

## **Deconstructing the NCLB Impact on the Instructional Goals and Practices of Urban School Teachers: A Case Study**

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*With the enactment of the NCLB mandates, emphasis on high-stakes testing became more prevalent than ever. Some argue that high-stakes tests can be a driving force behind fundamental change in schools. Whether or not this type of test-driven change leads to school improvement is an empirical question. What we do know is that high-stake testing can affect teachers' disposition of and their dedication to the teaching profession if what they accomplish at school is measured only in test scores. Drawing on data collected over the course of three academic years, this case study examines the extent to which the institutional pressure resulting from NCLB affected two urban teachers' teaching practices. To this end, this study analyzes various positions and decisions taken by these teachers to determine to in what way they succumbed to and/or resisted the institutional pressure of standardized tests, and the implication this has for student learning.*

*"No matter what I tried and did in my class to prepare my students for the MCAS (Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System) they still don't do well on it." (Mrs. Gloria, a pseudonym, March 2006).*

*"Even though the test scores of my students don't tell much about what they learn in my class, I'll still get the blame for their low scores." (Mrs. Belinda, a pseudonym, May 2007).*

With the enactment of the Federal educational policy, No Child Left Behind (NCLB), emphasis on high-stakes testing became more prevalent than ever (Hursh, 2005; Linn, 2004).<sup>1</sup> Despite differences of opinion as to whether high-stakes tests are a valid measurement of students' learning and teachers' performance, these tests continue to be used as barometers for school improvement (Sleeter, 2005; Anyon, 2005a; Cummins et al., 2007). Some researchers argue that high-stakes tests can be a driving force behind fundamental change in schools (Heubert, 2000; Shepard, 1993; Lipman, 2004, 2001). Whether or not this type of test driven change leads to school improvement is an empirical question. What we do know is that high-stake testing can discourage and frustrate many teachers and affect their disposition toward caring, for instance, as well as their dedication to the teaching profession. The high stakes testing

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<sup>1</sup> I wish to thank Dr. Luis Reyes for his constructive feedback on earlier versions of this article.

milieu may well lead to teacher work going unrecognized, if what teachers accomplish at school is measured only by their schools' adequate yearly progress (Mckenzie, 2003; Abrams, 2004).

This article presents the case of Mrs. Gloria and Mrs. Belinda, two urban middle school teachers who participated in this case study. As one can sense in the opening quotes, Mrs. Gloria and Mrs. Belinda expressed their frustration and feeling of powerless as they felt they did not fully succeed in helping their ELL (English language learners) students pass the MCAS, which served as an indicator determining whether or not their students were making adequate yearly progress. Mrs. Gloria and Mrs. Belinda are not alone in this struggle. Urban teachers across the U.S. public school system have to cope with the tremendous stress of ensuring that their students make adequate yearly progress. Failure to meet this expectation often leads to the poor yearly evaluation of their schools. In a context of high-stakes testing where "tests are widely regarded as an index of the quality of instruction within a particular school or district" (Cummins et al. 2007), it makes sense that Mrs. Gloria and Mrs. Belinda feel frustrated about their professions.

Academic yearly progress, a major component of the NCLB act of 2001, has put a great amount of stress and pressure on urban teachers, particularly those who teach low-income linguistically and culturally diverse students. Many of these teachers have temporarily discontinued teaching practices responsive to diverse students' needs to deliver mandated curricula so they can meet expectations of this educational policy (Sleeter & Stillman, 2007; Abrams, 2004; Lipman, 2004). As Sleeter and Stillman (2007) put it, "With the onslaught of accountability reforms, teachers' control over matters closest to them, such as pedagogy and curriculum content, has diminished because poor test scores commonly lead to increased pressure to teach to the standards and tighter monitoring of teachers' work" (p.14). The questions then become: How can urban teachers find creative and effective ways to teach when they are so pressured to meet the expectation of their schools' adequate yearly progress? What impact does meeting such an expectation have on urban teachers' teaching practices? What happens to urban teachers' autonomy and dignity when the teaching profession is reduced to making sure that they meet the expectation of their schools' academic yearly progress? This case study aims to shed light on these questions.

Specifically, drawing on data collected over the course of three academic years, this case study examines the extent to which the institutional pressure resulting from NCLB affected Mrs. Gloria's and Mrs. Belinda's professional autonomy as evidenced in their teaching practices.

Further, this study analyzes various positions and decisions taken by these teachers to determine to what degree and in what way they succumbed to and/or resisted the institutional pressure of State standardized tests such as tests such as the MCAS, MEPA [Massachusetts English Proficiency Assessment], and Step up Springfield. Finally, this study explores possible impact test-driven practices of these teachers may have had on the learning growth of their students.

### ***Setting the Groundwork***

At the outset, it is worth pointing out that the overarching goal of this case study is not to critique the NCLB mandate, a task that would be beyond the scope of this study. Rather, its main goal is to demonstrate in what way and to what degree the pressure of meeting the expectation of the adequate yearly progress of their school affects Mrs. Belinda's and Mrs. Gloria's teaching practices. With this in mind, I begin by briefly reviewing the No Child Left Behind Federal educational policy mandate as one of its features, the yearly academic progress, impacted the teaching practices of Mrs. Gloria and Mrs. Belinda. I then provide a detailed description of the social, learning, and teaching dynamics of their classrooms. Both Mrs. Gloria and Mrs. Belinda maintained that the emphasis on preparation for standardized tests including MCAS, Step UP Springfield, and MEPA, left them with insufficient time to pursue their classroom goals. For example, Mrs. Gloria stated that she spent approximately 80% of her time teaching students to the test. As I show later, these tests, which constitute a very structured accountability system, reduced the teaching space of Mrs. Gloria and Mrs. Belinda mostly to standardized preparation. The middle school where these two teachers taught was evaluated on students' scores on standardized tests mentioned above, and these scores served as the measurement to determine whether the school met the adequate yearly progress as set by the state of Massachusetts.

### ***The NCLB Legislation: An Overview***

The No Child Left Behind Act, signed into law on January 1, 2002, was supported by a "powerful coalition of business leaders, politicians, and elite universities with the money, expertise, and political power to force the nation's schools to construct an accountability system designed to control the outcomes of education, and persuade the voting public to support it" (Willett & Rosenberger as cited in Pease-Alvarez & Schecter, 2005, pp.191-192).

For these stakeholders, this legislation represented positive structural and educational changes. However, for urban teachers such as Mrs. Gloria and Mrs. Belinda, and for other progressive educators as well, this legislation continues to pose a threat to their autonomy and constitutes a false hope for bridging the achievement gap between rich and poor students (Valenzuela, 2005; Neil et al., 2004; Ingersol, 2003; Hall & Parker, 2007). As required by state and federal law, urban school district personnel, teachers, and school administrators are obliged to implement the NCLB legislation regardless of their opinion about or opposition to its content. As Sleeter & Stillman (2007) eloquently put it, “One of the working conditions teachers have consistently named as most intolerable is a lack of autonomy and decision-making power over structures and procedures that impact their day-to-day work” (p.14).

In Massachusetts, this legislation, coupled with the passage of Question 2, which eliminated the bilingual program in this state in 2002, pressed teachers to align “their curriculum with standards and implement high-stakes accountability practices in exchange for disciplined students and involved parents” (Willett & Rosenberger, 2005). Many teachers felt pressured to adjust their curriculum in accordance to the dictate of the NCLB legislation.

The NCLB mandate has brought issues related to the education of ELL, low-income, and minority students to the fore (Hall & Parker, 2007; Darling-Hammond, 2000; Oaks et al. 2004). However, the legislation has not proven effective in closing the academic gap between these students and their more privileged counterparts. As Hall & Parker argue,

NCLB’s intent was to push states through test-driven accountability to achieve results in reducing the achievement gap between white students and black and Latino students. While the rhetoric of the policy has reflected this direction, the recent data prove that NCLB as implemented has not resulted in marked gains for Black and Latino students. (p.139)

Standardized test scores, now held as the best of academic measurements, have never been proven a clear indicator of student learning (Berliner, 2006). Despite this, urban teachers are pressured to teach students technical and test-driven skills in the hope that these skills would “prepare” them for standardized tests.

This was the larger context in which Mrs. Gloria and Mrs. Belinda were expected to help their ELL middle school students acquire academic skills and to meet at the same time the state benchmark of standardized tests and their school's adequate yearly progress expectation. Too often Mrs. Gloria and Mrs. Belinda had to teach to the test, as the school district's first priority was improving students' scores on standardized tests. The importance given to these tests resulted in the standardization and regimentation of Mrs. Gloria's and Mrs. Belinda teaching practices.

***Mrs. Gloria, Mrs. Belinda, and ACCELA***

While Mrs. Gloria and Mrs. Belinda were trying to prepare their students for standardized tests mentioned earlier, they were enrolled in an inquiry-based master's program through ACCELA (Access through Critical Content and English Language Acquisition). ACCELA is a home/university partnership established between the Department of Teacher Education and Curriculum Studies at University of Massachusetts at Amherst and two urban school districts. This partnership was designed by professors at the university and sustained with the assistance of doctoral students who served as Project Assistants. As Gebhard, Harman, and Seger (2007) maintain that "this partnership was established in 2002 to support teachers, administrators, teacher educators, and researchers in understanding and responding to the combined influences of No Child Left Behind legislation, statewide curriculum frameworks, high-stakes tests, the passage of an English-only referendum, and the adoption of mandated approaches to literacy instruction."

Through this partnership, urban teachers enrolled in the inquiry-based master's program acquired theories and methods in first and second language acquisition and multicultural education. This program encouraged and supported these teachers in their efforts to reach out to their students' parents and communities. Many of these teachers including Mrs. Gloria successfully created spaces for parents to be involved in their children's learning, as demonstrated later.

I was an ACCELA project assistant, and I worked closely with Mrs. Gloria and Mrs. Belinda for three years helping them meet their master's degree requirements. Specifically, I assisted them in collecting and analyzing data for their masters' final project. One of the purposes of their research projects was to critically examine their own teaching practices while

exploring more effective ways to help their ELL students acquire necessary academic skills. Because of the relationship that I built with them over these three years, I had a unique opportunity to witness at first hand some of the struggles and challenges they faced in the classroom, notably in their efforts to prepare their students to meet the state benchmarks of the MCAS, Step UP Springfield, and MEPA.

### ***Method and Sources of Data***

For this case study, I used a qualitative research method, which entails, among other things, collecting data through participant observation including “taking field notes, making maps, and using any other means to record your observations” (Spradley, 1980, p.33). I was a participant observer in this study. This role enabled me to observe and interact with Mrs. Gloria and Mrs. Belinda and their students. While doing so, I took field notes, which serve as the database of case studies in qualitative research (Yin, 2003). Initial notes taken during field observations were in condensed form and unelaborated, denoting selective phrases, short and unconnected sentences, and my perceptions of what I thought happening at the site. I jotted down these observations in my notebook while observing and interacting with the informants.

During the time of this study, I observed Mrs. Gloria’s and Mrs. Belinda’s classrooms twice a week. Each time I went into their classrooms, I spent 1h 15 minutes both in Mrs. Gloria’s classroom and Mrs. Belinda’s. I started first observing Mrs. Gloria’s classroom as she was enrolled in the master’s program through ACCELA a year before Mrs. Belinda.

While I spent three years observing Mrs. Gloria’s classrooms, I spent approximately two years observing Mrs. Belinda’s. During the course of these years, I systematically collected data for this study; which included field notes; student scores on standardized tests; transcription of classroom interactions between teachers and students as well as between students with students; interviews conducted with both teachers and their students; and interviews with the school bilingual guidance counselor and the ELA (English language arts) coordinator. Like classroom interactions, all the interviews were transcribed for analysis.

Besides observing and documenting the number of hours that Mrs. Gloria and Mrs. Belinda and their students spent on standardized test preparation, I decided to interview them to find out how they felt about standardized tests, especially about the pressure to teach to these tests. Further, I interviewed the bilingual guidance counselor and the ELA coordinator in order to

have a broader sense of the way they felt the NCLB mandates impacted the school culture and dynamics. Patton (1990) argued, “we interview to learn about things we cannot directly observe” (p.109).

I interviewed Mrs. Gloria and Mrs. Belinda in their classrooms during their lunch time. All these interviews took place at different times in different settings—some were conducted in the teachers’ classrooms, others in the office of the coordinator of the adult ESL program. Some of these interviews were audio-taped in deference to subjects uncomfortable with being videotaped. Some interviews were neither videotaped nor audio-taped; I simply took notes while asking questions. I relied on my memory to transform those notes into field notes right after the interviews. My notes were sometimes organized immediately following the interviews; other times I did so when I returned home from the site. To “expand these notes” (Spradley, 1980, pp. 69-70), I added relevant and detailed information and events that I remembered from the classrooms but did not record immediately. In what follows, I analyze how Mrs. Gloria’s and Mrs. Belinda’s teaching practices are influenced by standardized tests. I then go on to discuss the findings of the study. I end this article with recommendations for further research.

### ***Mrs. Gloria’s Shifting Positions about Standardized Tests***

Mrs. Gloria adopted various positions about standardized tests particularly MCAS, a mandatory test for all students in Massachusetts. Her positions shifted throughout the three years that I observed her class. In one of two interviews conducted with Mrs. Gloria about the MCAS, she positioned herself as a teacher who had control over the test. As she pointed out, “the MCAS doesn’t make me change what I do in my class.” However, in an informal conversation later, she said, “no matter what I tried and did in my class to prepare my students for the MCAS they still don’t do well on it” (field notes, March, 2006). Furthermore, at other times Mrs. Gloria positioned herself as an opponent of high-stakes tests, as evidenced in the following statements she made while interacting with her students in class:

Mrs. Gloria: I don’t think a test is a real way of really measuring how much you know.  
Do I give you a lot of tests besides the MCAS?

Students: No.

Mrs Gloria: You know why?

Students: Because it's too much...

Mrs. Gloria: No, not too much, but because I rather hear you speak; I rather hear you tell me. When I'm interacting with you, that's a test. When I ask you: what do you think about this? And then somebody says this. Then I ask you what do you think about that? And we discuss stuff that we read. If you're discussing, and you're telling me how you feel, then, I know you understand it.

However, in other statements, Mrs. Gloria somewhat contradicted herself, highlighting to her students the importance of taking any kind of test seriously, especially tests she believed would affect their lives. She often talked in those terms about high-stakes tests. Her changing positions suggest that she may have felt constrained to abide by the NCLB mandates. She followed the school curricular mandate by administering standardized practices tests to her low-income students, as she knew that her students' standardized test scores would be used as an instrument to determine whether or not the school met the adequate yearly progress expectation set by the State of Massachusetts.

At the time of this study, the discourse of accountability dominated and shaped class discussion in Mrs. Gloria's class. Mrs. Gloria not only lectured her students on the tests but that she also guided her students through MCAS procedures and regulations. She felt that it was her responsibility to teach her students to the tests considered so important by the state. What follows is an excerpt from a videotaped classroom interaction of Mrs. Gloria and her students, focusing on the MCAS:

We're gonna finish to practice for the MCAS. Why do you think is this important? I think it's important because all the rest of your lives, if you're gonna take any kind of test like... If you wanna be an attorney, you have to take an exam; if you wanna be a teacher, you're gonna have to take an exam. So, all I'm trying to teach you is how to take...exams. Exams that are important in your lives, that are gonna make a difference in your lives. Whether it's fair or not, you're still gonna have to take those exams. So, my job is to teach strategies to take the MCAS, because right now is MCAS; after high school it might be an attorney exam; it might be whatever you wanna do in the rest of your life. Whether it's fair or not, that's the law and we have to take it. So, as a teacher the only thing I

wanna do is to make sure that you guys pass this. Because like I said, it's gonna affect your grades in the future.

Like many urban teachers, Mrs. Gloria was put in a position where she had to follow the "law," as she put it, by preparing her students to pass the MCAS. "Whether it's fair or not," her students have to take the MCAS and pass it. Therefore, as a teacher expected to abide by school policy and meet state expectations, Mrs. Gloria felt that she had to teach her students "how to take exams . . . exams that are important in their lives." To stress the importance of exams, she points out to her students that if they "want to be an attorney, a teacher " they will have to take an exam.

Mrs. Gloria positioned herself in class as an authority figure who advised her students to take high-stakes exams seriously on the premise that being apprenticed into taking these exams would be beneficial to them. Possibly, this is related to her home state of Texas, where high-stakes tests dominate the life of teachers and students; she may have felt that she had to encourage her students to take standardized tests seriously despite their opinions of the tests purpose or fairness.

Like many teachers, Mrs. Gloria expressed her disagreement, discontent, and frustration with the MCAS; however, she did what was expected of her as a teacher: prepare her students for high stake tests through mechanical drill practices. I observed that, while taking standardized practice tests, some of Gloria's students often talked to one another or fell asleep. Others complained that, "it's boring;" and, "why are we taking this, Mrs.?" (field notes, April 2006). Still others, as the excerpt of their classroom interaction with Mrs. Gloria illustrate below, stated that they did not learn anything from the MCAS and that instead the test makers learned from them:

Mrs. Gloria: Do you think you learn something from taking the MCAS test?

Students: you don't learn nothing...Miss.

Mrs. Gloria: you don't learn anything from the MCAS?

Students: the MCAS learns about us.

Mrs. Gloria: Say it again, I like that... say it loud.

Students: the MCAS learns from us.

Despite students' resistance to and rejection of standardized tests such as the MCAS, Mrs. Gloria continued to have her students spend several hours weekly taking old standardized

tests so they could familiarize themselves with the format. Ultimately, Mrs. Gloria succumbed to the pressure of teaching to the test.

However, it must be noted that, although Mrs. Gloria was hard-pressed by the state mandate and the school to teach her students to the test, she sometimes took risks with her students, engaging them in literacy activities unrelated to test preparation. One of these was a unit on Greek mythology. While working on this unit Mrs. Gloria invited her students' parents to her classroom so they could take part in the projects their children were doing on myths.

She started by brainstorming with her students about Greek mythology. At first, her students seemed to have difficulty understanding what Greek mythology involved. Mrs. Gloria then decided to begin with the word 'mythology' to engage her students in discussion. Mrs. Gloria's students were able to define a myth, but were not able to describe a Greek myth. Instead of merely defining Greek myth, Mrs. Gloria used examples to situate it in a specific context, drawing on her own childhood experience to do so: "In every culture, there are myths. In our culture, there are a lot of myths. I know in my culture, there are a lot of things people believe that are not necessarily true. When I was a child, I believed these things were true. Now I am an adult I don't believe in them anymore" (field notes, March 2005). After explaining to her students what mythology entails across cultures, she opened up space for her students to voice their opinion and share their knowledge about myths with the class. She divided them into small groups to talk about myths; she called on individual students and asked them to share what they understand about myths.

Mrs. Gloria engaged her students in classroom discussions about myths for about two weeks, during which students answered journal questions emerging from classroom discussions on the topic. In addition, Mrs. Gloria asked them to do a mini-project. For this project, she required that her students interview their parents to seek more information about the myths that shape their culture. Having researched myths at the school library with the help of Mrs. Gloria and at home with their parents, Mrs. Gloria's students did a formal presentation on myths in class and put up posters in the school hallway and Mrs. Gloria's classroom walls. In Mrs. Gloria's view, these posters were proof to parents, who visited the school once a semester for parent-teacher visits/meetings, that their children were given the opportunity in her class to draw on their cultural resources to conduct school-based projects. However, engaging students in this culturally and literacy-based project was insignificant for policy-makers who would draw on

Mrs. Gloria's students' standardized tests scores to judge her teaching performance. Mrs. Belinda also taught in this same test-driven atmosphere.

### ***Mrs. Belinda Teaching under the Pressure of Standardized Tests***

Like Mrs. Gloria, Mrs. Belinda was required to engage her students in rote standardized practice tests. Mrs. Belinda often had her students read silently in class, in the hope that this would prepare them for the reading sections of standardized tests. She believed that students need to learn how to read by themselves and at least initially try to understand the content without a teacher's prompt; she said, "when it is time to take any standardized test, no one will be there to help them read and understand what they read" (field notes, April 2007). Sometimes, Mrs. Belinda read to her students and sometimes she had them read aloud to her to assess their reading comprehension. She kept track of who took more turns than others did. She assigned different reading roles to each student. Class discussion often took place after the reading. In addition to having her students read passages in textbooks and discuss them in class, Mrs. Belinda had them work on small projects when she was not having them practice for standardized tests. One project was on the Titanic. For this project, students had to research the history of the Titanic to find out how many people lost their lives and how many survived the boat crash. To this end, Mrs. Belinda took them to the school library where her students looked up information online.

Mrs. Belinda's students were visibly excited about this project. Many were eager to share with Mrs. Belinda and their peers information they found about the boy and girl in the movie who met on the boat and fell in love. I observed Mrs. Belinda went back and forth among students to check if they needed assistance with their project.

This, however, was not a literacy event typical in Mrs. Belinda's classroom. The mandated curriculum, "Chunk and Chew," left Mrs. Belinda with very little time to create her own teaching space. This scripted curriculum was designed to help teachers more effectively prepare students for the reading component of standardized tests. Mrs. Belinda explained what the Chunk and Chew scripted curriculum entails:

For example, in our school we do what we call "Chunk and Chew," which is taking like, let's say a paragraph. The child is reading a paragraph, and then they are reading it to somebody else, and that person, the partner who they are reading

it to is supposed to come back and say “well, this is what you meant” “this is what I understand that you meant.” So when the students are actually reading for the MCAS, by that time, by the time they get to the MCAS, they are able to pick up the most important information from the context so that they can answer their questions. (Excerpt from interview, May 2007)

The necessity of incorporating “Chunk and Chew” into her classes meant that most of the “literacy” activities in which Mrs. Belinda’s engaged her students were geared towards the content of standardized tests. Indeed, Mrs. Miranda stated that, “the whole school curriculum was designed to prepare students for the MCAS and other tests” (field notes, April 2007). While observing her class, I noticed that Mrs. Belinda spent approximately fifty minutes out of the 90-minute class teaching her students how to write a five-paragraph essay. When I asked her how much time she spent preparing her students for the MCAS, she replied, “the whole year” (interview, March 2007). Asked how much teaching time she dedicated on weekly basis to standardized preparation tests, she stated, “at least two days a week” (interview, April 2007).

Teaching the writing steps designed to prepare her students for standardized tests was a ritual in Mrs. Belinda’s classroom. Each time I went into her class, her students were engaged in rote writing practices. These mechanical writing activities had students applying certain writing conventions—thesis statement, and use of temporal connectives (First, Second, Third, Finally). Students were given writing prompts that they were expected to build on in five-paragraph essays. Finally, Mrs. Belinda taught them how to use direct quotes from a story and incorporate these in their essays. However, Mrs. Belinda did not provide detailed feedback on their writing, rather evaluating essays with checkmarks.

Doggedly teaching these test-driven skills did not help Mrs. Belinda’s students pass the school district formative assessment test in spring 2007. Mrs. Belinda’s students scored below proficiency level; for this formative assessment test, Mrs. Belinda’s class average was 37 percent; the school averaged 58 percent; and the school district averaged 52 percent. Like Mrs. Gloria, Mrs. Belinda was very discouraged and frustrated: “Even though the test scores of my students don’t tell much about what they learn in my class, I’ll still get the blame for their low scores” (field notes, May 2007). Mrs. Belinda shared this low morale while discussing her students’ MCAS scores.

### ***Conclusions and Recommendations for Further Research***

Adequate yearly progress, the defining feature of the NCLB legislation, tends to reduce teaching to test preparation and correlates teaching performance to student tests scores (Sleeter, 2005; Cummins et al. 2007; Lipman, 2004). It makes sense, as a result, to have teachers like Mrs. Belinda and Mrs. Gloria expressing frustrations about the teaching profession. The pressure of meeting the expectation of their school's adequate yearly progress has put a great amount of stress on these two urban teachers. As a result, Mrs. Gloria and Belinda, who often already felt overwhelmed by the special demands made of them inside their schools, forcibly took varying positions about high-stakes tests. What does this high-stakes testing environment then mean for the teaching profession and student learning? Can learning occur when teaching space is reduced to teaching to the test?

Unfortunately, what seems to matter most to many school districts personnel and to policymakers are student scores on high-stakes tests. In fact, these scores have been utilized to determine which schools need improvement and/or should be classified as underperforming schools (Lipman, 2004; Heubert et al.1999). It is regrettable that policymakers do not seem to show much interest in looking closely at what creative and meaningful literacy activities actually engage students. They do not seem to be interested either in assessing student academic growth through assessment tools such as portfolios and home literacy-based projects like Mrs. Gloria's Greek mythology project.

Drawing on the findings of this study, I propose that policymakers and school district personnel reconsider the state mandatory rules and procedures of standardized tests. Three considerations prompt this proposal: First, these tests often do not fully capture what many competent, dedicated, and caring teachers know. Second, students' low scores on these tests do not reveal what they may have learned from culturally and linguistically relevant classroom literacy practices. Finally, these tests do not necessarily help teachers understand what part of their teaching practices they need to improve and/or modify in order to teach their students more effectively.

Therefore, instead of punishing teachers for their students' low scores on standardized tests and blaming them for their school's failure to meet adequate yearly progress expectations, I suggest that the school district allocate more resources to teachers' professional development and offer them continuing education courses. This professional development and these courses

should be designed to help teachers acquire teaching methods to teach students various content subjects in a systematic and effective way, ensuring that their course objectives and content are based on the needs of their students. Additionally, I propose sufficient resources be allocated to poorly funded schools so that both students and teachers have the materials needed to teach and learn. Lack of resources is one of the root causes that prevent many underserved students from achieving in school and cause many schools not meet the adequate yearly progress expectation. Moreover, I recommend that adequate resources be allocated to programs designed to support urban teachers like Mrs. Gloria in their willingness and efforts in reaching out to students' families and communities. As many scholars concur, family involvement in their children's school plays a vital role in student academic growth (Delgado-Gaitan, 2004; Nieto, 2004; Heath, 1983; Aeurbarch, 1995).

Finally, I strongly recommend that policymakers and the school district personnel ground their decisions to terminate or maintain public school teachers on these teachers' overall performance, not merely on their students' low scores on standardized tests and schools' adequate yearly progress. The school district may lose caring and dedicated teachers like Mrs. Gloria and Mrs. Belinda who might simply need rigorous, consistent, and relevant professional development. The district's goals should be designed to help urban teachers figure out more efficient ways to explicitly and systematically teach their students. Indeed, not only urban teachers need this rigorous training and professional development; all teachers can equally benefit from this type of training and professional development.

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