

High-Stakes Testing: How Are Social Studies Teachers Responding?

“Research & Practice,” established early in 2001, features educational research that is directly relevant to the work of classroom teachers. In this, the 19th article in the series, I invited S.G. Grant to examine the ways social studies teachers are responding to high-stakes testing.

—Walter C. Parker, “Research and Practice” Editor,
University of Washington, Seattle.

S. G. Grant

Although largely left out of the No Child Left Behind legislation, social studies remains a frequently tested subject on state-level standardized exams. As of 2004, 23 states conducted standards-based social studies tests, 10 of which could be considered high stakes.¹ Where social studies will fit into the national testing picture is uncertain, but the reality of state-level testing for teachers and students is unlikely to change in the near future.²

What school observers *think* could or should or may happen with high-stakes testing is interesting, to be sure, but research on the lived experiences of social studies teachers and their students may be more revealing. As we shall see, the evidence confirms and challenges both policymakers’ hopes and critics’ fears: Teachers are both reacting and acting.

Defining High-Stakes

Before looking at effects of state-level social studies testing, it is necessary to realize that not all state history tests have explicit and direct “stakes” or consequences for teachers or their students. “High stakes” is vaguely defined at best. As some researchers point out, however, how teachers perceive test-related consequences may be as important as how policymakers intend them.³

If an immediate and potentially dramatic effect on students’ school lives is one dimension of high-stakes testing, then the exams administered in states like Texas, Virginia, Mississippi, and New York qualify: Test scores in these states determine whether or not students graduate from high school. By

contrast, students’ test scores in states like Michigan and Kentucky count toward the general assessment of their schools, but hold no particular consequence for the students themselves. Another complication to the stakes issue comes in the form of elementary and middle school students in New York and other high-stakes states who take state exams, but whose scores have little direct impact on their school lives.

The stakes attached to social studies tests become especially complex when looking at teachers. Test performance in high-stakes states has far greater implications for students than for their teachers; in no state, for example, do teachers face immediate dismissal for low student test scores. That said, the perceived impact of state tests on teachers may be just as real as the real consequences attached. For evidence of this claim, one need look no further than the fact that teachers who face no state social studies test can feel just as pressed to change their teaching (or not!) as teachers who do.⁴

As the research evidence accumulates, one can conclude that the particular stakes attached to a state-level test may matter less than the mere existence of a

test. In short, the test part of the phrase “high-stakes test” may matter as much as the stakes themselves. Patterns emerge across teachers’ responses to state tests, but those patterns offer little predictable value. Some novice teachers and their veteran peers feel pressured to undercut their pedagogical goals in reaction to state test pressures. But other teachers, sometimes in the same schools, feel free to carve out their own pedagogical paths. There are many ways to interpret the influence of state social studies tests but, as policy tool, it is hard to ignore the conclusion that state-level tests produce a crazy quilt of responses.

How Do Social Studies Teachers Respond to Tests?

As the research base on how teachers respond to state social studies tests grows, an interesting distinction is emerging. The phrases “teaching to the test” and “what gets tested gets taught” make great headlines, but poor policy. Teaching is no single act. At a minimum, teachers choose curriculum, they design instructional activities, and they create assessments. Proponents and critics of testing alike typically assume that tests drive the entirety of teaching. The research evidence suggests otherwise. Although a number of questions remain open, the emerging research base suggests that state tests influence teachers’ content, instructional, and assessment decisions differently.

The Influence of Tests on Teachers' Content Decisions

The principal pedagogical effect of state social studies tests appears to be on teachers' content decisions. Teachers report making a range of small to large changes in the subject matter ideas they teach. This finding should surprise few observers, however. State tests do not tell teachers *how* to teach, but they do suggest *what* should be taught. That teachers modify their curriculum in reaction to standardized exams, then, makes sense given that state curriculum and assessment policies focus on content.

Predictably, novice teachers struggle to make content choices that will most advantage their test-taking students,⁵ but veteran teachers do as well.⁶ And yet, other teachers resist the temptation to tailor their curriculum to either state standards or state exams. Across the United States, teachers plan units on topics covered on state exams, but they also develop units on topics barely mentioned.⁷ Many teachers assert control over the curriculum they teach in elective courses.⁸ Less common, but still evident, are those teachers who resolve the content dilemmas they face by choosing to teach more ambitiously in classes that enroll students of all levels.⁹

The Influence of State Tests on Teachers' Assessment Practices

Any surprise that testing proponents and critics register when learning that teachers are not using state exams as the default curriculum in their classrooms is likely to increase when they see teachers using a variety of assessment methods.

Few teachers appear to be making wholesale changes in their student assessments.¹⁰ With a moment's reflection, this finding becomes less remarkable: Most teachers already employ test questions that mirror those on state exams—multiple choice questions, short answer tasks, and essays. Researchers find, however, that teachers are not designing test-based exams exclusively. Instead, they use these exams as part of their larger assessment plans.

Teachers are not sanguine about the state tests they administer: They dislike the pressure on their practices and on their students, the ways that scores are used, the kinds of test items employed, and the mixed messages that tests send about what is important. Yet few teachers dismiss outright the idea of a state-level test. Many protest one or more features of state test construction or the ways in which scores are interpreted; few protest against the very existence of a test. Many reasons support this conclusion—coercion by school and district administrators, pressure from parents and the public, uncertainty about what seems like an inevitable trend in American education. If these explanations account for the lack of teacher resistance to the concept of testing, so does one other: Most Americans accept the validity of tests as a means of judging student performance. Like the public at large, teachers seem to accept the premise that tests are useful and that multiple-choice questions and essay prompts represent reasonable ways of judging what students know and understand.

If testing is a fixture in U.S. school culture, so too is the idea that tests are limited in what they can measure. Tests may efficiently screen those who know from those who don't, but they are a screen with wide mesh: Americans know well the case of students whose test scores fail to predict their accomplishments. Both in schools and in the public, then, a kind of schizophrenia exists: Faith in tests, but doubts as to their importance.

The Influence of State Tests on Teachers' Instructional Strategies

The big surprise in the research literature is the minimal and uncertain influence state tests seem to have on teachers' instructional decisions. Some teachers are doing more test preparation than they would like and some are no longer doing activities that they have done in the past. The dismay of a Virginia teacher that "it's facts—names, dates, places. I used to be a good teacher—now I'm cramming this stuff down their throats,"

echoes loudly throughout a survey of Mississippi teachers' test-influenced instructional practices.¹¹ At the same time, many teachers continue to teach in ways they think are appropriate for students to learn.¹²

Make no mistake: Some teachers report ceding control over their instructional practices to their state tests. Still, as with most things related to schooling, simple understandings rarely suffice. For even within the research that demonstrates considerable test-based influence on teachers' instruction are signs of practices that buck this trend. Lecturing, rote recitation, and other seeming concessions to state-level testing exist alongside debates, projects, and class discussions. Tests do matter, but there is little evidence that shows wholesale instructional change.

This finding may cause testing critics to cheer and proponents to cringe. Both groups, however, would be wise to hold back. Testing critics imply that teachers routinely plan and deliver rich and engaging lessons and that state-level tests stifle this creativity. Yet researchers have long described a good portion of history teaching as pedantic, at best. State-level social studies tests, then, are as unlikely to induce large-scale instructional change as any other innovation.¹³ Dull teachers may be no more likely to invoke test-influenced practices than their more ambitious peers, but that does not mean that their students are any better off.

If the predictions of both critics and proponents miss their marks concerning the bulk of American teachers, so too do they misunderstand the best teachers. Although in short supply, excellent teachers exist in every kind of school situation. Some of these teachers find confirmation in their students' test performance, but many more seem to shake their collective heads at a testing movement that seems to dishonor their and their students' best efforts.¹⁴

The Influence of State Tests on Teachers' Classroom Practices

So far I have shown that tests do matter to teachers, but in various ways. The biggest influence appears to be on teachers'

content decisions. Tests factor into teachers' assessment and instructional decisions as well. But there is little evidence of massive test-based change. Why not? The short answer is that, in spite of their public presence, tests constitute but one influence on teachers' practices.

Researchers point to a long list of factors that influence teachers' pedagogical decisions. State-level tests make that list, but joining them are a host of other factors including personal considerations, organizational constraints, and policy issues. Beginning teachers face this array of influences no more and no less than do veterans. Similarly, teachers in states with few direct testing consequences face these influences no more and no less than do their high-stakes peers. Negotiating among competing influences is a persistent and on-going dilemma for all teachers.¹⁵

The personal factors that influence teachers' decision making include their subject matter knowledge and beliefs as well as their personal relationships and experiences. The education that teachers have already experienced in history and the social sciences influences their pedagogical thoughts and actions. Also important, however, are the kinds of personal experiences and relationships they have had throughout their lives. For example, teachers who struggled to find a reason to study history may well find that experience shapes their approaches to working with their resistant students.

The organizational influences on teachers' practices come in two forms. One form includes the individuals and groups with whom teachers interact in their school and district settings. The second set of organizational influences highlights the contexts in which teachers work; that is, the norms, structures, and resources that define their teaching situations. The people teachers work with—students, colleagues, administrators, parents—and the cultural conditions in which they work can exert influence on teachers' work in multiple, if not necessarily, predictable ways. For example, some teachers can find themselves at odds with their colleagues and

administrators whose low expectations for students translate into a pedantic curriculum that focuses exclusively on low-level knowledge and skills. Others may feel constrained by a competitive school climate where standardized test scores alone are used to praise and prod teachers' classroom efforts.¹⁶

Finally, policy factors such as local and state curriculum guidelines, textbook adoptions, and standardized tests figure into the pedagogical decisions teachers make. Teachers in earlier generations frequently cited textbooks as a powerful influence on their teaching practices.¹⁷ For the past 20 years, however, newer generations of teachers have faced a blinding array of curriculum and assessment policies that compete for their attention. Rarely, however, do these various policies (and the textbooks that districts purchase) align in coherent ways.

Within this swirl of personal, organizational, and policy influences, teachers find themselves surrounded by constant calls to improve their teaching, but inconsistent and often contradictory messages about how to do so. State-level tests support some of the messages social studies teachers get but conflict with others. The current level of attention to tests, especially of the high-stakes variety, would seem to redefine the nature, conditions, and outcomes of teachers' work. Yet the array of factors teachers must juggle on any given day undercuts some of the power of state testing as a lever of change.¹⁸

How do teachers make sense of this confusion? Some embrace every idea that floats by their classroom doorways in hopes that a shotgun approach will, eventually, help most students. Others close their doors, stick with the practices they believe work, and hope for the best. These responses, and others, suggest that looking closely at how teachers *interpret* state tests may be revealing. Looking closely, however, means more than simply charting teachers' yes or no responses to questions about whether or not tests determine their teaching. And it means remembering that there are no generic "best" teaching practices

nor any all-purpose "best" responses to state-level tests.¹⁹ Both proponents and critics of testing would be better served if they looked into the contextualized reasoning and practices of teachers.

One way of understanding the relationship between teachers and tests is to see their responses as *defensive*. Advanced first by Linda McNeil, the notion of defensive teaching assumes that teachers exist primarily in a reactive mode: State policymakers enact new curricula and new tests, and then teachers react to them.²⁰ This view offers considerable explanatory power, and some researchers have found evidence for the idea that teachers' pedagogical decisions are shaped by their perceptions of state testing conditions.²¹ For example, a novice Michigan teacher describes how he contorts his content in light of his state social studies test:

We have to start with the Constitution, because there are a lot of constitutional principles on the [Michigan Evaluation Assessment of Progress, MEAP]. We're afraid that if we do it in order, by the time we get to the Constitution, it's going to be so close to the MEAP that we may not focus as much on that as we should. So we start with that at the beginning and then go backwards: Do the Constitution, the Core Democratic Values, then backtrack to the colonial times and work our way forward from there.²²

This teacher makes a choice that he knows has little educational value. He is not alone in facing the dilemma of how best to respond to a testing context that undercuts sound pedagogy. However, the notion that teachers like this one merely react defensively to state tests is too blunt. There is no simple cause-effect relationship, as if a new state test is created and then teachers immediately teach only in ways they believe to be consistent with the test. That formula fails on two counts. First, the defensive teaching explanation does not account for those teachers who continue to use more challenging

teaching practices (or use them in concert with traditional practices). And second, it does not allow us to look deeply into the myriad ways that teachers respond to state exams. Here, interviews with teachers, observations of their practices, and analysis of the kinds of tasks they create, offer insights into and evidence for the autonomy and creativity teachers exhibit.

To be sure, all teachers are, in some sense, *reacting* to the social studies tests their state policymakers mandate. Yet, in doing so, they are also *acting* in ways that are more than defensive. Most teachers recognize that tests can constitute a potential constraint on their teaching. They also recognize, however, that they face many *potential* constraints, and that as potential constraints, these limits are negotiable. No one teaches in a vacuum; influences of all sorts are ever-present in the ways that teachers plan, enact, and assess their lessons. Those influences rarely promote a single conclusion, however, so teachers are always faced with the prospect of choosing among competing influences.²³ That they must choose among those influences puts teachers in the role of “gatekeeper” to their classrooms.²⁴ This role does not mean that teachers operate with complete autonomy, but it does mean that they *act* as well as *react* in making the decisions that shape their classroom practices.

Some teachers are “learning to live with [the test], but not by it.”²⁵ This seemingly subtle distinction turns out to be profound. Teachers may choose to live with a state social studies test by re-orienting their entire practices around their perceptions of what will produce the best student scores. But they may also choose differently.

With this evidence and these ideas in mind, I offer an alternative to the notion of defensive teaching, one that allows for a range of teachers’ responses, but also captures the necessary negotiations teachers face when confronted with competing demands. The construct I employ, *ambitious teaching*, assumes that teaching is nuanced, complex, and contextualized both because of and in spite of state social studies tests and the consequences they

hold. Drawing on the ideas of John Dewey, Joseph Schwab, David Hawkins, and Lee Shulman, I argue that ambitious teaching develops (a) when teachers know their subject matter well and see within it the potential to enrich their students’ lives; (b) when teachers know their students well, which includes understanding the kinds of lives their students lead, how these youngsters think about and perceive the world, and the idea that they are far more capable than they, and most others, believe them to be; and (c) when teachers know how to create the necessary space for themselves and their students in environments in which others (e.g., administrators and other teachers) may not appreciate either of their efforts.²⁶ In other words, ambitious teachers understand deeply both their subject matter and their students, and they are willing to push hard to create opportunities for powerful teaching and learning despite contextual factors (e.g., state curriculum, state tests, unsupportive administrators and colleagues) that may be pushing them in different directions.

Examples of ambitious teaching emerge throughout the research literature. A particularly good example is Jill Gradwell’s case study of Sara Cooper who teaches in spite of, rather than because of, the New York state history test. Cooper is a novice eighth-grade U.S. history teacher with a challenging class composition—equal parts gifted, “regular,” and special education students.²⁷ Cooper does not ignore the state eighth-grade social studies test. She does not talk much about the test in class, but she takes some actions (e.g., after-school review sessions) that she believes will advantage her students. That said, the test figures as only one of several factors influencing Cooper’s pedagogical decisions. Equally important are her ideas about the subject matter in question and her ideas about the particular students she teaches.²⁸ It is a complex dynamic, to be sure: Cooper must juggle her commitment to teaching the big ideas of history with her eager, but diverse students. And she must do so knowing that the state exam may demand that her students show only a hint of what they know and understand.

Facing up to that dynamic is what distinguishes an ambitious teacher. Cooper and other ambitious teachers know that they must make difficult choices and do so with uncertain results and with uncertain support from colleagues, administrators, and others. Also, like other ambitious teachers, Cooper is not always satisfied with the choices she makes. What keeps her going, however, is the realization that she can choose differently in the future.²⁹

Conclusion

In some ways, state-level social studies tests, of both high and low stakes varieties, are changing teaching in important ways. Until recently, relatively few teachers had to deal with standardized tests, particularly those with significant consequences attached. That social studies teachers today factor the exams into their classroom practices should surprise no one. How they do so, however, has been more a matter of speculation than evidence to this point.

Some observers conclude that teachers will react defensively, by slavishly enacting changes in their content, instruction, and assessments that mirror the presumed dictates of their state exams. Such reactions do occur. But evident throughout the research literature are cases of teachers who choose otherwise. Ambitious teachers take no elixir that offers immunity from the influence of their state exams. Instead, they understand the challenges that state tests pose and they factor those challenges into the mix of ideas and influences they consider when creating and teaching instructional units. The results are not always satisfactory: Ambitious teaching is no nirvana where every lesson meets every child’s every need. But ambitious teachers know that if they keep their eye on the big ideas of history and the potential that their students bring to class they can effectively navigate the sometimes uncertain waters of their teaching contexts. Researchers have yet to fully map the different routes that ambitious teachers take from their more pedestrian peers, but by continuing to explore and document teachers’

pedagogical decision making, they offer the possibility of illustrating the kind of powerful teaching that all children deserve. 📖

Notes

1. S. G. Grant and Catherine Horn, "The State of State-Level History Testing," in *Measuring History: Cases of High-Stakes Testing across the U.S.*, ed. S. G. Grant (Greenwich, Conn.: Information Age Publishing, 2006).
2. William Gaudelli, "The Future of High-Stakes History Assessment: Possible Scenarios, Potential Outcomes," in *Measuring History*.
3. William Firestone and David Mayrowetz, "Rethinking 'High Stakes': Lessons from the United States and England and Wales," *Teachers College Record* 102, no. 4 (2000).
4. Stephanie van Hover, "Teaching History in the Old Dominion: The Impact of Virginia's Accountability Reform on Seven Secondary Beginning History Teachers," in *Measuring History*; Elizabeth Yeager and Matthew Pinder, "Does Anyone Really Understand This Test? Florida High School Social Studies Teachers' Efforts to Make Sense of the FCAT," in *Measuring History*.
5. Avner Segall, "Teaching in the Age of Accountability: Measuring History or Measuring up to It?," in *Measuring History*; van Hover, "Teaching History in the Old Dominion."
6. Letitia Fickel, "Paradox of Practice: Expanding and Contracting Curriculum in a High-Stakes Climate," in *Measuring History*; Cinthia Salinas, "Teaching in a High-Stakes Testing Setting: What Becomes of Teacher Knowledge?," in *Measuring History*; Kenneth Vogler, "The Impact of a High School Graduation Examination on Mississippi Social Studies Teachers' Instructional Practices," in *Measuring History*.
7. Jane Bolgatz, "Using Primary Documents with Fourth-Grade Students: Talking about Racism While Preparing for State-Level Tests," in *Measuring History*; Jill M. Gradwell, "Teaching in Spite of, Rather Than Because of, the Test: A Case of Ambitious History Teaching in New York State," in *Measuring History*; Grant, *History Lessons: Teaching, Learning, and Testing in U.S. High School Classrooms* (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2003).
8. Fickel, "Paradox of Practice: Expanding and Contracting Curriculum in a High-Stakes Climate"; David Gerwin and Francesco Visone, "The Freedom to Teach: Contrasting History Teaching in Elective and State-Tested Courses," *Theory and Research in Social Education* 34, no. 2 (2006).
9. Gradwell, "Teaching in Spite of, Rather Than Because of, the Test: A Case of Ambitious History Teaching in New York State"; Grant, *History Lessons*; Grant, "More Journey Than End: A Case of Ambitious Teaching," in *Wise Social Studies Teaching in an Age of High-Stakes Testing*, ed. E. A. Yeager and O.L. Davis, Jr. (Greenwich, Conn.: Information Age Publishing, 2005).
10. Grant, *History Lessons*.
11. Ann Marie Smith, "Negotiating Control and Protecting the Private: History Teachers and the Virginia Standards of Learning," in *Measuring History*; Vogler, "The Impact of a High School Graduation Examination on Mississippi Social Studies Teachers' Instructional Practices."
12. Bolgatz, "Using Primary Documents with Fourth-

Grade Students: Talking about Racism While Preparing for State-Level Tests"; Gradwell, "Teaching in Spite of, Rather Than Because of, the Test: A Case of Ambitious History Teaching in New York State"; Grant, *History Lessons*.

13. David Tyack and Larry Cuban, *Tinkering toward Utopia* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995).
14. Grant et al., "When Increasing Stakes Need Not Mean Increasing Standards: The Case of the New York State Global History and Geography Exam," *Theory and Research in Social Education* 30, no. 4 (2002).
15. Grant, "Locating Authority over Content and Pedagogy: Cross-Current Influences on Teachers' Thinking and Practice," *Theory and Research in Social Education* 24, no. 3 (1996); Grant, "More Journey Than End: A Case of Ambitious Teaching."
16. Catherine Cornbleth, "What Constrains Meaningful Social Studies Teaching," *Social Education* 63, no. 3 (2002).
17. R. Stake and J. Easley, *Case Studies in Science Education* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois, 1978).
18. Grant, "Locating Authority over Content and Pedagogy: Cross-Current Influences on Teachers' Thinking and Practice."
19. See O. L. Davis's useful distinction between "best" and "wise" teaching practices in *Wise Social Studies Teaching*.
20. Linda McNeil, *Contradictions of Control* (New York: Routledge, 1988).
21. Susie Burroughs, "Testy Times for Social Studies," *Social Education* 66, no. 5 (2002); Vogler, "The Impact of a High School Graduation Examination on Mississippi Social Studies Teachers' Instructional Practices."
22. Segall, "Teaching in the Age of Accountability: Measuring History or Measuring up to It?," 116.
23. Grant, *History Lessons*.
24. Stephen Thornton, *Teaching Social Studies that Matters: Curriculum for Active Learning* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2005).
25. Segall, "Teaching in the Age of Accountability: Measuring History or Measuring up to It?" 123.
26. Grant, *History Lessons*; Grant, "More Journey Than End: A Case of Ambitious Teaching."
27. Gradwell, "Teaching in Spite of, Rather Than Because of, the Test: A Case of Ambitious History Teaching in New York State."
28. S.G. Grant and Jill M. Gradwell, "The Sources are Many: Exploring History Teachers' Selection of Classroom Texts," *Theory and Research in Social Education* 33, no. 2 (2005).
29. Other cases of ambitious teaching include Grant, "More Journey Than End: A Case of Ambitious Teaching," in *Wise Social Studies Teaching*; Andrea Libresco, "How She Stopped Worrying and Learned to Love the Test ... Sort of," in *Wise Social Studies Teaching*; Karen Riley, Elizabeth Wilson, and Terry Fogg, "Transforming the Spirit of Teaching through Wise Practice: Observations of Two Alabama Social Studies Teachers," *Social Education* 64, no. 6 (2000); Sam Wineburg and Suzanne Wilson, "Subject Matter Knowledge in the Teaching of History" in *Advances in Research on Teaching*, Vol. 3, ed. Jere Brophy (Greenwich, Conn.: JAI, 1991).

FREE Online Module Available for Constitution Day 2007!

Visit www.BillofRightsInstitute.org/NCSS1 to view our new FREE Online Interactive Constitution Day Activity that includes:

- **Madison's Notes are Missing**—It's your students' job to go back in time and report on the Constitutional Convention first-hand.
- **Founder Match Game**—Match a quote with the Founder who said it.
- **Constitution Crossword**—Using audio, visual, and textual clues help complete a puzzle based on the Founding.
- **PLUS**—Lesson plans, biographical essays and other FREE resources.



Visit www.BillofRightsInstitute.org/NCSS1 or call (800) 838-7870, ext. 22 for more information.

200 N. Glebe Road, Suite 200, Arlington, VA 22203

S. G. GRANT is professor of social studies education and chair of the Department of Learning and Instruction at the University at Buffalo in New York. Email: ssgrant@buffalo.edu.