

Educational Leaders Actions and Reactions
to the 2010 New York State 3 – 8 Assessment Results

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

The world of high stakes testing has become a reality throughout our nation. While assessment in of itself can be a powerful tool for measuring student understanding and progress; programs such as the New York State grades 3-8 assessment program has created those understandings along with many misunderstandings and unintended consequences. Hence, while it is certain that the exams are here to stay, the question explored in the following paper examined the roles of district and building leaders in coping with the most recent mathematics grades 3-8 assessment results.

Generally speaking most educators understand the role of testing in schools and its rise to preeminence in our most recent past, undoubtedly, a by-product of the *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) legislation. While testing can have many benefits for schools, as educators grapple with the needs of students, this new focus on testing, in our Nation in general and our State specifically, has often created an atmosphere that does not embrace growth, but, rather, one that inspires cynicism, punishment and fear (Hargreaves and Fink, 2006). It has literally changed the breadth and depth of the elementary experience for students and has created a narrowing of the curriculum that ultimately has changed the day to day educational experience for students. As such, it is often at odds with the notion of constructivist education. It has changed the foci of districts, buildings and classrooms and has created what Popkewitz would call a “technical” model school (Popkewitz, 1982). These consequences became even greater during the summer and fall of 2010 throughout the State of New York.

In the fall of 2010, school districts throughout New York dealt with the most recent and recalibrated grades 3-8 NYS assessments in English Language Arts (ELA) and Math in a variety

of ways. Essentially, the State Education department changed the cut scores that would determine a students' standing and with those changes in level, many more students tested as *not proficient*. These new cut scores sent shock waves throughout the State.

As reported in *The New York Times*, principals like Linda Singer of PS 255 in Brooklyn put it best, "When I got these scores I thought I would die – everything has changed." Simultaneously, many State officials, including Chancellor Tisch of the Board of Regents claimed "These results will finally provide real, unimpeachable evidence to be used for accountability." Hence, the disconnect felt by schools in the field from the State Department of Education was palpable for many administrators and teachers concerning.

Predictably the greatest losses were felt in New York City; however, the declining scores were also felt throughout districts on Long Island. On Long Island, the rapidity by which scores fell as a result of the change to cut scores in some districts was extremely acute. In our study we looked at how district and building leaders dealt with these declining math scores.

Specifically, we looked at two districts and one school within each of them. One district and its elementary school, henceforth known as school A, is located in Nassau county. The other district and its middle school, henceforth known as school B, is located in Suffolk County. It should be noted, that neither of these districts are particularly wealthy as measured by the number of students receiving free and reduced lunch. Additionally, neither has enjoyed strong scores relative to their neighbors in Nassau and Suffolk counties respectively in the past. These gaps were widened as a result of the most recent scores and recalibrated cut points. Our study looked at the ways in which school leaders acted and reacted in the face of these latest scores and the degree to which these responses were meaningful, effective and sustainable.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

- Popkewitz Model- According to Popkewitz, (1982), schools are defined as being technical, illusory, or constructivist
- Technical schools- Popkewitz noted that schools that rely overtly on top-down forms of leadership and management wherein the duties of the day take precedence over learning are best described as technical.
- Illusory Schools- Schools in which the activities of the day and the purposes of school seem unrelated are often defined as illusory in nature.
- Constructivist Schools- Schools represented by a strong culture of collaboration in addition to teaching and learning models which rely heavily on depth and student constructed meaning, are defined as constructivist.
- New York State 3-8 Testing Program. – Annual exams given by New York State in grades 3-8 in English Language Arts and Mathematics to measure student proficiency. These exams are used to measure student, school, and district performance in these areas and are used for accountability.
- ADC Model- This model, created by Dr. Frank Smith, is used to measure schools in the following categories: instruction, organization, governance and accountability.
- Sustainable Leadership- According to Hargreaves and Fink, sustainable leadership embodies the following principles: depth, length, breadth, justice, diversity, resourcefulness and conservation

Chapter 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

What does the literature suggest would be the appropriate and meaningful responses by school leaders in the face of declining test scores? Certainly, data and accountability have their place in schools. Schools should use assessment data and information to best help their staffs understand their school populations and ultimately assist their students in their learning. Too often schools and districts find themselves in a reactive, rather than a proactive stance when the rubber hits the road in terms of test scores. This leads to districts and schools that would best be described by Popkewitz as illusory and technical in nature (Popkewitz, 1982) Schools and their leaders need to work hard to understand the data with depth in order to understand its meanings and ultimately decide what would be the best way to educate students.

The research looks at these issues through a variety of lenses. First and foremost is the lens of accountability. According to Frank Smith in the Advocacy Design Center (ADC) model, effective schools ask themselves tough questions and have a meaningful relationship between inquiry and accountability. On the other hand, less effective schools view themselves as victims. Smith maintains that data must be made public to ensure accountability (Smith, n.d.). By doing so, schools are forced to work together to problem solve in a constructive and meaningful way as opposed to the more “technical” top-down methods that many schools and districts experience.

Smith, like Popkewitz, looks at the importance of organization in schools. Smith believes that in more successful schools, teachers do not operate as independent agents; rather there is a strong sense of interdependence and more public collaboration. Rather than send students to the

resident “experts”, such as the school reading or math specialist; essentially, all students are viewed as “our kids” not “my kids” or “your kids” (Smith, n.d.).

Perhaps one of the more critical lenses to view this issue lies in the notion of the tests themselves and the degree to which they fit, or do not fit into, a more meaningful and constructivist model. Resnick’s work raises the question of the NYS 3-8 Math and ELA assessment program and the degree to which these exams tests for higher order thinking skills. She makes the case for constructivism, and states, “we need direct assessments of the kinds of complex reasoning and problem-solving skills that constitute higher order thinking.”(Resnick, n.d.) It appears that current testing practices in American education do not provide very powerful tools for assessing the effects of efforts to teach thinking and reasoning.

Hence, Resnick argues that, “our current testing practices may in fact interfere with cultivation of the kind of higher order skills that are desired.” She describes these tests as “ill suited to assessing the kinds of integrated thinking that we call higher order.” (Resnick, n.d.)

As districts and their schools deal with large scale assessment programs they begin to narrow the curriculum and in many ways create a test-based, isolated curriculum, rather than a standards-based constructivist one. As a result, students are deprived of an overtly interdisciplinary, connective curriculum; rather, they are exposed to what Resnick refers to as isolated instruction. This inevitably leads to schools that do not assist students in thinking broadly and with depth.

Additionally, Resnick notes the importance of creating curriculum that fosters higher-order thinking skills for all students, not just those that are considered advanced. She states, “Higher order thinking is the hallmark of successful learning at all levels--not only the more advanced” (Resnick, n.d.)

If in fact, constructivism is one of the approaches necessary to creating a more meaningful educational experience for students, the question of who creates the curriculum moves to the forefront. Peterson and Knapp note the importance of the teacher and his/her interactions with students as the most pivotal factor in creating school improvement. This aspect of culture is meaningful given the sheer amount of work of administrators, supervisors, curriculum specialists, counselors and other educators who do not directly interact with students. Yet despite what might be considered an imperative to include teachers in the process, they “are often the most excluded from the scholarly discourse around issues of teaching and learning.” (Peterson and Knapp, n.d.)

Additionally, many districts look to outside experts such as the Teachers’ College Literacy Specialists, rather than create capacity from within. Often these districts will bring in “outside experts” to assist the district or school in responding to the needs based on test scores. According to Hargreaves and Dawe, as with the Hunter movement of the 1980’s, teachers today may be, “dubious of research findings which trainers present as, ‘indisputable fact’.” (Hargreaves and Dawe, 1990) In doing so, the leaders take their teachers and themselves out of the equation and in essence hitch their wagon to the all knowing power of a particular program to resolve an issue within the district. This not only reinforces teacher paralysis, but more importantly stops a cycle of sustainability as teachers and leaders await the work of the “outside experts.” (Hargreaves and Fink, 2006).

Despite differences in grade levels, the two schools in our study function almost identically. Based on Elmore’s work, these two schools would best be described as places where the day is divided into discrete units of time, where a single teacher works with a group of children in one classroom with an instructional model that could best be described as teacher

initiated-whole group instruction. The focus of work in these classrooms often revolves around textbooks (Elmore, 1987). He goes further to describe this type of schooling as, “Patch Processing”, where education can be compared to a conveyor belt. Elmore believes that this style of schooling is a function of the choices made by school leaders, because it is, “...the most efficient, predictable, and reliable way to handle the large volume of clients that public schools are forced to accommodate.” (Elmore, 1987)

Additionally, as poor results come to the surface, administrators, as well as teachers, begin to look for reasons beyond teaching and learning, that they believe impact test results. Most notably, Popkewitz describes how administrators and teachers, who work in poorer communities, feel that the shortcomings of a school can be attributed to the inadequacies of the neighborhoods which they serve. He states, “Teachers generally believed that achievement was only possible for a few of their students. To teachers and principals alike, these communities were characterized by poverty, broken homes, and a class culture indifferent or hostile to academic values which create social conditions that prevent students from learning.” (Popkewitz, 1980)

Hence, accountability is attributed to a child’s background and socio-economic status. Therein, lay the reasons for any limitations in their education. Immediately the accountability is seen as reflection of the neighborhoods in which the schools are located and the commensurate poverty levels, race, and demographics of those communities. This stereotyping deprives children of a fair and equal education.

Both of our sample schools began immediately to address the issues at hand with different remedies and quick- fix solutions. As both schools experienced a decrease in students achieving proficiency, these new results dominated the decision making process in these schools. Neither school attempted to create sustainable improvement but rather, both were concerned with

immediate results. Of course the literature would speak to an absolutely and diametrically different problem solving process. According to Hargreaves and Fink, to look at scores without deepening teaching and learning is utterly meaningless. As they state, “It’s no use raising test scores if they do not reflect deep and broad learning ...expending effort on testing, then achievement and achievement gaps, and leaving learning till last or omitting it all together” (Hargreaves and Fink, 2006).

Setting targets for a particular school requires patience and collaboration. Achievement goals should be agreed upon by all involved. If not, resentment and a lack of trust will surely follow. The research would suggest that shared leadership contributes to the organizational capacity of the school and to the nature of the professional community, both of which contribute to achievement. Effective leaders plan for sustainable leadership by not relying on a single person but instead by creating a culture of initiative and opportunity within the school so that leadership is distributed (Hargreaves and Fink, 2006). Further to this point, Gerald Grant states that the way authority is instituted in a school, as well as the manner in which it is exercised, shapes the intellectual and moral character of a school.

As stated by Hargreaves and Fink, the issue of achievement in schools would best be advanced through a model of sustainability that holds depth, length, breadth, justice, diversity, resourcefulness and conservation as core values (Hargreaves and Fink , 2006).

Chapter 3

METHODS & PROCEDURES

The larger objective of this research was to answer the question of leadership actions and reactions to low performance on NYS assessments, through an analysis of the implementation of the educational plans and of the impact of those plans on the educational community. We looked at both the quantitative and qualitative data of the districts. The study focused on the response of district leadership to the 2010 math scores and to the teachers' response to those initiatives.

The quantitative data was taken from the New York State School District report cards and from the New York State Basic Educational Data forms (BEDS) from various years between and including the years 2006-2010. Numerical data were used in this study, but the focus of the research was qualitative because the focus of the research was cultural as it related to the decisions made by leadership within the two districts discussed.

The data selected for the quantitative research focused on math scores for grades 3-4 and 7-8 for District A and District B respectively. This sample was selected because the greatest decrease in proficiency occurred in these grade ranges as reflected in the reported data concerning math competency as elucidated in Table 1 below.

Table 1
 School District A & B
 New York State Education Department District Performance

	Number tested	2006-2007 Proficiency	Number tested	2007-2008 Proficiency	Number tested	2008-2009 Proficiency	Number tested	2009-2010 Proficiency
Grade 3 (School District A)	434	90.5%	499	89.8%	488	91.0%	485	52.2%
Grade 4 (School District A)	463	81.3%	443	88.2%	482	90.0%	487	49.5%
Grade 7 (School District B)	370	71%	331	89%	288	93%	302	46%
Grade 8 (School District B)	323	62%	370	69%	311	84%	297	42%

Demographic data collected show a recent increase in the number of Hispanic students. This is in line with current trends and creates a new set of dynamics when coupled with the increase of English Language Learners (ELL's). This phenomenon has been well documented by Hughes (2010). The demographic data shown in table 2 also help to give clarity to the larger population changes which are occurring throughout Nassau and Suffolk Counties in general(Hughes, 2010). These changes are important when considering their potential for impact on scores. Additional demographic data which were included are listed below in table 2.

Table 2
 School District A & B
 Demographic Factors

		2005	2009
Eligible for free lunch	District A	28.2%	34 %

	District B	38.2 %	41.0 %
Reduced priced lunch	District A	8.3 %	6 %
	District B	10.2 %	8.1 %
LEP	District A	12 %	15 %
	District B	0.7 %	1.5 %
Ungraded Students	District A	(52) 0.83 %	(35)0.55 %
	District B	(78) 2.3 %	(32) 0.52 %
Black/African American	District A	66 %	56 %
	District B	15 %	13 %
Hispanic or Latino	District A	31.5 %	42 %
	District B	7.0 %	14.3%
Student Suspensions	District A	8.5 %	9 %
	District B	7.5 %	11.0 %
Annual Attendance	District A	93.8 %	95 %
	District B	92.3 %	96.2 %

These factors are merely meant to give context to the schools studied. As stated above, our research sought to examine the effect on school culture based on initiatives that were taken by school leaders in the face of the sudden drop in math proficiency based on recalibrated results from the New York State Educational Department. Within the context of these initiatives, the educational plans of School District A and School District B were analyzed. The purpose of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of the initiatives which took place as a result of a critical incident as seen through the Popkewitz Model (Popkewitz, et al., 1982). It will be shown that the reactive responses concerning the levels of math proficiency achieved within the districts became the ends rather than the means to bring about long term and sustainable change.

In order to understand the basis of the methods and procedures, it is critical to have a working understanding of the Popkewitz et al. model (1982). This chapter will identify and describe the technical, illusory, and or constructivist elements of the cultures that embody

Districts A and B (Popkewitz, et al, 1982). The structure of the analysis is designed with the Popkewitz model as a basis for understanding. In this format, the example below shows the critical incident, the significance, and the culture identified as shown in Table 3 (Popkewitz, et al, 1982).

Table 3
 “Examples of the Popkewitz Model in action”

Critical Incident	Significance	Culture
Low test scores on Math assessment. Principal creates a study team to analyze the exams and find weaknesses in current teaching program as it relates to the previous exam and turns them into units of study for the current class.	Administrators and teachers work together to analyze the exam and then make curricular decisions based on perceived needs of students.	Illusory
Low test scores on Math assessment. Principal creates a study team to analyze the current curriculum. Teachers are encouraged to look for ways to develop meaning based on the Standards with the hope that students will do well on the exam if they are exposed to rich and deep learning experiences.	Teachers create a curriculum that is student-centered in the hopes that this will generate meaningful learning that will ultimately translate to higher achievement in the future.	Constructivist
Low test scores on Math assessment. Principal informs staff through a memo and subsequent staff meetings that they must review for the upcoming exam on a daily basis with review books in their classes.	Teachers work with students on a great deal of rote and seemingly unexciting school work to prepare for the next round of tests.	Technical

The Critical incident used throughout the study is low math proficiency within the districts and schools reviewed. For the purposes of the study two cultural identifiers, actual results and personnel responsible have been added to complete the analysis of the selected districts. Tables 4 and 5 outline the steps taken by our representative schools.

Table 4
 SCHOOL DISTRICT A

Critical Incident: LOW MATH SCORES	Desired Goal	Decision Maker	Actual result	Culture
Increase AIS math teachers	Decrease teacher/student ratio	Central Admin.	Special Education students excluded	Technical illusory

	With temporary teachers		from program	
AIS Teacher Transfers	Assist in schools with large numbers of low proficiency	Central Admin.	All school's scores fell below proficiency no transfers	Technical
Push-In Model	Specialists will help student performance	Principal	Created teacher resentment	Technical
Scantron Testing 3x a year with Benchmark mid-term and Final	Facilitate data driven info/areas of weakness in learning	Central Admin.	Teachers and Parents not informed of results or how to interpret results.	Technical
Pacing Chart Envision	Inform teachers of time schedule to cover breath of material	Director of Math	Teaching does not reflect higher order Thinking skills	Technical
Cut back on field trips and enrichment assemblies	Increase instructional time in the class room	Principal	Decrease student prior knowledge base. Decrease parent involvement	Technical illusory
Staff Development	Increase knowledge	Central Admin	Created teacher resentment	Technical illusory

Table 5
SCHOOL DISTRICT B

Critical Incident: LOW MATH SCORES	Desired Goal	Decision Maker	Actual result	Culture
Regents Math / Pre-Algebra (Shift Pre-Alg to ICT & Regent Math to 8th Grade)	New Curriculum Early HS Credit for ALL Students	Chairpersons Principals District Office	More work on ICT Teacher Material at Higher Level then Students	Technical Illusory
New Textbooks New Reference Materials	Improve Student Performance	Principals	Textbooks not in yet (Funding)	Technical
Extra Help After School	Improve Scores for ALL students	Math Teachers	Improved scores of those students who went	Technical
Dash Board Data	Improve Student Performance on Exams	Math Teachers Assistant Principals	Data Collected Nothing Implemented	Technical Illusory
Revising Pacing Calendar for all students	Improve Teaching of Teachers	Department Chairs	Teachers do not reflect higher order questions "Speed Teach"	Technical
AIS Push In	Improve Teacher/Student Ratio	Teachers Assistant Principals	Slight Improvement to scores for all students	Technical
Think Link Computer Analysis Program	Quicker Assessment of student performance for	Principals	Took "borderline" students and gave them extra 1 on 1 time to improve score	Technical

	future exams			
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The data were analyzed according to emerging patterns and the results were assessed to see if the question of whether or not the leadership in the districts was addressing the problem of poor math assessment results in a constructivist manner. The sample selected for this study in School District A was 33 elementary teachers , one elementary school administrator, 1 math supervisor and the decision makers located in an administrative cohort known as central administration were also part of the sample.

For the purpose of the study when any or all of the administrators made a decision without teacher or parent inclusion that critical incident directive was given the label of “technical culture”. If the critical incident directive was an approach that included all stake holders then it was given the label of constructivist according to the Popkewitz model.

Throughout the study, most of the information was disseminated to the stakeholders by memos, at staff meetings, or through public announcements at parent-teacher meetings or sudden unannounced changes. These types of forums are certainly part of a highly technical culture (Popkewitz, et al., 1982).

Chapter 5

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to assess the implementation of the educational plans of Districts A & B in the face of declining Math Scores. This study focused on and analyzed cultures of districts and how those districts responded to issues that affect the quality of learning in the face of declining assessment results. The study also investigated the response of the stakeholders to the directives which lead to the more important question of, was the response to declining math scores, on the part of school leaders, meaningful and sustainable?

When analyzing those results through the lens of the Pokewitz model it was clear that many of the decisions made by administrators led to the reinforcement of “technical and illusory” schools. The numerous initiatives which were taken had a negative affect on the learning environment of the students and the effectiveness of the teachers concerning the application of higher order thinking skills throughout the curriculum. Sustainability, which is essential to the learning process, was absent and showed little evidence of being addressed throughout the process. The answer to the larger questions of whether or not these actions were appropriate will not be discussed until their effectiveness can be measured. The authors caution that one administration of the Math exam may not make that apparent. While it may be possible that the scores will increase it is more plausible that even if they do they will not reflect a deep, broad, sustainable or constructivist model

Both districts created work that was designed in isolation and was unrelated to quality learning. The teachers within these two districts had little or no professional autonomy over the structure of their daily course work. The leadership was focused on managing the instructional program with quick responses that appeared to be efficient. Perhaps, If the districts cited had a more constructivist philosophy, over a period of time, an environment would result that would embody invested stakeholders, who would contribute to the desired results of higher order thinking ; which would in turn be reflected in higher levels of achievement in math scores. Instead, initiatives such as decreasing teacher-student ratios were illusory, as the changes begun were either cancelled, or, the changes actually increased the student ratios while excluding the special education population. The manner in which the initiatives were put into effect had little or no bearing on the skills that are needed to address the kinds of complex reasoning and problem-solving skills that constitute higher order thinking (Resnick,n.d.),nor did they address the needs of the total student population reflected in the changing demographics to acquire the ability to express themselves on this level of reasoning as it relates to problem solving.

The study findings indicate that it is important for today's educational leaders to develop a constructivist philosophy that would embody reflection and discussion in a public venue which would foster a connection between what is to be done and how it would be accomplished. We believe this would result in a school community that shares data and looks for collective solutions based on that data. Research would suggest that In order for the changes to be sustainable every stakeholder must have access to the decision making process and believe that they are an important part of the change. It is clear that quick fixes are deceptive and illusory in nature. They often give the impression that progress and change are taking place when in fact the core culture remains unchanged as the technicalities change. In doing so, school leaders risk the possibility of future progress. It is clear, that openness about data, constructivism and shared

decision making are the key catalysts for school leaders when looking to create real and sustainable change in an effort to better student learning and achievement outcomes.

For further study, we would recommend the following: It would be important to look at schools and districts that have adopted a constructivist model and research their scores relative to the districts cited herein. It would then be important to look at those districts for the ways in which they affect change without falling into the technical/illusory trap. Additionally we would suggest a similar study in relation to ELA scores as well.

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