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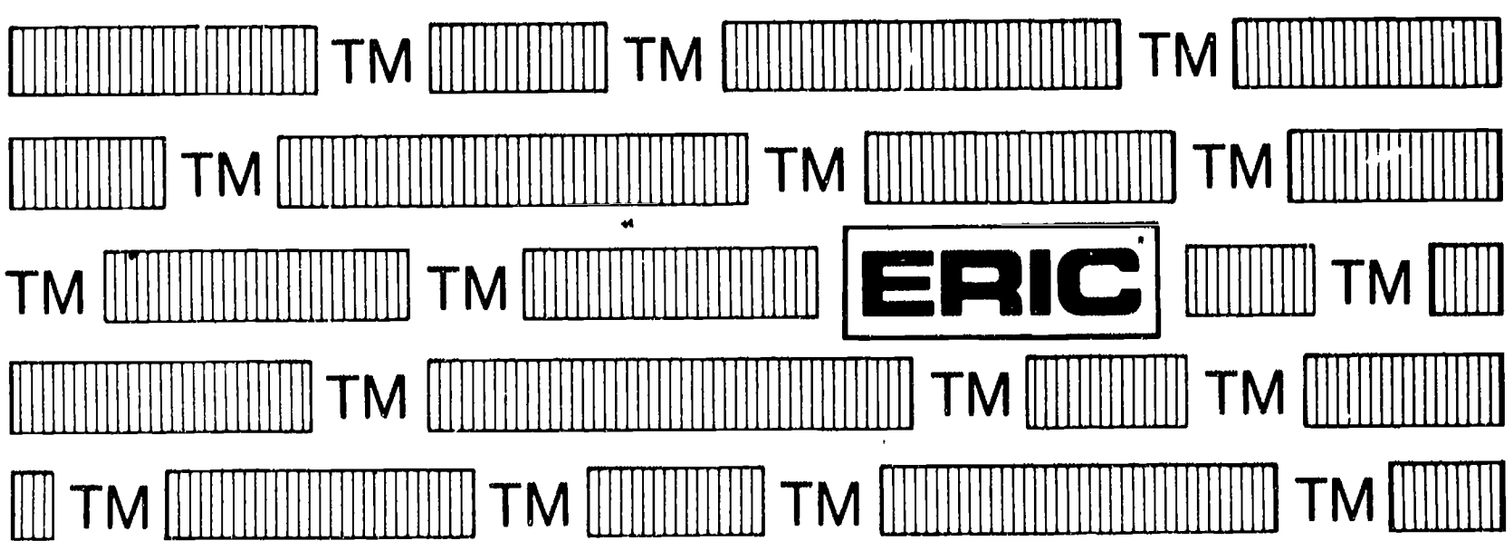
ABSTRACT

An urban school district affected by testing in the effective schools context is described in order to provide examples of the effects of testing on teaching and the curriculum. The report describes the method of operationalizing the effective schools research using test information. An important catalyst to improving the instructional program was the development of an accountability plan by the superintendent and its dissemination to all administrators and teachers within the school district. The goals of the program were to improve student achievement; improve the environment in which teaching and learning occur; and strengthen support from parents, the community at large, and community leaders for the program. The district utilized several new and tested strategies to precipitate positive change. The test results were part of the catalyst for change. The district has shown improvement in providing a quality education for all students through a strong instructional program manifested in higher test scores. (DWH)

THE EFFECTS OF TESTING ON TEACHING AND CURRICULUM IN A LARGE URBAN SCHOOL DISTRICT

ERIC/TM REPORT 86

by
Floraline I. Stevens



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Introduction

Over the years, a clear and definitive message has been given about testing--that is, testing and testing results (scores) influence and frequently control the many facets of instruction and educational management in public school systems. Bejar (1983) notes that there is a growing consensus that tests need to be closely allied with instruction. I believe that right now there are multiple effects of testing on instruction in a school district such as: school planning (placing students for appropriate instruction); staff development (preparing teachers and administrators for more effective use of their time and skills); decision making (selecting administrators); and educational credibility with all levels of politicians, parents, the news media, and the overall community.

Testing and test scores, particularly low test scores, frequently initiate change in a school system. Test scores are used to classify schools as being good or effective and poor or ineffective. Test scores are also used to determine whether or not good or effective schools have become less effective and, more importantly, whether poor or ineffective schools have improved.

Most of the research about effective schools centers on improving test scores of school children so that they perform like "school children from the mainstream of America," who presumably are in effective schools.

Until the release of UCLA Center for the Study of Evaluation's study on test use in schools (Herman and Dorr-Bremme, 1983), I assumed that teachers were the main initiators of change in schools, because they receive district-produced test scores. However, this national study found that principals reported that test results were important for curriculum evaluation and for student achievement reporting but not for teacher evaluation. Teachers indicated that their teacher-made tests and their evaluative opinions--not district curriculum mastery tests or standardized tests--were the most important for planning the school year, grouping students and deciding upon report card grades. The next set of findings revealed that very few elementary or secondary teachers participated in staff development to learn how to interpret and use the results of different types of tests, nor were teachers trained in the use of test results to improve instruction.

This information is critical because it indicates that one major reason teachers do not use either norm-referenced test results or district criterion-referenced tests to improve instruction is that they do not know how to, and have not been taught "how to" by their school districts. What the UCLA study emphasized was that staff development is crucial and essential in using tests effectively to improve instruction.

By contrast, principals use test results for instructional planning and decision making. Principals' use of test scores closely relates to the information found in effective schools research (Cuban, 1984; Edmonds, 1980; Clauset and Gaynor, 1982; Purkey and Smith, 1983; Kennedy, Apling and Neumann, 1980).

The effective schools research brought rays of sunlight to education after the gloom of the Coleman Report (1966). I will not debate the quality of the effective schools research, the experimental designs, or how scientific the research models were; the importance of this research involves the impact of the information on public schools. The information gave hope to an embattled group of professional educators. In general, the results said that given certain behaviors by school personnel, poor and low achieving students could improve their academic achievement. More specifically, the research described the proper roles of principals and teachers in bringing about positive results. Sweeney (1982) synthesized eight studies, including those of Edmonds and Brookover, about efective school leadership. He concluded from the studies that effective schools have effective leaders. Much of what the school does to promote achievement is within the principal's power to influence and control. Specifically, six leadership behaviors have been consistently associated with schools that are well managed and whose students achieve. Effective principals:

- **Emphasize achievement.** They give high priority to activities, instruction, and materials that foster academic success. Effective principals are visible and involved in what goes on in the school and its classrooms. They convey to teachers their commitment to achievement.
- **Set instructional strategies.** They take part in instructional decision making and accept responsibility for decisions about methods, materials, and evaluation procedures. They develop plans for solving students' learning problems.
- **Provide an orderly atmosphere.** They do what is necessary to ensure that the school's climate is conducive to learning: it is quiet, pleasant, and well-maintained.

- **Evaluate student progress frequently.** They monitor student achievement on a regular basis. Principals set expectations for the entire school and check to make sure those expectations are being met. They know how well their students are performing as compared to students in other schools.

- **Coordinate instructional programs.** They interrelate course content, sequences of objectives, and materials in all grades. They see that what goes on in the classroom has bearing on the overall goals and program of the school.

- **Support teachers.** Effective principals communicate with teachers about goals and procedures. They support teachers' attendance at professional meetings and workshops, and provide inservice that promotes improved teaching.

Additional support given to the concept of an effective leader as the catalyst for an effective school was found in a paper produced by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (April 1984) which synthesized over 263 studies from the effective schooling research. The research base included six parts, each with a particular focus: schools effects research, teacher effects research, curriculum alignment research, program coupling research, research on educational change, and research on instructional leadership. The research findings related specifically to the instructional leadership of administrators (i.e., principals) described the following behaviors:

1. STRONG LEADERSHIP GUIDES THE INSTRUCTIONAL PROGRAM.

    - Instructional leaders portray learning as the most important reason for being in school; public speeches and writings emphasize the importance and value of high achievement.

    - Building leadership believes that all students can learn and that the school makes the difference between success and failure.

- Building leaders know and can apply teaching and learning principles. Effective teaching practices are modeled for staff as appropriate.

- Leaders set expectations for curriculum quality through the use of standards and guidelines. Alignment is checked and improved; priorities are established within the curriculum; curriculum implementation is monitored.

- Instructional leaders check student progress frequently, relying on explicit performance data. Results are made visible; progress standards are set and used as points of comparison; discrepancies are used to stimulate action.

- Leaders set up systems of incentives and rewards to encourage excellence in student and teacher performance; they act as figureheads in delivering awards and highlighting the importance of excellence.

- Instructional leaders expect all staff to meet high instructional standards. Classroom visits to observe instruction are frequent; teacher supervision focuses on instructional improvement; staff development opportunities are secures and monitored.

- Leaders express an expectation and strong desire that instructional programs improve over time. Improvement strategies are organized and systematic; they are given high priority and visibility; implementation of new practices is carefully monitored; staff are supported.

- Leaders involve staff and others in planning implementation strategies. They set and enforce expectations for participation; commitments are made and followed through with determination and consistency; leaders rally support from the different constituencies in the school community.

2. THERE ARE HIGH EXPECTATIONS FOR QUALITY INSTRUCTION.

- All staff believe that students can learn regardless of their ability level and enthusiastically accept the challenge to teach them. When staff get together they often discuss instructional issues.

- Classroom observations are made acording to guidelines developed in advance; feedback is provided quickly; emphasis is on improving instruction and boosting student achievement.

- Staff development opportunities are provided; emphasis is on skill building; content addresses key instructional issues and priorities. Inservice activities are related to and build on each other; incentives encourage participation.

In general, the literature indicated that effective principals have a clear conception of what they expect from their faculty and students and are able to communicate these goals. Last in the effective schools research citations is Levine's and Stark's NIE study (1981) dealing with instructional and organizational arrangements that improved achievement in inner-city schools. Levine and Stark stated that one of the major positive instructional characteristics discovered when they visited several school districts was that the curriculum and instruction were aligned to improve the appropriateness of instruction and the effectiveness of instruction was tied to testing results.

The Study of an Urban School District

One urban school district affected by testing in the effective schools context will be described to provide examples of the effects of testing on teaching and the curriculum. The school district is quite large, diverse, and complex. Whatever is a problem is always a large problem. Whatever is an educational, social, or political issue becomes a large issue because of the district's vastness. The major thrust of this paper is a description of what is happening in the district to improve instruction through the use of tests. Citations from the effective schools literature present general descriptions of effective behaviors. The following text describes the method of operationalizing the effective schools research using test information.

This large urban school district evolved toward using test results through the following series of phenomena that set the stage for concerted efforts to improve instruction:

- Public pressure to rate the performance of school principals partly in accordance with test scores of the students.
- The competency test groundswell that required students to be certified through testing as proficient in reading, mathematics, and language before a high school diploma could be awarded.

- A desegregation court case which resulted in having special programs for ethnic minority students to relieve the harms of racial isolation, and receipt of state financial support for the programs. One major identified harm was low academic achievement.

- Concern that some students' test scores were depressed because of poor testing conditions and lack of proper test taking skills.

- The superintendent's plan of action to improve the instructional program.

Test Scores as a Catalyst for Community Pressure: Performance Evaluations of School Principals

Tests and their resultant scores are only samples of the levels of student achievement. However, teachers and principals, parents, the community, and the news media view these scores as report-card grades for schools. Norm-referenced test scores with median percentiles for reading and math, and proficiency testing with percentages of students passing the tests, are what the news media print and comment about. Test scores in most large cities are major news events, and some schools are labeled as "poor schools" based upon their scores.

To further emphasize this statement, real estate agents trying to relocate executives and other workers from across the nation into certain neighborhoods call school districts and ask, "Where are the schools with high test scores?" In response to this, a segment of the community which is principally Hispanic began to feel that its schools were "inferior" because of poor test scores. The leaders indicated it was because the school principals were of poor quality. A Hispanic organization wanted to evaluate principals in their community and to publicize the evaluation scores. The superintendent decided that, instead of an external evaluation of principals, the time was right for a more formal internal evaluation of principals' abilities to manage and

administer schools, and in particular, the instructional program. One of the criteria to be used would be school test scores. This decision was a landmark decision because although principals had always been informally evaluated, there were no remediation processes to help those principals needing more "principalship" skills.

Now, principals who were judged not to be good instructional leaders and managers were to undergo inservice training to improve. The message to all principals was that they were now accountable for the instructional program in their schools and part of the judging process was their schools' reading and math scores on a norm-referenced test.

Competency Testing as a Means for Criterion-Referenced Testing to Assume Legitimacy

One of the things principals constantly repeated over and over was that to evaluate programs of student learning one needs tests that match the curricular or learning objectives. As previously stated, in the UCLA study on test use in schools, teachers indicated that they felt their own tests were more appropriate for decision making. I noted that many schools were locked into one base for decision making--norm-referenced test (NRT) scores. Many teachers and administrators did not know that norm-referenced test items may not match the curriculum of the school district. In fact, in many instances, there may be a poor match between the district's learning objectives and the items on a norm-referenced test (Stevens and Burns, 1983).

Many state legislative mandates for proficiency in reading, math, and writing changed the notion that only NRT's should be used to evaluate students. Now some district staff were saying that to judge whether or not students had mastered the district's curriculum, administrators and teachers should be testing about information in the school district's curriculum. In other words, the test items should come from the learning objectives. Thus, criterion-referenced testing was accepted as a legitimate form of testing (Popham, 1978; Hsu and Boston, 1972).

In the school district, the competency legislation spurred a reevaluation of the content of curriculum at each grade level, K-12. Committees of teachers, administrators, parents, and curriculum specialists met and defined what they expected each student to learn and know at each grade level. In addition, they indicated which of the learning objectives were absolutely essential for normal progression from grade level to grade level. This process took a year, but it was worth it. Teachers now had specific learning objectives on which to base their instructional program for a particular grade level. Inservice training was provided for administrators and teachers on how to use the new curriculum guides. All teachers were given their own curriculum guides to keep for constant reference.

Proficiency testing was required to occur at one grade between grades 4-6, at grade 7, and at grade 10. At the senior high level, a graduation diploma was not issued until each senior high student passed all three tests in reading, math, and language.

The school district elected to spend considerable amounts of money to develop its own competency tests because it was deemed extremely important that the tests be fair and equitable to the population tested.

The district wanted to make sure that students were assessed on what was taught in the district, not on a "generalized" version of a national curriculum. In tandem with the proficiency tests, the curriculum specialists developed remedial materials for those students who did not pass the tests. A policy decision was made

that students could not take a failed proficiency test again until they had taken a remedial class in reading or math or language. This was an example of test results used to improve the instructional program because attention was diverted to those students deficient in some skills or to limited-English-proficient students. Recognition was given to the fact that supplemental or alternative materials and procedures have to be developed and used to help these students master the essential curriculum.

At the elementary level, grade 5 was selected to report proficiency scores to the state. However, the Board of Education decided that all elementary grades from 1 through 6 needed to determine their levels of mastery in reading, math, and language. A series of criterion-referenced tests (CRT) for each grade level was developed. Individual student and school summary computer printouts were produced that reported whether or not students "mastered" the particular curriculum for a particular grade level. At the end of the school year, these results were part of the determination of whether a student progressed to the next grade. At the beginning of the new school year, instructional plans were based upon these test data. Teachers knew the specific skills that students did or did not master from the previous grade level. Student grouping for instruction in the classroom was based upon CRT scores. Specimen tests or unit tests were developed by central office curriculum personnel to assist teachers in assessing skills as they are taught before the CRT was administered in the spring. The notion of continuous monitoring of student progress became operational with the development of these mini-assessment materials.

Curriculum Alignment as an Outgrowth of the Desegregation Court Case

The special concern in the district was that programmatically low-achieving minority students be given substantive and meaningful assistance to increase their academic achievement. This concern led to the development of a curriculum alignment project. The proposal was a collaborative effort between the district and an NIE regional lab. The overall goal was to improve the quality and efficiency of instruction in participating elementary schools. Specific objectives were (a) to help teachers match classroom instruction with district-defined essential skills in reading, math, and language; and (b) to help teachers match the time required for what they need to teach with the time actually available for instruction. From the evaluation report of this program, it was found that more at-grade-level instruction in reading, math, and language was now occurring in those schools. Test results showed that schools using curriculum alignment had higher scores than similar schools without the program. On the basis of these results, all the district's elementary schools were given information on how to implement curriculum alignment in the schools.

Teachers Are Helped to Produce Valid Student Test Scores

As was previously mentioned, concern as to whether a school district is improving its instructional services to students was principally determined by whether or not test scores improved.

The district was concerned that its students did their very best on tests so that valid results would be obtained. This concern led to two strands of material development for staff development and inservice training purposes. From the curriculum unit came a 223-page document with information on test-taking procedures and techniques. It was written for grades 7-12 but was applicable to upper elementary grades, too. The book stressed to its readers that tests are part of the educational process, and if tests are to be an accurate reflection of how much students know, students must learn to become better test takers. It was stated that several studies have demonstrated that students' test scores can be raised by teaching them to apply some general test-taking techniques such as the following:

- paying attention to the task
- understanding and following test directions
- reading test questions carefully
- using time wisely
- understanding the variety of formats
- marking the answer sheet correctly

Teachers learned how to make test-taking part of the instructional program through using classroom procedures for test-taking and teaching test-taking techniques.

From the research and evaluation office came a bulletin that also emphasized certain strategies to help students do their best on standardized achievement tests. Used in staff development meetings held in schools, this bulletin covered these major points:

- characteristics of today's standardized achievement tests such as content, format, answer document, machine scoring, and time limits
- development of student readiness for test-taking such as knowledge of testing schedule, skills continuums, course of study, norm-referenced test objectives, test-taking skills
- the proper physical setting such as seating, writing surface, and physical comfort
- proper test administration

The district was trying to make sure the test data were accurate, reliable, and valid because the decision making that affects the instructional program had to come from valid test data. Thus, a true picture of the district would be available for public scrutiny.

The "Critical Mass" that Mobilized the Professional Staff to Move Toward Improvement of the Instructional Program

Perhaps the most important catalyst to improving the instructional program was the development of an accountability plan by the superintendent and its dissemination to all administrators and teachers within the school district. This plan encompassed many of the effective schools behaviors. One part read: "When I was elected Superintendent, I began steps to improve our instructional program and to regain public support for our school district...." The superintendent then assigned the task of surveying 450 individuals and groups to learn what concepts and activities needed to be addressed in the schools. The combined results involved three goals which directly affected the instructional program. They are:

Goal 1 Improve student achievement.
Goal 2 Improve the environment in which teaching and learning occur.
Goal 3 Strengthen the support from parents and the community at large and its leaders for our program.

The superintendent stressed the following: "It is important for those who use this document to keep in mind that the activities with which it deals are, for the most part, already District practice. They are listed here so that we may all be on common ground--so we can assume that these basic activities represent a framework upon which we will build a better school system.

"I expect each person employed by the District to perform in a professional manner, to use his or her skills and talents for the benefit of those we serve, and to be creative in dealing with special opportunities inherent in each school or office. I expect each person employed by the

district to carry out our obligation in the light of a permanent committment to serve the needs of all of our students, in full recognition of the many ways in which those needs may differ.

"As we concern ourselves with the fundamentals of the educational process, we must never lose sight of the moral imperative which commands us to appreciate differences as well as similarities, diversity as well as commonality, special needs as well as more conventional requirements. Our skill as educators will be measured not alone by our technical competence, but also by our ability to use that competence in many different ways, for many different kinds of students, under many different sets of circumstances. Every student in the District is entitled to our very best efforts" (1981).

In the school district being discussed, many people would point to the following external conditions that they felt caused the achievement scores of many of the pupils to be low.

- The rising number of limited English-proficient students enrolled in the schools
- The loss of white middle-class students to private schools because of court ordered desegregation or other reasons
- The large numbers of minority students, of which many are poor and "disadvantaged," who comprised the majority of students in the district.

All of these are what can be described as "external conditions." Although these conditions may affect a school district negatively, school leadership was challenged by the superintendent to meet these conditions by planning, developing, and implementing strategies to improve academic achievement. Follow-up memoranda described the following specific activities to be implemented to meet the student achievement goal.

- Each school staff will develop, with parent input, a two-year plan to strengthen the total instructional program within available resources.

- The District will make certain that students are provided with instruction at appropriate grade levels in how to learn, including study skills, test taking, and time management.

- The District will provide administrators and teachers with updated training in the teaching of basic academic skills at all grade levels.

- Each school will devote time during grade-level and department meetings early in the school year or appropriate year-round track, and as necessary thereafter, to review the District's instructional expectations and to plan the school's total instructional program.

- The District will identify effective classroom practices which have a direct relationship to improved student performance.

- Each school will maintain a program which provides recognition for individual student progress and exceptional achievements.

- The District will continue to consider, in the evaluation of principals, competence in providing supportive supervision to classroom instruction.

- Each school will continue to provide a schedule which requires regularly assigned student homework based upon classroom instruction.

- All teachers will have evidence in the classroom of lesson planning to meet the needs of their students and the goals of the instructional program.

- Each principal will conduct regular classroom visits to assist teachers and to ensure implementation of the District's approved instructional program.

- Each school will annually review and analyze the progress the school is making toward the achievement of the School Performance Test Objectives defined in Office of Elementary Instruction.

These documents were not filed on principals' or field administrators' shelves or in their desks. Each activity had an implementation date and a position responsibility assigned to the professional staff. In addition, the superintendent assigned an assistant

superintendent to visit schools, randomly selected, to assess the degree that instructional and other supportive activities were being implemented and then to report to the superintendent's cabinet on the level of implementation. There were accountability and clout in the process. Further support for those activities related to the student achievement goal was provided by the superintendent in charge of instruction and his central office staff. Schools received a memorandum describing what their individual plans should have in them. In addition, the field superintendents' staffs were provided inservice training on developing plans so that staff could assist principals when they requested help. Also, central office instructional staff developed and sent to schools a booklet on basic activities in instruction ("how-to" information). Additionally, field directors of instruction met and reviewed the materials in the booklet and developed procedures for assisting schools in implementing activities not currently in practice, and upgrading those that were in practice. To give priority to working with hundreds of schools, field superintendents identified those schools needing the most assistance so that they would be visited first by field instructional staff. However, every district school received a checklist of tasks to be completed by designated deadlines. These school reports were sent to field superintendents to be summarized before sending to the superintendent.

For accountability purposes, the field superintendents and their staff, when making regularly scheduled visits to schools, requested from the principal materials or documentation that provided evidence that certain basic activities occurred in the school. One field superintendent described his plan to ensure that the activities for improving student

achievement were implemented. The plan was to develop a collegial system whereby a principal of a school that had "good" test score results served as a mentor to three or four principals with low test scores. At a low-scoring school, the field superintendent's staff visited and conferred with the principal to raise the principal's awareness level about what was happening academically at the school. In addition, the field staff requested from the principal a plan specific to the school to improve academic achievement. This system appeared to work because the group of schools under this field superintendent's purview improved their median percentile scores in reading. Grade 3 reading median percentile in 1981 was 27; in 1984 it was 46. Grade 5 was 24 in 1981 and 31 in 1983. No score was at the national median of 50, but there were 19 and 7 point gains in three years—as more low scoring schools improved their overall academic achievement. Comparing 1981 third grade median percentile reading scores with 1984, there is further illustration of academic improvement under this field superintendent. In 1981, 59% of the schools were at or below the 30th median percentile. By 1984, the percentage was greatly reduced to 25%. The percent of schools at or above the 50th percentile (median) grew from 18% in 1981 to 28% in 1984. Seventeen percent of the schools in 1984 had scores ranging from the 61st to the 89th median percentiles compared to 8% in 1981.

Conclusion

Does testing affect teaching and curriculum? Can you improve instruction through the use of tests? According to the example of this school district, the answer to both questions is yes. The caveat is that achieving these goals requires not one easy procedure but many procedures involving a combination of persons, starting with the superintendent. The superintendent stated to all—administrators, teachers, students, parents, and the community that instruction is the primary function of the school district. He used test scores as a basis to challenge all staff to help students achieve at their highest possible levels. He was aided in this endeavor by parental and community support for and insistence on better and more effective schools.

So, through a combination of events, conditions, and planned strategies, positive change in this large urban school district is occurring. For example, in the district's criterion-referenced testing program in spring, 1984, all elementary grades had average percentage-correct scores that were at or over 75%, indicating mastery. Grades 1-4 had average percentage scores that indicated mastery in mathematics. Grades 5 and 6 were below mastery at 74% and 70%, respectively. All of the average percentage scores improved from 4 to 9 percentage points from 1981 to 1984. After the accountability plan took root, the norm-referenced test scores moved from a plateau of 3 years of no growth (1980-1982). The district's grade 3 students moved from the 39th percentile in reading in 1982 to the 48th percentile in 1984, a 9-point increase. All of these scores are for the combined fluent English speakers and limited English speakers. In mathematics, grades 3 and 5 were at or above the 50th percentile in 1984.

That's not bad for a large urban school district whose composition is 78.7% minority, with large portions of poor students, immigrant students, and students who are just learning the English language. That's not bad at all.

This large urban school district is not a perfect district but it is working to improve. The district chose to ignore the "conditions" that could have been used as excuses not to perform effectively. It incorporated some new and some old tried-and-true strategies to bring about positive change. Its test results proved to be part of the catalyst for change, and served to show that the district is beginning to succeed in its efforts to provide a quality education for all students through a strong instructional program manifested in higher test scores.

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Over the years, a clear and definitive message has been given about testing--that is, testing and test results influence and frequently control the many facets of instruction and educational management. One of the major positive instructional characteristics discovered in effective schools research is that the curriculum and instruction in effective schools are aligned to improve the appropriateness of instruction, and the effectiveness of instruction is tied to testing results.

The major thrust of this paper is a description of what is happening in a large urban school district to improve instruction through the use of tests. It describes the method of operationalizing the effective schools research on the use of test scores.

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