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Children Left Behind: A Film by School Psychologists

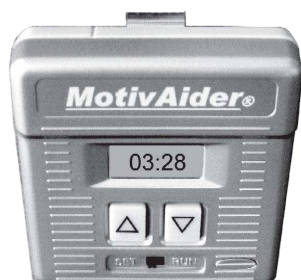
BY LOUIS J. KRUGER

Although much has been written about the expansion of the role of the school psychologist, it usually does not encompass filmmaking. Thus, when my graduate students, fellow school psychologists in Massachusetts, and I began a film project 4 years ago, it seemed like we were embarking on a quixotic journey. We were driven by our desire to change public policy and the realization that research and data are not always sufficient to sway opinions and influence legislators.

We wanted to inform others about the injustices associated with the use of high school exit exams. A high school exit exam is a curriculum-derived test that must be passed in order for a student to earn a high school diploma. These exams are often referred to as “high stakes tests” because of the impact they can have on an individual’s life. As recently as the 1970s, not one state had this type of requirement (Warren, 2007). Three decades later, the landscape has dramatically changed. At present, 24 states are using high stakes tests in an effort to reverse the supposed “rising tide of mediocrity” in our public schools and close the achievement gap between socioeconomic and racial groups (Center on Education Policy, 2008). In implementing high stakes testing in the public schools, state legislatures and departments of education have ignored the advice of the assessment experts and the position statements of many professional organizations, such as the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP, 2003), which have asserted that a high school diploma should not be withheld because of the results on a single statewide test.

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The film, *Children Left Behind*, is about the well-timed movement toward high stakes testing and its impact. In particular, the film focuses on Massachusetts and its use of high stakes tests. Massachusetts’s story has special significance. In the last several years, Massachusetts’s students have achieved top scores in the country on the Nation’s Report Card, and high academic achievement (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2007).

Against this backdrop of apparent success, *Children Left Behind* front the stories of students who are struggling with these exams. These stories provide a springboard for the exploration of the complex issues associated with these exams. The overwhelming focus is on the intended beneficiaries of education reform. The



The first public showing of *Children Left Behind* occurred at the 2007 NASP convention. Shown here at the convention is Northeastern University’s school psychologist, Louis Kruger, and his colleagues: Emanuel Mason, NASP Executive Director. From left to right: Emanuel Mason, Li, Jessica Hoffman, Louis Kruger, and Susan Gorin.

documentary focuses on the impact of high stakes testing on students in low-income, African Americans, English language learners, and impoverished communities. The documentary illuminates the benefits and disadvantages of high stakes tests. The social justice issue of high stakes testing is a ubiquitous part of our global society. The documentary asks the question: Are we leaving too many children behind in our quest for educational reform?

The first public screening of the film was at the Massachusetts State House where it received a standing ovation. Subsequently, we were invited to show the film at several venues, including Northeastern and Harvard University. We were also invited to be part of the annual convention of the American Psychological Association. The American Psychological Association on Films selected *Children Left Behind* to be part of the 2007 annual convention. Our film has also garnered the attention of Boston’s PBS TV station and National Public Radio. We had the opportunity to discuss the film and the issue of high stakes testing with the governor of Massachusetts, at a town hall meeting.

In reflecting upon the process involved in making the film, we believe that school psychology can reap multiple benefits from a documentary film through which school psychologists and graduate students can share their stories (Li et al., in press) and a vehicle for collaborating with concerned citizens about issues related to the field of school psychology. The film provides an opportunity for graduate students to apply their research skills, and computer-related skills in new contexts. The film also raises the visibility of school psychology.

It has been an exhilarating and sometimes exhausting experience. Recently, my colleagues, Emanuel Mason, Chiung-Chi Li, and Susan Gorin, Massachusetts Legislature’s Joint Committee on Education, discussed the use of the statewide assessments.

For more information about the film and to view the film, visit leftbehind.com. You can hear our testimony in front of the

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