

What does NRC leadership recommend in order to improve reading assessment?

- Reading assessment should reflect performance over multiple time points with various texts and purposes. (12)
- Assessment should measure a wide range of skills with a variety of formats and responses. (12)
- Assessments should follow ethical guidelines of the American Educational Research Association, standard practices of the American Psychological Association and recommended practices of the International Reading Association.
The national and international organizations that represent researchers and practitioners in reading and their state of the art knowledge have clear guidelines for effective and ethical assessment practices. (13)
- Assessments should provide clear distinctions between the acquisition of reading skills and the effective use of the skills for various purposes. (13)
- Assessments should provide students with useful information about their developmental accomplishments with clear suggestions for improvement. (13-14)
- Assessments should provide teachers with useful diagnostic information that can be linked to classroom instruction. (14)
- Assessments should provide parents with comprehensible explanations of their children's progress and achievement with suggestions for enhancing their involvement with their children's literacy development. (14)
- Assessments should provide administrators with data related to specific criteria and standards of performance in order to assess annual progress. (14-15)
- Assessments should be aligned with classroom curricula and instruction. (15)
- Assessments and testing procedures should be reviewed and revised by school boards, teachers, and parents on a regular basis.
Stakeholders should regularly assess the assessment to determine if it is valid (aligned with curriculum and the construct of reading), up to date (informed by the most recent research on reading and assessment) and useful (providing good information for the varied audiences of reading assessment). (15)



NATIONAL READING CONFERENCE POLICY BRIEF HIGH STAKES TESTING AND READING ASSESSMENT *A Summary*

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What is NRC?

The National Reading Conference (NRC) is a professional organization for individuals who share an interest in research and the dissemination of information about literacy and literacy instruction. (www.nrconline.org)

What are high stakes reading tests?

High stakes reading tests are those with highly consequential outcomes for students, teachers and schools. (2)

What are the consequences of high stakes reading tests?

These outcomes may include

- student promotion or retention,
- student placement in reading groups,
- school funding decisions,
- labeling of schools as successful or failing, and
- the degree of community support for a school. (2)

What does NRC Leadership believe about reading assessment?

1. Reading assessment is a useful tool in the service of improving the teaching and learning of reading. (3)
2. All reading assessment must be clearly and carefully tied to an informed understanding of what reading "is." (3)
3. Reading assessment must reflect our most current knowledge in the science of assessment. (3-4)

Never before has there been such a rich array of means for assessing students' reading development and achievement. Yet, high stakes testing may repress the realization of high quality reading instruction and assessment and it poses a threat to the development of students who are accomplished, lifelong readers.

Why are high stakes tests popular?

- **Many people believe that high stakes tests are fair.**
But examination of the assumption of fairness raises several questions. Thus, the inferences we make about students' reading achievement from a single score on a test that is influenced by students' prior knowledge, experiences and level of anxiety must be made with caution. (4)
- **Many people believe high stakes tests are scientific.**
Yet, if we examine what tests tell us about student reading and compare that with what we hope for all our students, we will find a considerable mismatch. In this sense, high stakes tests are an exceedingly thin measure of reading achievement and reading ability. (4-5)
- **High stakes tests are popular because they are familiar.**
Testing appears natural, given its tradition. Yet, we know that the current array of high stakes reading tests represents views of both reading and the assessment of reading that are decades old. (5-6)

Why is NRC leadership concerned about high stakes testing?

High stakes tests are used with increasing frequency in spite of the fact that there is no research that links increased testing with increased reading achievement. (6-7)

In reality, no research has been conducted that demonstrates a cause and effect relationship between increased high stakes testing and improvement in reading achievement scores. The massive testing of reading that is now federally mandated in grades 3 through 8 results in valuable class time taken from the instruction of reading and given to test preparation and administration.

High stakes tests are limited in their ability to describe students' reading achievement. (7)

A high stakes test score represents a single sample of what a student reader does on a standardized test. High stakes tests may well under represent the accomplishments of students and their teachers because these tests have a severely limited ability to describe complex reading and reading-related performances that mark the accomplished teaching and learning of reading.

High stakes tests may do more harm than good. (7-8)

One of the greatest challenges related to high stakes reading tests is to fully anticipate their consequences. Labels for students who do not do well on tests are accompanied with a myriad of related consequences. These include lowered expectations, differential treatment in the classroom and decreased perseverance for those labeled as low-achieving readers.

High stakes tests confine and constrict reading curriculum. (8-9)

In classrooms everywhere, there is tremendous pressure to improve test scores. Were the majority of standardized high stakes reading tests worth teaching to, this would not be an issue. The point is that most high stakes tests represent an over simplistic view of reading and have an narrow focus on particular reading skills and strategies.

High stakes tests alienate teachers. (9)

When testing concerns override teacher professionalism, curriculum decisions may be made according to how well reading instructional materials mirror a test format, and not according to accomplished teachers' knowledge. A high stakes test that is administered in September or October with scores reported back in April or May is of little or no instructional use. This particular lack of suitability of high stakes test results, when teachers may have strong and useful assessment alternatives, is troublesome.

High stakes tests disrupt high quality teaching and learning. (9-10)

For every school hour spent on reading test preparation and administration, an hour is taken from the instructional day. Time given for practice to take tests is time that could be spent on pursuing diverse instructional goals related to reading.

High stakes tests demand significant allocations of time and money that could be otherwise used to increase reading achievement. (10)

High stakes tests are expensive to purchase, prepare for, administer and score. Initiatives to support testing take from other, worthy initiatives related to fostering students' reading development.

High stakes tests are used with increasing frequency to characterize and label young children who are in early developmental stages of reading. (11-12)

High stakes tests force the labeling of young children and assignment to differential instruction that might not be appropriate or effective. Additionally, it is doubtful that most young children have extensive standardized testing experience, so the very act of placing these children in such a situation introduces factors of familiarity and anxiety as possible influences on test performance (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2003).

High stakes tests most often come with caveats related to the accuracy of scores they produce and the suitability of uses of scores, and these caveats are widely ignored. (11)

Among the most frequent caveats is the admonition not to use a single high stakes reading test score to make educational decisions. This caveat is based on the understanding that a student's single high stakes reading test score falls within a range of scores that represent the students' actual achievement level. When high stakes decisions are made using such unstable scores, the decisions may be faulty and costly.

This brochure is a summary of Afflerbach, P. (2004). *National Reading Conference Policy Brief: High Stakes Testing and Reading Assessment*. Page numbers refer to the full-length pdf version of this policy brief which can be found at <http://www.nrconline.org/publications/HighStakesTestingandReadingAssessment.pdf>