Teacher Policy Institute Project

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The Perceptions of Wyoming Elementary Teachers Concerning the Effect of NCLB Accountability Mandates and High-Stakes Testing on Their Instructional Practices

RESEARCH OVERVIEW

A mixed-methods (quantitative and qualitative) research study was conducted to investigate Wyoming elementary teachers' perceptions of the effect of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) accountability plan and high-stakes testing (the WyCAS, Wyoming's Comprehensive Assessment System, in particular) on their instructional practices.

Since the January 2002 federal implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLBA), our nation has made a huge investment in an effort to achieve what seems to be a worthy goal. That goal is to ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach proficiency on challenging state academic achievement standards as measured by state standardized tests. It is contended that this will result in the closing of the achievement gap between high- and low-performing children, especially the achievement gap between minority and non-minority students, and between economically disadvantaged children and their more economically advantaged peers. Although this goal seems to be worthy and good in theory, there is uncertainty concerning its outcome. Without further study, we cannot be certain of the effects of the NCLB accountability plan and its resulting high-stakes standardized testing on teachers and their instructional practices.

To provide the broadest picture of NCLB it is important to ascertain, as part of that picture, the ways in which the NCLBs mandated high-stakes standardized tests and Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) goals are affecting classroom instruction. Is this act affecting instruction in the intended educationally positive manner to assist teachers in closing the well-documented achievement gap, having little or no impact on teachers' instructional strategies, or impacting classroom instruction in an unintended negative way. To add to the current body of evidence, this research study accesses the perceptions of first- through sixth-grade elementary teachers in Wyoming concerning their opinions of the NCLBA and high-stakes standardized testing and their perceptions of the effects of the NCLB accountability plan, its accompanying AYP goals and high-stakes standardized testing on their instructional practices.

The primary research question for this study was: What are the perceptions/opinions of a representative sample of Wyoming's elementary teachers concerning the effect of the NCLB accountability plan and its consequent high-stakes testing on instructional practices?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The issue of school, teacher, and student accountability is foremost in the minds of many U.S. citizens. It is widely believed that children need to achieve well in school in order to perform well in the job market as adults. Furthermore, it is universally accepted that the quality of our nation's schools is largely responsible for keeping and improving our competitive edge in the world's marketplace (Abrams & Madaus, 2003; Phelps, 2003; Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003; U.S. Department of Education, 2002). To assure the superiority of the economic and global future of the United States, it has become a national, state, and local priority to improve the quality of instruction in an effort to close the achievement gap between non-Asian minorities and low socio-economic status students, and their Asian and White middle- and upper-class peers (Lecker, 2005; Phelps, 2003; Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003; U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

A Brief Historical Account

On October 4, 1957, the Russians launched the first space satellite moving ahead of the U.S. in the space race. This caused widespread panic that the U.S. was falling behind other competitive nations academically. The blame was placed on the schools which resulted in more rigorous science and math instruction with progress measured by standardized achievement tests (Lemann, 2000; Stoskopf, 2002). Then, in 1983, the Reagan administration published a report entitled *A Nation at Risk* which indicated that the U.S. was losing its competitive edge in the international market. Once again, schools were blamed for these problems and were looked on as the panacea of the problem. The main cure was to produce rigorous standards for better system coherence and efficiency. Standardized testing, once again the main measure to determine educational success, was used to assess student progress toward the standards as well as determine school and teacher effectiveness (Meier, 2000; Stoskopf, 2002; Tyack & Cubin, 1995). In the past 10-15 years, as a result of pressure to seek a cure for the perceived shortcomings of public education, every state or school district has established a comprehensive set of academic content standards for what students need to know at each grade span (K-4, 5-8, 9-12), or grade level (Burley, 2002; Marzano, 2002; Meier, 2000; Popham, 2002; Stoskopf, 2002). Implementation of these standards was an attempt to create a more rigorous and challenging curriculum for students and to achieve equal educational opportunity for all students regardless of race/ethnicity, socio-economic status, disability status, or English proficiency (Meier, 2000; U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

The federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLBA) of 2001, a Bush-administration revision of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, was signed into law on January 8, 2002. It is currently being implemented nationwide. The NCLBA had an accountability component with the purpose of assuring that public-school teachers provide adequate and effective instruction for all students and that all students achieve proficient or advanced mastery of grade-level standards. (Abrams & Madaus, 2003; Barone, 2004; Lashway, 2002; U.S. Department of Education, 2002). This accountability was measured predominately through the use of state-adopted standardized tests. The NCLB accountability plan's intention was to equalize educational opportunities and the achievement of minority, lower socio-economic status students and their White, middle- and upper-class peers (Phelps, 2003; Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003; U.S. Department of Education, 2002). The minorities being targeted by NCLB are Blacks, Hispanics, and Native Americans (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Students of Asian descent generally have little or no trouble achieving academically (Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003).

Standardized Tests: Appropriate or Inappropriate

Thernstrom and Thernstrom (2003) contended that ". . . test results tell us precisely what we need to know if we are to have any hope of refashioning instruction to bring the performance of black and Hispanic students up to the level of Asians and whites" (p. 25). Phelps (2003) listed a number of reasons why standardized tests are respected by a large proportion of the public. One of these reasons is that standardized tests provide information that is gathered from a source outside the school. He (Phelps, 2003) explained that standardized tests are the only objective measure of student achievement and they are usually superior in quality when compared with teacher-designed assessments simply because teachers have had little training in testing and measurement. Because teachers take into consideration a variety of factors of which subject-matter mastery is only one, standardized tests are the only pure measure of academic achievement. The results of these tests are standardized and, therefore, reliable when compared with the results obtained by other sources. Additionally, standardized tests help in providing clarity, focus, direction, and coherence to curriculum and instruction (Phelps, 2003; Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003; U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Phelps (2003) explained that standardized tests that have high-stakes serve as a motivation for students to learn more than they otherwise would. The United States Department of Education (2002) contended that high-stakes standardized tests also serve as a motivational factor to push teachers and schools to provide a higher-quality education for the students they serve. He (Phelps, 2003) contended that standardized tests serve as an affirmation for students who are academically gifted or who work especially hard to achieve academically, similar to the rewards given to children who excel athletically or musically.

Popham (2001, p. 15) stated, “The most serious consideration in the generation and use of a high-stakes testing program is whether the tests being employed actually help or hinder the quality of the education children receive.” Many educational theorists and researchers are not against standardized tests per se. Instead, they are leery of the suitability of these tests and the way the results are used. These educational theorists and researchers fear that the way the tests are presently being implemented is damaging to the quality of schooling (Abrams & Madaus, 2003; Burley, 2002; Meier, 2002; Popham, 2001, 2004; Prescott, 2001). Popham (2001) asserted that, if unexciting test preparation drill activities succeed in raising students' test scores, the standardized test is probably not appropriate because it essentially measures only low-level skills.

Kozol (2005) supported Popham's contention. As a result of his school observations and interviews of teachers and principals, Kozol (2005) insisted that Title I schools serving lower socioeconomic populations and more minority students tend to respond to low test scores in a way that suffocates engaged and meaningful learning. Teachers in these schools felt compelled to stay on task in the teaching of isolated skills to better prepare their students for the standardized test. The principals in these schools also placed more pressure on these teachers to produce higher test scores. Some researchers and educational indicated that, when teachers strive to raise their students' test scores through a sterilized skill and drill format, they risk extinguishing their students' love of learning theorists. As a result, they may drive some students out of school or encourage them to avoid school, particularly those students who are disadvantaged socio-economically or intellectually or who are second language learners (Burley, 2002; Kohn, 2000; Meier, 2002; Ohanian, 1999; Popham, 2001). Sadly, these are the students whose academic skills the NCLBA is focusing on improving. Kozol (2005) explained that teachers in schools that perform relatively well on standardized tests feel more comfortable allowing time for teachable moments that do not specifically match the standards. These teachers also feel empowered to implement the often more time consuming student-centered instruction that immerses children in the learning of important concepts.

Standardized tests can be inappropriate for measuring student achievement or school quality for a variety of reasons. These reasons include a testing-teaching mismatch (Popham, 2001), ‘apples to oranges’ comparisons where one group of students is compared with a completely different group of students ((Bracey, 1998; Kohn, 2001; Popham, 2001), and norm-referenced tests’ requirement for score spread to increase reliability (Bracey, 1998; Burley, 2002; FairTest, 2004a, 2004b; Kohn, 2000; Popham, 2001). Furthermore, test scores might reflect a student’s socio-economic status, or a student’s inherited academic aptitude, or some combination of these factors and/or other factors rather than what was learned in school (Berliner, 2005; Darling-Hammond, 2004; FairTest, 2004b; Hoover, 1997; Kozol, 2005; Popham, 2001; Rothstein, 2004; Sizer, 2004; Wilgoren, 2000). As Popham (2001, p. 74) went on to say, it is an “…erroneous idea that it’s possible to ascertain the caliber of schooling from students’ scores on standardized achievement tests.”

Measure of Achievement or Socioeconomic Status

Standardized tests have been implemented as an accountability tool to measure student achievement of academic standards as well as teacher and school quality (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Schools achieving the highest average test scores are often considered to be doing the best job of educating our nation's children. Conversely, those achieving the lowest test score averages are thought to be low-performing schools, schools in need of improvement, or failing schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). When asked whether standardized tests are accurate measures of achievement, Kohn (2001) stated that, “Every empirical investigation of this question has found that socioeconomic status (SES)…accounts for an overwhelming proportion of the variance in test scores” (p. 1). Many educational researchers agreed with Kohn (Berliner, 2005; Darling-Hammond, 2004; FairTest, 2004b; Kozol, 2005; Popham, 2001, 2005; Rothstein, 1998, 2004; Sizer, 2004; Wilgoren, 2000).

Berliner (2005) suggested that NCLB treats the symptoms of poverty rather than the root causes, and that school reform alone, although helpful, is not enough of an intervention to assure that these children achieve optimally. Rothstein (1998) contended that there are a number of characteristics that have a greater effect on a student's standardized test score than the quality of the school or the teacher. These characteristics include the number of words a child is exposed to each hour when they are between one and three months old, a child's prenatal and infant nutrition, a child's family structure (families with fewer siblings experience more intellectual stimulation at home because of the higher proportion of adults per child), and the number of years a child's parents attended school. According to Rothstein (1998) children living in single-parent homes and children born to very young mothers tend to perform less well academically and receive lower standardized test scores. Rothstein also maintained that unstable housing conditions which cause families to move frequently from school to school result in less-consistent instruction, and therefore, poorer performance academically. Children raised in communities where good job opportunities are limited, tend to conclude that school success is not worthwhile thus negatively impacting their motivation and achievement (Kozol, 2005; Rothstein, 1998). Although an effective teacher can make a great deal of difference in the academic achievement of a student, these socio-economic factors must be considered. Popham (2001) concurred that most schools identified as ‘in need of improvement’ or ‘failing’ are located in socio-economically disadvantaged settings.

Mislabeling of Schools

Popham (2004) contended that, as a result of the NCLB accountability plan, many of the schools labeled as ‘failing’ or ‘in need of improvement,’ simply are not. Conversely, of the many schools escaping this label, some are doing an unsatisfactory instructional job. Popham (2004) went on to explain that, when the wrong kinds of tests are used to implement NCLB mandates, inaccurate and damaging labeling of schools will increase.

There were two main things that determined how many schools in a state were classified as ‘in need of improvement: 1) the difficulty of the state standardized tests, and 2) the cut scores set by the state to indicate ‘proficient’ academic achievement status (Popham, 2004). To exacerbate the problem, some states fearing that too many of their schools would receive an ‘in need of improvement’ label, lowered their expectations or educational standards (Popham, 2004). Because of these differences in state academic expectations, standardized tests, and cut scores, it has been almost impossible to compare schools across state lines. A school in one state may be labeled as ‘in need of improvement’ when it is doing a much better job of educating its students than a school deemed to be providing a high-quality education in another state.

Effectiveness of a Single Measure of Achievement

Kozol (2005) stated, “Numbers do not tell us all we need to know about our children” (p. 130). Some research studies have supported the contention that a single test can only sample knowledge and, by themselves, standardized tests are fallible indicators of achievement (Abrams & Madaus, 2003; FairTest, 2004b; Harlow & Jones, 2003; Pavlividas, 2001). Educational theorist Olson (2000) stated that there is “virtually unanimous agreement among experts that no single measure should decide a student’s academic fate” (p. 12). Some policy makers, however, were against relying on teacher judgment as a determinant of student success since grade inflation has been widespread and teacher judgment was, therefore, unreliable (Phelps, 2003; Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003).

Curriculum Control Shift: The Disempowerment of Teachers

Since implementation of NCLB there has been more state and federal control of schools to compensate for what was often perceived to be local school incompetence. As a result, the authority and decision-making power of teachers and principals has decreased (Sizer, 2004). Many researchers and educational theorists have asserted that control over the curriculum nationwide, as a result of the NCLB mandated high stakes, has shifted from local administrators and classroom teachers to the agencies that create and/or control the exam (Abrams & Madaus, 2003; Kohn, 2001; Ohanian, 1999; Meier, 2000; Sizer; 2004; Stoskopf, 2002). This, they contended, has often resulted in a one-size-fits-all curriculum and test.

High-Stakes Testing and Instructional Differentiation

The innercity teachers observed and interviewed by Kozol (2005) serving mainly populations of low socioeconomic status and minority students where test scores were generally low, were much more likely to teach a ‘one-size-fits-all’ curriculum and less likely to differentiate instruction to meet the unique needs of the students. Based on the results of her ethnographic study where many teachers, administrators, and students were interviewed, Daniels (2002) concluded that teachers were less likely to ". . . focus on the individual needs and diverse learning styles of their students" (p. 199) as a result of high-stakes tests.

Elimination of Untested Curriculum – Reduction of Educational Quality

A number of schools have responded to mandated high-stakes testing by giving greater attention to tested content while deemphasizing or eliminating untested curriculum (Herszenhorn, 2003; Kohn, 2001; Kozol, 2005; Popham, 2001, 2002, 2004; Shepard & Dougherty, 1991). Popham (2001) asserted that when higher test scores are rewarded and lower test scores are punished, it is a natural human response to forego teaching that which is not tested, even if the untested curriculum has been deemed to be worthwhile and valuable. The untested curriculum that is deemphasized or eliminated has included programs in the arts, recess for young children, electives for high schoolers, science, social studies, current events, class meetings and other activities intended to promote social and moral learning (Herszenhorn, 2003; Kohn, 2001; Kozol, 2005; Popham, 2001; Shepard & Dougherty, 1991).

Popham (2004) stated that the relentless pressure to improve students' test scores had ". . . led to a serious erosion of educational quality in many parts of the nation" (p. 6). He stated, "…the passage of NCLB has dramatically increased the likelihood of test-induced educational harm" (Popham, 2004, p. 9). Popham (2004) suggested that, instead of hoping that the NCLB law would go away, we need to figure out a way for it to enhance, rather than erode, educational quality.

The Effects of High-Stakes Test Preparation on Instructional Practices

Many educational researchers and theorists have maintained that placing great importance on standardized test scores can have a major influence on what takes place in classrooms (Abrams & Madaus, 2003; Burley, 2002; Kohn, 2001; Meier, 2002; Popham, 2001, 2004; Prescott, 2001; Shepard & Dougherty, 1991). Shepard and Dougherty (1991) surveyed third- through sixth-grade teachers in two high-stakes districts. These researchers reported that 75% of the teachers gave greater emphasis to basic-skills instruction, vocabulary lists, word recognition skills, and formulaic computation than they would have if there were no consequences for low scores on mandated tests.

It is quite common for teachers to place their normal instruction on hold to spend time administering and reviewing practice tests (Burley, 2002; Kohn, 2001; Meier, 2002; Popham, 2004; Prescott, 2001). As a result of his public school observations and interviews with teachers, Kozol (2005) asserted that in some schools test preparation and test administration controlled more than a quarter of the school year. Many educational theorists and researchers have contended that when high stakes are attached to test results, the learning experiences of students can be weakened, and the quality of teaching can be compromised as teachers emphasize test preparation over other more valuable curriculum and instruction (Herman & Golan, 1990; Hoffman, Assaf, & Paris, 2001; Kohn, 2001; Popham, 2004). Some research studies have found that the amount of time devoted to test preparation in the classroom increased as a result of the pressure from the sanctions of high-stakes tests (Herman & Golan, 1990; Hoffman, Assaf, & Paris, 2001).

Kohn (2001) asserted that the people who work most closely with children are those most likely to understand how harmful standardized testing is. He (Kohn, 2001) maintained that support for standardized testing seems to grow as one moves further from the students. Based on interviews of ten primary teachers concerning mandated standardized testing, Palividas (2001) found that the amount of time spent preparing for and administering standardized tests was distressing to teachers because of the time it took away from valuable instruction. The interviewed teachers expressed that this loss of crucial instruction time was particularly harmful for low-performing students.

The Relationship of Test Score Improvement and Learning Improvement

Some recent studies have affirmed that improvements in high-stakes standardized test scores do not necessarily reflect general achievement gains (Abrams & Madaus, 2003; Amrein & Berliner, 2002a; 2002b; Klein, Hamilton, McCaffrey, & Stecher, 2000). In fact, a recent national study which surveyed teachers' opinions found that 40% of responding teachers reported that they had found ways to improve standardized test scores without necessarily improving learning (Pedulla et al., 2003).

METHOD

Survey Instruments

A survey instrument entitled “Teachers’ Perceptions of Standardized Testing” (see Appendix A) was developed, piloted, and revised by the researcher to ascertain teachers’ perceptions of the effects of the NCLB accountability plan and high-stakes standardized testing on their instructional practices. The survey included four scales concerning teachers’ opinions of Wyoming’s standardized test and NCLB accountability mandates, the amount of pressure they felt from various constituents to improve test scores, and their perceptions of how high-stakes testing and the NCLB accountability plan affected their instructional practices. The survey also asked participants to respond to four open-ended questions and provide demographic data including grade taught, years of teaching experience, number of students in their class, and whether their school had ever been labeled as ‘in need of improvement’ because of not meeting AYP goals. Additionally, the researcher conducted an extensive e-mail survey with 11 of the elementary teachers. Those teachers participating in this extensive e-mail survey were asked to respond in depth to 12 open-ended questions (see Appendix B).

The survey was mailed to first- through sixth-grade elementary teachers in Wyoming in January and February of 2005. The WyCAS was only administered to fourth graders at the elementary level. However, because all elementary teachers shared responsibility for assuring student achievement as measured by the Wyoming Comprehensive Assessment System (WyCAS), Wyoming’s standardized test, the researcher wanted to obtain opinions from a wide variety of elementary teachers concerning their perceptions of the effects of high-stakes testing and NCLB accountability mandates on their instructional practices.

Participants

The researcher sent out 314 surveys and had 142 returned; a 45% return rate. All but two of the respondents were Caucasian. One hundred seven respondents were females and 35 were males. Respondents were elementary teachers employed in 32 schools located in 25 towns and cities across Wyoming. There was a fairly equal distribution of participants around Wyoming with diverse schools and towns/cities represented. In Table 1 it can be seen that the respondents were also from towns/cities with varying populations. Six of the respondents taught in schools located on the Wind River Indian Reservation and served a predominantly Native American student population.

Table 1

Numbers of Teachers Employed in Wyoming Towns/Cities with Varying Populations

Population of town/city	1st-3rd grade	4th grade	5th-6th grade	Total
Fewer than 1,000 citizens	11	6	9	26
1,000 – 5,000 citizens	3	5	6	14
5,001 – 15,000 citizens	27	13	15	55
Over 15,000 citizens	19	15	12	46

When analyzing the data, teacher participants were placed in grade-level categories, AYP status categories, years of teaching experience categories, and class size categories. The three grade-level categories were first- through third- grade teachers; fourth-grade teachers; and fifth- and sixth-grade teachers. Fourth-grade teachers was a separate category because these were the only elementary teachers responsible for actually administering the standardized test. The two AYP-status categories were teachers who taught in schools that had or had not met Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) goals in math and/or language arts in any of the disaggregated categories during the past three years (2003, 2004, and 2005). The three teaching experience categories were ‘early career’ teachers with one to seven years of teaching experience, ‘middle career’ teachers with nine to 20 years of teaching experience, and ‘late career’ teachers with over 20 years of teaching experience. There were also three categories concerning class size. A leading study from Tennessee, entitled STAR, defined small classes as those with 17 or fewer students (Policy Report, 2000a). The current Wyoming education code stated that

Wyoming kindergarten through third grade classrooms should endeavor to have no more than 20 students per class and intermediate classrooms should endeavor to have no more than 22 students per class (Policy Report, 2000b). Based on this information, class size categories were created for this research analysis. Teachers with fewer than 18 students were considered to have a ‘small’ class size, teachers with 18 to 22 students were considered to have an ‘average’ class size, and teachers with over 22 students were considered to have a ‘large’ class size. The demographic data concerning the numbers of teacher respondents in each of the categories described above can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2

Participant Demographic Data (n = 142)

Category	Teachers	1^{st}-3^{rd} grade	4^{th} grade	5^{th}-6^{th} grade	Total
Gender	Male	2	15	18	35
	Female	58	24	25	107
Teaching experience	Early career (0-7years)	10	5	4	19
	Middle career (8-20 years)	23	13	11	47
	Late career (21+ years)	20	18	20	58
	Not reported				18
Number of students	Small class size (1-17)	24	8	5	37
	Average class size (18-22)	26	20	14	60
	Large class size (23+)	6	8	17	31
	Not reported				14

AYP status	AYP always met	44	29	33	106
	AYP not always met	16	10	10	36

Of the 142 participants, 117 responded to the four open-ended questions included as a part of the survey. At the end of the survey, participants were asked if they would be willing to respond to an in-depth open-ended individual questionnaire via e-mail concerning their views of the effect of standardized testing and the No Child Left Behind Act's accountability plan on their instructional practices. Eleven of the 29 teachers who expressed an interest responded to this extensive questionnaire. Demographic data concerning the 117 teachers who responded to the open-ended questions can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3

Demographic Data Concerning the Teachers Who Responded to Open-Ended Questions (n = 117)

Category	Sub-category and number of respondents		
Gender	Male		Female
	31		86
Grade taught	1st-3rd grade	4th grade	5th-6th grade
	46	36	35
Teaching experience	Early career	Middle career	Late career
	17	40	48
Number of students	Small class size	Average class size	Large class size

	31	48	27
AYP status	AYP always met	AYP not always met	
	84	33	

Data Analysis

During the data reduction stage, descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, percentages, and frequencies) and inferential statistics (ANOVAs and correlations) were performed on the quantitative data to describe the research participants and analyze their responses to the four scales on the survey. The qualitative data from the four open-ended questions on the general survey and from the in-depth open-ended e-mail questionnaires were sorted into themes arising from the participant responses and analyzed.

FINDINGS

Quantitative Findings

The means and standard deviations for the scale measuring elementary teachers' opinions of the WyCAS (Wyoming's Comprehensive Assessment System) divided into AYP status categories, grade level categories, years of teaching experience categories, and number of students taught categories can be found in Table 4.

Table 4

Opinion of WyCAS by AYP Status, Grade Level, Years of Teaching Experience, and Class Size

Category	Source	*n*	*M*	*SD*
AYP status	AYP always met	104	3.71	1.13

	AYP not always met	36	3.24	1.11
Grade taught	1st-3rd grade	59	3.69	.92
	4th grade	39	3.33	1.43
	5th–6th grade	42	3.68	1.11
Teaching experience	Early career (0-7 years)	19	3.78	1.07
	Middle career (8-20 years)	46	3.59	1.05
	Late career (21+ years)	57	3.57	1.15
Number of students	Small class size (0-17)	37	3.84	1.04
	Average class size (18-22)	59	3.57	1.22
	Large class size (23+)	30	3.29	1.13

The means and standard deviations for the scale showing the pressure felt by teachers from various constituents to improve students' standardized test scores divided into AYP status categories, grade level categories, years of teaching experience categories, and number of students taught categories can be found in Table 5.

Table 5

Pressure Felt by Teachers to Raise Standardized Test Scores by AYP Status, Grade Level, Years of Teaching Experience, and Class Size

Category	Source	*n*	*M*	*SD*
AYP status	AYP always met	105	3.10	.86
	AYP not always met	36	3.32	.75
Grade taught	1st-3rd grade	60	3.07	.91

	4^{th} grade	39	3.15	.85
	5^{th}–6^{th} grade	42	3.29	.70
Teaching experience	Early career (0-7 years)	19	2.63	.87
	Middle career (8-20 years)	47	3.22	.84
	Late career (21+ years)	57	3.20	.78
Number of students	Small class size (0-17)	37	3.01	1.06
	Average class size (18-22)	60	3.11	.78
	Large class size (23+)	30	3.33	.66

The means and standard deviations divided into AYP status categories, grade level categories, years of teaching experience categories, and number of students taught categories for the scale measuring the effect of the WyCAS on instructional practice can be seen in Table 6.

Table 6

Effect of the WyCAS on Instructional Practices by AYP Status, Grade Level, Years of Teaching Experience, and Class Size

Category	Source	*n*	*M*	*SD*
AYP status	AYP always met	104	2.83	.48
	AYP not always met	36	2.79	.58
Grade taught	1st-3^{rd} grade	59	2.88	.48
	4^{th} grade	39	2.83	.52
	5^{th}–6^{th} grade	42	2.73	.52

Teaching experience	Early career (0-7 years)	19	2.71	.33
	Middle career (8-20 years)	47	2.79	.50
	Late career (21+ years)	57	2.88	.52
Number of students	Small class size (0-17)	36	2.95	.54
	Average class size (18-22)	60	2.86	.45
	Large class size (23+)	30	2.72	.53

Finally, the means and standard deviations for the scale concerning teachers' opinions of the No Child Left Behind Act and its AYP mandates divided into AYP categories, grade level categories, years of teaching experience categories, and number of students taught categories can be found in Table 7.

Table 7

Opinion of NCLB/AYP by AYP Status, Grade Level, Years of Teaching Experience, and Class Size

Category	Source	*n*	*M*	*SD*
AYP status	AYP always met	106	2.15	.64
	AYP not always met	36	1.93	.63
Grade taught	1st-3rd grade	60	2.23	.62
	4th grade	39	1.96	.69
	5th–6th grade	43	2.02	.62
Teaching experience	Early career (0-7 years)	19	2.07	.72
	Middle career (8-20 years)	47	2.14	.57

	Late career (21+ years)	58	2.08	.67
Number of students	Small class size (0-17)	37	2.27	.69
	Average class size (18-22)	60	2.16	.62
	Large class size (23+)	31	1.85	.53

An alpha level of .05 was used for all statistical tests.

The highest correlation found (r = .504), a moderate positive correlation, was between teachers' opinions of NCLB/AYP and the effect the WyCAS had on their instructional practices. Since this was a positive correlation, the higher the teachers' opinions of NCLB/AYP, the more positive was the effect of WyCAS on their instructional practices and teaching efficacy. Conversely, the lower the teachers' opinions of NCLB/AYP, the less positive was the effect of WyCAS on their instructional practices.

The second highest correlation (r = .466), a moderate positive correlation, was between teachers' opinions of the WyCAS and the effect of the WyCAS on their instructional practices. Since this was a positive correlation, the higher the teachers' opinions of the WyCAS, the more positive was the effect of the WyCAS on their instructional practices. The lower the teachers' opinions of the WyCAS, the less positive was the effect of the WyCAS on their instructional practices.

The third highest correlation (r = .448), a moderate positive correlation, was between teachers' opinions of the WyCAS and their opinions of NCLB/AYP accountability mandates. Since this was a positive correlation, the higher the teachers' opinions of the WyCAS, the higher their opinions of NCLB/AYP. Conversely, the lower the teachers' opinions of the WyCAS, the lower their opinions of NCLB/AYP.

The fourth highest correlation (r = -.260), a low to moderate negative correlation, was between teachers' opinions of the WyCAS and the pressure they felt from a variety of constituents to improve students' standardized test scores. Since this was a negative correlation, the less pressure the teachers felt to improve students' standardized test scores, the higher their opinions of the WyCAS. Conversely, the more pressure the teachers felt to improve students' standardized test scores, the lower the teachers' opinions of the WyCAS.

All of the correlations among scale scores and continuous independent variables can be seen in Table 8.

Table 8

Correlations Among Scale Scores and Independent Variables (Class Size, Years Teaching Experience, Language Arts Proficiency Averages [2003, 2004, 2005], and Math Proficiency Averages [2003, 2004, 2005]}

Variables	Correlations						
	WyCAS opinion	Pressure felt	Effect of WyCAS	Tch. exper.	Students taught	Lang. Arts average	Math average
NCLB opinion	.448**	-.198*	.504**	-.038	-.132	-.002	-.003
WyCAS opinion	1	-.260**	.466**	-.095	-.149*	.060	.017
Pressure felt		1	-.126	.169*	.163*	-.003	.092
Effect of WyCAS			1	.086	-.194*	-.166*	-.138
Tch. experience				1	-.014	-.163*	-.078

Students taught	1	.075	.043
Lang. arts average		1	.866**
Math average			1

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level
* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level

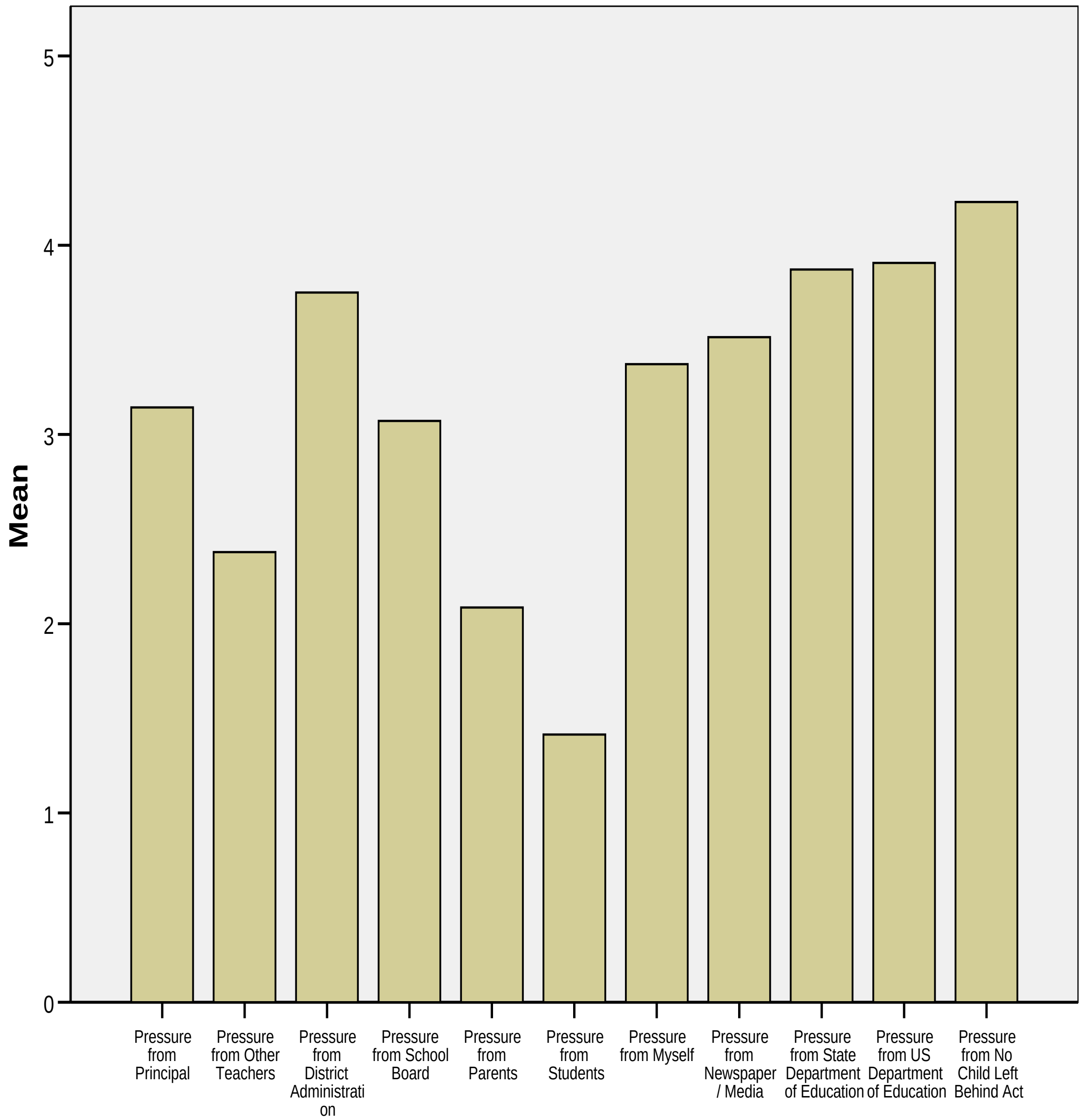
Analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed that teachers employed in schools that had always met adequate yearly progress (AYP) goals had a significantly higher opinion of the WyCAS ($M = 3.71$, $SD = 1.13$) than teachers employed in schools that had not always met AYP goals ($M = 3.24$, $SD = 1.11$) ($F(1,138) = 4.613$, $p = .033$). With η = .180, this was a small effect size.

Analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed that teachers with small class sizes of 17 or fewer students had a significantly higher opinion of NCLB/AYP mandates ($M = 2.27$, $SD = .69$) than teachers with large class sizes who were responsible for 23 or more students ($M = 1.85$, $SD = .53$) ($F(2,125) = 4.306$, $p = .016$). With $\eta = .254$, this was a small effect size.

Analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed that middle-career and late-career teachers with eight or more years of teaching experience felt significantly more pressure from a variety of sources including the federal Department of Education, the No Child Left Behind act, the state Department of Education, local school administrators, the school board, other teachers, parents, students, and themselves to raise their students' standardized test scores (middle career teacher-$M = 3.22$, $SD = .84$; late career teachers $M = 3.20$, $SD = .78$) than early-career teachers with zero to seven years of teaching experience ($M = 2.63$, $SD = .87$) ($F(2,120) = 4.028$, $p = .020$). With $\eta = .251$, this was a small effect size.

A majority of the teacher respondents reported feeling ‘a great deal’ of pressure to improve students’ standardized test scores from the federal No Child Left Behind Act. A little less than half of the respondents reported feeling ‘a great deal’ of pressure from both the federal and state Departments of Education. Only a small number of teachers reported feeling ‘a great deal’ of pressure from other teachers, parents and their students to improve standardized test scores. Refer to Figure 1 to view a graph of the means of each source of pressure felt by the elementary teacher respondents to improve standardized test scores.

Figure 1. Pressure felt by teachers to improve standardized test scores from various sources.



Qualitative Findings

After reading, rereading, and closely analyzing the qualitative responses of the participants, the researcher arrived at three overarching themes. These overarching themes were:

1) Respondents' perceptions of high-stakes accountability (NCLB–AYP–high-stakes standardized testing).

2) Effects of high-stakes accountability (NCLB–AYP–high-stakes standardized testing) on instructional practices, curriculum, and teaching efficacy.

3) Issues concerning the WyCAS (Wyoming's Comprehensive Assessment System).

The researcher then read, reread, and analyzed the participants' responses in each overarching theme and divided these responses into related subtheme categories. Counts were made of the number of participants who responded in each subtheme category. When the same participant responded more than once in a subtheme, only one response was counted. This was done in an effort to determine the number of respondents who held a particular opinion concerning high-stakes accountability or had been affected in a particular way by high-stakes accountability. When discussing the variety of reasons for responding to the particular subtheme, however, the same respondent may have indicated more than one reason. Counts for the different reasons concerning a subtheme may, therefore, include some of the same respondents. Of the 142 participants in this research study, 117 responded to the open-ended qualitative questions. A percentage of how many of these 117 participants responded to each subtheme was recorded. Subtheme categories that had a ten percent or higher response rate were described in detail accompanied by one or more representative participant quotes from a diverse mix of teachers. A number to identify the respondent as well as some basic demographic data will be included in parentheses following each quote. This demographic data will include grade taught, years of teaching experience (YTE), and number of students (S). Also, the status of the teacher's school in meeting AYP goals in 2003, 2004, and 2005 will be identified by either 'AYP-met' or 'AYP-not met.' 'AYP-met' means that adequate yearly progress

(AYP) goals were met in all disaggregated categories and as a school overall in 2003, 2004, and 2005. ‘AYP-not met’ means that adequate yearly progress (AYP) goals were not met in one or more disaggregated areas or as a school overall during 2003, 2004, and/or 2005.These representative quotes will be helpful to the reader in more clearly understanding the teachers’ perceptions concerning each subtheme category. Additionally, some of the unique outlier subtheme categories with a response rate of less than 10% were reported.

Theme 1: Respondents’ Perceptions of High-Stakes Accountability Mandates

Theme number one was “Respondents’ Perceptions of High-Stakes Accountability Mandates.” These high-stakes accountability mandates included the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) accountability plan, adequate yearly progress (AYP) goals, and high-stakes standardized testing. Three dominant subthemes emerged from this theme. These subthemes were:

1) NCLB expectations are unrealistic, unattainable and/or unfair
2) Standardized testing is only one assessment tool and, by itself, cannot assess all student knowledge or show all student growth
3) NCLB sanctions are punitive and, therefore, unfair and/or inappropriate

More detailed demographic information regarding the participants who responded to these subthemes can be seen in Table 9.

Table 9

Demographic Data of Respondents: Theme #1—Respondents’ Perceptions of High-Stakes Accountability (NCLB—AYP—High-Stakes Standardized Testing)

		NCLB expectations unrealistic	Only one accountability tool	NCLB sanctions inappropriate
Total respondents		87/117—74%	31/117—26%	18/117—15%
AYP status	AYP—met	56—64%	20—65%	11—61%
	AYP—not met	31—36%	10—32%	7—39%
Grade level taught	1st-3rd grade	29—33%	12—39%	7—39%
	4th grade	28—32%	10—32%	9—50%
	5th-6th grade	30—34%	8—26%	2—11%
Teaching experience	0-7 years	12—14%	3—10%	4—22%
	8-20 years	30—34%	16—52%	4—22%
	21+ years	39—45%	10—32%	5—28
	No response	6— 7%	2— 6%	5—27%
Number of students	0-17 students	21—24%	10—32%	6—33%
	18-22 students	37—43%	11—35%	7—39%
	23+ students	29—33%	9—29%	4—22%
	No response		1—	1—

To see a table summarizing the numbers of participants responding to each subtheme related to Theme 1 (Perceptions of High Stakes Accountability Mandates) see Table 10.

Table 10

Perceptions of High-Stakes Accountability Mandates

Response	Number	Percentage
NCLB expectations unrealistic, unattainable, and/or unfair	87/117	74%
NCLB does not consider extraneous factors	61/117	52%
Standardized test incapable of revealing all student knowledge	31/117	26%
NCLB sanctions punitive; therefore, unfair and/or inappropriate	18/117	15%
NCLB accountability goals are well-intentioned	15/117	13%
Teachers/schools unfairly blamed for achievement gap	15/117	13%

1) NCLB Expectations are Unrealistic, Unattainable and/or Unfair

With 87 or 74% of the 117 respondents, the most dominate subtheme concerning teachers' perceptions of NCLB mandates and high-stakes standardized testing was that NCLB expectations are unrealistic, unattainable, and/or unfair.

Sixty-one of the 117 teachers (52%) indicated that the NCLB act did not consider or address extraneous factors that were impossible for teachers and schools to control or change. The extraneous factors mentioned by the respondents included socioeconomic status; enriching background experiences; sleep or nutrition deficits; English as a second language; educational level of the parents; innate mental ability; unique talents, learning styles, and interests; motivation; negative or traumatic home/family conditions, etc. These teachers contended that they were able to help all of their students progress but, despite their efforts, they were unable to overcome all the obstacles that stood in the way of optimal progress. One teacher explained:

> No matter how much we wish and hope, not *all* students can excel. They come to us with different abilities and different traumas (thanks to drugs, alcohol, abuse, etc.)—these elements affect the brain and learning. In eight months I can't make them excel—they can improve and do improve, but not according to the unrealistic numbers of AYP (#70, Grade 1, 15 YTE, 22 S, AYP-met).

Another teacher stated:

> No place on the test is there a place to mark that the student taking the test is new to the school, that they have just four days earlier been placed in foster care, that mom and dad are currently getting a divorce, etc. I have had these things happen but the test must go on (#95, Grade 4, 31 YTE, 25 S, AYP-not met).

One teacher responded, "I think the NCLBA is a great idea, but unrealistic for some students due to lack of help at home, English as a second language, etc. Teachers can only do so much in school and then we need that extra support from home" (#72, Grade 2, 5 YTE, 17 S, AYP-met). "What about the child with an IQ of 68? Or with fetal alcohol syndrome? Or with *no* support from home? And so on…," questioned a teacher (#96, Grade 6, 21 YTE, 18 S, AYP-met). Another teacher summed it up by stating, "It seems that NCLB with its AYP goals do not take student population—diversity into account" (#73, Grade 1, 1 YTE, 20 S, AYP-not met).

Fifteen of the 117 teachers (13%) expressed concern that the NCLB mandates unfairly placed all the blame for the achievement gap on teachers and schools. One teacher stated, "NCLBA/AYP puts all of the responsibility on teachers. However, progress responsibilities should be parent, student, school, district, and state funding, etc." (#48, Grade 4, 26 YTE, 19 S, AYP-met). Another teacher questioned, "Where is parent accountability?" and went on to say,

> I cannot go home with each of my students, read to them, feed them dinner, and make sure they have enough sleep. Of my six students, only two are not meeting a majority of the standards—these two are the only ones who are not read to each night and come to school without breakfast (#10, Grade 1, 6 YTE, 6 S, AYP-met).

About one-fifth (13 teachers) of those responding to this subtheme suggested that it was impossible to legislate that all children will learn the same things at the same time. These teachers explained that children are widely varied and can not be treated as if they are manufactured products. As one teacher stated, "NCLBA is a great theory—but not realistic. We all work, learn, succeed at different levels-that is what makes us individuals" (#14, Grade 4, 8 YTE, 24 S, AYP-not met). A few expressed that NCLB mandates were unfair because they did not consider the growth lower-level students were able to make over the course of a school year. This was well explained with the following quote: "NCLB is not realistic. Even some of my students who have made *HUGE* gains will *NOT* score proficient" (#94, Grade 4, 21 YTE, 21 S, AYP-met).

Of the 87 teachers responding to this subtheme, 26 (30%) stated that NCLB mandates are unrealistic because they believed it was impossible for 100% of the students to be proficient in all academic areas. These respondents suggested that eventually every school would fail. As one teacher stated, "I believe the goals of NCLB are admirable, but the act is unrealistic. To have 100% of students at advanced or proficient is impossible. It is a no-win situation designed to fail schools…" (#97, Grade 5, 24 YTE, 23 S, AYP-not met). Another teacher responded, "The AYP goals are ludicrous and cannot be achieved by *any* school over the long term" (#30, Grade 2, 29 YTE, 21 S, AYP-met).

While 15 of the 117 respondents (13%) expressed that NCLB accountability goals were commendable and well-intentioned in theory, only three of the 117 respondents felt that the NCLB accountability mandates were a somewhat effective solution for closing the educational achievement gap.

2) Standardized Testing: Only ONE Accountability Tool

Thirty-one (26%) of the 117 respondents indicated that the standardized test was only one assessment tool and, by itself, incapable of revealing all student knowledge or academic growth. The majority of these 31 respondents contended that the standardized test should be used along with a variety of other assessments to determine student achievement and teacher/school effectiveness. One teacher stated, "The standardized test is a snapshot of a child. It should not be the only thing that decides if a school is making AYP" (#61, Grade 1, 15 YTE, 17 S, AYP-met). Another teacher commented, "You cannot judge a student's learning or a school by one test" (#66, Grade 4, 29 YTE, 26 S, AYP-not met). A teacher from a school on Wyoming's Indian reservation where AYP goals had never been achieved remarked, "One test, one day, to adequately monitor progress is not an ideal situation. One test cannot encompass all the skills a child learns in one year" (#59, Grade 3, 20 YTE, 15 S, AYP-not met).

3) NCLB Sanctions Punitive and, therefore, Unfair and/or Inappropriate

Eighteen (15%) of the 117 respondents stated that NCLB sanctions were unfair, punitive, and/or inappropriate. These respondents commented that sanctions such as publicly publishing test scores, closing down schools, and revoking funding were discouraging to teachers and damaging to schools. One teacher commented, "Most teachers feel that NCLB is currently misdirected. It's so unfair to put sanctions on a school just because of low test scores. It fails to look at the *WHOLE* picture" (#4, Grade 2, 33 YTE, 18 S, AYP-not met). Another teacher stated, "NCLB is an ineffective tool that is seriously damaging the education of our neediest students by closing schools, revoking funding, and discouraging teachers" (#23, Grade 2, 20 S, AYP- met). Some of these respondents suggested that schools struggling to meet AYP goals should be assisted in positive ways rather than punished. For example, one teacher said, "Many schools especially in lower SES communities find it difficult to meet AYP as defined by the NCLBA and are being punished rather than assisted" (#132, Grade 4/5, 1 YTE, 23 S, AYP-met).

Theme 2: Effects of High-Stakes Accountability on Curriculum, Instruction and Teacher Efficacy

Theme number two was "Effects of High-Stakes Accountability (NCLB, AYP, high-stakes standardized testing) on Curriculum, Instruction and Teaching Efficacy." Three dominant subthemes emerged from this theme. These subthemes were:

1) Negative effects of punitive sanctions on curriculum, instruction, and teaching efficacy.
2) Positive effects of NCLB on curriculum, instruction, and teaching efficacy.
3) Neutral Effects of NCLB on curriculum, instruction, and teaching efficacy.

More detailed statistical information regarding the demographic data of the participants who responded to these subthemes can be seen in Table 11.

Table 11

Demographic Data of Respondents: Theme #2— Effects of High-Stakes Accountability on Curriculum, Instruction and Learning

		Negative effects of NCLB sanctions	Positive effects of NCLB
Total respondents		92—79%	35—30%
AYP status	AYP—always met	66—72%	25—71%
	AYP—not always met	26—28%	10—29%
Grade level taught	1st—3rd grade	32—35%	14—40%
	4th grade	38—41%	12—34%
	5th-6th grade	22—24%	9—26%
Teaching experience	0-7 years	10—11%	2— 6%
	8-20 years	35—38%	12—34%
	21+ years	36—39%	19—54%
	Unknown	11—12%	2— 6%
Number of students	0-17 students	24—26%	5—14%
	18-22 students	39—42%	20—57%
	23+ students	25—27%	10—29%
	Unknown	4— 4%	

To see a table summarizing the numbers of participants responding to each subtheme related to Theme 2 (Effects of High Stakes Accountability on Curriculum, Instruction, and Teaching Efficacy) see Table 12.

Table 12

Effects of High-Stakes Accountability on Curriculum, Instruction, and Teacher Efficacy

Response	Number	Percentage
Negative effects of punitive sanctions	92/117	79%
Too much time in test preparation	51/117	44%
Non-tested curriculum eliminated/deemphasized	35/117	30%
Causes high pressure and stress for teachers	26/117	22%
Differentiated curriculum eliminated	23/117	20%
Reduced joy, creativity, and fun in teaching/learning	22/117	19%
Causes high pressure and stress for students	15/117	13%
Standardized test given too early in school year	8/117	7%
Positive effects of high-stakes accountability	35/117	30%
Improved writing instruction across the curriculum	18/117	15%
Positive school improvement efforts	16/117	14%
More focused curriculum	13/117	11%
Improved instruction requiring critical thinking	9/117	8%
No effects of high-stakes accountability	24/117	21%

1) Negative Effects of Punitive Sanctions on Curriculum, Instruction, and Teaching Efficacy

With 92 of the 117 respondents or 79%, the most dominate subtheme concerning the effects of high-stakes accountability on curriculum, instruction, and teaching efficacy concerned the negative effects of punitive sanctions on curriculum, instruction, and teaching efficacy.

There were a lot of components to this subtheme that interacted to create a complex weave of negative effects on the curriculum taught, teachers' instructional practices, and teaching efficacy. Twenty-six (22%) of the 117 respondents expressed that the NCLB accountability plan and its resulting high-stakes standardized testing created a great deal of pressure for teachers to raise standardized test scores which resulted in intense feelings of stress. Even when teachers felt that they were doing the best they could to be effective teachers, this high-level of stress contributed a great deal to teachers' feelings of frustration and discouragement. For example, one teacher commented, "It just makes me more tense. I teach the standards as well as I can, but there's that underlying threat that if I am not able to make some children learn certain concepts at a certain time, I'm not an adequate teacher" (#59, Grade 3, 20 YTE, 15 S, AYP-not met). Likewise another teacher noted, "NCLB creates a tremendous amount of pressure and takes away the joy of teaching and learning" (#14, Grade 4, 8 YTE, 24 S, AYP-not met).

Some teachers commented on the specific sources of the stress. Three teachers expressed that publicly publishing test scores had resulted in undue stress and discouragement for teachers. One of the respondents indicated that her administrator contributed to the stress she felt: "Our principal puts much pressure on the teachers at our school. We know our students must perform well" (#70, Grade 4, 15 YTE, 22 S, AYP-met). One fourth-grade teacher who was responsible for administering the WyCAS stated that she felt a great deal of pressure from the other fourth-grade teachers in her school, while teachers from the other grades were supportive.

Some teachers commented on the specific effects of the pressure on teachers. One teacher predicted that many highly-qualified and effective teachers would become so discouraged that they would leave the profession. This teacher stated, “NCLB will, over time, *create* a void of highly qualified teachers in the future. Who wants to teach at a Title I school when you don’t have the opportunity to meet AYP each year and have to put up with all the pressure!” (#106, Grade 4, 26 YTE, 23 S, AYP-met). Three teachers mentioned that they were considering a career change as a result of the high-stakes pressure. Two of the teacher respondents suggested that the high pressure to improve test scores would result in more competition among teachers. One of these teachers contended, “It will pit teacher against teacher as they vie for the best scores” (#113, Grade 5, 32 YTE, 27 S, AYP-not met). Four teachers intimated that the high-stakes pressure on teachers would encourage them to cheat on the standardized test so they would look better in the public eye and not have to suffer the negative consequences of low test scores.

Fifty-three of the 117 teachers (45%) expressed that, since the advent of NCLB, they felt the need to spend a good deal of their instructional time during the school year preparing students for the standardized test. “Too much emphasis is placed on this test, and you spend a lot of time preparing kids to take it,” was the comment of one teacher (#112, Grade 4, 28 YTE, 19 S, AYP-met) These teachers indicated that this emphasis on test preparation resulted in far less time to teach. The majority of these teachers did not equate instructional time spent in test preparation with meaningful teaching time. As one teacher stated, “I do a lot more test prep. Some is beneficial, but too much takes away from instruction” (#17, Grade 3, 8 YTE, 21 S, AYP-met). Another teacher explained, “Although I believe *all* want to see all children progress as much as possible, legislation like NCLB and documenting AYP sometimes can actually take away precious time to teach” (#24, Grade 1, 20 YTE, 21 S, AYP-Yes). Additionally, the majority of these teachers indicated that teaching to the test was not equated with high-quality teaching and learning: “I no longer teach a well-rounded education to my students. More time is spent in teaching to the test and not what the students need to be a success in life” (#43, Grade 5, 35 YTE, 22 S, AYP-met), and “NCLB moves instruction towards teaching to the test rather than being well balanced, holistic, and appropriately inclusive of higher level thinking” (#100, Grade 5, 24 YTE, 19 S, AYP-met). About half of these 53 teachers commented that they felt the time spent in test preparation would help their students achieve better standardized test scores. At the same time, they expressed feeling that, although the students would perform better on the standardized test, valuable academic content would be sacrificed to provide the necessary time to adequately prepare for the test. The majority of these 51 teachers indicated that the curriculum was becoming more watered down rather than more rigorous as teachers placed their instructional emphasis on raising standardized test scores. As one teacher commented, “We all feel stressed and try to rush to cover all the material that MIGHT be on the test…our curriculum is a mile wide and an inch deep” (#95, Grade 4, 31 YTE, 25 S, AYP-not met).

Twenty-two of the 117 respondents (19%) reported that the high pressure and its resulting stress took away the joy, fun, and creativity from both teaching and learning.

One teacher commented, “Teaching is not as rewarding now. Learning is narrow, test-score oriented. Where is the joy?” (#4, Grade 2, 33 YTE, 18 S, AYP-not met). Another teacher observed, “I have become a better ‘test teaching teacher,’ but certainly not as fun or memorable as I once was!” (#94, Grade 4, 21 YTE, 21 S, AYP-met). A third teacher remarked, “Three-fourths of my instruction has changed since the advent of NCLB because individual teachers are compared. Schools’ test scores are published in newspapers. Unfortunately, this pressure has taken the creativity out of what was once fun to teach” (#12, Grade 4, 21 YTE, 15 S, AYP-met). “Teaching and learning have become tedious—not fun and interesting,” noted another teacher (#138, Grade 5, 38 YTE, 23 S, AYP-met). These teachers expressed that the joy, fun, and creativity that had, in the past, been such an important component of effective teaching was disappearing as a result of being required to teach in more standardized ways. Furthermore, they voiced a feeling of disempowerment to make the instructional decisions that would be best for their students. One teacher contended:

> Personally, as a teacher, I feel like I am a worse teacher when I have to worry about what others (outside of my classroom and school) want me to do to satisfy some outside criteria. I know my kids best and I would like to have the freedom to do what I feel is most beneficial for their learning. I don’t like to be told what to do by people I don’t know and who don’t know my kids (#137, Grade 4/5, 12 YTE, 22 S, AYP-met).

Fifteen of the 117 teachers (13%) expressed that the pressure that the high-stakes tests put on students was more damaging than helpful, especially for students receiving special education services. As one teacher stated, “Unfortunately, the students with learning difficulties know that they are behind. They get very stressed and frustrated" (#58, Grade 4, 4 YTE, 19 S, AYP-met).

Eight of the 117 teachers (7%) reported that they felt the standardized test was given too early in the school year causing them to rush through areas of the curriculum and teach the curriculum in six months rather than nine. These teachers expressed that this resulted in superficial coverage of concepts and an emphasis on rote memorization rather than in-depth learning. As one teacher stated, "It has limited the amount of time that I can spend on any given area. I can't always teach all of the students to mastery because of all that needs to be covered by March" (#58, Grade 4, 4 YTE, 19 S, AYP-met). Another teacher commented:

> I feel rushed to deliver the extra concepts before I am ready to teach them. I feel like I am throwing concepts at the students haphazardly, instead of working through them progressively. There never seems to be enough time to deliver the broad base that is tested. That is frustrating to me as a teacher (#51, Grade 3/4, 11 YTE, 12 S, AYP-met).

Three of the teachers expressed the feeling that the students' focus for school learning comes to an abrupt end after administration of the standardized test. As one teacher explained, "The tests give an artificial message that school doesn't really matter after that. So, as a consequence, lots of teaching time is lost, I believe, both before and after the test" (#137, Grade 4, 12 YTE, 22 S, AYP-met).

Thirty-five of the 117 respondents (30%) indicated that non-tested curriculum had been deemphasized or eliminated regardless of whether a school had always met AYP goals or had been identified as a school in need of improvement. The majority of these teachers expressed discontent with the elimination of what they considered to be valuable curriculum. One teacher stated:

> It [NCLB] has placed the major influence of the curriculum squarely on what is tested. Once we figured out what the WyCAS scorers wanted, we focused all of our energy on those areas. Because of the high stakes testing with district budgets being based on AYP, the curriculum is mainly focused on the subjects tested. That leaves very little time for social studies, science, art, health, computers, and spontaneous teaching" (#58, Grade 4, 4 YTE, 19 S, AYP-met).

Another teacher explained:

> I have not eliminated curriculum, but I have shortened social studies and science a lot! What our district does is what the federal and state Departments of Education have deemed to be the most important—it's reading, writing, math, and soon science" (#70, Grade 4, 15 YTE, 12 S, AYP-met).

"Now our kids score better on the WyCAS, but other areas not tested have shown a decline or are not taught at all" (#96, Grade 6, 21 YTE, 18 S, AYP-met), commented another teacher. Three of these 35 teachers contended that their school principals wanted all untested curriculum eliminated to make more time for instruction in tested content. For example, one teacher stated, "Our administrator has *suggested* dropping science and social studies in the primary grades to make more time to focus on reading and math" (#4, 33 YTE, 18 S, AYP-not met). Six of these 35 teachers mentioned that the teachable moments that often arise in the course of a school day must be surpassed to make time for test preparation instruction. Three of these teachers indicated that subject-integrated thematic units were being replaced by isolated and fragmented skill instruction.

A couple of teachers described how they refused to compromise best teaching practices and valuable curriculum in response to NCLB high-stakes pressure. One of these teachers explained:

> I used to LOVE the 4th grade curriculum. Now I am up against three other teachers who are teaching WyCAS full out. Wyoming history and science are barely touched in their classrooms. WyCAS prompts are the rule of the day. I am sure their scores will be better than mine, but I believe in educating the whole child. Wyoming history and science are the 'wonders' in my curriculum. They expand my teaching (#36, Grade 4, 25 YTE, 19 S, AYP-met).

Although most of the respondents indicated that curriculum was being eliminated in response to NCLB mandates, a couple teachers reported that the curriculum was being expanded in an effort to improve standardized test scores. "If anything, we've added to the curriculum…especially in the areas of math and reading. Our building has really been intensifying injecting more problem solving into our math program and guided reading was added and has been the focus of our district and building for the past three years" (#113, Grade 5, 11 YTE, 12 S, AYP-not met), said one. "Actually I have added more to the curriculum to be sure I have a broad base for testing," another stated (#51, Grade 3/4, 11 YTE, 12 S, AYP-met).

Twenty-three of the 117 respondents (20%) expressed concern that a test-driven curriculum resulted in teachers and curriculums that did not meet the true needs of the students. For example one teacher said, "Too much testing and test-driven instruction. We lose sight of the child and their needs" (#16, Grades 1/2/3, AYP-not met). Another commented, "I am saddened by the importance of scores vs. the emotional/social part of a child" (#50, Grade 1/2/3, 16 S, AYP-met). The majority of these 23 teachers expressed that, since the advent of NCLB, they had adopted a one-size-fits-all curriculum in an effort to raise the test scores of the lower-level students. These teachers reported that they did not have the time or energy to provide differentiated instruction that would challenge the higher-level students. They had confidence that these higher-level students would do well on the standardized test regardless of the curriculum or instruction they received. Because of this, the academic needs of the higher-level students were largely ignored while the teachers put their efforts into remediating the academic skills of the lower-level students in an effort to raise their test scores. One teacher commented:

> I used to try to balance the amount of attention I gave my students. Now, I spend so much time with the remediation piece that the average and gifted kids don't receive their fair share of my attention or challenges. The average and gifted students don't get near the amount of attention that I used to give them (#77, Grade 4, 15 YTE, 16 S, AYP-met).

Another teacher stated, "We spend so much time trying to improve the special groups that we can't give the high level students as much challenge as they need. Therefore, they become an at-risk group" (#58, Grade 4, 4 YTE, 19 S, AYP-met). A third teacher noted:

> The NCLBA has hindered my teaching. It has made teaching more difficult. I have had to drop my high educational expectations for my class. The bright students are being hurt because the material has to be leveled so low. I've lowered my expectations for students and watered down the curriculum so the lower students will have more success" (#113, Grade 5, 32 YTE, 27 S, AYP-not met).

2) Positive Effects of NCLB and the WyCAS

Of 117 respondents, 35 or 30% made comments concerning the positive effects of the NCLB accountability plan and Wyoming's criterion-referenced standardized test, the WyCAS. The positive effects mentioned included improved instructional practices and curriculum choices, and higher student academic expectations.

It is important for the reader to understand some basic characteristics of the WyCAS, Wyoming's adopted standardized test at the time of this study. The WyCAS did have many multiple-choice items, but unlike many state standardized tests, the items were not exclusively multiple choice. The WyCAS also contained many short-answer and extended-response items that required students to thoroughly explain in writing their problem-solving strategies in both the reading and math subtests. Eighteen of the 117 participants' responses (15%) concerning the positive effects on curriculum and instructional practices were directly related to the student requirement to explain their thinking in writing on this standardized test. These teachers reported that this requirement encouraged them to improve their writing instruction and writing emphasis across the curriculum. One teacher explained, "WyCAS has definitely changed certain aspects of how I teach. An area where I might consider it an improvement is that I strive to teach the six traits of writing more thoroughly. One other area would be that I have the students write more in math than I used to" (#77, Grade 4, 15 YTE, 16 S, AYP-met). Another teacher commented, "The WyCAS has encouraged me to teach writing and reading skills better" (#65, Grade 4, 21 YTE, 21 S, AYP-met). Interestingly, 13 teachers teaching grades other than fourth grade commented on how the WyCAS requirements had encouraged them to improve their writing instruction across the curriculum. A fifth and sixth grade teacher noted, "I have included much more writing to explain thinking in my teaching” (#40, Grade 5/6, 25 YTE, 27 S, AYP-met). A second-grade teacher responded, “I teach second grade. Therefore the effect of testing on my teaching is limited. I feel WyCAS pressure has forced me to look mostly at my writing instruction and improve it” (#45, Grade 2, 18 YTE, 19 S, AYP-met). A first-grade teacher stated, “As a first grade teacher, I have done more writing in conjunction with math/problem solving” (#24, Grade 1, 20 YTE, 21 S, AYP-met).

Many test items on the WyCAS required students to utilize critical and analytical thinking to solve realistic problems. Because of this, nine of these 35 teachers (26%) expressed that they were encouraged to implement more classroom activities that required students to think through real-life problems critically and analytically and then justify their thinking both orally and in writing. These teachers also described how the WyCAS items encouraged them to focus more on the application of skills and knowledge rather than just the accumulation of information.

About a third of the 35 teachers (11) who mentioned positive effects of Wyoming’s accountability system commented that NCLB and WyCAS expectations had helped them refine and focus their curriculum. For example, one teacher stated, “It has made me structure and refine my curriculum better” (#58, Grade 4, 4 YTE, 19 S, AYP-met). Another teacher noted, “It has made me more aware of what might be tested and to look at material that can be eliminated or changed so that only the most important aspects can be covered” (#95, Grade 4, 31 YTE, 25 S, AYP-not met). A third teacher said, “I believe it has raised the bar and focused the curriculum” (#11, Grade 4, 15 YTE, 18 S, AYP-met).

Raising academic expectations for all of the students, especially the lower-level students, was mentioned by two of the teachers. For example, one of these teachers commented:

> I want my special education students doing the very same things all fourth graders are doing. I want them to be taught everything my class is taught. I think this has been a very positive change. All of my fourth grade students can achieve more than I once assumed. It does require more work for the classroom teacher to restructure assignments for some of our students, but I find the benefits worth the time (#70, Grade 4, 15 YTE, 22 S, AYP-met).

Sixteen of the 117 respondents (14%) reported that NCLB mandates had had a positive effect on school improvement efforts. Nine of these 16 teachers mentioned specific things that were being done in their schools and school districts to raise standardized test scores. Some of these were the hiring of more para professionals to assist with instruction, more staff development focused on improving curriculum and instruction, and increased purchasing of research-based instructional programs.

3) Neutral Effects of NCLB Mandates on Curriculum, Instruction, and Teaching Efficacy

Twenty-four of the 117 respondents (21%) reported that the NCLB mandates had no affect on their instructional practices. Five of these 24 teachers explained that they always try to do what is best for the students they teach regardless of federal mandates. One teacher expressed this sentiment as follows: “I do everything I can to ensure that my students are getting the best education possible, but not because of standardized tests or NCLB” (#117, Grades 1/2, 7 YTE, 20 S, AYP-not met). One teacher said that she ignored the test results because her school's test results had been pretty good every year. Two others commented that they ignored test results because they did not believe in teaching to a test. Two teachers stated that, although the NCLB act had not improved their teaching practices, it had made them more aware of the vast differences in children. One teacher insisted that things like becoming Nationally Board Certified and working to achieve a master's degree in Education had changed her teaching practices more than NCLB. Fifteen of these 24 teachers indicated that, since they were not fourth-grade teachers responsible for administering the standardized test, they were not affected by NCLB accountability mandates and high-stakes testing.

Theme 3: Perceptions of the WYCAS—Wyoming's Standardized Test

Theme number three had to do with elementary teachers' perceptions of the WyCAS, Wyoming's standardized test at the time of this study. Two dominant subthemes emerged. These subthemes were:

1) Issues with the test [WyCAS] itself
2) Issues with test management and administration

More detailed statistical information regarding the demographic data of the participants who responded to these subthemes can be seen in Table 13.

Table 13

Demographic Data of Respondents: Theme #3— Issues Concerning Wyoming's Standardized Test (WyCAS)

	Issues with test management and

		Issues with test itself	administration
Total respondents		67/117—57%	54/117—46%
AYP status	AYP—met	41—72%	38—70%
	AYP—not met	16—28%	16—30%
Grade level taught	1st-3rd grade	23—40%	22—41%
	4th grade	24—42%	18—33%
	5th-6th grade	10—18%	14—26%
Teaching experience	0-7 years	5— 9%	5— 9%
	8-20 years	18—32%	24—44%
	21+ years	30—53%	22—41%
	Unknown	4— 7%	3— 6%
Number of students	0-17 students	21—21%	14—26%
	18-22 students	32—56%	24—44%
	23+ students	13—23%	16—30%

To see a table summarizing the numbers of participants responding to each subtheme related to Theme 3 (Perceptions of the WyCAS) see Table 14.

Table 14

Perceptions of the WyCAS (Wyoming's Standardized Test)

Response	Number	Percentage

Issues related to the WyCAS test itself	67/117	57%
Too long	47/117	40%
Not developmentally appropriate	20/117	17%
Too much emphasis on reading and/or writing	13/117	11%
Test directions/test items poorly written/confusing	11/117	9%
Unfair for ELL and special education students	8/117	8%
Issues with test management and administration	54/117	46%
WyCAS comparisons of teachers/schools inappropriate	13/117	11%
'Apples to oranges' comparisons of students	12/117	9%
Subjective scoring of extended response items	9/117	8%
Test results received too late	8/117	7%

1) Issues with the Test Itself

Sixty-seven of the 117 respondents (57%) commented on issues related to the WyCAS.

Forty-seven of the 117 respondents (40%) indicated that the test was too long. These teachers indicated that the length of the test was exhausting for nine and ten year olds. They explained that this caused the students to lose interest and focus which negatively affected their test performance. One teacher commented, "WyCAS is *too* long. If you were to hand an adult the WyCAS test and tell them we would be covering that in the next 8-10 days, they would be discouraged and disheartened. Ten year olds feel worse" (#36, Grade 4, 20 YTE, 19 S, AYP-met). Another teacher explained, "Too long—students check out and could care less about results" (#60, Grade 5, 36 YTE, 24 S, AYP-not met). Still another teacher said:

> I really resent that the WyCAS test isn't given over a longer period of time. It's so smashed into such little time that it's hard on the fourth graders. It wears them out no matter how hard we try to spread out the testing so it won't bother them too much" (#137, Grade 4/5, 12 YTE, 22 S, AYP-met).

Twenty of the 117 teachers (17%) claimed that the fourth-grade WyCAS was not developmentally appropriate because many of the test items were above the fourth-grade level. One teacher noted, "The WyCAS test is not appropriate for fourth grade students. It tests abstract concepts above the reasoning skills of many students at that grade level (#84, Grade 4, 28 YTE, 12 S, AYP-not met). Another teacher suggested, "The WyCAS needs to be a more realistic test. Don't set the bar so high that *most* students can't reach it!" (#71, Grade 3, 4 YTE, 20 S, AYP-met). Another teacher insisted that the WyCAS was "…very difficult for 'average' students" (#46, Grade 4, 26 YTE, 18 S, AYP-met). "It is written above grade level and immediately frustrates struggling students" (#14, Grade 4, 8 YTE, 24 S, AYP-not met), explained another.

Thirteen of the 117 teachers (11%) expressed the belief that there was too much emphasis on writing and/or reading on the WyCAS. They contended that this unfairly penalized students who were not good at writing. "If a student excels in math, but absolutely hates to write, there goes his math score. Math should test math abilities, not writing abilities," explained one teacher (#35, Grade 4, 22 YTE, 20 S, AYP-met). "The WyCAS is unfairly weighted towards writing. Young elementary students can understand and demonstrate much more than they can explain orally and especially in writing. They should not be punished for this developmental reality," commented another (#100, Grade 5, 24 YTE, 19 S, AYP-met).

There were other issues that were mentioned by respondents, although not as often as the three issues discussed above. Eleven of the 117 respondents (9%) mentioned that test directions and test items were sometimes poorly written and, therefore, confusing. Nine teachers (8%) stated that the WyCAS was unfair for English language learners (ELL) and special education students. Four respondents said that items on the WyCAS, especially writing prompts, were uninteresting and therefore resulted in students doing less than their best writing. Two contended that there was a teaching/testing mismatch. In particular, these teachers noted that although students had learned to use resources such as dictionaries to further their learning in the classroom, they were forbidden to use such resources on the test.

2) Issues with Test Management and Test Administration

Fifty four of the 117 respondents (46%) described issues with test management and test administration.

Thirteen of the 117 respondents (11%) contended that using WyCAS test results to judge and compare teachers, schools and school districts was inappropriate and not the original intent of the WyCAS. One teacher noted, “It [WyCAS] was brought in with the idea of not comparing teachers but as a check on learning, and now is the instrument used to compare teachers, schools, and NCLB goals” (#57, Grade 2, 26 YTE, 20 S, AYP-met). Another teacher explained, “The WyCAS has never been a valid tool for AYP. It was only designed for teachers to assess their teaching. It was never designed as a high stakes test, but has since become just that” (#58, Grade 4, 4 YTE, 19 S, AYP-met).

Twelve of the 117 respondents (10%) mentioned the problem of comparing one year’s fourth grade class with another year’s fourth grade class, which many of them referred to as ‘apples-to-oranges comparisons.’ “It’s not fair to compare year to year as every class is different!” explained one teacher (#5, Grade 4, 22 YTE, 18 S, AYP-met). Another teacher commented, “WyCAS does not compare student scores with those same student scores. Therefore, it is completely ineffective as a measurement of learning progress” (#68, Grade 6, 14 YTE, 23 S, AYP-not met). Still another teacher noted, “It is not fair to compare one class to another and judge a teacher by a year’s group—strong or weak” (#131, Grade 4/5/6, 12 YTE, 20 S, AYP-not met).

Mentioned by nine (8%) of the 117 respondents was that the scoring of the WyCAS written responses was subjective and, therefore, unfair. Eight teachers (7%) reported that the test results were received too late, usually during the summer after the students had moved on to the next grade. Because of this, they expressed that the test results were not helpful to the teachers in improving instruction. Seven teachers (6%) contended that the WyCAS was not a good match with the standards that they were required to teach and, therefore, the results were meaningless. Furthermore, seven teachers (6%) commented that the results were not specific enough to inform instruction. For example, students were given an overall math score but there was no information regarding their achievement of specific math concepts and skills. Seven teachers (6%) insisted that there was inconsistency between the test forms utilized and between the makeup of the WyCAS one year compared with its makeup the next year. Three respondents perceived that the WyCAS was designed to trick the students rather than assess their school achievement. One teacher who taught Native American students on Wyoming’s Indian reservation claimed that the WyCAS was biased against minority populations.

Conclusions, Policy Implications, and Recommendations

Introduction

The question for this research study was: What are the perceptions/opinions of a representative sample of Wyoming's elementary teachers concerning the effect of the NCLB accountability plan and its consequent high-stakes testing on instructional practices? In this chapter the outcomes of this research study will be discussed along with the researcher's resulting conclusions, recommendations, and policy implications. These will be briefly identified here in the introduction and described in greater detail later in this chapter.

It was found that the high expectations of the NCLB accountability plan and the extended response items on the WyCAS were helpful in encouraging schools and teachers to improve their curriculum and instruction. Improved curriculum and instruction practices included a more focused curriculum, higher expectations for students, and an increased emphasis on writing instruction across the curriculum. Therefore the researcher recommends that these high NCLB expectations and extended response standardized test items be retained.

Seventy-nine percent of the teacher respondents reported that the punitive sanctions mandated by the NCLB accountability plan had resulted in many unintended negative effects on curriculum, instruction, and teaching efficacy. These negative effects included increased stress, frustration, and discouragement for teachers as well as lower quality, less engaging, and/or deemphasized/eliminated learning experiences for the students. Another negative effect reported by these teachers was that a differentiated curriculum was being replaced by a one-size-fits-all curriculum. Teachers reported responding to the pressure to raise test scores by ignoring the academic needs of higher-level students while focusing their efforts on the remediation of lower-level students. Because of these negative effects, the researcher concludes that NCLB punitive sanctions should be eliminated while retaining the act's high expectations. Regardless of whether the negative sanctions will, in the future, be retained or removed, the researcher advises teachers and schools to respond to NCLB mandates in an educationally sound manner. The researcher recommends that school staff development opportunities, federal and state Department of Education employees, and school district administrators emphasize the importance of implementing best practices in the teaching of an engaging, challenging, and rigorous curriculum differentiated to meet unique student academic needs. By doing this, the achievement gap can be effectively lowered while teaching all students optimally using research-based best instructional practices.

Fifty-two percent of the respondents indicated that the NCLB act did not consider extraneous factors beyond the control of teachers and schools. These factors included innate mental ability; enriching background experiences; health and nutritional variables; level of parental support; and traumatic emotional distracters. Other factors mentioned by the teachers as being beyond the control of local school districts and teachers were the inequalities in school environments, school supplies, and quality of teachers. The researcher concludes that it is important for the federal government to encourage teachers and schools to do their best to educate all children. However, it is equally important for the federal government to aggressively address systemic societal and familial issues that contribute greatly to the educational and racial achievement gap. Additionally, to achieve success in the educational arena, the federal government must make provisions to equalize schools and educational opportunities. These provisions would include equal school funding, equal school environments, equal learning materials, equally-qualified teachers, and equal teacher-to-student ratios.

Twenty-six of the respondents contended that using the standardized test as the sole indicator of student achievement and teacher/school quality is inadequate and ineffective. They explained that the standardized test, by itself, is incapable of measuring all student knowledge, determining student academic growth, and comprehensively evaluating teacher and school quality. The researcher recommends, therefore, that the standardized test be utilized in conjunction with a variety of other assessments and evaluations to determine student achievement and teacher/school quality.

Findings from this research study indicated that Wyoming's standardized test, the WyCAS, was too long, not developmentally appropriate, that some of the directions and items were written in a confusing manner, and that the results were received too late to inform instruction. To resolve these test issues, the researcher recommends that Wyoming's standardized test be shortened and that a panel of teachers be employed to peruse test items to determine developmental appropriateness and the clarity of test directions and test items. The researcher also recommends that the results be communicated to the schools and teachers in a timely manner.

The WyCAS test results from one year's group of students were being compared with the test results from another year's group of students and 10% of the respondents expressed that this was an unfair and inappropriate comparison. To resolve this issue, the researcher recommends that students be tested in each grade and their test results be compared from year to year to determine their individual academic growth. The researcher also recommends that testing systems should be restructured to measure individual student growth over the course of each school year. By so doing, it could be determined whether a lower-level student was making progress even though they were not performing at grade level. It could also be determined whether a high-level student was continuing to progress rather than remaining stagnant academically while the teacher focused on remediating the skills of lower-level students. Such tests would be more accurate and adequate indicators of student achievement and teacher success.

A small number of teachers indicated that the test results were not specific enough and, therefore, were not useful in informing instruction. To remedy this situation, the researcher recommends that the essential skills and concepts that are to be assessed by the standardized test be communicated to the teacher. This will enable teachers to adequately prepare their students by teaching *to* the test. In this way, the standardized test will be an assessment of school learning rather than an indicator of socioeconomic status. Additionally, the researcher concludes that test results need to be much more specific indicating the actual concepts and skills that have been mastered by each student and those that need further instruction. In this way the results of the standardized test could be effectively used to inform instruction.

Retain High Expectations and Extended Test Response Items

Thirty percent of the responding teachers commented on positive effects of the NCLB accountability plan and the WyCAS. The main things related to NCLB and the WyCAS that helped the surveyed Wyoming elementary teachers improve their instruction were the high expectations of the No Child Left Behind act and the extended written responses required on the WyCAS.

Findings from this research study indicatd that the high expectations of the NCLB act encouraged teachers to refine and focus their curriculum and raise the achievement bar for their students, especially for those students who struggled academically. This finding was supported by some educational theorists who insisted that the high expectations of NCLB and standardized testing were helpful in providing clarity, focus, direction, and coherence to curriculum and instruction (US Department of Education, 2002; Phelps, 2003; Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003). These theorists contended that the high expectations of the No Child Left Behind Act and standardized testing would motivate teachers and schools to provide a higher-quality education. Furthermore, for these respondents, the extended response items on the WyCAS had the effect of raising the academic bar resulting in better teaching and learning. The extended response items encouraged the teaching of more critical thinking skills and the emphasis on more writing across the curriculum requiring students to explain their thinking.

Because of the above results, it is the researcher’s conclusion that NCLBs high expectations need to be retained. Additionally, the researcher concludes that the extended response items on Wyoming’s standardized test need to be preserved to encourage teachers to continue emphasizing writing and critical thinking skills across the curriculum. These extended response items should be included on the standardized test even if it is more expensive and time consuming to score them.

Eliminate Negative Sanctions

Seventy-nine percent of the 117 respondents noted the negative effects of punitive sanctions on curriculum, instruction, and teaching efficacy. As Shepard and Dougherty (1991) maintained, placing great importance on standardized test results, especially when the test results are rewarded or punished, can have a major influence on what takes place in classrooms. Dominant negative effects included the high levels of pressure and the resulting stress felt by teachers to raise their students' test scores. Teachers reported feeling the most pressure to improve standardized test scores from the federal and state Departments of Education and the No Child Left Behind Act. Furthermore, statistical correlations revealed that the more pressure felt by teachers to improve standardized test scores, the lower their opinions of NCLB, AYP, and the WyCAS. Statistical correlations also revealed that the more pressure felt by teachers to improve test scores, the less positive the effect of the WyCAS on their instructional practices.

The high levels of stress from the high-stakes pressure to improve standardized test scores resulted in feelings of discouragement and frustration for teachers. The pressure to raise test scores or face negative consequences resulted in teachers spending a great deal of their instructional time preparing students for the test. This was compounded by the fact that the standardized test was administered in March giving teachers only six months to teach all the content that would be tested. Teachers expressed that they were sacrificing valuable academic content so there would be more time to adequately prepare students for the test. This finding was supported by some research studies where it was found that the amount of time devoted to test preparation in the classroom increased as a result of the pressure from the sanctions of high-stakes tests (Herman & Golan, 1990; Hoffman, Assaf, & Paris, 2001). These researchers concluded that, when high stakes are attached to test results, the learning experiences of students can be weakened, and the quality of teaching can be compromised.

Untested curriculum such as social studies, current events, social skills instruction, recess, and art were deemphasized or eliminated altogether as reported by 30% of the respondents. Many educational researchers and theorists supported this finding when they asserted that, when higher test scores are rewarded and lower test scores are punished, it is a natural human response to forego teaching that which is not tested even if the untested curriculum is deemed to be worthwhile and valuable (Herman & Golan, 1990; Hoffman, Assaf, & Paris, 2001; Herszenhorn, 2003; Kohn, 2001; Kozol, 2005; Popham, 2001, 2002, 2004; Shepard & Dougherty, 1991). Teacher respondents expressed that teachable moments and more time consuming student-centered, project-based, or thematic-based instruction were being replaced with more efficient isolated and often superficial basic skill instruction. With less time to teach valuable content, teachers explained that the result was a lower-quality, watered-down curriculum rather than a more rigorous curriculum as intended by NCLB. As predicted by Popham (2004), teachers and schools who feared an ‘in need of improvement’ label because of low test scores would lower their academic expectations and academic standards.

Teacher respondents expressed that the emphasis on preparing students for the standardized test, exacerbated by negative sanctions for low test scores, was resulting in less teaching and learning joy, fun, and creativity. As a result, instruction was less effective, less motivating, less engaging, less demanding, and less meaningful. Popham (2004) predicted this finding when he stated that the relentless pressure to improve students’ test scores had “…led to a serious erosion of educational quality in many parts of the nation” (p. 6), and “…the passage of NCLB has dramatically increased the likelihood of test-induced educational harm” (p. 9).

Results of this study indicated that, for many, as a result of the negative high-stakes promised for low standardized test scores, a test-driven ‘one-size-fits-all’ curriculum had replaced a more differentiated curriculum designed to meet the unique academic needs of each student. This finding was supported by many educational researchers and theorists (Abrams & Madaus, 2003; Kohn, 2001; Ohanian, 1999; Meier, 2000; Sizer, 2004; Stoskopf, 2002). Kozol’s (2005) findings indicated that a one-size-fits-all curriculum was predominant in Title I schools where test scores were generally low. Twenty percent of the respondents contended that they felt compelled to spend their time and efforts improving the achievement of the lower-level students. This was done in an effort to raise the numbers of students performing at the proficient level on the standardized tests and, therefore, achieve AYP goals. The responding teachers explained that they often ignored the academic needs of the higher-level students because these students were already likely to perform at proficiency on the standardized test. Because of this, many of these teachers felt they were leaving the higher-level students behind. Educational researchers supported this finding (Daniels, 2002; Kozol 2005). These researchers indicated that the punitive high-stakes included in the NCLB accountability plan were resulting in the implementation of one-size-fits-all curriculums with less instructional differentiation to meet unique student needs. The education of students was being hurt rather than helped when negative sanctions discouraged teachers from differentiating their instruction which had enabled each and every student to develop optimally in every academic subject.

Because of all the negative effects associated with high-stakes accountability sanctions noted by the surveyed teachers, the researcher concludes that the negative sanctions related to NCLB mandates should be eliminated. If the high expectations are retained while the negative sanctions are eliminated, teachers might feel encouraged to return to high-quality teaching practices and retain valuable untested curriculum. Furthermore, teachers would be likely to feel more freedom to make instructional decisions that they know are best for their students; instructional decisions that are more effective in engaging the students in interesting, exciting, fun, motivating, and meaningful learning that is truly differentiated, challenging and rigorous.

Popham (2004) insisted that teachers needed to stop hoping the NCLB law would go away and cease responding to this law in an educationally unsound manner. Instead, he suggested that teachers and schools figure out ways for the NCLB law to enhance rather than erode educational quality. Even if, in the future, the negative sanctions of NCLB are retained for those not meeting adequate yearly progress goals, teachers and schools need to stop responding to NCLB high-stakes mandates by eliminating untested curriculum and teaching in ways that are unengaging for the students and ineffective in producing meaningful and deep-level conceptual learning.

The researcher concludes that it is essential that professional development workshops, state Department of Education employees, and school district administrators encourage teachers to implement research-based best instructional practices and engaging motivating academic activities while differentiating instruction to meet the academic needs of all students. Staff development opportunities that will help teachers to truly improve student learning are indispensible. For example, teachers need to learn strategies that will enable them to integrate many different subjects in the learning of one major topic. Instructing teachers in techniques that will immerse students in their learning so that it is fun, exciting, engaging, interesting, and, therefore, motivating is also a necessity. It is the researcher's recommendation that such a rich and rigorous curriculum as well as high-quality instruction be encouraged regardless of the impact of this practice on standardized test scores. These conclusions and recommendations were supported by much of the current literature regarding the negative effects of the sanctions on teachers and schools not meeting AYP goals (Burley, 2002; Herman & Golan, 1990; Herszenhorn, 2003; Hoffman, Assaf, & Paris, 2001; Kohn, 2001; Kozol, 2005; Meier, 2002; Ohanian, 1999; Pavlividas, 2001; Popham, 2004; Prescott, 2001; Shepard & Dougherty, 1991). Moreover, these conclusions were supported by this study's correlations between teachers' opinions of NCLB, AYP, and the WyCAS and the effect of standardized testing on their instructional practices. These moderate positive correlations (.504 and .466 respectively) indicated that the higher the teachers' opinions of NCLB, AYP, and the WyCAS, the more positive the effect of standardized testing on their instructional practices. Because of these findings, the researcher encourages teachers to keep a positive attitude about the NCLB mandates (even if they involve negative sanctions) and the researcher recommends that teachers find ways to raise scores and lower the achievement gap without compromising research-based best practices.

Address Societal and Familial Factors Contributing to the Achievement Gap

Fifty-two percent of the respondents suggested that extraneous factors beyond the control of the teacher and the school were not considered by NCLB mandates. They explained that these extraneous factors could have a profound effect on the learning of the students. The extraneous factors included innate ability; health and nutrition variables; enriching background experiences; level of parental support; and traumatic emotional distracters such as divorce, abuse, and drug and alcohol use in the family. Other extraneous factors beyond the control of local school districts and teachers included the inequalities in school environments, learning materials, and qualified teachers. Surveyed teachers contended that these extraneous factors could not be overcome simply by placing the blame for the achievement gap solely on teachers and schools and mandating negative sanctions for low test scores. As Berliner (2005) explained, school reform alone, although helpful, is not enough of an intervention to assure that students achieve optimally in the academic arena.

To overcome many of the issues that contribute to the achievement gap, it is essential for the United States as a whole to aggressively address contributing societal and familial issues that are beyond the control of schools and teachers. It is the researcher's conclusion that the equalizing of schools serving all socioeconomic levels needs to become a priority. As supported by the literature, these equalizing provisions should include equal school building and classroom environments, equal learning materials, equally-qualified teachers, and equality concerning teacher-to-student ratio (Kozol, 2005; Rothstein, 2004). The researcher also concludes that, if the government is going to mandate and expect a closure in the achievement gap, it must provide the essential school funding, school environments, and positive public education support to make this a reality. Furthermore, the researcher concludes that provisions to assist low socioeconomic families in receiving adequate health care and nutrition is a necessity. Additionally, providing parent education to help these families in providing rich preschool experiences is important in keeping the achievement gap from even beginning.

Use Standardized Testing Along With Other Forms of Assessment

Twenty-six percent of the respondents suggested that a variety of evaluative tools be used to determine student achievement and judge the quality of schools and teachers. Some educational theorists contended that standardized testing was the only pure and objective way of measuring student achievement (Department of Education, 2002; Phelps, 2003; Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003). Other educational theorists and researchers determined that using the standardized test as the only assessment tool was inadequate in determining all student knowledge and academic growth, and in judging teacher and school quality (Abrams & Madaus, 2003; Fair Test, 2004a; Olson, 2000; Pavlividas, 2001). These educational theorists and researchers suggested that standardized testing could be one of the many evaluative tools utilized, but was not enough by itself. It would also be necessary to include a variety of other evaluative tools to provide a more complete analysis of student achievement and the quality of teaching and schools. These assessments could include portfolio assessment; teacher observation and opinion; teacher-created informal assessments; district-level assessments; other assessments such as DIBELS tests; the John's Basic Reading Inventory; the Developmental Reading/Writing Assessments; Running Records; and/or principal and peer evaluation of teachers. This researcher's conclusions and recommendations concur with these suggestions.

Improve Wyoming's Standardied Test

As far as Wyoming's standardized test (WyCAS) is concerned, 40% thought the WyCAS was too long for fourth graders which caused the students to lose focus and interest, thus negatively affecting test scores. Seventeen percent indicated that the WyCAS was developmentally inappropriate with many test items above the level of the average fourth grader and requiring levels of writing that were not realistic for this age of child. A few also indicated that many of test directions and test items were poorly written, confusing, and/or uninteresting resulting in lowered test scores. Based on these findings, the researcher concludes that the standardized test should be much shorter so that students can maintain optimal focus and interest to do their best work. Furthermore, test items and directions should be perused by a panel of teachers to determine whether they are developmentally appropriate, clearly written, and match the academic teaching standards.

Ten percent of the teacher respondents stated that ‘apples to oranges’ comparisons of test results were inappropriate and meaningless. These teachers explained that one year’s fourth grade class should never be compared with the next year’s fourth grade class. They explained that every class is different and it is therefore impossible to compare one class with another. This finding was supported in the literature (Bracey, 1998; Burley, 2002; Fair Test, 2004a; Kohn, 2000; Popham, 2001). Some students do not perform at grade level by the end of a school year, but have made a lot of academic progress during that school year. The way Wyoming’s standardized testing program (WyCAS) was implemented at the time of this study, these students were simply identified as failures because they were unable to achieve proficiency on the standardized test. They were given no credit for the progress they had made during the school year which was sometimes extensive albeit below grade level. It is the researcher’s conclusion that the standardized test should be administered at each grade level so that it is possible to measure an individual student’s academic growth from year to year. Moreover, it would be advisable to design and implement a testing system that would measure how much each individual student learned during a school year rather than just where they stood in regard to grade-level proficiencies at the end of a year.

A small number of teachers contended that test results were received after the students had moved on to the next grade which was too late to inform instruction. Additionally, a small number of respondents noted that test results were not specific enough to inform instruction. To remedy these issues, the researcher recommends that the test results be communicated to the schools in a timely manner. Furthermore, since the test is intended to be a measurement of what the students learn in school rather than a test to determine their socioeconomic status and background experiences, it is necessary for teachers to know the essential skills and concepts that will be assessed by the standardized test. This will enable teachers to adequately prepare their students by teaching *to* the test. In this way, the standardized test will be a true measurement of school achievement rather than an indicator of socioeconomic status. This recommendation is supported by Popham (2001) who insisted that standardized tests be educationally supportive. Additionally, the researcher concludes that test results need to be much more specific so that they can be used to inform instruction. It does little good to find out that a child has a low score in math because there are so many components to mathematical understanding. It is much more informative to know, for example, that the student struggled with the questions assessing area and perimeter while mastering elapsed time concepts.

Conclusion

The No Child Left Behind accountability plan was implemented to ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach proficiency on challenging state academic achievement standards as measured by state standardized tests. It has been contended by the U.S. Department of Education that the NCLB mandates will result in the closing of the achievement gap between high- and low-performing children, especially the achievement gap between minority and non-minority students, and between economically disadvantaged children and their more economically advantaged peers. As a part of this plan it was hoped that the quality of public education would be improved. As mentioned in the introduction, these goals seem to be worthy and good in theory, but there is uncertainty concerning their outcome. This research study has helped to determine the positive, neutral, and unintended negative effects of the NCLB accountability plan and its mandated high-stakes standardized testing on teachers and their instructional practices.

This study revealed that there have been some positive effects on curriculum and instruction as a result of the No Child Left Behind Act and high-stakes standardized testing. These positive effects have been helpful in closing the achievement gap and improving the quality of public education. However, the results of this study indicated that most of the effects on curriculum and instruction as a result of the No Child Left Behind Act and it's consequent high-stakes testing have been negative, albeit unintended. It is the researcher's hope that the high expectations of NCLB be retained while revising the plan to accommodate the research findings and, as a result, make the plan more effective in closing the achievement gap and improving the quality of schools and teachers.

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Appendix A

The Survey—“Teachers’ Perceptions of Standardized Testing”

February, 2005

Dear Research Participant,

Let me buy you a beverage, and perhaps while you’re sipping it, you’ll take just a few minutes to answer some brief questions. This survey is designed to obtain Wyoming elementary teachers’ opinions and insights concerning standardized testing – the WyCAS in particular - and its effects on teaching and learning. Although this will be the last year that the WyCAS will be used, your candid responses may be helpful to policy makers as they develop future effective standardized testing programs considering the teacher's perspective. Overall results will be reported in my doctoral dissertation. I understand that many of you do not give the WyCAS at your grade level. However, since student performance on the WyCAS is the responsibility of all teachers regardless of grade level, it is important to ascertain the opinions and insights of *all* elementary teachers.

This survey will take you about 10 - 15 minutes to complete. Agreeing to complete this survey is completely voluntary. Please be assured that all of your survey responses will remain confidential and anonymous. The surveys are numbered only as a way for me to keep track of who returns them.

If possible, please return the completed survey by March 1st to me, Joanie James, in the enclosed stamped and addressed envelope. If you are a few days late in returning the survey, don't worry. I'd like to receive as many responses as possible. If you have any questions, you can contact me at 766-2011 during the day and at 755-5665 in the evenings.

Thanks so much for your time and effort in completing this survey!

Sincerely,

Joanie James

Teachers' Perceptions of Standardized Testing

Directions: In this survey,, the terms "test" and "standardized test" refer to the WyCAS standardized test given in Wyoming. Please respond as honestly as possible to the following items. Your individual responses will be kept anonymous and confidential.

On the following continuum, circle the number that best indicates your opinion of the WyCAS?

1)	ineffective	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	effective
2)	necessary	1	2	3	4	5_	6	7	unnecessary
3)	useless	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	useful
4)	valid	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	invalid
5)	important	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	unimportant
6)	inappropriate	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	appropriate
7)	inaccurate	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	accurate
8)	informative	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	uninformative
9)	beneficial	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	harmful
10)	worthless	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	worthwhile

Check a box to indicate the extent you feel pressure from the following individuals or groups to improve students' WyCAS scores.

	Almost No Pressure	Some Pressure	Moderate Pressure	Quite a Bit of Pressure	A Great Deal of Pressure
11) My Principal					
12) Other Teachers					
13) District Administration					
14) Local School Board					
15) Parents					
16) Students					
17) Myself					
18) Newspaper/Media					
19) State Dept. of Education					
20) U.S. Dept. of Education					

21) No Child Left Behind Act					

The following items inquire about how the WyCAS affects your instructional practices. Please read each item and check a box to indicate your degree of agreement: SD = Strongly Disagree, D = Disagree, N = Neutral, A = Agree, or SA = Strongly Agree.

	SD	D	N	A	SA
22) WyCAS testing encourages me to use more rote drill in my teaching.					
23) WyCAS testing encourages me to eliminate curriculum material that is not tested.					
24) WyCAS testing encourages me to use more student inquiry in my teaching.					
25) WyCAS testing has encouraged me to more effectively meet the needs of differentiated learners.					
26) WyCAS testing has changed my instructional practices for the better.					
27) The WyCAS helps me to clarify which learning goals are the most important.					
28) The WyCAS encourages me to emphasize the teaching of factual recall knowledge.					
29) The WyCAS encourages me to emphasize deep-level understanding in my teaching.					
30) WyCAS testing encourages me to more effectively teach students who perform at a high level academically.					
31) WyCAS testing encourages me to use more explicit instruction.					
32) WyCAS testing encourages me to collaborate with other teachers.					
33) To prepare for the WyCAS, I spend a lot of time teaching my students test-taking skills.					
34) The WyCAS encourages me to teach in more student-centered ways.					
35) WyCAS testing encourages me to more effectively teach students who struggle academically.					
36) The WyCAS encourages me to teach more critical thinking skills.					
37) WyCAS testing encourages me to teach to the standards.					
38) I spend a lot of time teaching my students content that I know will be					

	SD	D	N	A	SA
on the WyCAS.					

The following items inquire about your opinion / perception of the *No Child Left Behind Act (NCLBA)* and its *Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)* goals. As above, check a box to indicate your level of agreement.

	SD	**D**	**N**	**A**	**SA**
39) The NCLBA with its AYP goals has encouraged teachers to improve their teaching effectiveness with *all* students.					
40) Publicly publishing test scores and/or schools' progress toward the AYP goals encourages teachers to improve their teaching effectiveness.					
41) The NCLBA with its AYP goals has encouraged the elimination of non-tested curriculum.					
42) The NCLBA with its AYP goals is helping to reduce the achievement gap in education.					
43) The NCLBA with its AYP goals encourages teachers "to teach to the test".					
44) The NCLBA with its AYP goals has contributed to "teacher burnout".					
45) The NCLBA with its AYP goals is helpful in making sure *all* students receive a high-quality education.					
46) The NCLBA with its AYP goals empowers teachers to make instructional decisions that will be best for their students.					
47) The NCLBA with its AYP goals encourages teachers to use "best practices" when teaching their students.					
48) The NCLBA with its AYP goals is an effective way to assess the quality of schools.					

Please tell me a little about yourself:

I am a:

_____ Male
_____ Female

I consider myself to be:

_____ Caucasian _____ Native American _____ Hispanic / Latino
_____ African American _____ Asian _____ Other __________

I have been teaching a total of ______ years.

Present teaching assignment (please check all that apply):

_____ 1st Grade
_____ 2nd Grade
_____ 3rd Grade
_____ 4th Grade
_____ 5th Grade
_____ 6th Grade

There are _______ students in my class

The school in which I teach is a (please check all that apply):

_____ Public School in a community with *less than 1,000 citizens*
_____ Public School in a community *between 1,000 and 5,000 citizens*
_____ Public School in a community *between 5,000 and 15,000 citizens*
_____ Public School in a community *over 15,000 citizens*

The name of the school where I teach is:

____

The name of the city or town where I teach is:

____

According to the No Child Left Behind Mandates, the school in which I teach:

_____ ***Has*** been identified as *a school in need of improvement* in any academic area and/or with any disaggregated population of students.
_____ ***Has not*** been identified as *a school in need of improvement* in any academic area and/or with any disaggregated population of students.

Please comment below concerning your opinions of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLBA) and its Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) goals:

Please comment below concerning your opinions of the WyCAS:

Please comment below concerning the effects of the WyCAS and the NCLBA on your instructional practices:

Please comment below on changes you would like to see made to Wyoming's standardized testing program:

Important Notice -- Please Read

I plan to follow up this survey with ***in-depth individual open-ended teacher surveys*** via email concerning teachers' perceptions and insights about Wyoming's current standardized testing program. The purpose of these in-depth individual teacher surveys is to obtain more detailed information and in-depth responses..

An ***in-depth individual open-ended survey*** would take a maximum of one hour of your time and would be conducted via email. A $10.00 stipend will be paid to all participants.

Teachers' comments during the in-depth individual survey may be reported in my dissertation, but these comments will be reported in a manner that will assure the anonymity of the teacher participant.

If you are willing to participate in an in-depth individual teacher survey, please indicate your willingness below and provide your contact information. Please return this page with your survey response.

I would be willing to participate in an ***in-depth individual open-ended survey*** with the researcher:

YES NO

If you indicated a willingness to participate in an ***in-depth individual open-ended survey,*** please provide your contact information below:

NAME: ____

E-MAIL ADDRESS: ____

SCHOOL: ____

Appendix B

In-Depth Individual Open-Ended Survey

1) Tell me about how the WyCAS and the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) accountability plan has affected your teaching or changed the way you teach. (See sub questions below to help spark your thinking):

--In what ways has the WyCAS accountability plan improved your teaching?

--In what ways has the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) accountability plan improved your teaching?

--In what ways has the WyCAS hurt your teaching?

--In what ways has the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) accountability plan hurt your teaching?

--Has the NCLBA's effects on the WyCAS changed how you teach?

--If the NCLBA held no influence on standardized test scores, what would you think about the WyCAS or standardized testing in general?

2) What is the value of standardized testing (specifically the WyCAS) to you as a teacher?

3) How have the results of the WyCAS been used to improve your school, your instruction and the learning of the your students?

4) What is your candid opinion of our past test, the WyCAS?

--Pros

--Cons

5) What is your candid opinion of the NCLBA accountability plan?

--Pros

--Cons

6) If you are aware of the changes in the upcoming PAWS test, do you think these changes will make Wyoming's standardized testing program better or worse? Why?

7) If you had the power to change the No Child Left Behind accountability plan, what changes would you make?

8) To what do you attribute your school's scores (whether they be low or high scores) on the WyCAS?

9) How much pressure do you feel for your students to perform well on the WyCAS?

10) How do your prepare your students for WyCAS testing? Is this test-prep time well spent?

11) How has the NCLBA accountability mandates and the WyCAS affected your teaching of differentiated learners?

12) Have you (or your school district) eliminated curriculum that is not tested in an effort to better prepare your students for Wyoming's standardized test? If so, has this been helpful? Why?