

Government policies push schools to prioritize creating better test-takers over better people

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Personal growth and job skills have taken a backseat to an increased focus on standardized test scores in schools across the nation, according

to new University at Buffalo-led research.

The study, which analyzed the educational goals of principals at thousands of public, private and [charter schools](#) over two decades, found the shift in priorities is most pronounced in [public schools](#).

The change in educational goals can be traced to the rise in test-based school accountability policies in the 1990s, which culminated with the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 that mandated statewide testing in the United States, according to the research.

"The balanced development of both academic and soft skills is crucial, not only for well-rounded child development in schools, but also for career and life success," says Jaekyung Lee, Ph.D., lead researcher and professor of learning and instruction in the UB Graduate School of Education.

"Increasing concerns about poor student performance in the United States led states to adopt high-stakes testing policies," says Lee.

"However, working under the constraints of limited resources, complex power dynamics and externally imposed policies, school principals are often faced with challenges in prioritizing educational goals. Forced to focus narrowly on [academic skills](#) measured by state tests, other equally important goals were deprioritized."

The study, published in March in *Educational Administration Quarterly*, is one of few studies to examine the influence of education policies on school principals' priorities, rather than on student achievement or teacher practices. A school leader's perception of educational goals guides, directs and motivates the daily operations and performance of school members, says Lee.

Using data from the Schools and Staffing Survey, the researchers

compared the national trends of educational goal priorities between public and private schools from 1991-2012.

The surveys asked principals to choose their top three priorities among the following goals: basic literary and numerical skills, academic excellence, [personal growth](#), job skills, work habits and discipline, human relations, moral values, and multicultural awareness.

Academic excellence experienced a significant rise in ranking among public school principals, with 83% choosing it as one of three top priorities in 2012, up from 60% in 1991. The percentage who selected development of basic literacy and numeracy skills also rose, increasing from 76% to 85%.

The shift, however, came at the expense of personal growth (self-esteem and self-awareness), which in 1991 was chosen by 62% of public school principals but only by 32% in 2012. The importance of [job skills](#) also declined, with the percentage of principals rating it as one of three top priorities falling from 13% to 9%.

Private [school](#) principals experienced a similar but less drastic shift in priorities. The results, says Lee, reflect the influence of educational policy discourse and media reports on [private schools](#) which, unlike public schools, are less exposed to government regulations on curriculum standards.

The study's findings about the NCLB policy impact on narrowing educational goals resonate with Lee's previous studies, including a recent report published by the Rockefeller Institute of Government that called for renewed education policy actions to improve children's socioemotional skills and well-being.

"School leaders can and should play an important role in envisioning and

realizing [educational goals](#)," says Lee. "Principals need to develop strategies to accomplish the whole educational mission, encompassing academic, socioemotional, moral, multicultural and vocational learning to meet the diverse needs of their students as well as the larger society."

More information: Jaekyung Lee et al, Is "Whole Child" Education Obsolete? Public School Principals' Educational Goal Priorities in the Era of Accountability, *Educational Administration Quarterly* (2020).
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