NYC theme high schools show benefits, but inequity is an issue

Small theme high schools have the potential to boost student achievement and engagement in a way that large, anonymous “shopping mall” high schools have failed to do, write researchers Jacqueline Ancess and David Allen in a recent Harvard Educational Review article.

In one of the more large-scale reform efforts using this strategy, New York City has developed 175 of these small high schools with a dizzying array of themes, from art, science, business, law, technology, social studies to athletics, community service and social justice. Theme schools enroll about 25% of New York City's high school students.

One major goal in developing small theme high schools has been to raise the abysmally low graduation rate of students in the city’s schools. Only 43% of high school students in New York City schools graduate, according to New York State Department of Education data.

According to the researchers, “Embedded within the theme component are powerful beliefs and promises, that there is a relationship among student commitment, engagement and learning experiences and desirable post-secondary trajectories for students; and that these learning experiences can deliver both equity and excellence in school systems where there has been little of either.”

Early indications are that the strategy is working in New York City. According to city statistics for 2004, 93% of students in small schools were promoted from ninth to tenth grade compared with 68% citywide. According to 2006 statistics, average daily attendance was 91%, compared with 82% citywide. These results are particularly promising, the researchers note, given that 67% of entering students scored below standard in literacy, compared with 60% citywide.

Schools can perpetuate inequity

But the researchers caution that while small theme high schools are making progress in engaging students, they may be perpetuating inequity and segregation with the “unspoken code” of themes.

“Themes communicate powerful messages about race, gender, class, income, expectations, college going, future orientations, definitions of success, and more,” the authors write. “Indeed, they are often their proxies.”

Themes, which reflect the interests of teachers, administrators, students, philanthropists and partner organizations can serve as socioeconomic, academic or racial codes that attract only one group of students. Education advocate and author Jonathan Kozol recently noted the presence of “small schools that cater to very artistic, upscale Greenwich Village families” and “small academies for Black and Latino students with names like Academy of Leadership, or the Academy of Business Enterprise.”

The hope was that by sorting students by their common interests instead of by home
Most do not get top choices

The huge number of New York City students that enter school each year also make it difficult to have enough capacity in the most desirable theme schools. Students with the highest standardized test results have preferential access to the school of their choice, so some small schools are made up of students who score in the 98th and 99th percentiles.

Unless enough attractive theme schools exist,” the researchers write, “the policy risks promoting even greater inequity if those who do not get their top choices are the usual suspects: the system’s most vulnerable and needy students.”

While some 82%, or 77,428 students who applied to the city’s public high schools, received one of their choices, only 45% received one of their top three choices and another 18%, or 16,609 students, were assigned to an undersubscribed school they did not choose, according to 2005 city Department of Education statistics.

While New York City does not require applications for small public high schools to have a theme, most proposals do include them to ensure that their school will be differentiated from others and so that they can avoid being assigned those students who have no interest in a theme or resist the concept altogether. All of the schools are required to meet New York State Regents standards and administer the Regents exam required for a diploma. Technically, at least, the researchers note, graduates of any of the schools should be eligible for college.

Despite the 14-year history of theme schools in New York, many of them exist in name only. The researchers describe three kinds of theme schools, nominal, marginal and integral. In some schools, the theme exists in name only and in others, only in the margin of the curriculum. One school, for example, began with a program to provide students with internship opportunities throughout the community. After significant leadership changes, the defection of partners and their contributions and the lack of system-level policies for sustainability, the school gradually lost all connections to the business world.

However, the researchers describe schools in which the theme is integral to the curriculum and the school community. “In such schools,” the researchers write, “the theme’s influence can be seen in the daily life of students and teachers; in how the school’s leaders talk and behave; in the content of the curriculum, the forms of instruction, and the ways students are assessed; in the art of student work posted on the school’s walls; in unique school rituals; and in how the school interacts with its community, including families and neighborhood organizations.”

To address racial or socioeconomic inequity in school choice, the Department of Education provides a high school directory in multiple languages, open houses at schools, high school fairs in each borough and parent workshops. One challenge for administrators, is developing thematic integrity with curricular, instructional and assessment mandates for six-week benchmark tests. The Department of Education may need to release schools from these requirements and also develop alternative program assessment mechanisms “such as critical friends or school quality reviews that rely on the collective perspectives of multiple stakeholders and provide schools with data for improving instruction and student support systems.”

Teachers unimpressed with effects of single-sex classes in one school

Single-sex classes are one of the latest gambits to improve students’ academic performance and reduce behavioral problems. In fact, the U.S. Department of Education recently released guidelines to help districts set up single-sex classes in coeducation schools, which are believed to be especially beneficial for boys.

But, in a recent article in Educational Studies, researchers Colette Gray and Joanne Wilson report that in a secondary school in Northern Ireland, where one cohort of pupils has been taught in single-sex classrooms for four years, teachers are unimpressed with the results and do not support continuing the initiative. Ironically, if anything, the program seems to have had a neutral effect on girls and to have been more detrimental to boys, the teachers report.

At the medium-sized school of 600-700 students in a working-class area, single-sex classes did not raise academic achievement nor improve behavior for these students, according to surveys of teachers in the school. Only 16% of teachers believed single-sex classes raised standards, and a majority favored abandoning the experiment. Many teachers found teaching boys’ classes stressful and believed that a “macho mind-set” increased disruptive behavior, bullying and discouraged academic achievement.

To raise performance in English and math, Grade 8 pupils in 2000 were taught these subjects in single-sex classes. When the students progressed to grades 9, 10 and 11 all subjects were taught in single-sex classes.

Gray and Wilson analyzed the results of a survey of 43 teachers (31 female and 12 male) and interviews (one-to-one and small group) with a stratified sample of 15 teachers. The researchers focused specifically on:

• Teachers’ involvement in the implementation process;
• The impact on teachers’ enjoyment of teaching;
• Teachers’ perception of the impact of this approach on classroom behavior and academic performance; and
• Teachers’ views on the sustainability of the approach.

Negative effect on boys

Most teachers—77%—disagreed with the statement that single-sex classes have a positive effect on boys’ behavior, with many believing the classes created new behavior problems. According to the researchers, the majority of teachers believed that “some boys actively encourage and reinforce bad behavior, with some teachers noting that “It now is seen as fine to defy teachers’ and to show ‘disaffection’, ‘disinterest’ and ‘aggression’.” While some teachers noted that girls could be catty and unpleasant to each other in single-sex classrooms, nearly two-thirds did not see a negative impact on girls’ behavior.

Only 23% of the teachers were convinced that the single-sex classes had a positive impact on boys’ academic performance, compared with 39% who felt that girls’ academic performance improved in single-sex classrooms.

A disturbing trend noted in previous research is that boys in single-sex classes used terms of abuse they had previously applied to girls to put down other boys. According to one teacher, “{boys} compete with each other for attention in class and those who do want to learn, particularly in the lower-band classes, are made the butt of class jokes. It’s not seen as trendy, it ruins their street cred.” Some male teachers observed that boys who are shy, smaller than their peers and have feminine qualities may be more likely to be targeted for bullying.

Many teachers believe that peer pressure

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not to stand out academically contributed to declining examination results. They indicated that this class of students may be one of the academically weaker cohorts. But, by implementing single-sex classes across all subjects, the school basically eliminated its control group in the initiative, so it is difficult to lay the blame for declining exam results with the single-sex initiative, according to the researchers.

“Typically, experiments with single-sex classes target specific subject areas, such as mathematics and English, before implementing them across the curriculum,” the researchers write. “By monitoring behavior within and between classes, teachers can test the hypothesis that single-sex classes have a detrimental effect on pupils’ behavior and academic performance.”

Only 26% of teachers would recommend single-sex classes to another school. The researchers noted that while teachers acknowledged that the initiative was a last-ditch effort to do something about falling standards, they may have forgotten the scope of the problems before implementation.

A recurring theme of teachers’ responses is that they were not adequately consulted about the plan or trained on how to implement it. Few teachers felt prepared for the single-sex initiative, with 71% describing as “inadequate” the training available to teachers prior to implementation.

Less than a third of teachers remembered being consulted before the program was instituted, perhaps helping to explain why nearly two-thirds said the initiative was unpopular with staff, with many saying they felt “devalued,” “distanced from the process,” and “excluded” from the decision-making system.

The researchers note that there is substantial research to indicate that “teachers’ attitudes to systems can either positively or negatively facilitate their implementation.”

Clearly, the results indicate the importance of the consultation phase, the necessity of getting teachers to buy in or invest in the program. Beyond that, however, the researchers suggest that it may be better to use single-sex classes in specific areas of the curriculum. Using this approach, pupils serve as their own control group to better gauge the effectiveness of the approach.


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Experiential education narrows gap between low- and high-income students

Experiential education, particularly community service and service learning, appears to narrow the achievement gap between higher- and lower-income students, reports a study published in the *Journal of Experiential Education*.

After analyzing national survey data from students and principals, researchers found that low-socioeconomic status (SES) students who participated in community service had significantly fewer missed days of school and significantly higher grades than students who did not participate in service.

“Our results suggest that service-learning may be an especially valued strategy for student engagement and achievement for principals in schools that are urban, or majority nonwhite, or high poverty,” the researchers conclude.

Research has repeatedly shown that low SES has negative impact on a wide range of aspects of child and adolescent well-being, including student academic achievement.

Lower-income children are often cognitively stimulated less than higher-income children, and some studies have shown that participation in extracurricular activities and cooperative active student learning can help make up for this deficit and have as much effect on academic achievement as SES, the researchers say.

Community service may have this impact on academic achievement, the researchers write, because it:

- may make students feel useful and valued and help them see the connection between what they learn in school and the “real world,” and
- may provide students with multiple sources of instructive feedback and create high expectations.

The data for the study were obtained across three different data sets:

- a national sample of U.S. principals selected from the 2001-2002 Common Core of Data public schools universe file (survey responses were received from 1,799 schools, 91% of schools surveyed);
- a large, diverse sample of more than 217,000 6th-12th grade students from more than 300 U.S. communities that administered the Search Institute Profiles of Student Life: Attitudes and Behavior Survey (PSL-AB) in the 1999-2000 school year; and
- a racially and economically diverse sample of 5,136 6th-12th grade students from Colorado Springs, CO, who took both the PSL-AB survey and Search Institute’s Youth Supplement Survey in February 1999.

Urban principals see impact

In this study, principals of urban, high-poverty, or majority nonwhite schools were significantly more likely to view service learning as having a very positive impact on attendance, school engagement and academic achievement.

Only 8% of low-SES students without service reported getting mostly A’s while 11% of low-SES students who did service had high grades, a considerable difference within that group, the researchers note. They acknowledge that low-SES students who engage in service may be more academically oriented.

“Service-learning appeared to be associated with smaller gaps for attendance, achievement, motivation, school engagement, reading for pleasure and especially for bonding to school, but not for homework or self-reported grades,” the researchers note.

Even a relatively limited commitment to service learning appeared to make a difference in student attitudes toward school. Only 18% of students had at least a few weeks of service-learning; another 21% had a few hours to a few days. In the Colorado Springs sample, researchers found that...
students who reported a “few weeks” or more of service learning had more positive results on motivation, school engagement, bonding to school, homework and reading for pleasure than all other students. The students also had better attendance and grades than students with no service-learning, but not significantly better than students with a few hours of service-learning.

The researchers’ findings about the impact on students from disadvantaged backgrounds are supported by previous research. In research for the Massachusetts Department of Education (2005), researchers concluded that service learning has tremendous potential in the lives of at-risk youth who do not typically participate in community activities.

According to the research by Duckenfield and Drew (2006) of the National Dropout Prevention Center at Clemson University, Clemson, SC, the best research-based dropout prevention strategies include school/community collaboration, family engagement, early literacy development, and service learning.

A complementary strategy to standards-based reforms, the researchers note, has been called “developmental attentiveness” or “human development as a core goal.” This approach links school reform with the developmental needs of children and the broader community environment. Learning service can play a key role in this approach to education, the researchers say.


How black students view help-seeking behaviors

In classrooms where students are predominantly black, help-seeking behavior is not viewed negatively by peers and is not correlated with students’ acceptance by peers, reports an article in the Negro Educational Review.

University of Pittsburgh researcher Sharon Nelson-Le Gall examined help-seeking behavior, peer acceptance and academic competence in a sample of 99 black students (48 boys and 51 girls) in fourth-grade classrooms in one elementary school in a Pennsylvania city.

In more mixed classrooms, previous research has found that black children are perceived by their classmates to seek help more often than their white counterparts and that help-seeking is negatively related to acceptance by peers.

In this study, the researcher administered a sociometric measure, asking children to indicate how much they liked peers in their classrooms on a scale of 1 to 5. Peer ratings were also sought on academic competence and prosocial competence (HELPER). In addition, the researcher observed children in their classrooms over a four-week period.

As predicted, girls were more highly rated as helpers than boys and were perceived to be more academically competent than boys.

“The findings of the present study suggest that the forms and functions of help seeking that occur among black children in the classroom may reflect culturally shared notions about appropriate and effective ways to interact with peers and are likely to be influenced by their experiences in their families, neighborhoods, and cultural institutions in their communities of origin,” the researcher writes.

Research supports both pros and cons of ‘No Child Left Behind’ debate

Pro and con arguments often seem to cancel each other out in the debate over standardized assessment and school accountability. In a recent issue of *Applied Measurement in Education*, Lihshing Wang and a team of researchers from the University of Cincinnati bring a third evidence-based perspective by examining multidisciplinary studies on the four following issues:

1. **Assessment-driven reform**
2. **Standards-based assessment**
3. **Assessment-centered accountability**
4. **High-stakes consequences**

“Only a handful of scholars and practitioners have argued in defense of standardized tests,” write Wang and fellow researchers Gulbahar H. Beckett and Lionel Brown. However, there is emerging evidence that high-stakes assessment is a potent force for bringing about improvements in student learning.

The researchers present the pro and con arguments for each of the four interrelated issues and then offer a critical synthesis based on their review of the research. No Child Left Behind sets standards that are intended to challenge all students and that hold educators accountable for student performance. The researchers address performance of U.S. students in international rankings, the effect of socioeconomic status on learning, the latest research on the neuroplasticity of the brain and the unintended positive and negative consequences of high-stakes standards testing.

**1. Assessment-driven reform**

**Pro arguments**

Assessment-driven reform is needed to counter declining trends in SAT and ACT scores and the mediocre performance of U.S. students in international rankings such as Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), proponents argue. Assessment-driven reform can have a powerful influence on school curriculum and reform, if tests are carefully designed to be consistent with the kinds of learning desired in the classroom and if there is a tight connection between cognitive learning theory, the curriculum, classroom activities and assessment items.

**Con arguments**

SAT scores declined during the 1970s and 1980s because more students aspired to go to college and took the tests, not because of performance factors. There has been an upward trend in the 1990s and into the 2000s. The Department of Education statistics show improvement in areas such as a decrease in dropout rates and an increase in high school students taking advanced courses and Advanced Placement examinations. Standardized tests undervalue the “sensitive interaction between teachers and their students in the complex, social system of the classroom.” The real problem with the education system is the fundamental misdesign of schools, lack of qualified teachers and the instability of families and communities.

**Synthesis view**

While there are encouraging statistics on domestic educational performance, American school children do not seem to perform well in international rankings. “It seems clear that in the world of increasing globalization, the U.S. educational system can and should do better,” the researchers conclude. The goal of using tests is not just to measure performance but also to drive changes in alternative instructional materials, learning models and staff development that can...
Research and the NCLB debate

Continued from page 7

make the shifts in the desired teaching and learning.

2. Standards-based assessment

Pro arguments

It is desirable to agree on a common core of knowledge that teachers should teach and students should learn. Without common standards, it is difficult to compare grades across teachers and schools because of local norms.

All students, regardless of socioeconomic status, race or disability, should be expected to meet common standards that challenge them to acquire content and skills that are more than just minimum requirements. Neuroplasticity research in the past decade has shown that “the critical period for learning is now considered regulatable through environmental enrichment and mental force throughout life.”

In a nationwide survey by the National Board on Educational Testing and Public Policy, a majority of teachers supported their state content standards and more than one half reported that their state-mandated test is based on a curriculum that all teachers should follow. In public polls, there is wide support for standardized assessment.

Con arguments

By imposing standards on students’ minds we are, in effect, depriving them of their fundamental intellectual freedom by applying one standard set of knowledge. Standardized tests oversimplify knowledge and do not test higher-order thinking skills. State standards are externally imposed on local teachers.

These mandatory assessments cannot work unless teachers understand and accept the philosophical underpinnings of standards. One-size-fits-all standards either dumb down instruction to the lowest common denominator or condemn low-ability students to frequent failure.

Synthesis view

Few would argue against the noble goal of helping all children meet the same set of high standards. Neurocognitive research provides strong evidence that the human brain is adaptable well into adulthood. However, genetic signals play a large role in the initial structuring of the brain and there is a limit to how much and how quickly cells enlarge and add synapses. This suggests that the human mind may lose its plasticity in learning after reaching a certain age. There is a learning cap determined by genetic as well as socioeconomic factors that determines how far and fast a student can develop during their school years. The NCLB’s requirement that all children must reach the same set of standards at the same time fails to acknowledge this.

3. Assessment-centered accountability

Pro arguments

Standardized testing is the best alternative for comparing student performance across different education systems because human judgment is error-prone. Decades of evidence show that the quality of teachers’ tests pales compared with more rigorously developed large-scale tests.

When used for purposes of accountability, standardized tests can provide more objective and less ambiguous evidence. In one international study that looked at the effects of dropping and reintroducing standardized tests in 29 industrialized countries, academic standards declined, students studied less, curricula became incoherent and selection and promotion became arbitrary after standardized tests were dropped.

Con arguments

Important learning outcomes are not measured by standards testing. Only self-generated professional responsibility can sustain fundamental school and student improvement. To guide instruction, teachers should constantly look for evidence from a variety of sources to make sense of what is happening in their classrooms.

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Standardized tests measure little more than socioeconomic status, and teachers and administrators should not be held responsible for that or should a fourth-grade teacher be held accountable for her students’ test scores when those scores reflect all that has happened to the children before. Standardized tests fail to differentiate instruction for different kinds of kids without condemning low-achieving students to boring and unproductive schooling.

**Synthesis view**

Educators have the duty to help students break hereditary and environmental barriers. A well-established accountability system must make sure that the process of accountability is legal. Without adequate funding for test development and personnel training, the accountability mandate is likely to be challenged on legal grounds. There needs to be an evaluation mechanism that captures the individual contribution of a teacher and recognizes the preexisting differences in students. The current NCLB goal of bringing all children to a level of proficiency by 2014 has been projected to be unattainable. Holding students, teachers and administrators accountable for reaching an unattainable goal will lead to unintended negative consequences.

4. High-stakes consequences

**Pro arguments**

Assessment-based accountability is possible only when high stakes are associated with the results. Educators must inform themselves about their content, construction and consequences. There is a “trickle-down effect” on teachers in that they must become more reflective and critical of their classroom instruction. One reason the American educational system has failed is because there have not been high stakes for failure. For the most part, students will only read a play by Shakespeare if they will be tested on it in a final exam. High-stakes testing has the unintended consequences of improving professional development. A number of studies have found a strong positive relation between level of stakes and performance on assessments.

**Con arguments**

The behaviorist theory underlying high-stakes accountability oversimplifies how human behavior is conditioned by rewards and punishments. Decades of research has shown that extrinsic sources of motivation such as stars, stickers and grades actually undermines natural curiosity and a student’s enjoyment of learning. Punitive consequences achieve temporary compliance at the cost of demoralizing teachers and students. The fundamental criticism of high-stakes accountability systems is that they rely excessively on extrinsic motivation at the expense of intrinsic motivation. Some of the negative consequences of high-stakes accountability systems include higher dropout and holdback rates, lower motivation, teaching to the test, unethical test preparation, etc. Some reports of gains have been discredited as test-polluting practices such as excluding students or higher dropout rates.

**Synthesis view**

There is emerging evidence that high-stakes state assessment is a potent policy for bringing about positive changes in student learning. In a re-analysis of the gain comparison between state assessment and National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), average NAEP increases were much higher in high-stakes schools compared with no-stakes schools.

In response to criticism that gains could be due to high dropout and exclusion rates, further analysis showed that dropout rates were below the national average and that the exclusion rates were the same as the rest of the nation. “Whether such extrinsically motivated score improvement can sustain life-long learning and whether such positive effects offset the negative consequences, how-

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Parental involvement typically declines during the middle school years, but a new study in the *Journal of Early Adolescence* emphasizes the importance of continued involvement by parents. In this study of 184 seventh and eighth graders from two suburban middle schools in Maryland, Christopher Spera from the State University of New York at Albany found that parental involvement was linked to student interest in school.

"An important finding was the relationship between students’ reports of parental involvement and their reports of interest in school, which suggests that parental involvement practices, such as helping children with homework or a class project, may engender interest in school for children," he writes.

The study, which was based on student responses to questionnaires, examined the links between adolescent outcomes and parental aspirations, goals and values, parenting practices and parenting style. While previous studies have found relationships between student achievement and parenting style (child-centered vs. authoritative), this study uses an expanded contextual model of parenting to better understand the process of socialization.

Unlike some previous research, Spera did not find differences in parental educational goals and values across ethnicity and socioeconomic status. Adolescents of all ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds reported that their parents held high goals and values for their education, indicating that some other key variable, such as parents’ own level of education or their view of the quality of the school system may be at play in earlier reported differences, he says.

However, parental aspirations did vary by ethnicity with children from African American families reporting that their parents held higher aspirations for them than did Hispanic and Caucasian adolescents. Girls reported higher parental goals and values than boys, perhaps because girls are more receptive to their parents’ goals and values than boys, Spera speculates.

The importance of parental involvement for adolescents’ interest and motivation suggests that educators should encourage parental involvement by inviting parents into the school and classroom, Spera says.


### NCLB debate

*Continued from page 9 ever, remain to be seen,” the researchers conclude.

#### Recommended research agenda

The debate about standardized testing will continue and the pendulum will continue to swing. The researchers recommend the following action research agenda:

- Develop classroom-level diagnostic tests for evaluation aligned with state-level standardized tests.
- Include classroom teachers and cognitive-developmental and social psychologists in state assessment panels to achieve meaningful alignment of content standards and classroom curriculum.
- Offer computerized adaptive testing so that students of diverse ability levels can meet learning goals that are tailored to their current ability level.
- Conduct research in accountability with value-added methodology which measures residual gain or loss between a student’s achievement score and his or her projected score to better isolate school and teacher effects.

Oral reading fluency predicts students’ performance on statewide tests

Students with poor oral reading fluency are frequently tagged as needing extra help to develop their reading skills and comprehension. How well does oral reading fluency predict performance on statewide proficiency tests?

With the implementation of No Child Left Behind, researchers are more closely studying the link between oral reading fluency and performance on these tests. Some of the questions they are asking include: Can oral reading fluency predict who will pass and who will fail state tests? Does the relationship between oral reading fluency and reading comprehension change with age, grade or reading level? Does it change across classrooms or ability groups (high vs. low ability students)?

In a recent issue of *Educational Assessment*, David E. Wood from the Estes Park School District in Estes Park, Colorado, finds significant correlations between oral reading fluency and performance on the Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP) for grades 3-5.

“An assessment system is needed that provides important indicators regarding whether students are making adequate progress toward standards, and thus are likely to be proficient on statewide tests,” Wood writes.

Reading fluency cut scores provided valuable information about whether students would pass or fail the Colorado statewide exam, Wood says. He also found that oral fluency reliably predicted performance in the statewide test in all three grades. Other studies have focused on only one grade, usually third or fourth grade.

In this study, 281 elementary grade students were tested with DIBELS, a measure of oral reading fluency, two months prior to taking the CSAP. There were five classrooms at each grade level. The Colorado students were predominantly white and from one middle-class community. In analyzing the data, Wood found that for every 1-point increase in oral reading fluency, there was a corresponding increase of 1.23 points in the CSAP score. The researcher found that the increase in oral reading fluency each year was 16.36 words per minute.

For students who have already taken the statewide assessment, a student’s performance in previous years also provides information about future performance. When this was taken into account, Wood says that oral reading fluency contributed a relatively small proportion of the variance, but it still supplied additional information about individual students.

One of the most interesting findings of the study, Wood writes, was that the relationship between oral reading fluency and CSAP performance varied with the individual classrooms. The variations could indicate different levels of teacher effectiveness or different levels of emphasis on fluency or comprehension.

More research is needed on the predictability of oral reading fluency measures further in advance of statewide testing to allow more time for intervention, Wood says.

“Modeling the Relationship Between Oral Reading Fluency and Performance on a Statewide Reading Test” *Educational Assessment, Volume 11 Number 2*, pps. 85-104.

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