

Children Left Behind: A Film by School Psychologists

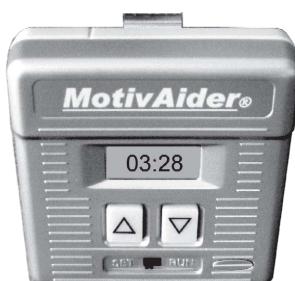
BY LOUIS J. KRUGER

Although much has been written about the expansion of the role of the school psychologist, it usually does not encompass filmmaking. Thus, when my graduate students, fellow school psychologists in Massachusetts, and I began a film project 4 years ago, it seemed like we were embarking on a quixotic journey. We were driven by our desire to change public policy and the realization that research and data are not always sufficient to sway opinions and influence legislators.

We wanted to inform others about the injustices associated with the use of high school exit exams. A high school exit exam is a curriculum-derived test that must be passed in order for a student to earn a high school diploma. These exams are often referred to as "high stakes tests" because of the impact they can have on an individual's life. As recently as the 1970s, not one state had this type of requirement (Warren, 2007). Three decades later, the landscape has dramatically changed. At present, 24 states are using high stakes tests in an effort to reverse the supposed "rising tide of mediocrity" in our public schools and close the achievement gap between socioeconomic and racial groups (Center on Education Policy, 2008). In implementing high stakes testing in the public schools, state legislatures and departments of education have ignored the advice of the assessment experts and the position statements of many professional organizations, such as the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP, 2003), which have asserted that a high school diploma should not be withheld because of the results on a single statewide test.

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The film, *Children Left Behind*, is about the well-intended purposes that are driving this movement toward high stakes testing and its unintended consequences. In particular, the film focuses on Massachusetts and its education reform efforts and high stakes tests. Massachusetts's story has special significance for the entire nation: During the last several years, Massachusetts's students have consistently achieved the highest scores in the country on the Nation's Report Card, an objective measure of academic achievement (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2007).

Against this backdrop of apparent success, *Children Left Behind* brings to the forefront the stories of students who are struggling with these tests. These compelling stories provide a springboard for the exploration of the educational, political, and ethical issues associated with these exams. The overwhelming majority of these students are the intended beneficiaries of education reform. They are students with disabilities, La-



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The first public showing of *Children Left Behind* occurred at the NASP 2009 convention in Boston. Shown here at the convention is Northeastern University's school psychology faculty with Susan Gorin, NASP Executive Director. From left to right: Emanuel Mason, Karin Lifter, Robert Volpe, Chieh Li, Jessica Hoffman, Louis Kruger, and Susan Gorin.

tinos, African Americans, English language learners, and students from economically impoverished communities. The documentary illuminates both the purported benefits and disadvantages of high stakes tests. The social justice issues are palpable. Testing is a ubiquitous part of our global society. The documentary raises the question of whether we are leaving too many children behind in our quest for higher test scores.

The first public screening of the film was at the NASP convention in Boston, where it received a standing ovation. Subsequently, we were invited to screen the movie at several venues, including Northeastern and Harvard Universities. We also had the honor of being invited to show the film at the Massachusetts State House for state legislators and their aides. The American Psychological Association's Ad Hoc Committee on Films selected *Children Left Behind* to be part of the film program at the 2009 APA annual convention. Our film has also garnered the attention of the media including Boston's PBS TV station and National Public Radio station and, in July, we had the opportunity to discuss the film and the issue of high-stakes testing with Deval Patrick, the governor of Massachusetts, at a town hall meeting.

In reflecting upon the process involved in making the film, it is apparent that school psychology can reap multiple benefits from a documentary. First, it provides a medium through which school psychologists and graduate students could promote social justice (Li et al., in press) and a vehicle for collaborating with other professionals and concerned citizens about issues related to the field of school psychology. Second, a film provides an opportunity for graduate students to apply their creativity, interpersonal skills, and computer-related skills in new context. Finally, the documentary can help raise the visibility of school psychology.

It has been an exhilarating and sometimes exhausting journey, and it is far from over. Recently, my colleagues, Emanuel Mason, Chieh Li, and I testified in front of the Massachusetts Legislature's Joint Committee on Education on the need to revise the use of the statewide assessments.

For more information about the film and to view a video trailer, visit www.childrenleftbehind.com. You can hear our testimony in front of the Massachusetts Legislature's Joint Committee on Education at: www.schoolpsychology.neu.edu/news.html. ■

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