As graduation rates go down, school ratings go up

February 14 2008

A new study by researchers at Rice University and the University of Texas-Austin finds that Texas' public school accountability system, the model for the national No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), directly contributes to lower graduation rates. Each year Texas public high schools lose at least 135,000 youth prior to graduation -- a disproportionate number of whom are African-American, Latino and English-as-a-second-language (ESL) students.

By analyzing data from more than 271,000 students, the study found that 60 percent of African-American students, 75 percent of Latino students and 80 percent of ESL students did not graduate within five years. The researchers found an overall graduation rate of only 33 percent.

"High-stakes, test-based accountability doesn't lead to school improvement or equitable educational possibilities," said Linda McSpadden McNeil, director of the Center for Education at Rice University. "It leads to avoidable losses of students. Inherently the system creates a dilemma for principals: comply or educate. Unfortunately we found that compliance means losing students."

The study shows as schools came under the accountability system, which uses student test scores to rate schools and reward or discipline principals, massive numbers of students left the school system. The exit of low-achieving students created the appearance of rising test scores and of a narrowing of the achievement gap between white and minority students, thus increasing the schools' ratings.

This study has serious implications for the nation's schools under the NCLB law. It finds that the higher the stakes and the longer such an accountability system governs schools, the more school personnel view students not as children to educate but as potential liabilities or assets for their school's performance indicators, their own careers or their school's funding.

The study shows a strong relationship between the increasing number of dropouts and school's rising accountability ratings, finding that:

-- Losses of low-achieving students help raise school ratings under the accountability system.

-- The accountability system allows principals to hold back students who are deemed at risk of reducing the school's scores; many students retained this way end up dropping out.

-- The test scores grouped by race single out the low-achieving students in these subgroups as potential liabilities to the school ratings, increasing incentives for school administrators to allow those students to quietly exit the system.

-- The accountability system's zero tolerance rules for attendance and behavior, which put youth into the court system for minor offenses and absences, alienate students and increase the likelihood they will drop out.

The discrepancy between the official dropout rates, in the 2 to 3 percent range, and the actual rates can be attributed to the state's method of counting, which does not include students who drop out of school for reasons such as pregnancy or incarceration or declare intent to take the GED sometime in the future.

The study analyzes student-level data of 271,000 students in one of

Texas' large urban districts over a seven-year period. It also includes analysis of the policy and its implementation, extensive observations in high schools in that district and interviews with students, teachers, administrators and students who left school without graduating.

Source: Rice University