

College readiness declines when school's focus is improving test scores, study finds

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University of Illinois education professor Anjale D. Welton is the co-author of a study that explored efforts to maintain a college-going culture at one Texas high school. Illinois alumna Montrisha M. Williams of the American Institutes for Research co-wrote the paper. Credit: L. Brian Stauffer

Education reform policies that penalize struggling schools for poor standardized test scores may hinder—not improve—students' college readiness, if a school's instructional focus becomes improving its test scores, suggests a new study that explored efforts to promote a college-going culture at one Texas high school.

Published recently in *The High School Journal*, the case study reveals the unintended consequences of school reform policies, and how these mandates may warp schools' instructional focus and thwart [students'](#) academic success.

In 2008, Texas adopted statewide College and Career Readiness Standards that established student performance benchmarks for math, science, reading and geography. Texas also is one of 26 states that require students to pass an exit exam—usually taken during students' junior year—to receive a [high school](#) diploma.

Anjalé D. Welton, a professor of educational policy

at the University of Illinois, and Montrisha M. Williams, a researcher with the American Institutes for Research, explored the impact that these mandates had at Green High School, a pseudonym the authors used for a school located in a semirural community near a major city in Texas.

Poor academic performance on federal and state accountability tests for three consecutive years had garnered Green High School an "academically unacceptable" rating from the state education agency. As a result, teachers and staff at Green were under pressure to produce improvement within the next year, prompting them to concentrate instructional time and resources on preparing students for the exit exam.

Many teachers revised their curricula to focus on the basic skills emphasized on the exam, and made instructional decisions, such as not assigning homework, that compromised students' college readiness, according to the researchers.

More than half of Green's students were enrolled in some form of intervention for the exit exam during the time Welton and Williams were collecting data. Because so many students were being steered into these interventions, the school eliminated some advanced placement courses due to low enrollment, the researchers discovered.

Some students expressed frustration about the lack of academic rigor in their remaining AP courses, which they linked to inexperienced teachers' lower academic expectations for students.

Students were highly aware of Green's negative academic reputation and told the researchers that they felt "stigmatized" and "humiliated" by it.

A high turnover rate among Green's teaching staff made it difficult for youth to receive the social support that is essential to creating a college-going culture, especially among first-generation college

students, the researchers found.

"This school was so focused on meeting the demands of state policy that it was unaware of the toll it was taking on the culture and climate of the school," Welton said. "The goal of standards and assessment is to make students more prepared for the rigors of college, but are schools implementing these measures in a way that emphasizes college readiness? Are they sending the message that students should go to college, and assisting them in applying and finding financial aid and scholarships? We should be able to do both - hold schools accountable and create a college-going culture."

The community surrounding Green High School had experienced a major demographic shift over the prior decade as urban families relocated to the city's outskirts. However, the researchers observed that school officials and teachers were unprepared to meet the needs of low-income and minority youth, and blamed these students for Green's academic decline.

While Green implemented some promising programs to increase the numbers of graduates going to college, these initiatives reached few students, leaving most youth on their own to figure out how to access college information, according to the study.

Although Welton and Williams' research focused on one [school](#), they believe that other schools across the U.S. are experiencing similar difficulties, suggesting a need to examine the true impact of accountability mandates and help schools develop teaching practices that support students' academic success and postsecondary aspirations.

"Schools with large populations of youth of color and low-income youth are overwhelmingly targeted for reform initiatives, and, as a society, we need to examine how schools become highly minoritized and why they have large numbers of students with various needs," Welton said. "In states such as Texas, people of color are the majority population, and we need to rethink how we label schools for reform purposes."

"Rather than centering performance problems on

students and teachers, policymakers should take into consideration the systemic inequities and larger sociopolitical contexts in which schools operate," Williams said. "We also need to be more aware of the impact of labeling schools 'high minority, high poverty' and 'low performing,' because these descriptors convey deficit connotations."

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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