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An evaluation of the impact of end-of-course exams and ACT-QualityCore on U.S. history instruction in a Kentucky high school



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ABSTRACT

The growth of high-stakes testing in state accountability systems necessitates further examination of their impact on stakeholders. Prompted by broader state-level reform in Kentucky, this evaluation aims to provide insight into a new accountability system's effect on social studies teachers. Using a goal-free evaluation model and case study design, the researchers examined the content and instructional decisions made by a group of U.S. history teachers in response to a new end-of-course exam designed by ACT-QualityCore. The evaluation incorporated a content analysis of teacher materials, observation of a professional learning community meeting, and teacher interviews. The results of this evaluation indicate that teachers generally support the changes in the new assessment system but find specific elements frustrating and hesitate to completely revamp their instructional practices. Considering these assessment system changes occurred to advance Kentucky's goal of college and career readiness for all, this evaluation provides insight into what is actually happening in classrooms and should assist teachers and administrators as they assess the impact of these reforms on classroom practice.

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Introduction

“Accountability” is an educational buzzword, and a desire to increase accountability has fueled the growth of standardized, state-wide assessment. Although state-wide accountability systems are not new for many states, the passage of No Child Left Behind initiated an increasing trend of high-stakes accountability systems (e.g., end-of-course exams, graduation exams). The controversial nature of accountability has become even more so in a high-stakes environment.

For years, researchers have investigated high-stakes testing and have reached varying conclusions as to the direction and degree of its impact on students and teachers. Despite inconsistent results, the number of states using high-stakes testing as an accountability measure continues to grow. In 2009, the Kentucky General Assembly directed the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) to revamp the state assessment system, anchoring it to the goal of college and career readiness for all students. One change included instituting end-of-course assessments (EOC) at the secondary level. In 2011, KDE selected

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ACT-QualityCore (hereinafter referred to as QualityCore) as the EOC vendor, and in that same year EOC were implemented in four subjects: algebra II, biology, English II, and U.S. history. Although researchers have previously examined the impact of state assessment on Kentucky social studies teachers (e.g., Fickel (2006)), this recent shift necessitates a closer examination of its impact on teachers. Doing so will allow stakeholders to better evaluate the new accountability system's effect on Kentucky classrooms.

This evaluation used a goal-free model and case study design to examine the content and instructional decisions that five U.S. history teachers at a Kentucky high school made in response to the new EOC. The evaluation incorporated a content analysis of teacher materials, observation of a professional learning community meeting, and teacher interviews. The results indicate that teachers generally support the changes in the new assessment system but find specific elements frustrating and hesitate to completely revamp their instructional practices. Changes are happening in Kentucky's U.S. history classrooms, but stakeholders need to consider if these changes are moving Kentucky toward its identified goal of college and career readiness for all.

Review of literature and Kentucky assessment changes

The debate over high-stakes testing

The literature base reflects the controversy surrounding high-stakes testing. High-stakes testing advocates have argued it combats poor performance, declining scores, and low expectations in today's schools because high-stakes tests carry the weight necessary to influence change in students and teachers (Finn, 1995; Reville, 2008; Sireci, 2008). Shanker (1995) argued that high-stakes tests change behavior because they force students to work harder by going "right to the heart of what motivates them to work and learn" (p. 149) – the diploma. In investigating the relationship between high-stakes testing and student outcomes, Bishop, Mane, Bishop, and Moriarity (2001) found that "stakes for students policies" (p. 7), most notably mandatory end-of-course exams, did lead to significant improvements in test scores and college enrollment. Operating under the assumption that changes in tests prompt changes in instruction, policymakers frequently view high-stakes tests as a way to influence teacher behavior (Grant, 2006; Vogler & Virtue, 2007). Some studies confirmed this conclusion. In a survey of Florida elementary teachers, Jones and Egley (2004) found that high-stakes tests forced teachers to reassess what they were teaching, leading to more consciously aligned curriculum. Reville (2008) cited changes in the Massachusetts state assessment system as evidence that "stakes create urgency" (p. 54), especially when combating low expectations for and subpar instruction of minority students.

Not all agree that the changes incurred by high-stakes accountability are positive. Jones, Jones, and Hargrove (2003) complained that high-stakes tests were an attempt by politicians to control teachers through a "shift in power, respect, and professional autonomy" (p. 34). A number of researchers (FairTest, 2008; French, 2008; Jones et al., 2003; Jones & Egley, 2004) contended that high-stakes testing led to narrowed curriculum, more teacher-centered instruction, and pre-occupation with test preparation. Several of these same researchers (FairTest, 2008; French, 2008; Jones et al., 2003) also criticized high-stakes testing's ability to accurately measure what students know and can do, especially students' higher-order thinking.

The impact of high-stakes testing on teacher gatekeeping

Teachers have been described as "gatekeepers" whose decisions about aims, subject matter and instructional methods, and student interest and effort impact students more significantly than policies created by outside authorities (e.g., curriculum guides) (Thornton, 1991; Thornton, 2005). According to Thornton (2005), a teacher's views on the purpose and meaning of social studies are particularly powerful influences, especially when it comes to the success of reform efforts. The concept of teacher gatekeeping is a valuable lens to employ when examining teachers' approaches to content and instructional decisions within a high-stakes environment.

The continued use of high-stakes tests reflects a persistent belief that increased accountability alters teacher behavior and promotes improvements in the classroom (Grant et al., 2002; Vogler & Virtue, 2007). Much of the research suggested a more complicated picture, especially when comparing the impact of high-stakes-testing on content, instruction, and in-class assessment (Cimbricz, 2002; Grant, 2006; Vogler & Virtue, 2007). Consistently, researchers have found that high-stakes testing had the greatest impact on teachers' content decisions, leading teachers to alter course pacing, increase the amount of covered content, and/or adjust emphasized content to reflect state assessments (Diamond, 2007; Fickel, 2006; Grant et al., 2002; Grant, 2007; Salinas, 2006; Segall, 2006; van Hover, 2006). In particular, social studies teachers have noted feeling compelled to narrow their curriculum because of high stake testing (Au 2007; Clarke et al., 2003; Vogler & Virtue, 2007). Teachers also report a tendency to adjust in-class assessment methods, mainly by modeling the format and question styles of the state test (Abrams, Pedulla, & Madaus, 2003; Grant, 2007; van Hover, 2006).

Instructionally, the impact of high-stakes testing on teachers' decisions is harder to discern. Some researchers (Clarke et al., 2003; Diamond, 2007; Jones & Egley, 2004) found that high-stakes testing led teachers to focus on developing students' higher-order thinking skills, thereby elevating the rigor of their instruction. More commonly, researchers found that teachers primarily resorted to teacher-centered strategies such as lecture (Au, 2009; Diamond, 2007; Fickel, 2006; Jones et al., 2003; Vogler, 2006). In yet other cases, teachers made few adjustments to instruction beyond additional focus on

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