Testing the Limits: How High-Stakes Testing Puts Young Children At Risk

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What Policymakers Want to Know Today

“Are Children Learning?”

“Are public funds being used wisely?”

High-Stakes or High Standards?

“If you’re against high-stakes testing, it’s like being soft on crime. People are afraid of appearing soft on standards.”

—NY Assemblyman Ted Sanders
(quoted in the New York Times, 6/15/05)

Problems With The NRS

• Construct underrepresentation and construct-irrelevant variance
• Weak validity data
• Measurement-Driven Instruction
• Inadequate provision for children from non-English speaking homes or those who are disabled

The NRS Experience (cont.)

• One-quarter of the testers said that test procedures were unnatural
• Half of the teacher-testers reported children not doing as well as expected

GAO Report (May 2005) Validity

“The Head Start Bureau has not shown that the NRS…results are valid measures of the learning that takes place [in Head Start].”
GAO Report (May 2005)
*Measurement-Driven Instruction*

“...at least 18% of grantees changed instruction during the first year to emphasize areas covered in the NRS.”

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**Florida Voluntary Prekindergarten Education Program**

Enacted January 2, 2005

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**Texas School Readiness Certification System - 1**

Kindergartners are directly tested with a 10-minute language and literacy “screener” and teachers complete a social skills inventory for each child.

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**Texas School Readiness Certification System - 2**

Children’s scores are linked to their preschools, and if 80% of the children pass, the preschool is awarded a “readiness certification”.

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**Preschool Accountability and Kindergarten Testing: Threats to Validity**

- Fairness of the sample
- Impact of “summer loss”
- Ignoring the baseline
The best way to evaluate a child’s performance is to study performance, not something else.

The best way to improve a child’s performance is to teach the child, not test the child.

What Pre-K Accountability Can Teach Us About High-Stakes Tests (and NCLB)

1. High-stakes tests bring out the worst in everyone.

2. Tests used for high-stakes change what is taught.

3. High-stakes tests are typically misleading in content and conclusions.
4. Results from high-stakes tests should not be used as proxies or substitutes for teacher quality and child learning.

Understanding the child within context is key to understanding the child.