

Researchers attack Bush's education reforms

Testing-based system harms minorities, they say

By Andrew Mollison
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WASHINGTON — Researchers from the University of California at Berkeley and their colleagues from Texas warned yesterday that President Bush's new education reforms could harm Latinos and other minority children who often score low on standardized tests.

The elaborate testing and accountability systems used in Texas, North Carolina and Florida were the models for the assessment systems required under the bipartisan No Child Left Behind Act, which Bush pushed through Congress and signed into law in January.

"State assessment systems such as the one in Texas are causing more harm than good," said Angela Valenzuela, an associate professor at University of Texas at Austin.

She spoke at a forum sponsored by the university's Center for Mexican American Studies, the Congressional Hispanic Caucus and the Hispanic Education Coalition. It featured researchers from the education departments of the University of Texas, Rice University and UC Berkeley.

Among other things, the new law requires that states test every public school student in grades 3 through 8 annually in reading and math.

Schools in which all students (or some groups of students, such as members of minorities, the

poor or those with disabilities) get low scores are to get extra help at first. But if the students continue to get very low scores on state tests, all or most of a school's administrators and teachers must be replaced.

Although the law calls for use of "multiple measures" to rate students or schools, the scores earned by students on the standardized tests end up carrying the most weight, the researchers said.

They said the bad side effects of such "single-score assessments" include lower graduation rates, lower grade-to-grade promotion rates, rising dropout rates, elaborate ruses by principals to keep from testing low-performing students, and more emphasis on test practice than on higher-order thinking skills.

Material defending the new law was distributed at the forum by White House and Education Department employees. One of their handouts said, "The results of these tests can be used to direct resources, such as after-school tutoring or summer school, toward those who are falling behind, increasing their chance of success during the next school year."

But several researchers said their studies didn't detect such a trend. They said schools in poor and largely minority neighborhoods in Houston and Austin, Texas, and in Oakland still have fewer amenities, such as books in the library or running water in science classrooms, than those in more prosperous parts of town.

"As the rest of the nation moves toward high-stakes testing, we think it valid, fair and democratic for states to use multiple

assessments, at a minimum," Valenzuela said.

She said that in a "multiple assessments" system, a low test score "can be offset by a positive showing of other areas that include grades, other test score information, portfolios (files containing samples of a student's work), and even teacher recommendations."

Kris Sloan, an education researcher at the University of Texas, said the new law has some useful provisions, such as one requiring that the scores of low-income and minority children be included in all-school averages, but also reported separately.

"That shines lights on students that historically have been neglected," Sloan said. "There are certain folks who have conducted research who say that has pressured school districts into then delivering more equitable instruction to them."