In 2001 the No Child Left Behind Act was legislated by Congress and signed into law by President Bush. The act was intended to reform U.S. public education and improve student achievement through, among other mechanisms, demanding strict accountability for results of student achievement. It is crucial for school social workers to become more aware of the potentially negative consequences that stem from reliance on “high stakes” testing. The authors review the disparate impact of traditional assessment approaches and high-stakes testing on ethnic minority students in general, and more specifically, on Hispanic students. In addition, the authors discuss the general influence of culture and ethnicity on standardized test results and review various approaches to mitigating such testing effects and discuss their relative merits and drawbacks. The authors ask whether certain Hispanic cultural or ethnic norms influence testing behaviors, thereby often negating results. Implications for social work practice are discussed.

**KEY WORDS:** educational success; Hispanics/Latinos; No Child Left Behind Act; high-stakes tests

The changing demands of an unpredictable world require an educational system capable of delivering world-class learning to all students. The recently enacted No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) (P.L. 107-110) was created in response to such demands, with the intention of reforming public education and improving student achievement throughout the United States. Although debate about its relative merits began even before the act was legislated, school social workers may be unaware of the negative consequences created by certain aspects of this law, specifically those that require strict accountability measured through standardized testing. Because of the wide-sweeping nature of this law, it is crucial for all school social workers to become more aware of such consequences faced by our vulnerable and disempowered clients. We discuss the consequences of NCLB faced specifically by Hispanic students in U.S. public schools to provide school social workers with the knowledge for effective advocacy. (“Latino” and “Hispanic” are two terms used frequently in the literature to “denote individuals whose ancestry is linked to one of the Spanish- or Portuguese-speaking countries in the Americas. Hispanic is the official term used by the U.S. government” [Suleiman, 2003, p. 186]. For the sole purpose of readability, we use the term Hispanic in this article, unless citing an original source that uses a different term.)

**BACKGROUND**

A confluence of needs, monetary constraints, continually declining test scores in worldwide comparisons, and changing employment demands strengthened the cry for educational accountability across the United States (Johnson, 1998; Stiggins & Knight, 1998). This escalating demand for accountability in the U.S. public education system has given rise to a proliferation of “high-stakes” tests as the primary means of individual and system assessment. These tests are labeled high-stakes because the scores are directly tied to issues of consequence, such as individual promotion or graduation, or monetary allotments to schools or systems (Holman, 1995), contrasting with earlier use to identify gaps in learning, but not for reward or punishment. Consequence-based educational assessments became the domain of the federal government during the past decade, with the Bush
administration emphasizing the use of annual assessments as a tenet of its educational reform policy (Linn, 2000).

In 2001 Congress reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)—the principal federal law affecting education from kindergarten through high school—with the NCLB. Although this article focuses specifically on issues surrounding high-stakes testing, readers are encouraged to visit the official Web site of the U.S. Department of Education at http://www.nochildlefthind.gov to learn details about other provisions of this law.

NCLB was purported to reform education and improve student achievement through, among other mechanisms, demanding strict accountability for results of student achievement (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Specific improvements are mandated of low-achieving schools, districts, and states are delineated in the act. The primary practical application of NCLB across U.S. public schools has been to transform yearly, standardized testing into high-stakes, consequence-based testing for students. The relative benefits versus detriments of high-stakes testing and NCLB continue to be debated by politicians, policymakers, educators, and researchers (see, for example, Braun, 2004; Jacob, 2001; Linn, 2000; National Education Association [NEA], 2004; Rosenshine, 2003).

Before the practice of high-stakes, consequence-based testing becomes further entrenched in our public schools, we need to consider the specific effects of such testing on culturally diverse students, because these are students who historically have scored lower than white students on standardized tests and are most likely to drop out of school without a high school diploma (Camara & Schmidt, 1999; Lee, 2002). Although ample research has demonstrated the inherent biases of standardized tests against African American students (Lee, 1998; Madaus & Clarke, 2001; Roth, Bevier, Bobko, Switzer, & Tyler, 2001), we know very little about such biases against Hispanic students (Escamilia, Mahon, Riley-Bernal, & Rutledge, 2003; National Center for Education Statistics, 1995; Valencia, Villarreal, & Salinas, 2002). Because individuals identified as Hispanic are currently the largest ethnic minority group in the United States, this lack of awareness must be corrected. It is estimated that by 2046, Hispanics will outnumber white people. Although Hispanics number more than 13 percent of the nation's total population, they constitute more than 25 percent of those younger than age 18. Thus, this article is designed to raise the awareness of school social workers to the potential adverse consequences for Hispanic students of the high-stakes tests being used to adhere to the requirements of NCLB.

TRADITIONAL ASSESSMENT APPROACHES AND HIGH-STAKES TESTING

Educational assessments have traditionally included standardized assessments of student achievement, teacher preparedness, and system effectiveness (Hood, 1998), with the purported goals of identifying successes and gaps in instruction and student learning. Ideally, the system can then respond flexibly to student, teacher, and system needs (Stiggins & Knight, 1998). Over the past several decades, the use of these tests has shifted from identifying areas of needed change to managing and aligning students and schools according to narrowly defined system goals (Rothman, 1995). Thus, these tests become high stakes because of the consequences directly tied to students' performances on them. According to Smith and Fey (2000), high-stakes tests are mandated tests, the results of which are automatically used to make inferences, decisions, or characterizations about students or the systems by which they are educated. By 1989, 40 states conducted high-stakes testing as a primary assessment tool of both individual students and educational systems (Holman, 1995).

NCLB has further entrenched high-stakes testing in the public school system. States must establish a baseline level of achievement from which they must demonstrate yearly improvement to reach the ESEA goal of having all students reach the "proficient" level on state tests by 2014 (NEA, 2004). States, school districts, and schools must demonstrate "adequate yearly progress (AYP)" with the results of standardized tests in math and reading administered to all students in grades 3 through 8 and once to all students in grades 9 through 12, beginning with the 2005-06 school year (NEA). If schools do not demonstrate AYP, a series of corrective actions are delineated in the law, potentially resulting in restructuring, financial penalties, closure, or even takeover of the school by the state or a private management company. Thus, NCLB requires states, school districts, and schools to use high-stakes tests to demonstrate adherence to the new law.
High-stakes tests can take several forms; the most commonly known are the traditional standardized achievement exams. Using uniform administration and scoring procedures, standardized tests attempt to assess students' strengths and weaknesses in specific subject areas. Many are norm-referenced to offer performance comparisons across grade levels. The results are then used to categorize students according to academic aptitude and achievement.

For example, the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) is one of the most widely used standardized achievement tests in the nation (Rothman, 1995). Frequently, the Standard Assessment of Intelligence (SAI), commonly labeled an IQ test, is an aptitude assessment administered through the ITBS (Fancher, 1985). Scores from such aptitude and achievement tests are then used to make decisions about students' educational placements or programs. Other standardized, norm-referenced exams, such as the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), are frequently used by colleges and universities to make admissions decisions (Gandara & Lopez, 1998).

A more recent development in the area of educational assessment is the criterion-referenced test. These exams, also used as high-stakes tests, purportedly assess the achievement of identified skills by determining whether the skills are present or absent. The focus is on the student's relative mastery or nonmastery of targeted skills, not the rank ordering of students created by norm-referenced tests (Holman, 1995; Rothman, 1995). Related to the criterion-referenced test form is the performance-based assessment (PBA). PBAs generally include exercises designed to provide a comprehensive view of the students' capabilities (Rothman; Hood, 1998). Because they require students to solve complex problems based on real-world circumstances, PBAs are considered to be more "authentic" tests. Thus, some authors have suggested that PBAs are nondiscriminatory (Holman; Lee, 1998), although there is no uniform agreement on this.

**GENERAL INFLUENCE OF CULTURE AND ETHNICITY ON TEST RESULTS**

Long before NCLB applied high-stakes consequences to standardized tests, results had revealed consistent racial and ethnic group differences. Galton first reported the disparity between the average SAI scores of African Americans and white Americans in 1969 (as mentioned in Gould, 1996). By the 1970s, this cited difference had been labeled the "generally accepted effect size" (Roth et al., 2001), with the accompanying implication of acceptance of such differences. Today studies continue to reveal that all ethnic minority populations except Asian Americans score significantly lower on traditional standardized tests than do white Americans (Onwuegbuzie & Daley, 2001; Roth et al.). On the SAI, Asian Americans average three points higher than white Americans, whereas white Americans average 15 points higher than African Americans and 11 to 22 points higher than Hispanic students (Holman, 1995; Onwuegbuzie & Daley; Roth et al.).

Similar differences are found in SAT scores. In 1998 white Americans scored an average combined score of 1054, Mexican American students averaged 913, Hispanic students averaged 927, and African American students averaged 900 (College Board, 1998). Although the gap has narrowed slightly in recent years, this still represents a difference of 12 percent to 15 percent between white students and their racial and ethnic counterparts, even when controlling for socioeconomic status (SES) (Gandara & Lopez, 1998; Holman, 1995).

Teachers who use culturally responsive teaching strategies regularly report frustration with the outcomes of standardized exams, stating that students' test scores frequently contradict the teachers' personal classroom observations and assessments (Hood, 1998). This frustration with cultural bias in standardized tests has been one reason for the proliferation of "new and improved" assessment tools, theoretically designed to reduce such bias (Holman, 1995; Hood). However, despite the efforts to design culturally sensitive instruments, such as the PBAs, little empirical evidence supports the claim that any of the current education assessment forms are culturally sensitive (Hood; Lee, 1998). In fact, research consistently has shown that these assessment approaches demonstrate significant gender, cultural, and socioeconomic biases, giving rise to score differences consistent with standardized assessments (Holman; Onwuegbuzie & Daley, 2001).

For example, a recent study of elementary and high schools that used PBAs found that gender, race and ethnicity, and SES exerted the same influence on test results as found with traditional standardized exams (Newman & Associates, 1996). A statistical review of state educational records also revealed that minority students typically had failure rates five to 10 times higher than that of white
students on PBAs (Jaeger, 1989). In North Carolina, a study found that African American students, 35.7 percent of the total sample, made up 82.3 percent of those failing a PBA test (Serow & Davies, 1982). Similarly, a study of the mathematics portion of the Texas exit-level test, a criterion-referenced test, revealed an 18 percent difference in passing rates between Hispanic and white students, and a 25.5 percent difference between African American and white students (Ivory, 1993).

ATTEMPTS TO MITIGATE CULTURE AND ETHNICITY EFFECTS ON TEST RESULTS

Attempts to mitigate the prejudicial outcomes of assessment tools have taken several approaches. First, traditional standardized instruments have been modified to address cultural biases. One example of such modification is the well-known Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC), modified to the WISC-R and then to the WISC-III and the WISC-IV. Unfortunately, however, each new modification results in the uncovering of other biases, requiring perpetual changes (Hood, 1998).

Second, modifications to assessment tests have attempted to connect culturally responsive instructional strategies to testing results. Despite positive findings from this strategy, researchers have concluded that this manner of teaching and assessment is difficult to accomplish within the constraints inherent to public education (Newman & Associates, 1996).

A third approach is the development of nondiscriminatory assessment tools. Based on a body of research highlighting the importance of culture in influencing students' ability to demonstrate knowledge acquisition, nondiscriminatory, culturally responsive assessment tools are expected to empower underachieving ethnic minority students (Johnson, 1998; Lee, 1998). However, the practical capacity for ameliorating discriminatory effects through changes in test design remains unclear. PBAs are plagued by low reliability and lack empirical support for the nondiscriminatory claims (Hood, 1998; Linn, 1993; Shavelson, Baxter, & Pine, 1992). Furthermore, colleges and universities do not currently use these assessments, rendering this approach ultimately of little consequence.

The fourth approach to mitigating prejudicial test effects has focused on language proficiency. Language proficiency is an empirically validated source of test effect and remediation. Students who know the "language of the test" perform better, and improving a student's grasp of the test's language has been shown to improve test results (Burriel, Perez, DeMent, Chavez, & Moran, 1998; Garcia-Vazquez, 1995). To learn the language of the test often necessitates learning the environmental norms and contexts, often subtle and underexposed, in which the language is being used. Although this solution may appear attractive, we believe that it perpetuates a discriminatory bias against any student lacking proficiency in white, middle-class English—the majority, socioeconomic "norm" of U.S. society. Furthermore, significant growth in ethnic minority populations and the slowing acculturation rates may render slower achievement in English proficiency (Green, 1999). Congress recognized this, for example, in its recent reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (P.L. 90-247), which requires all assessment devices to be developed in the student's native language (Altschuler & Kopels, 2003). Therefore, allowing language to be the focus of remediation appears prejudicial at worst and short-sighted at best (Garcia-Vazquez).

CONSEQUENCES OF DISPARITIES IN OUTCOMES

Academic Self-Concept

Cumulatively, test scores infer and affect academic achievement. This, coupled with the general expectation for students to acculturate to school norms, illustrates the potential breadth of discrimination in the nation's educational system. Discrimination such as this may have far-reaching consequences for Hispanics and other students of ethnic minority heritage. Lowered academic self-concept is one such consequence of underachievement on high-stakes tests.

Academic self-concept is considered a broad construct, reflecting both descriptive and evaluative aspects of the self. It includes individuals' description of their own strengths and weaknesses in a specific area, as well as an overall appraisal of their competencies in an academic domain. However, cultural norms affect how students describe their strengths and self-appraise. That is, the white, middle-class norm of "beating on your breast to show off" is antithetical to the Hispanic value of modesty and self-effacing behaviors (personal communication with D. Valdez, MSW, contracts manager, Department of Children and Family Services,
Spokane, Washington, July 26, 2005). Thus, lowered academic self-concept of Hispanic students may be exacerbated if they respect and adhere to cultural values.

The relationship between academic self-concept and academic achievement is generally reciprocal (Marsh, 1990). In other words, positive self-concept fosters achievement, and successful achievement strengthens self-concept. Conversely, negative academic self-concept has a limiting effect on academic achievement. For instance, research has found significant relationships between academic self-concept and school withdrawal (House, 1996). This relationship gains importance when considering the more than 40 percent withdrawal rate currently characteristic of the Hispanic student population (Gallenstein, 1998).

Perceptions of Self-Efficacy

A second significant concern is the impact of high-stakes assessments on Hispanic students' perceptions of self-efficacy. Bandura (1997) defined self-efficacy as the extent to which people believe they can perform a behavior to produce a particular desired outcome. High-stakes tests could reasonably potentiate lowered self-efficacy among Hispanic students, because academic self-efficacy was found to be the strongest predictor of academic performance among a group of Hispanic adolescents (Buriel et al., 1998). Experiencing disparately low outcomes on such assessments, Hispanic students face this lack of success numerous times during their school years, potentially resulting in lowered self-efficacy.

And, similar in concept to the earlier discussion of academic self-concept, the environmental context of white, middle-class America must be taken into account when measuring levels of self-efficacy. Belief in one's self and ability is also dependent on an overall "vision" of being successful. Our society does not currently embrace successful Hispanic role models or a belief in successful Hispanic educational performance on tests. Without these visions and beliefs, Hispanic students have little support in the surrounding environment to contribute to their vision (personal communication with D. Valdez, MSW, contracts manager, Department of Children and Family Services, Spokane, Washington, July 26, 2005).

Unfortunately, a review of the literature reveals little information in this area of concern. One study of the impact of college entrance exams on Hispanic students found that students with the lowest SAT scores were more likely to judge themselves as having less ability than students with higher scores (Gandara & Lopez, 1998). This finding was especially interesting in light of several variables. First, there was no significant difference in college performance between the low scorers and the high scorers. Second, parents and teachers consistently downplayed the importance of the exams. And third, the students themselves verbally discounted the importance of the scores. These conflicting findings appeared to reveal an unconscious internalization of the test results, with the consequent effects on overall self-efficacy (Gandara & Lopez). If the academic self-concept and self-efficacy of highly successful Hispanic students can be so significantly affected by the results of a single high-stakes testing experience, the potential ramifications of such annual assessments on all Hispanic students must be of grave concern.

Oppression-Induced Frustrations

The reduced academic self-concept and perception of self-efficacy may culminate in heightened frustration, loss of interest in academics, and disbelief in the reality of lifetime achievement through education. Such oppression-induced frustrations have been identified among Hispanic students. For example, one study found that Mexican American students characterize school learning as "doing the Anglo thing," choosing to resist learning as a defense against this system-wide oppression (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). According to Houston (1988), academic reluctance among students of minority culture results, in part, from their resentment and distrust of the dominant culture. Similarly, in a study of Hispanic students, Matute-Bianchi (1986) found that approximately half of those sampled rejected the (white) behavioral and normative patterns required for academic success. These students acknowledged the existence of separate home and school cultures, perceiving that success in the school culture required the abandonment of their primary cultural identity. In essence, academic achievement was viewed as incompatible with maintaining the integrity of a Hispanic identity. Indeed, a longitudinal study (Sleeter & Grant, as cited in Sleeter, 1996) revealed a loss of faith in the relevance of education. The findings showed that, over time, Hispanic students abandoned their hopeful visions of the future, eventually capitulating to the effects...
of school and societal disenfranchisement (Sleeter). Unfortunately, none of these studies attempted to assess the prevailing developmental or societal contexts. This assessment could be helpful in explaining some of these findings, because racial identity development, in the context of white society, affects self-perception, as well as attitudes toward acculturation and assimilation (Tatum, 1997).

Students experiencing persistently lower scores on mandated assessments could also negatively affect Hispanic parents. Typically and logically, Hispanic parents seeing their children oppressed by discriminatory practices results in a reduction of trust in education as either a system or a solution. This is a significant concern given that parental support and involvement correlate with academic achievement and remaining in school (Gallenstein, 1998; Okagaki & Sternberg, 1993). Limited parental support of academic achievement may then contribute to patterns of involuntary school withdrawal (Gallenstein; Sleeter, 1996), thereby creating barriers to workplace advancement. Cumulatively, these factors may serve to increase societal stratification along racial and ethnic lines.

**DO HISPANIC CULTURAL AND ETHNIC NORMS INFLUENCE TEST BEHAVIORS?**

Researchers have argued that social values have played a significant role in the definition of standardized test constructs and the procedural norms involved in testing (Koelsch, Estrin, & Favr, 1995; Messick, 1994). Although attempts to address these differences focus generally on test design, instructional strategies, and language proficiency, the impact of culture-based behavior differences on test behavior is simply not being addressed. As social workers, we must address the environmental impact of behavior, and the socioeconomic, cultural context in which outcomes occur (Germain & Gitterman, 1996; Kemp, Whittaker, & Tracy, 1997). Thus, in the following section, we discuss some Hispanic cultural strengths that are not as strongly required for success on high-stakes testing as are dominant behavioral and normative patterns. We do not mean to imply that Hispanic families do not also value many mainstream behavioral and normative patterns; rather, we believe that the unique strengths of some Hispanic cultural values may unfortunately be antithetical to success on high-stakes testing administered in U.S. public schools.

**HISPANIC CULTURAL STRENGTHS**

**Relationality**

An important example is the foundational Hispanic value of relationality (Carter & McGoldrick, 1999; Green, 1999). This cultural norm emphasizes interdependence, mutual help, and group process as a means of decision making over autonomous action (Colon, 1996). Children especially are encouraged to learn by relying on the directions and ideas of their adult family members (Grossman, 1995), translating into a norm of noncompetitiveness. Thus, this cultural difference between Hispanics and the dominant white Americans may result in limited readiness for the competitive demands of public school, especially with relationality simply not being a priority in successful test-taking behaviors (Carter & McGoldrick). We suggest that, as a result, high-stakes tests may be inherently discriminatory against Hispanic students, when test success does not require behavioral strengths in relationality, cooperative decision making, or interdependence.

**Allocentrism**

Closely tied to relationality is allocentrism. An allocentric view of the self, common to Hispanics, defines one’s self-concept primarily in relation to others, emphasizing interdependence. An idiocentric view of the self, common to white people, emphasizes personal freedom, expression, and independence (Dabul, Bernal, & Knight, 1995). Clearly, the U.S. public education system is designed around an idiocentric self-view. Triandis and colleagues (1985) said that idiocentric students tend to have higher levels of academic motivation and place greater emphasis on competition. Comparing these self-descriptors and their role in academic achievement, Dabul and colleagues found that adolescents valuing allocentrism had higher perceived academic competence and grade point averages than those valuing allocentrism, regardless of ethnicity or SES (Dabul et al.). Thus, allocentrism, an important cultural strength for Hispanics, also appears to be a cultural barrier to educational success in the dominant educational world.

**Cultural Identity**

Most ethnic minority groups retain their strengths through preserving their cultural identity separate from the dominant culture (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Garcia-Vazquez, 1995). In contrast, however, the more acculturated Hispanic students are, the more
successful they are academically. For example, a qualitative study of highly successful Hispanic high school students found that the principle obstacle to academic achievement was the disparity between home and school cultures (Cordeiro & Carspecken, 1993). Success, it appeared, required the students to distance themselves from their original cultural identification. Concurrently, it required the acquisition of a school-based identity, as well as the materialistic definitions of success characteristic of white Americans (Cordeiro & Carspecken). Similarly, a successful San Diego program developed to promote educational achievement among ethnic minority students deliberately facilitated the acculturation process as a means to success. Titled “Advancement via Individual Determination,” the program taught students to maintain two identities and to move comfortably between their two cultures of home and school (Gallenstein, 1998). Is it possible that such ventures ignore the impact of differing developmental stages of racial and ethnic identity? It appears programs such as these may require Hispanic students to forfeit their separate cultural identity to succeed academically.

**Guessing**

Although guessing is said to be a culturally discouraged practice among Hispanics, we found no literature about its prevalence or impact. However, guessing is absolutely fundamental to success on many high-stakes tests (Grossman, 1995). For example, one of the most important college entrance exams, the SAT, scores students according to the number of correct answers without penalty for wrong answers. Therefore, success is predicated on guessing the answers to unknown questions. With a one in four chance of success, nonguessers face considerable penalties. If, in fact, guessing is discouraged within Hispanic culture, Hispanic students striving to maintain their cultural identity are being penalized on these tests.

**DISCUSSION**

Overall, the academic achievement of Hispanic students appears to be dependent on their ability to adopt dominant behavioral norms contradictory to Hispanic cultural norms. Despite the limited attention paid to this situation, Hispanic values, such as relationality and allocentrism, appear to prevent students from succeeding academically in predominantly white settings. The context of white, middle-class values, testing language, and norms of self-perception all negatively affect the test success for Hispanic students. We believe that the preceding discussion suggests that value conflicts inherent to test design and procedures serve to systematically discriminate against Hispanic students.

Although there has already been significant controversy regarding the impact of NCLB, its emphasis on using mandated assessments for consequential results is particularly disturbing when considering the known effects of culture on test scores. Considering these known prejudicial effects, the use of high-stakes tests to infer academic competence and decide outcomes can be considered a form of institutionalized oppression (Gandara & Lopez, 1998). Standardized assessment of diverse peoples is, arguably, an oxymoron. Furthermore, the centrality of the position assigned to high-stakes tests, affecting students from system entrance to exit, appears to be evidence of racism embedded in the nation’s education system.

To date, solutions have been superficial and shortsighted. Similar to acculturation programs is multicultural education, originally designed as a novel and positive step. Multicultural education has been characterized as both radical and misdirected (Sleeter, 1996). Multicultural education has been criticized for having failed to teach students to participate fully in the culture and achievements of this country (Sleeter). Ultimately, multicultural education is often a combination of poor practices, such as the superficial study of food, music, and dance, instead of an attempt to reposition perspectives that can foster understanding and equitable academic success (Sleeter).

Such mediocrity generally evidenced in multicultural education need not be universal. A study of high-performing public schools along the Texas–Mexico border revealed how some schools met success despite the fact that their students were largely of low SES, bilingual, and of limited English proficiency (Reyes, Scribner, & Scribner, 1999). Structured as learning communities, these schools are characterized by high teacher expectancy and caring. Furthermore, an advocacy-oriented approach to assessment is used. This approach “tests the tests,” so to speak, to determine whether the instrument is undermining or supporting a student’s potential. Although maintaining an emphasis on system excellence through outcome-based assessment, these public schools recognize the need to
change the testing instruments, rather than harm the student, when the tests are culturally invalid.

System accountability that is derived from individual assessment shifts responsibility from the system to the student. Regardless of claims to the contrary, individual assessments assess individuals, not systems. Only anonymous assessments would assess systems alone. So, the consequences of high-stakes test scores lie squarely at the feet of individual students (Reyes et al., 1999). It is the individual student who may not be promoted, graduated, or accepted at the university, and it is the individual student who suffers the consequences. Ultimately, high-stakes testing places blame and responsibility with the individual (Reyes et al.).

IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

Social workers, especially those working in public schools, are ethically compelled to act in an advocacy role to protect individual Hispanic students from the impact of the high-stakes test system. First, it is important that school social workers ensure that academic progress of every individual student, Hispanic or otherwise, is the focus of the educational testing process, rather than the system itself. We are not arguing against the importance of outcome-based assessments or the need to know how education systems are doing; rather, it is crucial that school social workers protect individual students from bearing the primary punishment for possible system failure.

Second, school social workers are in a unique position to affect the traditionally negative academic atmosphere experienced by diverse families. Most important, school social workers can influence the internal biases inside the school organization, to improve the attitudes toward Hispanic families. School social workers must engage in ongoing meso-level advocacy efforts to shift paradigmatic thinking within and among the internal stakeholders to be more welcoming and accepting of diversity, including disparate cultural strengths. In addition, school social workers must persist in their efforts to support and connect with parents, especially ethnic minority parents who historically have felt excluded from the educational system (Hurd & Edwards, 1995). Specifically, Hispanic families, who are least acculturated and therefore whose children are most likely to be negatively affected by standardized testing, may also be more likely to be intimidated by school authority or to have residency issues that force them to remain silent and invisible. School social workers must be visible and verbal advocates for the needs of these students and their families.

In the long-term, it would be optimal for school social workers to support Hispanic parents in overcoming their reticence to engage with school systems by helping to mobilize them to advocate for their children. School social workers can support the Hispanic community in its commitment to protecting the educational rights of their children. To accomplish this, they can educate ethnic minority parents about the inequity and potential for harm embedded within high-stakes tests and about successful advocacy approaches to use specifically for school systems. However, this should be seen as a long-term goal, accomplished only after a paradigmatic shift in school-based biased thinking has occurred. Otherwise, school social workers run the risk of increasing the marginalization of these already isolated families.

Third, school social workers must continue to demand that the nation's education system deliver quality education to all students and not use standardized assessments as financial incentives or punishments for school systems. The use of mandated assessments, with their revealed correlations between achievement and ethnic status allows society to blame the victim, rather than the system itself. The Texas schools mentioned earlier reveal that environmental constraints need not predetermine academic success or failure. Rather, achievement is within the reach of all students when both instruction and assessment are caring and culturally appropriate (Reyes et al., 1999).

CONCLUSION

The movement toward accountability in the nation's public education system through NCLB has taken an alarming turn. NCLB mandates schools to rely increasingly on assessment practices that are inherently discriminatory. With Hispanic students at grave risk, school social workers cannot ethically remain silent about the potential for harm posed by the current system.

REFERENCES


Sandra J. Altshuler, PhD, is associate professor, School of Social Work, Eastern Washington University, 203 Senior Hall, Cheney, WA 99004; e-mail: salshuler@mail.ewu.edu.

Tresa Schmartz, MSW, is adjunct instructor, Department of Psychology, Whitworth College, Spokane, WA. The authors wish to thank Diana Valdez, MSW, Melissa Lavitt, PhD, and the anonymous reviewers for their comments and suggestions on earlier versions of the article.

Address all correspondence to Dr. Altshuler.

Accepted September 9, 2005

---

**NASW PRESS POLICY ON ETHICAL BEHAVIOR**

The NASW Press expects authors to adhere to ethical standards for scholarship as articulated in the NASW Code of Ethics and *Writing for the NASW Press: Information for Authors.* These standards include actions such as:

- taking responsibility and credit only for work they have actually performed
- honestly acknowledging the work of others
- submitting only original work to journals
- fully documenting their own and others' related work.

If possible breaches of ethical standards have been identified at the review or publication process, the NASW Press may notify the author and bring the ethics issue to the attention of the appropriate professional body or other authority. Peer review confidentiality will not apply where there is evidence of plagiarism.

As reviewed and revised by NASW National Committee on Inquiry (NCOI), May 30, 1997

Approved by NASW Board of Directors, September 1997

---

_Sandra J. Altshuler, PhD, is associate professor, School of Social Work, Eastern Washington University, 203 Senior Hall, Cheney, WA 99004; e-mail: salshuler@mail.ewu.edu._
Copyright of Children & Schools is the property of National Association of Social Workers and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.