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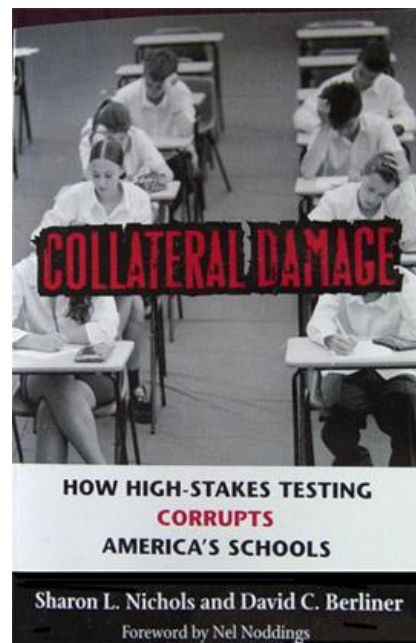
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Nichols, Sharon L. & Berliner, David C. (2007) *Collateral Damage: How High-Stakes Testing Corrupts America's Schools*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard Education Press.
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Collateral Damage sets out to deliver both Nichols and Berliner's upfront and on-the-lines perceptions and observations of the current state of teaching and learning in schools across America. The Foreword, written by Nel Noddings, acknowledges the corrupt and demoralizing climate that our nation's teachers find to be their workplace today. Noddings recognizes *Collateral Damage* as a timely, reflective, and sadly frank expose of the consequential and collateral damage which Nichols and Berliner relate to the high-stakes testing mandates resulting from the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Noddings speaks from her experienced view and although she sees the results of NCLB as a disheartening series of "unfortunate results" (p. xi) she states that these results could have easily



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been predicted. She, like Nichols and Berliner, recognized a collective fear and worry inherent in the NCLB mandates that teachers just could not do a “good job, without threats, penalties, and rigid controls” which has overshadowed the heart and caring of our nation’s teachers who do go out and do good work and continue “to make a difference in the lives of kids” (p. xiv). Noddings’s positioning of this book as an important exposé of the collateral damage suffered by public education at the hands of high-stake tests stands as a tribute to her colleagues, Nichols and Berliner, and to all of the teachers who contributed.

In *Collateral Damage*, Nichols and Berliner set out to crystallize and identify for the reader the evidence from the field which describes their premise “that high-stakes testing is harmful as well as ineffective” (p. xvi). Bringing their pragmatic and critical voice to this book, Nichols and Berliner communicate their own firsthand experiences, stories told, reports uncovered, allegations hushed, corruption, and the resulting collateral damage of high-stakes testing. In *Collateral Damage*, they have offered their take on the current state of educational reform in a realistic, highly charged and provocative account describing the collateral damage resulting from high-stakes testing in America’s schools.

Nichols and Berliner retell a short history of high-stakes testing in American schools. Historically the heavy reliance and overemphasis on test scores have created and continued to fuel a high-stakes testing economy in schools. Consequences attached to single test scores have created issues and high-stakes outcomes that are at best questionable and at worst create powerful and detrimental social and cultural problems. The current high-stakes testing environment has moved education into a purely standards-based environment, where the resulting educational environment has been robbed of its true purposes and has been replaced by a “big stick” management system (p. 168). Nichols and Berliner present the historical vignette which they contend got us into this mess. They call for the reader to connect the past practices to the current high-stakes reforms and recognize the present status of America’s

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schools as an “educational crisis that threatens to leave our *nation* behind” (p. 7).

The authors lead the reader through a historical, social, and cultural account of the why’s and how’s related to policy, power and the positioning of American schools. The authors contend that “(H)igh-stakes testing is now a part of our culture and has come to prominence, we think, because it fits easily into contemporary ways of thinking” (p. 24). In matter-of-fact talk, Nichols and Berliner liken the highly damaging and counterproductive consequences of high-stakes testing to Campbell’s Law which states that “the more any quantitative social indicator is used for social decision-making, the more subject it will be to corruption pressures and the more apt it will be to distort and corrupt the social processes it was intended to monitor” (p. 27). Nichols and Berliner explain that as the stakes attached to single test scores have greater rewards and sanctions those test scores become highly susceptible to corruption and distortion. They describe a kind of Machivallian under-belly of the high-stakes testing environment, where the ends have justified the means. Teachers, students, and administrators have been drawn into unsavory forms of cheating. The justification for continuing this new high-stakes standards-based accountability is still based on little “valid knowledge” (p. 119). Nichols and Berliner ask: “Why have we created a system that seems to unnecessarily pressure people whom we expect to be moral leaders of our youth?” (p. 56).

As readers of this text try to answer Nichols and Berliner’s central question of *why* the American educational system has been so enticed by this push for higher test scores at all costs, we recognize that these “hurtful and damaging” (p. 119) practices not only prevail but continue to flourish. The authors call for action, debate, and attention to what really matters in public education. Simply put, the authors “worry that the process that is being monitored by these test scores—quality education—is corrupted and distorted simultaneously, rendering the indicator itself less valid, perhaps meaningless” (p. 30). This, as Nichols and Berliner remind us, is the tantalizing deception inherent in Campbell’s Law where high-stakes testing has conditioned

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us to believe we are making a difference. The voices of the teachers represented in *Collateral Damage* describe a pressure filled teaching and learning environment. Teachers are the test purveyors where curricular focus is solely directed to the test. Across America, schools have become overly structured systems void of any curricular activity or subjects that “are not likely to be contributors to test-score growth” (p. 132). Test-preparation has narrowed the curriculum to such an extent that teachers are fearful and suffer consequential effects “when going beyond the confines” of the test (p. 137).

The authors conclude that the negative effects of high-stakes testing have both narrowed and corrupted education as a whole. These researchers appeal to readers to examine our very basic understandings about the purpose of education, assessment, and evaluation. High-stakes tests are powerful measures which on their best day may be limited and narrow indicators of highly local and unstable slices of learning. The assumptions of a high-stakes test include a highly normalized gaze of teaching and learning where any comparison among a population quickly becomes moot within school populations where all is not equal or fair. At the heart of this argument Nichols and Berliner contend that high-stakes testing in its current use and misuse is flawed and that the collateral damage is beyond the awareness of many within the education system. The serious damage that the authors describe here is complex and the forces acting for and against change are both charged within the same socially constructed environment. Nichols and Berliner write this book with the hope and possibility that a spark from their writing will ignite the change to move high-stakes testing from its current flawed state to a fully purpose driven assessment act where *testing* occurs in response to instruction and learning. High-stakes testing has placed education and learning at the juncture of highly irreconcilable differences—where cohabitation is no longer possible—the collateral damage is too great. Dewey (1938) once asked of us to consider the purpose of education; Nichols and Berliner asks us to recognize the collateral damage of high-stakes testing in the wake of the intent of the No Child Left Behind Act.

It seems, Nichols and Berliner, like Dewey (1938), recognize that schooling in America is possibly one of its greatest inventions and today in these shifting and changing times—schooling has lost all possibility and hope. Nichols and Berliner have taken up the cause to tell these many stories from teachers across the nation where high-stakes test scores are being used for ways and means in which they were never normed or intended. (Linn, 2003) Schools are caught in the press to evaluate students on information rather than on knowledge. Most important is the clear message that teachers do, in fact, value and rely on accountability and assessment systems to do their job. Teachers know that their work is much greater than “preparing students for the test.” (p. 124) The consequences and collateral damage outlined in this book paint a distorted portrait of teaching and learning which exists in American public schools. Classrooms in these settings have become test prep centers for a narrow curriculum which is aligned to a highly unstable high-stakes test measure which is closely tied to the individual state standards.

The authors unabashedly pull out all of the unsightly mechanisms of the “carrot and stick” testing agenda developed in the shadows of the NCLB Act. Nichols and Berliner ask simply: “Why has high-stakes testing so easily slipped into contemporary American life?” (p. 18). Arguably, lead politicians and local administrators state that what is tested gets taught. Accountability and assessment along with sound standards are recognized as essential and guiding characteristics of any successful school system. Nichols and Berliner sidestep this confusion and clearly state their support of performance standards, accountability, and democratic assessment. Moreover, what these scholars argue, here, is that they are against high-stakes testing “because teachers, students, parents, and American Education are being hurt by high-stakes testing” (p. 25) and they support their position with such moving renderings that the reader is left to wonder along with Berliner, Nichols and Dewey “What is the purpose of schooling?”

Surely, the seemingly irreconcilable differences between the teaching act and high-stakes tests which have created such a casualty laden chasm in educational settings throughout schools in America have not created outcomes that matter to the education of our students. This story has exposed what good teachers have always known: that a single test score alone cannot act as the sole determiner or judgment of teaching and learning. Nichols and Berliner have shared the stories and lived experiences of those who are closest to the tests—the students, the teachers, the parents, and the administrators. The authors retell the stories of deceit where high-stakes educational decisions have been made based on the premise or belief that it is better to lie or omit details in order to remain in the public favor. Here, as Campbell's Law plays out in distorted school achievement data, all across the nation the effects of high-stakes testing will continue to ensure that these large-scale testing systems comply with the newly mandated order of high-stakes testing and thus become complicit in the rules of the testing game, as set out by the large testing companies. As one reads this “tell it like we see it and hear it” expose of the bureaucracy of schooling it truly is difficult not to ask: Who is in charge? How has the accountability system become so corrupt and meaningless to those it seeks to serve? And, why are we missing the opportunity, possibility, and potential of schooling in America?

Finally, as Noddings so eloquently stated in the Foreword to this book, “Nichols and Berliner have my sincere thanks for making public the harm done by high-stakes testing” (p. xiv). This book stands as a “call to arms” to all—teachers, students, parents, administrators—who still care and hold hope for moving beyond the *Collateral Damage*.

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