

**UH Law Center/UH Writing Center Partnership:
Writing Diagnostic Assessment, Project 1
Reading, Summer 2008**

The readings attached will be used for the timed writing assessment you will take after the Memorial Day holiday.

1. Chicago Tribune, The Social Promotions Surrender, Editorial

The Chicago school board is removing math proficiency from the equation when deciding whether a child is ready to be promoted. Even if a student performed abysmally on a math standards test, he or she will be eligible to move to the next grade if reading scores are up to snuff and other factors are met. Students will not be forced to take summer school because they have low math scores.

School officials say this will allow them to redouble efforts to help kids with reading. No one will argue with an emphasis on reading. In some key tests, reading scores lag far behind math scores in Chicago schools. A focus on reading may, school officials argue, boost math scores by better preparing students to solve math word-problems, which require reading skills.

However, the essential argument against social promotion remains: If the kids aren't learning, the solution isn't to surrender, to push them on through the school system and pop them out with a degree that is meaningless. . . . Similarly, school officials shouldn't need to be reminded that math isn't optional in a child's education; it's critical as a gateway to higher math, physics, chemistry and other sciences. And it is critical in the basic transactions of life. . . .

Bottom line: Slowly returning to social promotion relieves the pressure on teachers, parents and students, but ultimately devalues the diploma the kids receive.

2. Phi Delta Kappan, High Standards + High Stakes = High Achievement in Massachusetts, by S. Paul Reville

Tests, an integral part of [education] reform strategy, are often confused with the overall reform. Tests are merely the yardstick with which progress is measured. In addition to being an instrument of accountability, tests are a diagnostic tool that can provide valuable information to teachers. Critics are fond of proclaiming the obvious—education cannot be improved by tests, and "no one ever fattened a cow by weighing it." Of course, no reformer ever thought so. The tests were instituted to measure the degree to which the educational goals were being realized, to gauge the degree to which students had attained proficiency, and to expose the weaknesses of current strategies and thereby force action for improvement. . . .

In the end, standards-based reform is all about fairness. Fairness demands clear and challenging standards that reflect the knowledge and skills all students will need to succeed in this economy, in this democratic society, in a life of continuing learning, and as heads of families. Fairness demands that we expect all students to master the same challenging core skills and knowledge, even though many may achieve well beyond the core. Fairness means that we provide every student with the opportunity to learn and that we hold all of our students and those charged with educating them accountable for their respective shares of the learning process. Fairness requires us to award every student a diploma that actually stands for the achievement of a defined body of learning and not merely for "time served." Fairness requires that we discipline the system to deliver full learning opportunities for all children. Fairness means providing incentives for achievement; relevant data to all teachers, parents, and students; and help to those who need it. Fairness demands that we do not artificially shield students from stress and judgment by society, since this is the reality of the world they inhabit. Fairness demands consequences, not excuses, for performance.

3. The Nation, No Politician Left Behind, by Deborah Meier

Education is always about politics—in the best and worst senses. . . . So along comes No Child Left Behind. NCLB proposes to accomplish a statistical impossibility (that all children score in the top twenty-fifth percentile); it raises false expectations; it's built on an illusion that tests alone can—and should—measure worthwhile standards; that schools can do it all; that progress comes in steady increments; that penalties will motivate children and teachers; that lack of money is a mere excuse; that a single nationwide system is part of the American dream; and, finally, that schools can do it all.

What is inexcusable is not just the "achievement gap" on tests but the gaps you can see with your own eyes: the gaps in graduation rates, which have been disguised for years by the very folks who support NCLB; the real dropout rates; the attendance data; the condition of buildings and playgrounds; and more. When we know of solutions that are promising, we're told: too expensive; utopian. It's easy for those with money to say it doesn't take money to educate all children well—they can always fall back on rich-family-sponsored education after school, on weekends and during the summer, or choose to spend two or three times as much just on the school day itself, as wealthy communities do. We are just plain lied to, and then shocked that our education czar was the perpetrator of such lies. For example, when Houston's graduation and dropout data was revealed to be blatantly false, the myth of the "Texas miracle" should have been forever put to rest, but the scandal disappeared from the headlines within days and it remains alive and well.

To add insult to injury, we use as our only measure of academic performance the one tool that most reliably reflects family assets: standardized paper-and-pencil tests. And the more we reduce taxes on the rich and rely on local taxpayers to fund schools, the more likely we are to have the cheapest and most unreliable kinds of tests—which makes an even further mockery of the idea of closing gaps. We spend \$50 billion a year on schooling K through 12 and three times that this year alone on the Iraq war—and yet are

told we "can't afford" what the experts say might make a difference. In the end, standardized tests will largely continue to measure the other gaps in life.

4. Psychology Today, When Pass is a Four-letter Word, by Brenda Goodman

Recent research suggests that holding kids back is rarely helpful. In fact, it's often detrimental, says Susan Stone, assistant professor of social welfare at the University of California at Berkeley. As leader of the Consortium on Chicago School Research, Stone headed an eight-year study of retention in the Chicago public schools. The consortium's most recent report found that after one year, third graders who are held back aren't better off compared with students who squeak by into the next grade. Sixth graders who repeated the grade fared worse than those barely allowed to advance, and almost 78 percent of eighth graders who were held back dropped out of school altogether.

"Kids disengage from school because they're learning the same thing in the same way over and over again," says Stone.

5. National Review, REACHing for Improvement, by K. Lloyd Billingsley

Those students who need help the most may be left behind nonetheless—owing to the perverse incentives and simplistic growth targets that characterize most states' approaches to meeting No Child Left Behind requirements.

With the annual targets coming into view, the incentive is to concentrate resources on average students just below the proficiency bar. If these students climb over it, schools and states will be in compliance. In practice, this means that average suburban students in high-performing schools will get priority for help. On the other hand, students in low-income neighborhoods and low-performing schools, with results nowhere near the proficiency line, are not as likely to be targeted for the help they need.

What they are likely to get are dumbed-down standards that will enable schools to declare these students proficient without any substantive improvement. This is similar to the common practice of social promotion, advancing students to the next grade even if they have not mastered the material taught at their present level. While testing trickery may help schools and states feel good about themselves, it cheats the students. The goal, after all, is true proficiency for all, not the educators' ability to claim proficiency.

6. Houston Chronicle, Third Graders Promoted After Failing Reading Test, by Jason Spenser

Hundreds of third-graders who failed the required reading test were moved on to the fourth grade anyway because of a loophole in the law that was supposed to end social promotion in Texas schools. The 1999 legislation, championed by then-Gov. George W. Bush, became the centerpiece of his education platform in the 2000 presidential election, and he then parlayed it into the federal No Child Left Behind Act.

But in four of the state's largest school districts, 38 percent of failing third-grade students in the 2003-2004 class took advantage of a provision in the law that allows them to get around the passing requirement as long as the child's parents, reading teacher and principal agree. A growing number of education experts, citing research that shows students who are held back in lower grade levels are more likely to drop out of high school, say that may be a good thing. . . . "We're talking about a small number that actually proceeded onto the fourth grade," said Margaret Stroud, HISD's deputy superintendent. Those students are receiving extra attention, such as tutorials and smaller classes, she said.

Research has shown that some students benefit from social promotion, while others are better off repeating the grade they failed, said professor Gary Dworkin of the University of Houston. "Kids who just miss passing do very well being socially promoted," Dworkin said. "If they fail miserably, they are less likely to do well if they're socially promoted."

Exceptions to the passing requirement should be granted sparingly, and only for students with a record of progress, said Justin Torres, research director in Washington, D.C. "There should be some limited exceptions, because there are unusual circumstances," Torres said. "You'd want to be sure that there's a reasonable expectation that the child could make up the lost ground in the next year with specialized attention."

. . . .

More education experts are subscribing to the theory that failing students should be promoted and given special attention to help them catch up. That philosophy could be driving teachers and principals to recommend that more failing third-graders move on to the fourth grade. Struggling third-graders are less likely to become high school dropouts if they are promoted and given extra help to get back on track, said David Conley, director of the University of Oregon's Center for Educational Policy Research. "You end up with 16-year-olds in eighth grade, you've got kids driving to middle school," Conley said. "These kids hit ninth grade, and that's when they drop out."