

# AVOIDABLE LOSSES: HIGH-STAKES ACCOUNTABILITY AND THE DROPOUT CRISIS

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## Executive Summary

A new study by researchers at Rice University and the University of Texas-Austin, finds that the Texas public school accountability system contributes directly to low graduation rates. Each year Texas public high schools lose at least 135,000 youth prior to graduation. A disproportionate number of these are African American, Latino, and English Language Learners. This study has serious implications for the nation's schools under the federal No Child Left Behind law, which was modeled on the Texas accountability system.

By analyzing data from more than 271,000 students in a large urban district the researchers call Brazos City, the study found that 60 percent of the African American students, 75 percent of Latino students and 80 percent of ESL students did not graduate within five years. The researchers found an overall graduation rate of only 33 percent.

The accountability system uses student test scores for rating schools and rewarding principals. The logic behind the system was that holding adults in the system accountable for student achievement would lead to improved test scores. The requirement to disaggregate and report student test scores by race, with no school permitted to rise in the ratings without increases in the scores of Latino and African American youth, had the stated intent of narrowing the persistent gap between the scores of these historically underserved subgroups and their Anglo counterparts.

“Avoidable Losses” investigates the disparity between these claims of improving achievement and closing the achievement gaps, and the persistent losses of thousands of young people from the system under the high-stakes accountability system.

The study finds that high-stakes test-based accountability leads not to equitable educational possibilities for youth, but to avoidable losses of thousands of youth from the schools. These losses occur not as administrators cheat or fail to comply, but as they comply with the system as it was designed: that is, in the production of rising test scores for their schools. The study shows that as schools came under the accountability system, which uses test scores to rate schools and reward or discipline principals, large numbers of students left the school system. The exit of low-achieving students created the appearance of rising test scores and of narrowing the achievement gap between white and minority students, thus increasing schools' ratings.

**Methods:** The study steps outside the system's own indicators, the student scores on the state test and the school ratings. The study's shift away from reliance on school-level data to student-level data across multiple years permitted analysis of the effects of the accountability system on the youth themselves. The research employed multiple

methodologies in order to track the policy through the system to the children. The study analyzed student-level data on more than 271,000 students in a large urban district over a 7-year period. It included analysis of the accountability policy and its implementation down through the system to the school level; extensive observations in high schools in the Brazos City school district; and interviews with administrators, teachers, and students, including students who had left school prior to graduating. It also included a multi-year case study of a high school attempting to comply with standardized accountability while undertaking reorganization and curricular reforms, and its resulting inability to hold onto many of its students.

### **Findings:**

- Losses of low-achieving students help raise school ratings under the accountability system, thus accruing rewards to their principals in the form of bonuses and job security.
- The statistical analysis of a sample of high schools serving poor and minority youth revealed a pattern of rising school ratings in schools that retained a large percentage of their students in 9<sup>th</sup> grade. Many of those retained in grade did not go on to complete high school.
- This pattern of 9<sup>th</sup> grade retention (often up to 30% of the class) was traced to a legal waiver that allowed principals to adjust grade promotion standards to retain in grade students deemed to be at risk of reducing the school's scores on the state test; this practice has become commonplace, beyond the waiver provision.
- The reporting of student test scores by racial categories resulted in the singling out of the lowest-achieving students in these historically underserved subgroups as potential liabilities to the school ratings, increasing the incentives for school administrators to allow these students to quietly exit the system, rather than to provide them with the quality education necessary for them to succeed.
- The case study revealed the difficulty of undertaking substantive, long-term improvements under the pressure to produce immediate spikes in test scores to raise school ratings and achieve acceptable Annual Yearly Progress.
- The degradation of the curriculum into test drills, which have little relevance beyond the state test, distances students who otherwise wish to persist to graduation, exacerbating the likelihood they will leave school.
- The accountability system's zero tolerance rules for attendance and behavior, including rigid regulations which shift youth into the court system for minor offenses and absences, alienate students and increase the likelihood they will drop out.
- Students experience the degradation of curriculum, zero tolerance policies and 9<sup>th</sup> grade retention as confusing and arbitrary, each which multiplies and magnifies the potential negative impact of the other on student decisions to persist or leave.

**In summary**, the study found that there is a strong association between high-stakes accountability and dropping out. This is in large part owing to the system's internal administrative incentives, which reward increased school ratings, even if they are produced at the expense of youth whose test scores are not likely to contribute positively to the production of these indicators. In such a system, students come to be seen as assets

or liabilities to their schools' ratings. The triaging of thousands of youth out of our schools becomes not a side effect of standardized accountability, but an avoidable loss to make the system look successful.

There are many causes behind students' dropping out of school, from poverty and unstable families, to pregnancy or the need to earn money. What this study shows is that standardized accountability not only does not aid in overcoming those barriers to school completion; it adds to them. Unreliable official statistics on student mobility and transfers, as well as understated official dropout figures (often reported as only 2-3%), make it difficult to assess the exact losses from our schools. Even if the figures generated in this study (for example, 75% of Latino youth in Brazos City not graduating) were adjusted downward by 10% to include possible transfers to other educational settings, the scale of the losses would still be unacceptable, and the numbers attributable to the impact of the accountability system would bear serious reconsideration of its claims.

This study has serious implications for the nation's schools under the NCLB law. It finds that the higher the stakes and the longer such an accountability system governs schools, the more school personnel view students not as children to educate but as potential liabilities or assets for the school's performance indicators, their own careers, or their school's funding.

"Avoidable Losses" is available at <http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v16n3/>.

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