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from Five First-Grade Classrooms*

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Commentary

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Commentary by Martha Foote

Laura Kates' paper is both extremely timely and important. Not only have our children and schools been subjected for over a decade to accountability pressures from city, state, and federal governments to improve test scores, pressures that have warped the proper use of assessments, we are embarking on a new iteration of assessments to align with the recent adoption of the Common Core Standards.

Here in New York, our state education leaders have chosen to work with PARCC (the Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Career), one of two state consortia developing these new assessments of student achievement (The other is called the SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium.) Yet, it is important to keep in mind that these assessments are not only to be used to measure student achievement. In its successful application to win federal grant funds, PARCC promised to combine its new performance assessments, given throughout the school year, with a more traditional end-of-the-year measure to be used for school accountability purposes. Moreover, there are hints from the federal Department of Education that the PARCC assessments will also be used to measure student growth and teacher and principal effectiveness.

So, where will these new PARCC assessments and policies leave us? As Dr. Kates's paper indicates, even the most thoughtful assessments come with a host of unintended consequences when they are 1) bureaucratically imposed, and 2) used for punitive accountability purposes. Unfortunately, it looks like we are about to experience *deja vu* with the imminent introduction of the PARCC assessments.

PARCC, it can be assumed, does have some good intentions: to improve assessments by designing them to measure deeper learning—critical thinking, application, analysis—rather than promote

superficial memorization, a common criticism of standardized tests. Furthermore, PARCC policymakers believe that if deeper learning will be needed to pass the PARCC assessments, then deeper learning will take place in the classroom, a positive development. However, these policymakers are disregarding a few key elements in this scenario. First, teaching and learning are not simple linear mechanisms. They are complex activities that involve myriad variables, including student backgrounds, school resources, and teacher experience. Therefore, just because an assessment demands deeper learning, it does not mean that deeper learning will suddenly permeate a classroom.

Second, I remain skeptical that any mass-produced standardized assessment will ever be able to measure truly deep and complex learning. For example, the NYS Global History Regents exam has been touted as measuring higher-order learning as it demands several essays. However, in the opinion of many teachers and historians, these essays foster formulaic writing that impede the kinds of deep thinking required in their field.

Third, as Dr. Kates points out, teacher receptions to a mandate, as the PARCC assessments will be, are undoubtedly tied to teacher perceptions of the usefulness of this mandate. In the case of ECLAS, despite its partial similarity to their own classroom assessments, the teachers in Kates's study saw ECLAS as a waste of time that provided little benefit to their teaching. Because it was bureaucratically imposed from on-high, because they did not 'own' it and therefore could not mold and tailor it to their needs, it was not useful. As professionals, teachers need to have the opportunity and support to develop curriculum and assessments that work for them and their students. They do not need to follow yet another mandate divorced from the reality of their classroom context.

Aside from the issues stemming from the bureaucratic imposition of assessments, there are many concerns about the unintended consequences of testing when punitive accountability measures come into play. In Kates's study, not only did it appear that students' scores were inflated so as to enhance falsely the effectiveness of previous teachers, one principal was prepared to eliminate painting from kindergarten classrooms as he believed it detracted from increasing ECLAS scores. Unfortunately, the information gleaned about the intended uses of the PARCC assessments foretells similar negative effects. If they are, indeed, used to judge teachers, principals and schools, then a host of problems can be predicted as pressure will undoubtedly escalate to raise scores in attempts to save jobs and reputations.

For one, we can expect there will be a narrowing of the curriculum so that those subjects that are not tested will not be taught. Art and music—gone. Physical education and foreign languages—gone. Not to mention field trips. For another, classrooms will likely be filled with teaching to the test. Yes, students will be taught English language arts and math, but predominantly as they manifest in the PARCC assessments. Science and social studies are even more of a wild card as those subjects are addressed through language skills in the Common Core Standards, not as subjects in their own right. And finally, we run the risk that school will become more alienating and less engaging to children. Frankly, how can we expect our children to become excited about school and learning when the focus and goal is to have them pass a test? How can we expect them to become lifelong learners when learning is defined as knowing enough to pass a test?

I can only hope that policymakers will take heed of studies like this and begin to rethink their school reform initiatives because, as Dr. Kates shows us, bureaucratic mandates and punitive accountability measures do not work to improve teaching and learning. It is high time to take a time out from testing and reassess our testing policies.