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Testing Our Schools - Talking Points

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Testing Our Schools

By Derek Wilmott

Film Summary

The No Child Left Behind Act was officially signed on January 8, 2002, receiving broad bipartisan support in Washington. This documentary explores the debate over whether reliance on standardized tests could do more harm than good for the nation's students and schools. It specifically looks at developments in Virginia, California, and Massachusetts. Interviews included administrators, educators, students, politicians, and test-designers to discuss their views concerning standardized testing in the public school systems. Prior to the 2002 legislation states had already begun looking at standardized testing as a means of evaluating students and teachers.

In 1995, California quickly adopted the Stanford 9 (SAT-9) test, while preparing for a more custom designed test for the state. Students taking the SAT-9 pointed out that they were tested on subjects they had not begun to study. Massachusetts, on the other hand, tried to get their exams right from the start. Spending \$18 million a year writing the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) and in 2001 committees of teachers reviewed questions in all subjects, rejecting those that did not reflect the actual curriculum. The MCAS mostly held the students responsible, although low-performing schools were also penalized. Still errors with the tests were found, primarily from the students taking the exam. In the Virginia schools, the film looks at, the difficulties that educators faced in determining which questions should be included or excluded, with special interest groups lobbying to include their topics into the state school exam.

Frontline asks serious questions concerning standardized testing in our schools. Can standardized achievement tests really measure the quality of a school? How does the intense pressure to raise test scores affect the quality of teaching and learning in the classroom? What are the challenges of setting academic standards in the first place?

What the candidates are saying:

Hillary Clinton - Senator Clinton voted for the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001 and still supports it today. She believes that President Bush has not provided enough funding, cutting the program's budget by \$12 billion. However, in June 2007, with the Act up for renewal by Congress, she criticized the program, saying that its emphasis on testing has caused American children to narrow their studies and lose their creative edge. She has proposed a \$10 billion program for pre-K education that will address the 80% of children not enrolled in such programs.

Clinton is against education vouchers for use at private schools. She gives two reasons, the first is her belief that money will be siphoned off from underfunded public schools. The second objection is that she feels vouchers will open the door to various types of discrimination, by allowing vouchers given or withheld based on religious or other criteria.

Sources: Senate website - <http://clinton.senate.gov/>
Clinton for President website - <http://www.hillaryclinton.com/>

Mike Huckabee - Believes that incorporating character education into school curriculums is necessary, and that when schools fail, the whole school board should be replaced. He supports charter schools, and the displaying of the Ten Commandments in schools. Huckabee is a strong supporter of academic testing. While governor of Arkansas he supported the creation of a two-year initiative, called "The Arts - A Lifetime of Learning," to promote art education in Arkansas schools. He was a supporter of the Fair Dismissal Law aimed at removing poorly performing teachers in Arkansas. While supporting the No Child Left Behind Act, he would like to see states develop their own benchmarks. Huckabee also supports homeschooling.

Sources: Huckabee for president website - <http://www.mikehuckabee.com/>

John McCain - voted for the No Child Left Behind Act, but would like to see a stronger emphasis on math and science. McCain believes that part of the problem in our education is the lack of choices. He therefore, supports homeschooling and school vouchers. McCain sponsored the Education A-Plus bill in 1997 and again in 1999, which would have allowed parents to open tax-free savings accounts for their children's school expenses, such as tutoring, computers, and books.

Sources: Senate website - <http://mccain.senate.gov/public/>
McCain for president website - <http://www.johnmccain.com/Informing/Issues/>

Barack Obama - He believes that the goal of the No Child Left Behind Act was a good one, but that inadequate implementation by the Education Department and design flaws in the law have limited its effectiveness and undermines its support. Obama points to the high drop-out rate from U.S. high schools, large percentage of students requiring remedial math and science in their first year of college, the lack of teacher retention, and soaring cost of college tuition as all part problems with the education system. He is for providing grants to promote state efforts in pre-school education, the expansion of the Head Starts programs, and reforming the No Child Left Behind Act by asking for more funding of the program and to improve the accountability aspect by supporting schools that need improvement.

Obama, while in the Illinois State Senate helped create the state's Early Learning Council. He has also supported legislation to increase the maximum Pell Grant awards to \$5100. Obama has also introduced legislation, in the Senate, to create the Teacher Residency Programs and to increase support for summer learning opportunities.

Sources: Senate website - <http://obama.senate.gov/>
Obama for president website - <http://www.barackobama.com/index.php>

Other questions to consider:

- Are standards and accountability a kind of business model?
- Who should set the standards for our schools?
- Has the NCLB act lived up to expectations?
- Should NCLB be reformed, continued in its present form, or replaced?