



High Stakes Testing and Instruction

What the research says

**Patte Barth, Center for Public Education
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Questions for this session

- ▶ How are high-stakes tests affecting instruction?
- ▶ How does instruction affect test scores on high-stakes tests?
- ▶ Can school leaders make sure students are well prepared AND produce high scores?

A blurred background image of a classroom. In the foreground, a young woman with long dark hair and glasses is looking down at papers on her desk. Behind her, another student is visible, and in the background, a teacher or another student is standing near a whiteboard. The overall scene is out of focus, emphasizing the text overlaid on it.

**How are high-stakes tests
affecting instruction?**

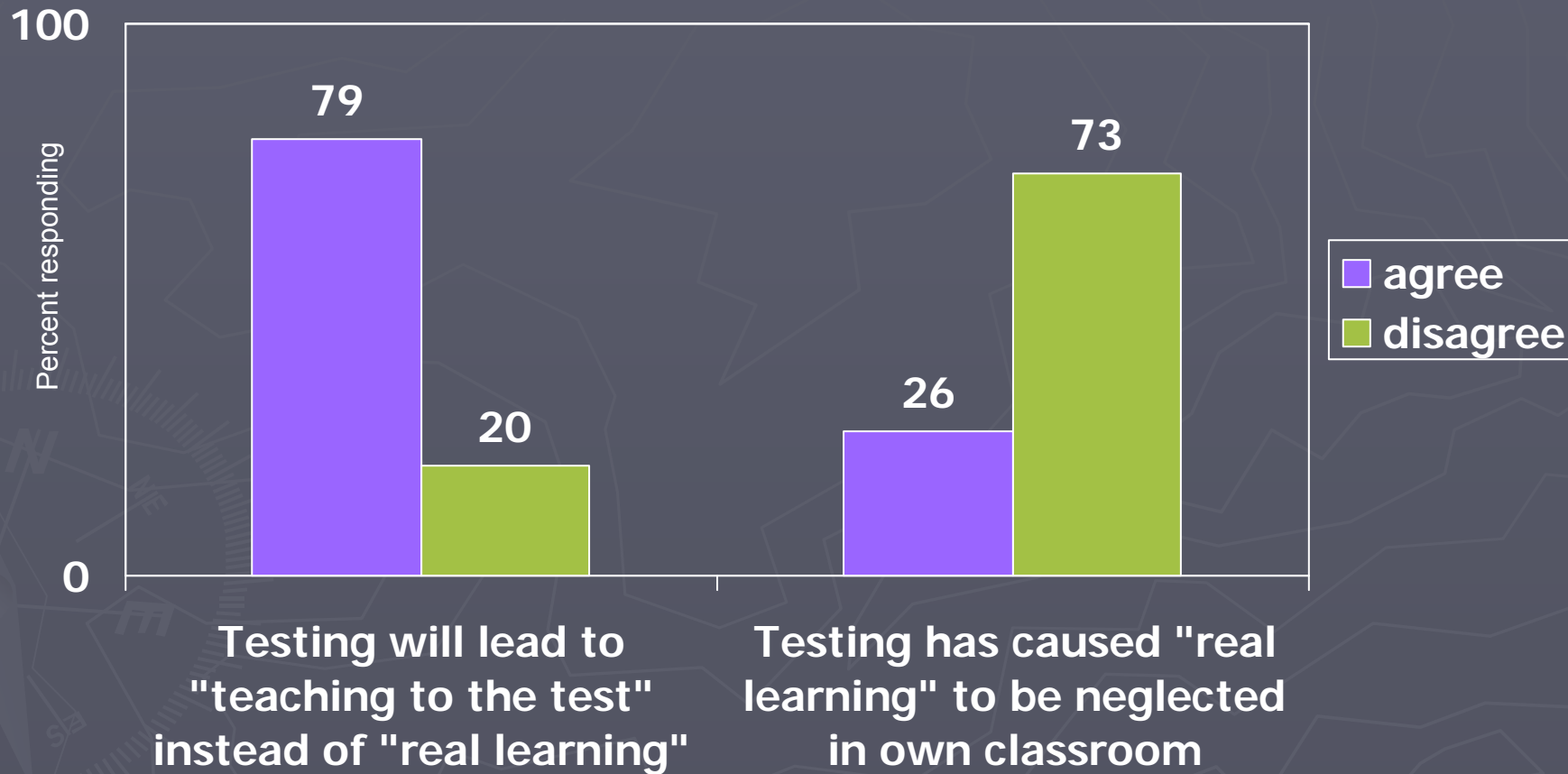
Frequently cited negative effects of high-stakes tests

- ▶ Narrow the curriculum
- ▶ Exclude topics either not tested or not likely to appear on the test
- ▶ Reduce learning to the memorization of easy-to-recall facts
- ▶ Demand too much classroom time for test preparation rather than learning.

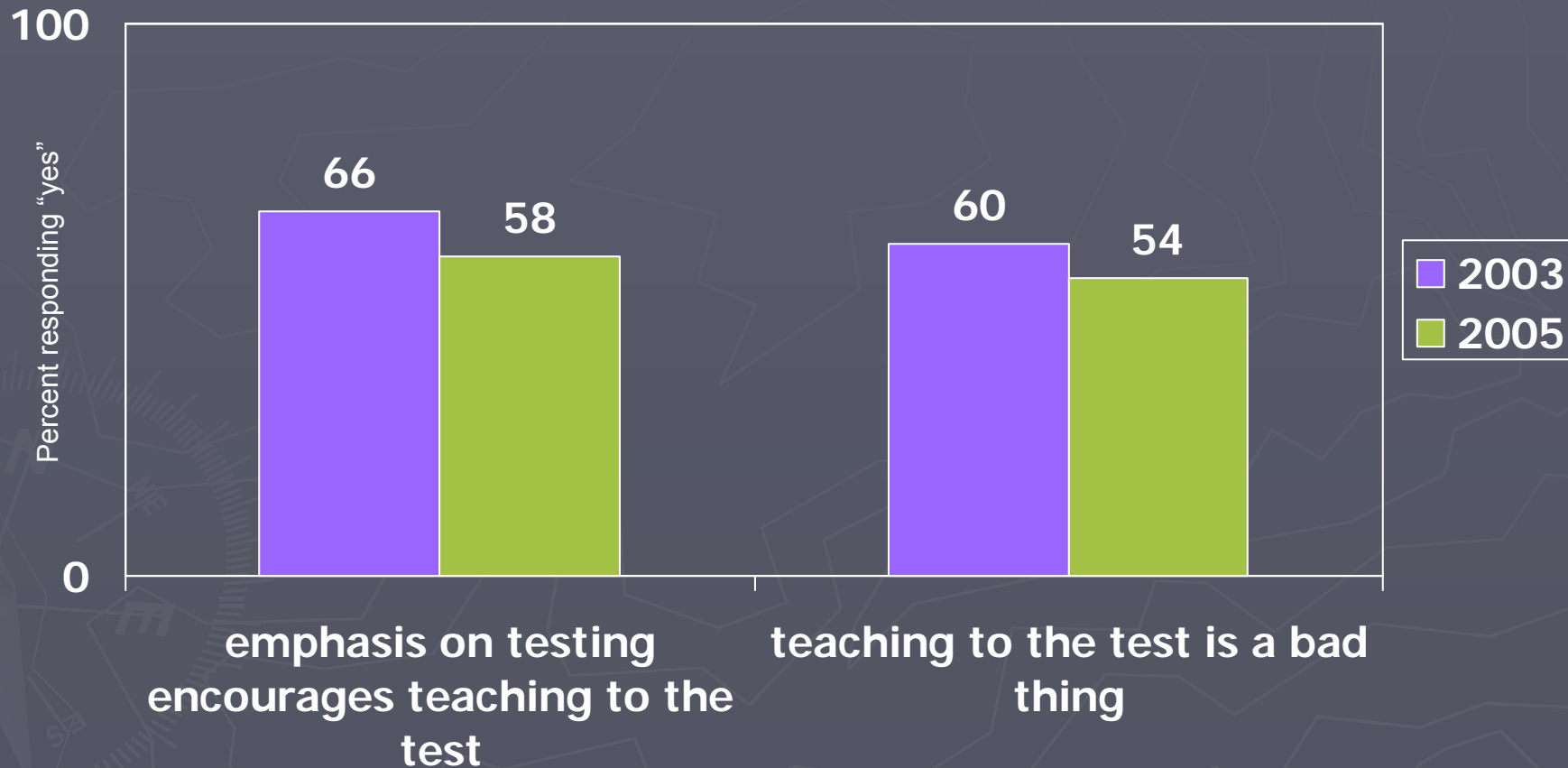
Problem with most of the articles on high-stakes tests

- ▶ vast majority are anecdotal
- ▶ can't tell us if incidents are isolated or widespread

Teachers think the emphasis on testing will distort instruction, yet few say it affects their own teaching



The public is concerned about teaching to the test, but their concern is declining



The public overall supports annual testing but is worried it could go too far

- ▶ Main concern – dependence on single test for major decisions
- ▶ Two-thirds think a single test does not provide a fair picture of school performance

New survey: NCLB forcing districts to narrow curriculum

- ▶ 71% of districts reported reducing time in at least one subject to provide more time for reading & math
- ▶ Respondents divided over whether this was good or bad
 - Some thought it shortchanged students
 - Others thought it helped them help low-achieving students

Frequently cited positive effects of high-stakes tests

- ▶ Provide a valid, external measure of the academic program
- ▶ Motivate schools and students to work hard
- ▶ Assure that all students get the benefit of high academic standards

A photograph of a classroom scene. In the foreground, a young woman with long dark hair and glasses is looking down at an open book on a desk. Behind her, another student is partially visible, also looking down. In the background, a male teacher or adult is standing and talking to a group of students. The image is slightly blurred and has a soft, warm tone.

**Is high-stakes testing
good educational policy?**

Ed research as soap opera


- ▶ Amrein & Berliner looked at state scores against NAEP over time & found no transfer of gains
- ▶ Raymond & Hanushek looked at same data and concluded the opposite
- ▶ Rosenshine narrowed analysis to states with high-stakes tests compared to NAEP & found a strong relationship
- ▶ Amrein & Berliner re-examined their data & found some differences but accounted for them by student exclusions
- ▶ Braun then compared high-stakes to low-stakes states and found strong relationship of high-stakes to achievement
- ▶ John Bishop included other countries & found strong positive relationship between exit exams & achievement
- ▶ Swanson looked at 10 years of standards-based policies & also found a positive relationship in mathematics

How does high-stakes testing affect instruction?

- ▶ Bad effects are documented but research doesn't tell us how widespread they are
- ▶ More analysts find a positive relationship to achievement than don't, especially for low-income students
- ▶ It's hard to separate the effects of high-stakes testing from the effects of different accountability mechanisms

Experts on both sides agree that accountability systems and the tests on which they depend are in their infancy and will need a great deal of refinement as they develop.

-- *Ruth Mitchell*

A blurred photograph of a classroom. In the foreground, a student with long dark hair and glasses is looking down at a book or paper. In the background, other students are seated at desks, and a teacher is standing near the back of the room. The overall scene is out of focus, emphasizing the text overlaid on the image.

How does instruction affect scores on high-stakes tests?

Teaching to the test can be

- ▶ Good if it means teaching a curriculum aligned to state standards and emphasizing higher order skills
- ▶ Bad if it means memorizing the content on test items and emphasizing test-taking skills

CELA study of literacy skills

- ▶ 5-year study of 25 middle- and high-schools
- ▶ Schools in CA, FL, TX and NY
- ▶ Compared “typical” and “high” performers as measured by state tests

What the CELA study found in high-performing schools

- ▶ Literacy skills are taught in rich and varied lesson types
- ▶ Reading & writing are taught across the curriculum
- ▶ “Test preparation” is integrated across the curriculum and emphasis is on literacy, not test-taking skills

California study of high-poverty schools

- ▶ In-depth survey of 257 elementary schools and 5500 principals & teachers
- ▶ Compared low-, mid- and high-performing schools
- ▶ High-performers scored as much as 250 points higher on CA's 200-1000 API scale

What the California study found in high-performing schools:

- ▶ Priority on student achievement
- ▶ Aligned curriculum to state standards
- ▶ Used assessment data to inform and adjust instruction
- ▶ Principals ensured there were adequate resources, especially qualified teachers

CEP study on effects of NCLB

- ▶ Survey of education officials in 50 states and 299 representative districts
- ▶ Case studies of 38 school districts

What the CEP study found


- ▶ 9 in 10 districts reported aligning curriculum & instruction to standards & assessments
- ▶ 9 in 10 reported using research & test data to inform instructional decisions

What the CEP study found

- ▶ 3 in 4 districts reported success with these strategies
- ▶ 3 in 4 ranked district policies as important or very important to raising student achievement

What instruction produces higher test scores?

- ▶ Curriculum is aligned to state standards & tests
- ▶ Student achievement data informs instruction & supports
- ▶ Test preparation is embedded and does not take up a lot of valuable class time
- ▶ Lessons emphasize student learning & higher order thinking

A blurred background image of a classroom. In the foreground, a young woman with long dark hair and glasses is looking down at a book or paper on her desk. Behind her, another student is visible, and in the background, a teacher or another student is standing near a desk. The overall scene is a typical classroom setting.

**Can school leaders make sure
students are well prepared
AND produce high scores?**

What to do at the district level:

- ▶ Make sure teachers have a curriculum aligned to state standards & tests
- ▶ Encourage curriculum & lesson plans that reinforce literacy and math skills across the curriculum
- ▶ If needed, provide professional development on how to use data to inform decisions from the board to the classroom

What to do at the district level:

- ▶ Invest in aligned “low stakes” benchmark assessments
- ▶ Administer district assessments in subjects other than reading & math to signal their importance
- ▶ Use rich, open-ended assessments to encourage higher order thinking

Consider the human factor

Don't let fear take charge of your district

Toward better assessments & accountability plans

- ▶ Some tests are better targets than others. Be familiar with your state's test; push for good standardized tests
- ▶ Be constructive advocates for effective accountability systems

Stay informed

- ▶ More is being learned about testing and accountability systems
- ▶ The Center for Public Education will stay on top of these developments and provide new research as it emerges

Questions?



A photograph of a classroom scene. In the foreground, a young woman with long dark hair and glasses is looking down at an open book on a desk. Behind her, another student is partially visible, also looking at a book. In the background, a teacher or another student is standing near a whiteboard, which has some writing on it. The overall atmosphere is one of focused learning.

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