

washingtonpost.com

Political Backlash Builds Over High-Stakes Testing

Public Support Wanes for Tests Seen as Punitive

By Peter Whoriskey
Washington Post Staff Writer
Monday, October 23, 2006; A03

LAUDERHILL, Fla. -- School exams may be detested by students everywhere, but in this state at the forefront of the testing and accountability movement in the United States, the backlash against them has become far broader, and politically potent.

The role of the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test, or FCAT, has become central to the race to succeed Gov. Jeb Bush (R), with polls showing a growing discontent over the exams, which he has championed and which are used to determine many aspects of the school system, including teacher pay, budgets and who flunks third grade.

Republican Charlie Crist is offering to push forward with the testing regime, but Democrat Jim Davis has condemned what he calls its "punitive" nature, arguing that exam pressures have transformed schools into "dreary test-taking factories."

"Couple years ago one of my sons brought this quiz home, and the first question was 'What does the FCAT stand for?' " Davis told a meeting of clergy here Saturday. "I won't repeat to you what I said because I used words I'm teaching my boys not to use. . . . We're going to stop using the FCAT to punish children, teachers and schools."

This election season may be the first in which the growing use of high-stakes school testing, embodied in the No Child Left Behind legislation, has reached this level of political prominence.

A similar exam revolt has become a key issue in the race for governor in Texas, another state in the vanguard of the testing movement, and the issue has roiled the Ohio gubernatorial contest as well.

High-stakes testing -- using standardized test scores to impose consequences affecting teachers and students -- has been embraced widely in recent years as a way to hold educators and students accountable for their performance. Experts say the movement is one of the most significant shifts in U.S. education in decades.

Texas and Florida were among the states that adopted high-stakes testing early, and each has pushed its program beyond what is required in No Child Left Behind.

Advocates say that under the pressure of the exams, students in Florida, Texas and elsewhere have shown significant improvements. The testing systems include the public release of schools' results and test-based financial incentives for educators, and determine which third-graders can be promoted and which high school students can graduate.

But teachers unions and some parents groups have argued that an overemphasis on the tests has reduced

Advertisement



education to rote drills and needlessly heightened stresses on elementary students, and that the reported test gains have been illusory, overstated or short-lived.

Many opponents say they do not object to the testing but to the high stakes attached to the results, which they say force schools to develop a myopic curriculum focused on the test.

In Florida, as many as 14 percent of 200,000 public school third-graders in some years have been held back, most for failing to make an adequate score on the reading test.

In Texas, an inspector general is investigating possible cheating and other testing irregularities at almost 700 schools.

While many past education debates have dissolved into intangible issues of school finance, the testing critics believe that the issue may sway larger numbers of voters because the tests are having such pronounced and immediate effects on children.

"We have third-grade children who have been retained so many times they are wearing brassieres in the third grade," said Florida state Sen. Frederica Wilson, one of the leaders of the anti-testing movement here.

"When parents are dealing with children vomiting on the morning of the tests and seeing other signs of test stress, they're going to be motivated at the voting booth," said Gloria Pipkin, the president of a testing watchdog group, the Florida Coalition for Assessment Reform. "Texas and Florida are the poster children for excessive testing, and we're seeing an enormous backlash."

Polls are also registering growing voter discontent over tests.

A Zogby International poll for the Miami Herald last month showed that 61 percent of voters disagreed with grading and funding schools based on their test scores, and almost half said schools were allocating too much time for test preparation. A poll by the Florida Times-Union and the South Florida Sun-Sentinel showed similar results.

In Texas, a survey drafted by two polling firms, one Democratic and one Republican, and paid for by the Texas State Teachers Association, indicated that 56 percent of voters thought there was too much emphasis on state testing in their schools.

A national poll by a pro-testing group, the Teaching Commission, showed that 52 percent of respondents thought that standardized tests do not accurately measure student achievement; 35 percent thought they do.

"Our kids should be leading the world, and they're not going to get there by filling in little ovals all day long," Chris Bell, the Democratic challenger for Texas governor, says in a television ad.

Gov. Rick Perry, however, is sticking to the program.

"I won't dismiss the idea that there are a lot of folks out there -- maybe a large number -- who don't like testing," said Robert Black, a spokesman for Perry. "But the governor has never been one to follow polls. If you want to hold schools accountable and make sure they are learning, you have to test."

Opposition to the tests has been building over several years.

At first, Wilson said, opposition was considered a "minority issue" because many of the students being held back in third grade or denied diplomas were African American or Hispanic. But with children in many schools taking on more homework and rote drills, she said, enough parents have complained that the candidates "could see that the FCAT was devastating Florida families."

Crist, who as Florida education commissioner supported the pro-testing agenda of the Bush administration, began the race offering to move ahead with the program. But more recently, noting that the test has become "a pejorative," he has indicated that his position on testing is more flexible.

The polls aside, Crist sees support for the FCAT.

"Residents across the state have said that the FCAT is making a difference," according to Erin Isaac, deputy press secretary for the Crist campaign, in response to e-mailed questions. "Charlie Crist believes that if we don't measure every student's progress every year, we don't care."

His opponent expressed a different view. "Parents in this state are outraged," Davis said Saturday. "They're seeing the rote drills and the pressure. But they're not seeing their children learn."

© 2006 The Washington Post Company

Ads by Google

[Student Assessment & Prep](#)

Practice, Scoring, Timing & Ranking Preparation for test success!
www.kidtest.com

[YoJo Assembly Programs](#)

Award-winning & tons-of-fun assemblies for schools K-6
www.YoJo.com

[FCAT Tutorial Software](#)

Award-winning test-prep software for complete FCAT preparation
www.sleek.com