state. The report found that teachers, students, and parents in North Carolina believe that the state’s focus on high-stakes testing as the means of accountability for students, teachers, and schools has been ineffective, counterproductive, and has created an incentive structure which denies North Carolina’s young people the quality education they deserve.

HIGH-STAKES TESTING ≠ ACCOUNTABILITY

“You Can’t Measure What a Child Knows by a Single Test.”
80% of teachers believe that the focus on testing did not improve the quality of education in their schools.

“Educators [are] Leaving a System They No Longer Believe In.”
Almost 90% of teachers think EOCs and EOGs worsen teacher morale.
Over 75% of teachers believe the focus on testing has led many good teachers to leave the profession entirely.

“No Blade of Grass Grows at the Same Time.”
Over 50% of teachers spend over half of their total class time on preparation for the EOCs, EOGs, and assessments throughout the year.

Parents and teachers in one county reported that the principals and other school officials were charged with conducting regular audits of how closely the teachers’ followed the pacing guides.

“No Child Says, One Day I Want to be a Prisoner.”
Nearly 50% of teachers believe the focus on testing and the preparation for testing leads students to be more disruptive in class, they as teachers are less tolerant of disruptive behavior because of the focus on testing, and students are more likely to drop out of school because of the emphasis of the EOCs, EOGs, and interim assessments.

“Children Can’t Read.”
“Sometimes it can be a little heartbreaking, but there are some students that come in there who are 16, 17, and 18, and they’re reading on a 3rd, 4th, and 5th grade reading level. Some of it is developmental, but a lot of it is just us…”
When asked to picture the ideal classroom, teachers, students and parents shared almost identical visions of healthy, supportive classrooms, where teachers and students were engaged in critical thinking about their role in the world and learning life skills to prepare them for entry into the world. This vision is shared by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction; this report reveals the differences in process, incentives, and methods to arrive at that goal. In the survey, interviews, and focus groups, teachers, students, and parents offered practical considerations for policymakers that they felt reflect and responded to the realities in the classroom and the shared goals of public education:

1. **ESTABLISH CLASSROOM-BASED ASSESSMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY FOR STUDENTS, TEACHERS, AND SCHOOLS**
   - Offer multiple methods of evaluation of students for different learning styles rather than relying solely on standardized tests.
   - Incorporate peer reviews into teachers’ evaluations.
   - Provide opportunities for students and parents to evaluate teachers.
   - Develop an Advisory Committee of students, teachers, parents, and administrators to regularly weigh in on school evaluation.

2. **EQUIP STUDENTS TO BE ACTIVE, ENGAGED PARTICIPANTS IN DEMOCRACY AND A DIVERSE SOCIETY**
   - Use local history, surroundings, and context to shape curriculum.
   - Focus on developing social and emotional “life skills,” such as empathy, conflict resolution, critical thinking, cross-cultural communication, cooperation, social entrepreneurship, and healthy competition.
   - Empower students, and encourage them to question and challenge hypotheses and ideas.

3. **FOCUS ON EARLY INTERVENTIONS FOR LITERACY AS A BASIS FOR ALL LEARNING**
   - Offer professional development for all teachers (regardless of their substantive specialty) to assist with identifying literacy challenges in the classroom and developing targeted interventions to support students with greater needs.

4. **PROVIDE MEANINGFUL PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES FOR TEACHERS**
   - Prioritize professional development opportunities around classroom management, and positive and bias-free discipline.
   - Provide training on supporting and developing diverse student talent and leadership.

5. **ESTABLISH A SYSTEM OF DATA COLLECTION TO MEASURE SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION OF REFORM EFFORTS AND IDENTIFY DISPARITIES IN ACCESS TO QUALITY EDUCATION**
   - For example, to address tracking, collect data on the process of course selection and placement, require written recommendations from teachers, guidance counselors, administrators detailing reasons why particular students are placed in particular classes and provide summary in the aggregate for public review.
A Statewide Conversation and Development of a Collective Action Plan. Ultimately, engaging education stakeholders in dialogue around high-stakes testing and developing community-based reforms may require a significant time commitment in terms of outreach and relationship building. For this to be successful, there are many potential points of intervention for community action at the local, state, and federal level; for example, Advancement Project recommends:

**FEDERAL**

- **Support the Overhaul of No Child Left Behind.** Detach monetary rewards from performance on statewide exams.
- **Oppose Legislation which Creates Additional Incentives (such as monetary resources for schools) based on School/Student Performance on Standardized Exams.**
- **Support Legislation Targeted at Increasing Teachers’ Access to Training and Development Programs in Literacy, Cultural Sensitivities, and Student Engagement.**

**STATE**

- **Call for Community Involvement in ACRE and other Accountability Reform Efforts.** The stories in this report illustrate the wealth of knowledge held by teachers, students, and parents on this issue.
- **Demand Alternative Forms of Accountability for Students, Teachers, and Schools that Captures Growth Over Time.** Look to some of the examples of alternative models of accountability in the Action Kit.
- **Develop a Statewide System for Academic Placement Based on Multiple Data Points.** For example, develop a system which incorporates a variety of data points into its evaluation such as comments from students and teachers, test scores, work performed in class. Ensure the system is transparent and appealable by students, parents, and teachers.
- **Incorporate Principles and Practices Expressed by Teachers, Students, and Parents in this Report into State Board of Education Policies.**
- **Call for the Collection and Public Dissemination of Data on Testing, Tracking, and Grade Retention.** Specific examples include: the time spent on preparation for and taking standardized assessments and exams, teacher professional development hours devoted to testing preparation, the numbers of students recommended for and accepted in advanced placement or honors courses, number of students retained in each grade and promoted. This information should be disaggregated by race, socio-economic status, English Language Learner status, disability status, year, and school.

**LOCAL**

- **Understand and Examine the “High-Stakes” Attached to Test Performance.** Review local school testing policies and procedures to understand when students are being tested, on what, and the consequences attached to those scores, particularly academic placement, teachers’ pay, and access to advanced courses or special academic programs.
- **Understand and Combat the School to Prison Pipeline.** Review local school discipline policies and codes of conduct and work to revise policies to minimize student exclusion from the learning environment (particularly for minor offenses) and maximize student engagement and re-engagement when exclusion is necessary.
- **Get the Facts on the Impact of Testing on Quality Education.** Support youth-led organizing efforts around education.