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LEAP-ing Toward Accountability? Ideology, Practice, and the Voices of Louisiana Educators

Jim Horn
Monmouth University, West Long Branch, New Jersey USA

Louisiana educators at an urban K-5 school participated in a two-year study to share their experiences related to the implementation of a state high-stakes testing program (LEAP 21) that is used to make promotion decisions in grades 4 and 8. Observations, document analysis, and interviews were used to study the development of attitudes, perceptions, and practices related to the use of and consequences emanating from this testing practice. It was found that the state test has far-reaching effects on teaching, curriculum, school climate, students, parents, and school administration. The ideology of testing as a positive reform idea and the practice of testing as a constant and tangible threat, form the two poles of an experiential field that these educators encounter as figure and ground. The avoidance of failure and the threat of failure push these educators toward an ideological commitment to testing. Key words: High Stakes Tests, Accountability, Testing Programs, Academic Achievement, Student Evaluation, and Teacher Attitudes

Introduction: New Millenialist Rhetoric or the Continuing Crusade?

Even with your parents' best example and your teachers' best efforts, in the end it is your work that determines how much and how well you learn. When you work to your full capacity, you can hope to attain the knowledge and skills that will enable you to create your future and control your destiny. If you do not, you will have your future thrust upon you by others. A Nation at Risk (1983)

In the early years of the new American Republic, the desire for universal schooling (at least universal for white males) represented the seeds of a new civic faith in the power of schooling to meld the unceasing waves of immigrants with an emerging American ideology grounded in capitalism, Protestantism, and republicanism (Kaestle & Foner, 1983). As the inheritor of strong Calvinist traditions, Horace Mann, himself a lapsed Puritan, adopted a revivalist rhetoric based on individual initiative to sell his Crusade for Common Schools to all individuals and socio-economic groups willing to listen, from the elite northeastern Brahmin seeking property insurance against the perceived threat of an uneducated immigrant rabble, to the Irish and Jewish immigrants of Boston and New York trying to leverage access through education to some semblance of prosperity and equality. The dream of universal schooling had something for everybody, and the faith in the power of education to deliver a better life would become

the secular American religion, even today remaining largely unchallenged even if not entirely believed.

If the secular faith in education developed during the last century eventually lapsed into an implacable orthodoxy, as some critics have contended, our most recent American socio-economic initiatives restore a reformist vision that is no less sweeping, or grandiose perhaps, than the millennialist dreams of our Puritan forefathers or the Common School crusaders of the 19th Century. Internationally, America is engaged in a struggle to maintain, far into the future, market supremacy in the global economy, a supremacy that will be depend upon continued increases in productivity that must be sustained with a shrinking supply of renewable resources. This new American mission, sustained by the moral and nationalistic fervor that embodies our political legacy, is mirrored in the most recent educational reform crusade to establish world-class education standards for knowledge productivity and to establish accountability measures to make sure those standards are maintained.

This effort began in earnest in 1983, with the wide circulation of *A Nation at Risk*, a broadside against American public education that announced the condition of American schools constituted a form a "unilateral economic disarmament." Building on the sentiments and recommendations of that document, the Charlottesville Education Summit in 1989 laid out the road map for achieving high standards and educational accountability measures. From there, the movement has continued to pick up political steam, despite research studies (Airasian, 1988; Herman & Golan, 1993; Jones, et al, 1999; Mehrens, 1998; Paris, Lawton, Turner & Roth, 1991), statements by testing authorities (Bracey, 1999; Madaus, 1985; Popham, 1999), and position statements by educational organizations (American Educational Research Association, 2000; National Research Council, 1999) that present good reasons for skepticism or caution regarding the use of standardized test scores as a suitable vehicle for making high-stakes decisions in schools. Despite calls, however, for more balanced multi-method accountability approaches, promoters of high-stakes standardized testing have won the day, partially it seems by offering an educational reform solution that appeals, as did Horace Mann's, to a wide variety of socioeconomic groups, while not challenging the organizational structure, or the underlying "grammar of schooling" (Tyack & Cuban, 1995, p. 9).

For proponents of high-stakes testing, there is the prospect of monetary rewards for recognizing excellence that will be accompanied by a well-deserved public denunciation of the slackers, whether they are students or educators. For other proponents more liberally affected, there is the prospect of financial help and other resources if test success is not demonstrated in schools handicapped by poverty, isolation, and neglect. For educators and students of America's schools, there appears to be little choice offered in the matter as state and federal political elites of both left and right are conjoined in a mutual embrace that defies partisan convention.

The Voices of Educators on the Front Lines of High-stakes Testing

Large numbers of research articles, books, news stories, and commentaries have appeared during the past decade regarding high-stakes testing in K-12 public education. Over the two-year period of this research, for instance, over 200 news stories on high-stakes testing were obtained from a single Internet portal news clipping service. Only a

small fraction of research literature, however, has dealt specifically with presenting and understanding the perspectives of frontline educators at sites of high-stakes testing. Several exceptions to the dearth of research aimed at presenting practitioner perspectives, however, are worth noting. Smith (1991) used observations and interviews to gather data over 15 months on the negative effects of testing on teachers. Gordon and Reese (1997) used surveys and in-depth interviews to collect data from Texas teachers on preparation for TAAS (Texas Assessment of Academic Skills) and the effects of TAAS on teaching and learning. A more recent study (Barksdale-Ladd & Thomas, 2000) combined individual interviews and focus groups in a phenomenological study to examine the perceptions of both teachers and parents regarding high-stakes testing. Even more recently, researchers (Hoffman, Assaf, & Paris, 2001) surveyed 200 Texas teachers and solicited their comments regarding the effects of TAAS. In this study, too, researchers found a preponderance of negative perceptions related to testing.

Purpose

The goal of this research project has been to present and to understand the perspectives of educators regarding the implementation and use of high-stakes testing at their own elementary school in an urban setting during the first two years of state testing in Louisiana. In much of the past and current testing discussions and debates, the voices of educators at testing sites have been conspicuously muted or even absent. Without a clear understanding of the ideas, beliefs, and actions of those who occupy that critical intersection of policy talk and policy action, or that juncture between the ideological and the pragmatic, our understanding of the implementation and consequences of high-stakes testing will remain, at best, partial. With the voices of educators from the testing site as an integral part of the research literature, we can hope to reach a more thorough understanding of the solution that testing offers, regardless of how appealing or how appalling we may view that solution or its appropriateness to the problem that high-stakes testing was supposed to address. If, as Gregory Bateson (1972, p. 271) has remarked, “sometimes . . . one does not know what the problems were till after they have been solved,” then an examination of the “solving” that is going on now in Louisiana schools and across the U. S. may begin to help unmask some of the real problems that have been subsumed within or obfuscated by the rhetoric of reform.

The Setting—Alpha Elementary

Alpha Elementary is a K-5 Title One school located in the heart of a low-income residential area of a medium-sized city in Louisiana’s northwest corner. The rumble of trains can be heard less than a mile to the east, and when the wind is from the west, there is the strong smell of the petroleum refinery whose torches cast an ominous glow over that part of the city at night. This is a neighborhood of high mobility and limited resources, with 84 percent of Alpha’s children qualifying for free lunches. A significant share of Alpha’s Adopt-a-School donations go to provide shoes, clothing, and school supplies for students who would, otherwise, go without. Ninety-eight percent of Alpha’s 850 students are African-American, the children of the working poor, though a growing

number of parents have found better-paying jobs at the gambling casinos that line the river on the east side of town.

Just over half of Alpha's teachers are black, and 53 of Alpha's 58 teachers are certified in the areas they teach. Turnover is low, a factor that can be attributed largely to the tenacity and leadership of the school principal, who is proud to point out that the five uncertified teachers are working toward that goal. Teachers find high levels of support from the school administration, and they point out that the school principal usually finds a way to purchase the materials they request. Halls and classrooms are generally clean and orderly, even though some areas show serious signs of wear and tear. A new wing on the school has been built and another one is planned, partly from the need to house the burgeoning numbers of fourth and fifth grader that have resulted from the mandated retention policy that came with LEAP 21, the new state-wide testing program for grades 4 and 8.

Louisiana: Taking the High-Stakes LEAP

> *This test is now the deciding factor—it used to be a lot of things went into an education—there were social issues, there were a lot of different things—now it is just a test. It decides everything.*

Accustomed to occupying a bottom slot in national comparisons of educational achievement, the State of Louisiana in March 2000 became recognized for its lead position among states on an education issue of national significance. In the "Quality Counts 2001" special report of *Education Week* (1/11/01), Louisiana became the first state in the nation to use state test scores as the sole basis for the promotion of fourth and eighth grade students. Known as the LEAP 21 (Louisiana Education Assessment Program for the 21st Century), the criterion-referenced test was piloted statewide in 1999 to establish benchmarks. From those results, the Louisiana Department of Education mandated that, beginning in March 2000, all fourth and eighth graders must have passing scores on *both* the English Language Arts and Mathematics sections of the test to move to the fifth and ninth grades respectively. Failing students are given a chance at summer school and another testing session at the end of the 4-5 week remediation. Those who fail the repeated exam are retained in the fourth or eight grade respectively.

Some weeks before the March 2000 Test Week, the State predicted that 20 percent of the Louisiana's students could fail meet the minimum passing score of 37 percent, which the State designated as "approaching basic." The prediction proved on target for the 20 percent of students statewide who failed the English Language Arts in 2000, but the State underestimated the 28 percent who would fail the Math part of the test. At Alpha Elementary, the urban Title One elementary school that was the site of this research project, State estimates would not come close. In the first year of high stakes, 52.5 percent (62 students) of fourth graders failed the English Language Arts section of

LEAP, and 62 percent (73 students) failed Math[1]. Only 30 percent of fourth graders would pass both parts during this first year of high stakes, meaning that 70 percent (75 students) would be retained in fourth grade.

Gathering Data

Over a period of two years beginning in March 2000, observations, interviews, and document analysis were used to generate data from administrators and faculty at an urban Louisiana Title One school for K-5 students. Initially, researchers observed in fourth grade classrooms before and during test week for the LEAP 21 (Louisiana Education Assessment Program for the 21st Century) in March 2000. Even though the test had been given the previous March to establish baseline data, the March 2000 exam was the first to carry high stakes for the students and the school. Prior to and during testing, researchers spent time in the classrooms speaking with students and teachers and observing test preparation and testing procedures.

Two rounds of interviews were conducted with four fourth grade teachers, their curriculum coordinator, and the assistant principal. Using the same semi-structured protocol for all interviews, the first round was conducted at Alpha Elementary in March 2000, and the second round was conducted via telephone in September 2001. One special education teacher and the guidance counselor were interviewed once in September 2001, and the principal was interviewed three times in March 2000, September 2001, and March 2002. Interviews were intended to elicit attitudes, beliefs, and experiences regarding the purpose, use, and effects of high-stakes testing in the participants' school. Interviews were audiotaped and later transcribed.

Observation notes, school information notices, and transcriptions of audiotaped interviews were copied into Hyperqual 3, Version 1.0, which is a qualitative data analysis software tool (Padilla, 1999). This tool was helpful in the early phases of organizing and tagging data according to the initial categories that could be linked to words or phrases (in vivo codes) that were used by the participants and the researchers during the observations and interviews. It also proved useful in searching the data within specific interview transcripts and across all transcripts.

Methodology

The understanding of data, the presentation of findings, and the subsequent interpretive discussion of the findings have been largely influenced by an evolving research model, recursive enaction (Horn, 1998, 2002). Recursive enaction is grounded in the search for a qualitative science of human experience (Goodwin, 1994; Varela, 1979; Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1991) that is based upon phenomenological description (Moustakas, 1990) and understanding through insight and interpretation (Gadamer, 1976; Lonergan, 1958) of experience as social phenomena (Blumer, 1969;

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[1] Beginning in 2002-2003, the State planned to require passing scores for the Social Studies and Science sections that round out the four parts of the LEAP 21. Those plans continue to be on hold.

Glaser & Strauss, 1967) in natural, or non-experimental, settings (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). In short, the goal of this research approach is to locate, understand, and interpret the human patterning that sustains meaningful activity within social organizations. The analysis and presentation of data follows a reflexive four-step schema of immersion, insight, coherent patterns, and interpretation.

Findings

Getting Ready for LEAP

March 10, 2000

It is the Friday before LEAP (Louisiana Education Assessment Program) Week at Alpha Elementary in Delta Parish, Louisiana. For students, educators, and parents here and across Louisiana, it is the time that all have anticipated with varying degrees of anxiety since school began seven months earlier with LEAP 21 as the primary focus for the school year. There is reason for anxiety among students, educators, and parents: this year is the first time that fourth graders at Alpha and throughout Louisiana must pass the State test to move on the fifth grade.

For the past couple of weeks, the local newspaper has featured articles explaining the new high-stakes test and bringing to the public's attention a number of community events aimed at helping parents and students in last-minute preparations for the big week. The local newspaper reports on March 4 that a local Baptist church hosted on the previous Saturday the "Lean on Jesus Test Rally," where 100 parents and children showed up for testing tips and to "build self-esteem." At Alpha Elementary, the K-5 school where two graduate students and I have been observing and interviewing teachers and administrators, a mood of guarded optimism mixes with anxiety and frustration. Not only will this year's test be the dominant indicator for the school's annual report card, but this year students who do not pass both the language and math sections of the test will be retained in fourth grade. The assistant principal reports that students are acting out more and that "teachers [are] edgier, writing up things they normally don't."

In all four of the fourth grade classes at Alpha, LEAP review proceeds with the Test Alert Booklet, a recent publication the State has offered to schools to bone up on test-taking skills and to practice the math and reading skills that will be assessed by the LEAP test. In Mrs. T's class, she reminds her students, "on the LEAP, just do your best—that's all you can be asked to do." Near the end of her lesson that has included work on choosing the correct mathematical operation to answer a question, she acknowledges that some of her students may be overwhelmed, but that "you know how important it [LEAP] is, your parents know how important it is, for you to take the test and pass the test."

Next door, Mrs. C., another fourth grade teacher, is taking a break to relieve the tension of LEAP practice, and her students are working contentedly in pairs to construct miniature Mardi Gras floats from shoe boxes and colored paper. Mrs. C. worries that her students are too stressed to perform optimally on the four-day test, and she says more than twice during a brief conversation, "I can't wait till this testing is over." Each time she sighs her demeanor shifts between nervous anxiety and weariness.

After this brief work break, Mrs. C's students put away their glue and construction paper and resume their practice of identifying mathematical operations from the clue words found in the sample math problems. At the end of the review, Mrs. C says: "If you've paid attention all year, you'll do fine. You don't have to make 90 percent, just Approaching Basics. If you do that and your class work, you'll go to 5th grade. If not, you won't—it's against the law." As the children prepare to leave for lunch, she calls out, "Don't lose sleep, don't get sick . . . . I'll give you a treat for being here by eight o'clock every day next week." And once again, she points to next week's test schedule on the blackboard:

Monday—Writing
Tuesday—Language
Wednesday—Math
Thursday—Social Studies
Friday—Science

As the children stand to leave, she says, "If you're caught cheating, you'll get a zero and be in fourth grade next year—every girl and boy for himself, and God for us all."

March 15, 2000

At 8:30 on the following Wednesday morning of LEAP Week, the intercom pops and a female voice asks for an attendance report. Mrs. B responds that all of her thirty, fourth graders are present for this third day of testing. She waits to see if there are further questions from the office before she pushes a button on a portable CD player. Relaxation music mixed with the twittering of birds fills the room. Mrs. B. instructs her students to stand and stretch. She leads them through several minutes of breathing and stretching, followed by a seated visualization exercise.

"Close your eyes and visualize the day ahead," she says, "and meditate on the math section." She instructs her students to think positively about their ability for completing this portion of the LEAP.

"Do you believe?" she asks her students.
"Yeah," they respond with eyes still closed but without much enthusiasm.
"Do you believe?" she repeats in a louder voice.
"Yes, Ma'am," comes a louder response as a few students break into shy smiles.

Test booklets with each child's name already recorded are passed around, and the students rigidly await the now-familiar instructions and warnings about cheating, causing disturbances, or the use of unauthorized materials. The Math portion of the LEAP has begun.

LEAP 21: The End of Social Promotion and the Beginning of Mass Retention

> *A lot of our children can communicate with you verbally and they can give you a response, but sometimes they freeze up when it comes to writing. So I am real afraid of what it's going to mean for our boys and girls as far as high numbers of retentions.*

The scenarios just presented are based on observation notes recorded at Alpha Elementary School, but they could have occurred at any of the hundreds of elementary schools across Louisiana the weeks prior to and during LEAP Week of March 2000. In 1998 Louisiana joined a growing number of states developing and implementing testing programs with high stakes for schools, teachers, and students. As stated in the 2000-2001 Annual Report, LEAP 21 is a part of Louisiana's Reaching for Results, "an educational reform system designed to improve student achievement. The LEAP 21 tests are designed to ensure that grade 4 and grade 8 students have adequate knowledge and skills before moving on to the next grade" (p. 1).

When the ramifications of LEAP became known widely in the state, significant numbers of parents made plans to enroll their children in private schools for their fourth and eighth years. As the assistant principal explained,

> . . . everybody was losing students—what they were doing was dropping out in the third-grade, going to private school, and coming back as a fifth grader to avoid having to take that test. And the same thing, they would drop out in the seventh grade, go to private school in the eighth grade, and come back to public school in the ninth grade. And then the State Department came back and said everybody, no matter where they are going to school, has to take the test.

When initial observations and interviews were conducted at Alpha Elementary in early 2000, this K-5 inner-city school had an enrollment of 854 students with a high transfer rate, meaning approximately 200 students moved in or out of the school during the course of the school year. At the time of the first high-stakes LEAP exam in March 2000, the fourth grade at Alpha consisted of four regular education classes with 30-33 students in each, one special education self-contained class, and one inclusion special education teacher who works with the other teachers to meet the needs of the mainstreamed special education students in fourth grade.

Even though a new elementary school near Alpha drew away approximately 150 students in the fall of 2000, approximately 840 remained, only 14 students shy of the 854 students at Alpha the previous year. This was due significantly to more than 80 fourth graders who failed one or both of the high stakes sections of the LEAP during the previous March. This bulge in fourth grade enrollment necessitated the creation of two new sections of fourth grade, for a total of six sections averaging just over 30 students in each. The increasing number of fourth graders can be tracked by the rise in the number of tests given to fourth graders in 2000-2001, the second year of high stakes. In 2000, 118 students were tested with 15 students exempted from the test. In March 2001, 174 students were tested, even though the number of exempted students more than doubled from 15 to 33.

In the second year of high stakes, 2000-2001, the percentage of students passing both parts[2] of LEAP remained just under 50 percent, as compared to 30 percent passing both sections in 1999-2000. These results, on the face of it, were reason to celebrate, and celebrate the educators and students did. However, the impressive gains of 18 percentage points in overall passing percentages for regular education and 21 points for special education belie the fact that half of the students in a majority of the fourth grade students at Alpha had been there before, some more than once.

During the second round of interviews conducted soon after the Summer re-test numbers were issued in September, 2001, the stress related to large numbers of repeating fourth graders began to show up in the remarks of the Alpha educators. Faced with 12 of her 25 students repeating fourth grade, one frustrated teacher put it this way just after school began,

> Fifty percent of the class has to repeat the fourth grade, and we are going to do the same thing over again . . . . They have already done the material once, so it is not particularly exciting or fun because you have already done it . . . . They start with resolve because they feel embarrassed, worried, because of the failure . . . . But they are doing the same thing over again. Nobody likes to repeat to repeat, to repeat.

During the second round of interviews conducted soon after the Summer re-test numbers were issued in September, 2001, the stress related to large numbers of repeating fourth graders began to show up in the remarks of the Alpha educators. Another of the fourth-grade teachers noted that she had 31 students in September 2001 “and 12 of them have failed.” This teacher reported that two of her students she knew to be in the fourth grade for the third time:

> Two of them I had two years ago . . . . Normally, you have a child and even if that child repeats, you wouldn’t have them again because usually the next year they get together on go on, but this was years ago and then I have the students again . . . and that is frustrating.

The assistant principal expressed concern about the likelihood of problems associated with the growing age disparity as students are repeatedly retained in fourth grade:

> I think there are some problems that are just coming to the surface—such as over-aged kids in a younger setting. . . . It has created some problems—some different kinds of problems that I don't think they thought through . . . . So you end up with a kid who is 14 in the fourth grade and he is still sitting there, and everybody says, I don't want my fourth grade girl going to class with this 14 year-old boy.

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[2] Percentages of passing students increased from the previous year for both Language Arts (51% to 78%) and Mathematics (38 % to 53%).

These problems were confirmed in the final interview with the principal in 2002. One of the effects of retentions at Alpha is a growing discipline problem among students repeating fourth grade and among the new population bubble of former repeaters now being seen in the fifth grade.

Showing "Exemplary Growth" and Remaining "Academically Below Average"

While students are the ones who are most immediately affected by the high stakes related to LEAP 21, the test also carries consequences for teachers, administrators, and schools. Even though LEAP 21 is a criterion-referenced test, the State assigns to each school a norm-referenced School Performance Score (SPS) based on a combination of test scores and attendance figures. Scores on the LEAP 21 test constitute 60 percent of a school's SPS. The Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS), given in third and fifth grades, counts 30 percent. The remaining 10 percent is derived from attendance figures. Each year the State requires that each school improve its overall score to reach a specified target that is determined in Baton Rouge. If attained, the targeted improvement keeps under-performing schools off of the state's list of schools facing corrective action, which may include allowance of student transfers out of the school or closure for schools consistently failing to meet targets.

Following the initial test in 1999, the State assigned Alpha a two-year growth target of 12.5 points, a gain that would move their SPS from 33.1 to 45.6. In 2000, the first year of high stakes, Alpha's SPS improved only slightly to 34. 7, while the State average increased from 69.4 to 77.3. Needless to say, there was widespread concern at Alpha as to what might happen if the gains remained as flat in subsequent years. In 2001, however, Alpha's SPS Index shot up 18 points, thus ending the two-year cycle with a 20-point gain.

There is an irony that accompanies these gains for which the school was recognized by the State in 2001 as showing "Exemplary Academic Growth." For even though Alpha's SPS shot up by 20 points in two years to 53.7, the State average SPS moved up also 10 points, from 693 to 79.8, thus making Alpha's climb from the "Academically Below State Average" category (30.1- 79.8) even more daunting. If the State average continues to move upward, as predicted, over the next ten years, it will prove increasingly unlikely that below-average schools such as Alpha can escape their inferior status assigned by the label of the School Performance Score. Regarding this phenomenon, the assistant principal commented wryly:

> . . . we're probably judging one school against another more than we should be because of the scores in the paper. . . . It's not match play. . . it should be how you are performing against the course, and we're turning it into match play, head-to-head competition, and that is not good.

The principal noted that the increasing distance to the next rung on the performance ladder had been a subject of discussion among principals, some of whom were expressed anger and dismay. Her focus, however, came back to her school:

> It concerns me as to how people interpret that data, and how they look at our school, but with me being right there in the classrooms on a regular basis, I see constant progress, I am not concerned. I know that the teachers are working hard, and they are working smarter. And I see that that teachers are changing in attitudes. And when you see something like that, you can't help but be positive about what is going on. My teachers did not focus on the data—we celebrated like we had brought home the gold and the silver in the Olympics. I can't push them anymore—I can't ask for more than what I am getting right now.

The Perceived Purposes of LEAP 21

> *I remember saying, give me motivated kids and I will be a better teacher—maybe we can use this to motivate kids.*

A number of the questions put to the Alpha educators were intended to elicit their thoughts and feelings regarding the purposes of the LEAP 21. Early in the interview protocol, participants were asked what they considered the purposes of the LEAP 21, and later in the interviews they were asked to discuss the intended consequences and the unintended results. In analyzing the results, it became clear that these educators perceive the test as positively intended. Most Alpha educators see the LEAP as an attempt to end social promotion, to hold educators responsible for teaching the prescribed curriculum, and to increase student learning. All participants supported the goal of higher academic achievement for students and the elimination of social promotion, and they identified LEAP as instrumental in enforcing these goals. While expressing hope, if not certainty, about overall purposes of LEAP, one fourth-grade teacher answered "I hope that the purpose is trying to help the young boys and girls because in the past we have had just social promotion, just passing on."

While the participants saw the connection between LEAP and these purposes, they saw teacher and student accountability as the primary reasons for the LEAP. One educator put her response in terms that addressed the State's low rankings in national comparisons:

> To me it is to monitor and make sure we are teaching what we should be teaching, and that our boys and girls are mastering those skills. Because they have been down on Louisiana in terms of education, in terms of our students ranking last, we ranked last in terms of student performance, we ranked last in terms of teacher salary, so look at it as a means of monitoring what is going on in the classroom.

Another participant spoke of how the responsibility of educators to make decisions regarding student promotion had been preempted by the use of this new singular determinant called LEAP 21:

> I feel like for 100 years or more educators decided who deserve to be promoted and who didn't, and we kind of mess that up, so now the public through the politicians has taken away that away from us and now they are deciding. I don't know if that is right or wrong.

The question related to purposes for LEAP brought responses that indicated a belief that the State's purpose was to show that the teachers had taught and that the children had learned. There was a consensus among these educators that LEAP was intended as "a tool to use to say you actually taught the material and the children retained the material that we asked you to teach." With further questioning during the interviews related to consequences, both intended and unintended, the respondents began to elaborate perspectives that would indicate a complex relationship between purposes and outcomes.

The LEAP and School Climate

> *You know everything is so focused on this one thing. . . it has kind of taken the joy out of teaching and learning.*

Since the inception of LEAP, Alpha educators describe the climate at their school as focused, serious, and stressful. Recess time has given way to a direct instruction program in reading that runs school-wide every day from 8:30 to 9:45. Assemblies that are not motivational sessions for LEAP are rare. Field trips prior to the March testing each year are just as uncommon, and the attention has diminished for school observances such as Black History Month. Emphasis on diagnostic testing has moved down to second grade, and in the 2002-2003 school year, all first graders will be tested for the first time. Testing is the order of the day, and there is no school program that has remained unaffected. As one educator explained

> We've got to teach to those standards and not a lot of the fluff. We've got to stop having assemblies, taking these kids out of class and doing things that are fun to do—Christmas program, Black History Month. And all of that is important to a person's overall education, but this is important now—it is the LEAP that is important. The other stuff you'd better pick up through church or recreational groups or whatever. High stakes means we're going to have to change everything.

The pressures associated with testing has had unforeseen effects on faculty relations at the school, particularly among fourth-grade teachers. These teachers, their curriculum coordinator, and the administration have grown closer both personally and professionally as they work as a team to improve LEAP scores. Although each of these teachers experienced an increase in stress as a result of LEAP, they all noted an increase in sharing of ideas related to teaching tactics and strategies, both successful and unsuccessful:

> After 3:00 we [fourth grade teachers] are in the hall yelling and hollering among ourselves, and we communicate on the phone, or we sit in the library and say, "Well, I did this, but nothing happened, but when I went back and re-taught this, something happened.

Another teacher also noted closer relations with other fourth grade teachers:

> We gave a lot of grade-level meetings . . . and we are constantly back and forth, on a daily basis finding out, how is this student doing in your class . . . .we are having to do a lot more team preparation.

The curriculum coordinator responded this way when asked about relations among faculty:

> For my fourth grade teachers it has brought us much closer together. There are things I have done for my fourth grade teachers this year that I have not done for the other teachers because I am aware of how stressed they are. . . . We have done a lot of fun things together in terms of going out, away from the school and just hanging out, just trying to relax.

The LEAP and the Curriculum

> *I still believe in a well-rounded person and extracurricular activities, be it athletics or band. I think those are important, but they're not important anymore, there's only one thing: to be an educated person in the state of Louisiana, you'd better pass the LEAP.*

It is not uncommon for educational reform efforts to set in motion unintended and counterproductive consequences that have a neutralizing effect on the measured successes of intended outcomes. This phenomenon seems to be at work at Alpha, and it is manifested in the remarks of the educator participants regarding the curriculum changes that have come about since LEAP began. Educators at Alpha are intensely focused on helping more students to pass the LEAP, and that focus has brought about significant changes in the content that is presented, how that content is taught, and how the learning of that content is evaluated. Though primarily impacting the fourth grade curriculum, there is a strong perception that the school program in K-3 should work actively to offer a curriculum consistent with and supportive of the basic goal of improving LEAP scores. The gravity arising from this centripetal pressure can be appreciated when one educator points out

> . . . that because the LEAP test is fourth grade level is not a test for fourth graders—it is a test of first, second, third, and fourth graders . . . right now the ones feeling the pressure to pass the test are fourth graders but really the pressure to learn the material -- you've got to learn it all the way along. . . . This test is now the deciding factor— it used to be a lot of things went into an education—there were social issues there were a lot of different things—now it is just a test. It decides everything.

During the 2000-2001 school year, the fourth-grade curriculum for Delta Parish was revised to reflect the math, English, science, and social studies skills that are assessed by Leap 21. These standards and benchmarks, along with a renewed emphasis on test-taking strategies, form the core for lessons presented to fourth-graders at Alpha

from August to March each year. The process of selecting and sequencing the skills that are tested and, therefore, taught during the school year begins early when the principal meets with her coordinators. Most teachers admitted that "the curriculum is much more test directed than before because of the pressure." Another said, "we're getting information all the time about which particular parts of the curriculum to zoom in on."

Interviews with Alpha educators yielded remarks that show that the LEAP has had a powerful funneling effect that continues to pull content, instruction, assessment, and other school activities into ever-tightening spiral. When asked if the curriculum had changed since the introduction of LEAP, the principal summed up most responses when she said, "we're a lot more focused, and we're teaching to the test." All participants indicated that the primary focus of the fourth grade was to teach the skills that are tested with the LEAP. Teachers were quick to point out that LEAP was the primary determinant in which of the State curriculum standards and benchmarks are addressed and evaluated during the school year, even though other goals could be addressed "after March:"

> We're doing a lot of our testing in the classroom on the format of the LEAP . . . . If we know it is a skill that weighs heavily on the LEAP test, instead of teaching in April we make sure that the children are exposed to those skills a little sooner. It dictates when we teach certain things because we teach skills other than just those on the LEAP, but we make sure that are children are exposed to those skills that on the LEAP prior to March.

In a study on the effects of high-stakes testing (Gordon & Reese, 1997), researchers found that high-stakes testing may become the primary learning objective rather than the tool to measure the attainment of learning objectives. What became clear from our conversations with Alpha educators over time is that the scale used to measure negative or positive effects of curricular decisions has become a scale derived from the measured or predicted effect on student test scores. In effect, the multiple criteria that educators often use to judge the veracity of curricular decisions has been reduced to a single criterion: is this curricular decision likely to raise or lower student scores? As the principal explained, the LEAP has essentially replaced the parish curriculum guide, and it has become the primary tool used in choosing the State Content Standards and Benchmarks. One teacher Alpha saw the change in terms of offering more challenging content:

> Students are being exposed to information that is much more challenging and interesting, and it's making them thinkers—causing them to sit down and analyze, which is something that they have to be able to do in terms of being prepared for the future.

When asked if the LEAP has narrowed or widened the curriculum, the principal responded that she thought the LEAP "has narrowed the curriculum, but I do not think that is the bad thing." She went on to elaborate that she, as a former classroom teacher, had also offered a rather narrow curriculum, but one chosen for its practical import related to life skills and not because it was intellectually exciting or academically demanding:

> I was guilty of not focusing in on some areas because I thought they are not going to need that, you know, they are not going to need this algebra, and this is higher stuff. That was an injustice because when a child left, I didn't know where the child might go, and my focus was narrow, I didn't give the children some of the tools they needed so that they could have built on when they got to high school—and I don't know what they might have turned out to be if I had touched on some of these areas.

When discussing the issue of teaching to the test, the principal indicated that some teachers see their creativity threatened by the strong emphasis on teaching only the skills, concepts, and facts that may appear on the LEAP. She offered little consolation:

> We have got to understand that we didn't accept this job and come to work so we can be creative. . . . if only we had been hired for these wonderful, creative, fantastic . . . ideas, then we would have gone into being an artist, a sculptor, that type of thing. . . . I equate it to getting on a train and trying to get the Dallas and I want the train to stop so I can go over here and look at these daisies. . . and that is the way that I tried to explain it to my teachers. . . previously we had a tendency to do that—we had a destination and half the time we didn't get there because we felt the need to go into these other things. Now you don't have a choice—you've got to get the Dallas by March.

The LEAP and Teaching

> *. . . children can know information, but if it is not presented to them in the same way that it is presented on the test, then that doesn't work.*

All the participants noted the unerring focus on the LEAP, and they all indicated that the test has affected what and how they teach, as well as how they assess students. Educators saw the LEAP as providing a new focus for instruction, and their response to this new focus varied. One teacher who saw the new focus as an implicit, if not explicit approval, to teach the test: “LEAP gives us a direction. Now we're going to have to teach the test. And before that was always liked cheating, for a teacher to say, teach the test, but now why not, what else is there to learn.” Another teacher, less liberated by the prospect of teaching to the test, remarked, “it’s more focused on the test . . . . Before I could do a lot of things that were student generated . . . . I don’t have that leeway to do it as much. I will be able to do some after the test, but since August it’s been totally this test, this test.” These educators reactions ranged from a grudging acceptance to determined resignation, and the following reaction shows, perhaps, a wistful and more detailed recollection of teaching prior to LEAP:

> I really feel like there are so many things socially that I could share with the children from my experience, social experiences that I believe these children miss, that they don't get from television or home. They don't understand the holidays sometimes, you know the way we understand the holidays, and stories,

> and little pieces of experiences that I used to do but I don't do anymore with the kids.

The LEAP has certainly affected teaching, and it has affected the teachers as significantly. The major effect that teachers noted was an increase in stress levels arising from inward and outward pressure to obtain results, but also teachers noted stress that arises from the frustration that comes the adoption of an unyielding scope and sequence that leaves little latitude for dealing the many students who are not on the fourth-grade level, where their instruction is focused:

> It has made me hyper, stressful—very stressful that is if you care and you have some concern . . . . I have these children two or three levels behind. I can't teach them second or third grade level. I have to introduce or I have to present to all of them fourth grade material. I don't go back to second or third and pull that, even though I know that they are there. I have to do what my curriculum guide says for fourth grade.

Direct Instruction and "Learning your Lines"

In an effort to increase reading comprehension, which is seen by Alpha's teachers as a key to greater gains in all four areas of LEAP, the school purchased the reading component of Direct Instruction from Science Research Associates in the Fall of 2000. Direct Instruction is a scripted drill-and-practice teaching technique pioneered by Siegfried Engelmann in the 1960s as a remedial instructional strategy. Initially intended for K-3 reading and math, direct instruction has expanded to include components, too, for science, writing, spelling, and social studies (Smith, 1991). Both the assistant principal and principal attended a summer institute devoted to explaining the benefits of direct instruction and how the program works. The assistant principal explained the benefits of the program for teachers this way:

> . . . It took a lot of the planning time away from the teacher—the teachers didn't have to do any planning for reading. I told them to swap off—instead of planning, you have to practice so that you don't walk in there cold—you can't just read it to them. It's like a bad actor in a good movie—you're given a script, but it's how you deliver that script is what makes a difference. . . . in direct instruction, we were in there from 8:30 to 9:45. . . . It was pretty intense.

Though highly unpopular when first introduced, fourth grade teachers now appear resigned to this new strategy if it can be linked to increases in test scores. Following the 26 percent increase in the passing rate for Language Arts in 2001, all the teachers and administrators attributed gains to the new focus on reading that came with Direct Instruction. For the 20-point gain in their School Performance Score (SPS), the State gave Alpha $24,000 in "award money." The principal reports that they will use that money to purchase the Direct Instruction component for math, so that all fourth graders in the 2002-2003 school year will receive Direct Instruction in math. The assistant principal enthused

> . . . I love it. I have always hated canned programs . . . but this program works. I had teachers who hated it last year—thought they were going to be a bunch of robots reading a script. By the time we got to January, they're dragging me into their room and showing me what kind of success they were having.

Even with the success, the acceptance of direct instruction was also accompanied by a sense of loss that was expressed by this teacher when she said

> it's a much more serious attitude here. . . than what we had before, so you know there's a joy in succeeding somewhat, but there's also that loss of individual in ways that teachers have when they present materials and information, and you kind of lose some of yourself because you are in this really structured program.

The LEAP and School Administration

Alpha's principal pointed out that the price of accountability through testing is being paid in the loss of teachers (both competent and incompetent), as well as the loss of prospective teachers whose career choices are negatively affected by the perceived pressures and possible consequences associated with LEAP. The principal reported that she (and other principals in the parish) was having difficulty filling fourth-grade positions "because of the stress level" associated with the LEAP 21. Some principals had fourth-grade teachers who were requesting transfers to the lower grades in order to reduce stress, and most of all of the inquiries from applicants were for grades other than fourth. The principal felt herself fortunate to keep her fourth grade teachers, a fact she attributed to their determination "that they were going to bring up scores or just keel over." She went on to point out, however, that "we're losing a lot of good people in education," a fact that compounds the permanent shortage of certified teachers in poor, urban schools.

> We have got a shortage in education like I have never seen before and I have seen a lot of people who would make a good teacher and I see now because we're so focused and on test scores that we're throwing people off the train -- we're not even bothering to fool with them -- if you're not cutting it, then you're out of here. . . you're going to get them out of there or they are going to leave on their own. And I am seeing that we're not taking the time to nurture and work with and produce good educators because time is always of the essence. And we're throwing away a lot of good teachers.

The principal noted that the LEAP has affected every facet of her work, including personnel decisions related to hiring and re-assignments, curriculum planning, budgeting for and purchasing materials, staff development, planning assemblies, staff development, and communications with parents:

> I use those scores when I'm purchasing materials, manipulatives, purchasing programs for the computer. When I'm inviting people into the school to work with the teachers and . . . children . . . I go back and looked at my test scores to see if

> this is going to help me. When I'm looking at interviewing . . .I talk about test scores and if you have test scores that were low in this area in this area, what would you do. . . . We look at test scores of individual teachers—if I'm looking at test scores on an individual teacher, and I am seeing those scores fall down year after year after year, then it's a school problem, it's a teacher problem, and I need to move that teacher out of that area. . . . We keep those scores focused constantly every time we talk with teachers.

Perhaps the most significant administrative change that the principal could attribute to LEAP was the change in management style to a more actively engaged approach:

> It's making a bunch of people get up off their butts, me included . . . and raising a whole bunch of people's level of concern . . . . It is making teachers teach, administrators get out of the office, put the paperwork aside—lord knows we're taking it home—and staying up to one or two in the morning to get done—but it is making us get into those classrooms to see what is going on. It is making us give more direction to the vision of the school and making us have a mission, it is making us have a hard look at what we did in the past, and to focus—(laughs) and it is killing us in the process.

The school principal noted that the LEAP has affected her relationships with teachers both positively and negatively. On the positive side, the principal saw her role as shifting from school manager to instructional leader, and this has brought her closer both professionally and personally to her faculty:

> I'm finding that in the past, I was more of a manager . . . . With the high stakes testing, you make yourself get in the classrooms more, so I found out a lot more about my teachers, their abilities, their skills. That came hand-in-hand with finding out more about your teachers at a personal level . . . I think right now we're hand-in-hand, we're all working together, and that came along from them feeling comfortable about coming to share things with me on a personal level about what was going on with their lives and things that might affect their job. . . . It forced us to be more comfortable, to share, to have a one-on-one relationship now because we have so much at stake.

At the same time that the principal noted more involvement with the instructional process and more personalized knowledge about her teachers, she also pointed out that time constraints imposed on her by the LEAP had decreased her capacity to assist or nurture teachers as she became aware through her new hands-on approach that they needed such assistance from her:

> I have always looked at my role as an administrator -- if you're not where you are supposed to be [as a teacher], it is my job to get you there -- it is my job to sit down with you and to work with you provide and services for you and a

> classroom demonstrations for you and the lesson plans, but you don't have time for that.

The LEAP and Parents

> *We've done about everything we can do. I'm very prayed up. --Parent quoted by local newspaper two weeks before the 2000 LEAP*

Alpha educators have taken a number of measures to inform parents about LEAP and to involve parents in the preparation of their students for the tests. All of the participants agreed that the academic gains demanded by LEAP require a strong commitment by parents to help their children attain higher test scores. Teachers emphasized an open-door policy for parental visits, and they make regular contacts by sending letters, phone calls from school, and even some home visits. One teacher noted that parents were invited to call her on weekends and to visit the classroom at any time. Multiple yearly contacts with parents or multiple attempts at contact with parents are the norm at Alpha among fourth-grade teachers.

All participants agreed that LEAP "has brought about an increase in our parent concern." This increase in concern, however, has not always translated to increased involvement by parents:

> We still have a multitude of workshops that parents have been invited to come to, and we have had sharing sessions. I have things organized with the bus to bring them over here, but I have not seen those numbers increase. The only time that we had a large number of parents who came was we sent out home saying we were going to share some information about fourth-grade testing – [part of message being] if you do not come, your child will fail the fourth-grade test. You get to bribing and always thinking creatively and hope that it does not come back on you--just to get parents to come (laughs). We had wall-to-wall parents, but we were trying to share information with them that they could take home, so they could use this packet.

As in many other poor, urban schools, the parents of these children are often the least capable in providing the support needed for their children to improve academically. Both principals and teachers pointed out that, despite ongoing efforts to maintain contact with parents, the majority of parents did not become engaged in actively helping their children, even when parents expressed concern and worry about their child's need for improvement. This is attributable, in part, to the fact that these parents' own educational attainments often reflect an inadequacy that many of the children of this school came to inherit. One teacher remembered, "when we had our parent meeting, the parents found they were unable to comprehend the State practice test that was given out at the meeting. Some of the activities had to be worked out step by step so that they had a better idea of what their children were facing and better able to help their children."

Another of the educators made the following observations related to parental awareness and a sense of desperation and confusion arising from an increased awareness that is not matched by an increased confidence in being able to help their children:

> They are helpless, they cannot teach their children. In this low socioeconomic area they can't help them, the parents cry . . . . they come and say 'where can I go to where can I get a tutor, where can I get a program.' I see them more aware but they are confused too. . . . I also see them as totally frustrated, confused, and admitting, 'I didn't do well in school, but I didn't have to take this test.' And they say that a lot. So I see the parents as extremely frustrated.

The LEAP and Students

> *We have some children who come and want to learn, but they are just not able to do it, so they don't pass the test. And they are staying after school, but they are still not getting to the point where they can pass that test. We are seeing improvement in those students but not enough to pass the LEAP.*

One teacher noted that LEAP 21, combined with the predominantly weak or non-existent home support system, contributed to a widespread fear of failure among her students. Faced with large numbers of students receiving minimal encouragement or coaching outside of school, one of the fourth-grade teachers resorts to the recounting of morality tales as a method to counter that fear:

> I have been telling them there's no need to be afraid. Just because you don't have anybody at home that cares, you as an individual person, you should be caring. Because you are that age now where you ought to be telling yourself, I want to be somebody—I want to do something with my life . . . . I use . . . a story that was read where a little boy had parents, but they didn't care about what he did. And he just went on, and there were a lot of people on the outside of the school that helped him, and he graduated with honors. He went on to college, and he was a doctor. So . . . you can be anything that you want to be, but it's left up to you as that individual.

Even though Alpha educators were often positive and sometimes ambivalent regarding LEAP, they were unanimous in their belief that the LEAP should not constitute the sole criterion for determining promotion and retention of their students:

> I have a concern about determining whether a child passes or fails over something they do over a five-day span. . . . I think we need to use the test to see where we are lacking with this child and develop a program for this child or these children to address those concerns or skills and put him in an enriching type situation, but just to say they're going to be in fourth grade and stay there until they pass the test is not a good thing.

Another teacher expressed her concern this way:

> I don't like . . . some of the things I see when our students don't pass it, especially when you have children who do really well during the school year and you know it's not a situation where the teacher is just giving students grades
> . . . and then they don't pass that test and you have to hold them back. That's kind of hard to deal with—it's kind of hard to say to the child that everything you did during the school year doesn't matter, doesn't count.

Stress in a Zip-lock Bag

> *I knew there was going to be some stress on the students, but I didn't see the extent of it where children before testing are just getting physically ill and throwing up and this kind of thing and children crying and not wanting to come to school.*

All the educators noted increased stress levels in their students that they attribute to the high stakes nature of a test that is the unrelenting focus of their school day. The fact that a year's worth work can be wiped out on single test creates distress among students at test time:

> . . . you have a child that has done well all year long and they think that the week of the test, if they blow it here, they have blown it for the entire school year. I think the we need to look at some other things in terms of promotion to fifth grade, rather than basing it on whether or not you passed [the LEAP] in language arts or math—that's very stressful for the child.

Teachers shared a number of harrowing stories related to their students' reactions to testing. One teacher recalled the previous year when one of her students became ill and threw up on a test. The soiled test had to be sealed in a plastic bag and turned in for test security purposes. Another student developed a nosebleed that was so severe that she had to be taken to the hospital. A second teacher told us about one of her students who simply bubbled in her test before the directions were completely explained. The test was turned in, but the student had to retake that section of the test on a make-up day. During observations during the March 2000 Test Week, one student was observed crying during the LEAP. The teacher attempted to comfort her with encouraging words and hugs. Later the teacher informed us that the child was just overwhelmed with all the stress of the test.

Although the stress at test time is almost palpable, for some students the more significant distress comes in waiting for the results or after the results are provided. Here is a gripping example offered by the curriculum coordinator of one student's pain of waiting:

> Well, just this week, it was very difficult. . . I have a student—this is his fourth year in fourth grade—and we received our LEAP results for summer school yesterday. So he has been asking me every day. . . did I pass, did I pass. And I was reluctant to tell him, so I asked the teacher, do you want to tell him, and she said no. So we had to pull him out—while he was waiting for me to tell him the results, you can hear his heart pounding.

Another teacher recalled how another student dealt the news of failure, this time a special education student with spina bifida whose failure quickly turned to shame:

> . . . he hid under the bed last time—I mean this is a child who can't walk—he scooted out of his chair, he was embarrassed, he was upset. He crawled under the bed when he found out he didn't pass last time—he was afraid to see his mom when she got home. So it is really an esteem knocker.

Discussion

Problems and Winners: Promise and Losers

The debate swirling around the issue of high-stakes standardized testing shows signs of becoming increasingly polarized (if that is possible), with the two opposing camps fortifying positions familiar to the traditionalist and the progressivist armies that have waged the curriculum and policy wars for the past hundred years in American education. And as talk gives way to policy battles fought mainly through an American press bent toward the sensational, much of the debate is replaced by the exchange of propaganda salvos intent upon causing damage to the other side. The experiences, then, of Alpha educators to the test talk and the test practice of LEAP 21 are not likely to satisfy either proponents or opponents of high-stakes standardized testing; for these teachers' remarks have consistently expressed both the hopes and fears, the celebrations and concerns, and the joys and the anguish of professional educators intent upon doing the best they can for their students given the orders of the day for which they had no voice in issuing. A special education teacher articulates this so poignantly in a remark:

> To me it is heartbreaking to see . . . . It is really, really hard for everyone involved to go through this, the preparation, the judgment, the consequences—so many lives have been—it is so serious now. And it is one test, one time, 4th and 8th grades—you lose your childhood, and yes, maybe it helped us focus on doing things better . . . but I don't think this one test was the answer. . . . I still have a teacher thing, still hopeful, and still looking for more changes to make things better for everyone involved, especially for my . . . kids.

High-stakes testing proponents, whose research and commentary inevitably finds evidence to support high standards and high-stakes as a way to ensure that we "leave no child behind," may be dismayed, if undeterred, that so many children at Alpha Elementary are being left behind. In 2000, 70 percent of fourth graders (75 students) were left behind, and in 2001 almost 50 percent (82 students) were retained in fourth grade. (In 2002,the number of failures crept up slightly to just above 50 percent.). These same proponents of testing who rail about bad teaching may be flummoxed by the fact that Alpha and other area schools are finding it difficult to recruit fourth grade teachers, either good or bad, to teach the burgeoning fourth grade classes. At Alpha, for example, it was necessary to transfer a fifth-grade teacher and to call back to active duty one of their

retired teachers. These same proponents who summon parents toward more responsibility and involvement may be taken aback that some parents have chosen to send their children out of state to live with relatives during the fourth grade in order to escape the LEAP; or perhaps they may be bewildered that a significant portion of the parents who came to school to get their LEAP coaching materials could not answer the sample LEAP questions. Further, proponents who see high-stakes as a way to motivate individual responsibility by students may become uneasy, or even queasy, when told of anxious fourth graders crying uncontrollably, having nose bleeds, or throwing up on their test booklets (that must be re-sealed and returned to the State for security purposes). These proponents may feel a twinge of regret or empathy, even, when they hear of the boy whose heart could be heard beating from across the teacher's desk as he waited to find out that he would be in the fourth grade for a fourth time. Or will these proponents of high stakes testing be temporarily quieted when told the of that boy with spina bifida who failed the LEAP for the second time and who, in shame, managed to crawl from his wheelchair and hide under the bed rather than face his disappointed mother.

On the other hand, opponents of LEAP 21 and other forms of high-stakes testing may find ammunition or at least register some grim consolation in these disturbing findings just cited. However, opponents of testing will be less sanguine when they hear teachers argue in support of LEAP that "students are being exposed to information that is much more challenging, interesting, and . . . making them thinkers." Opponents of high-stakes, too, may be dismayed when Alpha educators speak of LEAP "making teachers teach and administrators get out of the office and into the classrooms." Opponents of testing, too, may be disappointed to hear teachers claim that, with LEAP, "you can see exactly what the child's deficits are and their strengths [and]. . . . You can use those things for building blocks and . . . remediation." And what are opponents of LEAP to make of this math teacher turned principal who recognizes for the first time that her prior teaching had been patronizing and intended to placate children whom she had determined would need only survival skills rather than algebra, thus keeping them from the requirements that would at least make the consideration of college a possibility.

The story contained in the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of these Alpha educators is far too complex to satisfy the requirements of either of ideological polarities that attract ardent supporters or ardent detractors of testing. The experiential field of Alpha Elementary includes the entire spectrum of seemingly dichotomous testing consequences that, unlike the arguments of ideologues, cannot be separated out into neat columns to be added up into sums of virtues or vices, depending upon the ideological pole to which one may become magnetized. The experiential field of these educators contains the strong ideological components that result from such large-scale State commitments as LEAP; and it contains, too, the behavioral, or sensory, components that arise from these educators' direct observations and participation in events that follow from this ideological commitment as it moves from concept to practice to consequences. For these teachers, coordinators, counselors, and administrators, the ideological commitment and the participatory events, though often at odds, form a unitary experiential field within which they are embedded. This does not mean, however, that these educators are unable to distinguish between these two aspects of their experience, as their remarks indicate a clarity that exposes the strong divergences that do exist between concepts of testing and consequences of testing in their school.

When the ideology of high-stakes testing is not aligned with the observed outcomes, which is often the case, these educators are exposed to two sides of an experiential field that most often forms a dichotomy of figure and ground (Varela, 1979, pp. 271-278) of the explicit and the implicit. We can see this in the distinctions that the educators made in regards to the confrontation of the ideological commitment and the practical effects of testing as instituted in their school. As these educators see State testing raising standards and expectations, they are very much aware that testing increases pressure, stress, and failure. With increased accountability comes widespread retention; as curriculum and assessments become focused and clear, we see the narrowing of subjects, school activities, and the constriction of assessment strategies; as high stakes provide a strong impetus to improve or remove ineffective teachers, so, too, does it push out some competent teachers and discourage new applicants where they are most needed; just as instruction becomes more rigorous and focused, there is loss of the spontaneity, creativity, and professional judgment. Just as teachers see academic gains among some of their students, they see more failure and a loss of joy in coming to school and learning.

As Alpha's school performance shows "exemplary academic growth" and brings a financial awards, Alpha remains "academically below average" and finds the next rung of the performance ladder even farther away as the State average scores move upward; and while the school administrators are more engaged in the instructional program in active ways, there is less time to focus on the individual growth needs of teachers that their increased involvement has helped them to identify. Even though increased parental outreach has increasingly brought parents into the school, more parents are grasping, sometimes with desperation, for ways to help their children. And while the high-stakes testing at Alpha has provided an impetus to work harder, faster, and longer," these educators face increasing level of exhaustion and the potential for burnout. In the end, these educators present themselves as determined, persistent, and hopeful at the same time they exhibit signs of serious stress, anxiety, and continuing worry about their students' prospects. How can this be so?

At Alpha Elementary, the ramifications for failure, ranging from student retention to public renunciation to school closure, are severe enough to create a relentless pressure to do, within legal bounds, whatever is necessary to raise test scores. The words and deeds of these educators make that point clear. Having had this mandate forced upon them with these potential and real consequences intact, it should come as no surprise which aspects of their experiential field that these educators choose to make figural: if they are to minimize the negative consequences of testing, they must surely focus on the ideological promise. It is against this dark background of failure that the brighter promises of testing are placed front and center, thus transforming the terrible prospect of tangible failure into an attraction to the ideology of testing and all that that demands. To survive in this setting requires nothing less, and the data gathered at Alpha clearly shows, a shift over time to this direction of the "positive," and away from the "negative." After numerous conversations and three interviews over two years, one of the last points made the principal was this:

> We had to improve our test scores—we didn't want people coming in and taking over our school. The bottom line was we were going to have to improve our test scores and the children, and our children were going to be the beneficiaries of the

> hard work that would have to be done. So I don't even want to hear that—even at faculty meetings, my last thing is 'does anybody have any announcements, anything positive to say—anything negative, keep it to yourself.' Because it doesn't help. If you've got to do it, just do it.

The implications of this shift remain unknown, as does the degree of its persistence. If it seriously diminishes the failure that these teachers want most to avoid for their students, themselves, and the school, then their choice will have served the purpose for which it was chosen. On the other hand, if the attention and commitment given to testing do not produce the sought-after results, then one must wonder how these educators may come to view those students, and themselves, whose failure embodies that reality they have attempted most diligently to extinguish[3].

Addendum

During the past five years, educational organizations and other professional associations involved with evaluation and testing (APA, AERA, ASCD, AEA, Alliance for Childhood, International Reading Association, NCTM, NAD, NASP, NSSE), have issued statements that question or condemn the use of a single assessment instrument for making high-stakes educational decisions. Despite these statements, the high-stakes testing trend is on the increase, particularly, it seems, in those states with large minority populations. Amrein and Berliner (2002) report, for example, that "none of the ten states with the lowest populations of African-Americans have implemented high-stakes tests, whereas all of the ten states with the highest populations of African-Americans have done so" (p. 12). Whether this fact will be read as a simple coincidence or as another, yet, bitter irony, will depend in part upon a continuing capacity to shift our focus from the ideology of testing to the effects of testing on students, educators, and parents.

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[3] As this article was submitted for publication, Alpha's scores for 2003, which take into account the summer remediation and re-testing, show that close to 45 percent of Alpha's fourth-graders are repeating fourth grade during the current school year.

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Author Note

Jim Horn is Associate Professor of Graduate Foundations at Monmouth University in West Long Branch, New Jersey. He can be contacted at ontogeny1@verizon.net.

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