

PURE FACT SHEET

Testing and High Stakes

Testing in Chicago has been a high-stakes business since 1995, when newly-appointed Chicago Public Schools Chief Executive Officer Paul Vallas instituted student retention and school intervention policies based on single year test scores on the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS) at the elementary school level and the Tests of Proficiency (TAP) at the high school level.

Since then, retention and probation policies have been modified, but only a little, and new stakes have been added with the aggressive CPS school closure program and the looming consequences of failure to make Adequate Yearly Progress, or AYP, under the federal No Child Left Behind Act.

Here are some of the programs that combine testing and high stakes in Chicago.

CPS program

What is it?

Does it work?

Student retention

3rd, 6th and 8th grade students are held back if they score lower than a specified cut-off point on annual standardized tests after summer school.

The Consortium on Chicago School Research (CCSR) conducted a six-year study of CPS's student retention program ("Ending Social Promotion" 1998-2004). Their findings mirrored national studies: "Did retaining these low-achieving students help? The answer to this question is definitely **no**."

School probation

In 1996, CPS placed on remediation and then probation any school where fewer than 15% of the students scored at or above national norms on the Iowa or TAP tests. Under probation, the school's LSC was sidelined in favor of central-office control. A probation manager was assigned, and the school's discretionary funds were directed toward programs chosen by the probation manager. The current policy uses a 40% cut-off score along with other measures.

Studies of the probation initiatives were not positive. A 2003 CCSR report by Kara Finnegan and Jennifer O'Day, "External Support to Schools on Probation: Getting a Leg Up?" which focused on the success of external partners CPS provided to probation schools, concluded that the help given to probation schools was not effective enough to overcome the challenges these schools faced.

School closure

In 2004, CPS instituted a policy under which almost any school could be closed, but most schools are closed for low test scores.

Closed schools are often reopened as new charter or contract schools. So far, like their counterparts across the U.S., these schools have failed to outperform regular CPS schools.

NCLB AYP requirements

The No Child Left Behind Act sets up consequences for schools and school districts which do not meet state-established test score levels (called Adequate Yearly Progress) for more than one year. Failure to make AYP for five or more years can lead to school closure and replacement and other consequences.

Again, closing and replacing schools with private operators is not a proven reform strategy.

“The Big Picture,” a 2005 study by Designs for Change, challenges CPS’s claims of success for its major interventions of retention and probation by pointing out that the vast majority of schools experiencing these interventions continue to perform too poorly to get off of probation including 80 of the 88 schools with the highest student retention rates. In fact, **schools that avoided central office intervention and focused less on teaching to the test improved the most.**

The DFC study found that schools on probation with more grade retention and that focused more on teaching to the test did not improve. The schools that steadily improved had a strong LSC working with the principal, emphasized collaboration and professional development for teachers, retained fewer students, and focused less on teaching to the test.

Researchers have also found that **complex, intellectually challenging work improves students’ basic skills** as measured on standardized tests, so that “teaching to the test” is not the best way to raise test scores (“Authentic Intellectual Work and Standardized Tests: Conflict or Coexistence?”, Newman, Bryk, and Nagaoka, Consortium on Chicago School Research, 2001).