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The Impact of High Stakes Testing on School Leadership

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A Former Principal's Conundrum

As I observed and recorded a classroom teacher at the beginning of the spring semester, I remembered how much I enjoyed working with teachers to help them grow and become master teachers. While reflecting on this master teacher's lesson, I pondered how drastically things have changed since I became a school administrator in 2001. I was amazed when the advanced academics teacher mentioned the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) need a source for STAAR on a number of occasions throughout her lesson. The intent of her comments was to bring awareness to these young learners about the upcoming tests.

As I walked around the classroom, I noticed packets of STAAR "*decontextualized test preparation*" (Firestone, Schorr & Monfils, 2004) materials. I was reminded once again of the changes that education has endured in the last 15 years. Having worked with this particular teacher in the past, I felt comfortable approaching her about what I had witnessed, an unusual focus on STAAR in an advanced academics classroom. When I asked her, she explained that her supervisors had given her a class set of STAAR preparation materials to use along with the directive to "block off an hour of the day to go over the STAAR preparation materials".

Not only was I surprised by the teacher's instructional practices, but by the principal's directive to stop instruction of the district's curriculum to go over "*decontextualized test preparation*" (Firestone et al., 2004) materials. The principal who had issued the directive was known and well respected by his colleagues for being an advocate of strong instruction. He was known for believing that if teachers focused on providing students with strong learning opportunities aligned to the curriculum and the students' needs, there was no need to use "*decontextualized test preparation*" materials. The principal was known for saying, "Strong instruction takes care of test scores!"

I left the school disappointed! I was mortified that a principal who had been an advocate of good instruction for over 20 years, and a teacher who worked with advanced students had opted to use "*decontextualized test preparation*" materials in an effort to increase STAAR scores. I was determined to understand and shed some light on the reasoning behind the actions of a principal who issued a directive undermining his own personal and instructional beliefs.

The intent of the study was to shed some light onto the reality of the pressure school principals face under the implementation of high-stakes tests, such as the Texas STAAR. This manuscript provides suggestions for principals and educational leadership programs to tackle the challenges principals face under the current state testing programs.

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Contextual Framework

Having a good teacher is the most important factor in improving student achievement (Weisberg, Sexton, Mulhern, & Keeling, 2009). Research has shown that teacher preparation shares a strong correlation with student achievement (Kaplan & Owings, 2001). Given the significant impact teacher effectiveness and the quality of instruction have on students' success, it is of utmost importance that school leaders ensure every child has the opportunity to receive instruction from excellent teachers. "The difference between a good and a bad teacher can be a full level of achievement in a single school year", (Hanushek as cited in Kaplan & Owings, 2001, p. 67). Although school leaders cannot control the quality of the preparation teachers bring to their schools, they can control the level of support, professional development opportunities, and the supervision they provide for their teachers.

School leaders can be steadfast instructional leaders. Instructional leadership can significantly impact student learning and success (The Wallace Foundation, 2011; Branch, Hanushek, & Rivkin, 2013). If educators are to effectively impact student learning, teachers must receive meaningful feedback from their instructional leaders so they can improve their teaching practices (Darling-Hammond, 2014). Therefore, instructional leadership cannot be overlooked or dismissed as principals deal with the pressure of producing high test scores.

Instructional Leadership

The notion of principals as instructional leaders has gained attention as a result of the growing focus on accountability; however, instructional leadership is not a new phenomenon (Jenkins, 2009). Instructional leadership is the principals' efforts to impact teachers' practices in an attempt to improve student learning. Being instructional leaders is more than completing teacher evaluations when the principals judge the teachers' teaching practices. Instructional leaders spend time in the classrooms supervising and providing meaningful feedback; they use the gathered information to promote reflection and teacher growth. Highly effective instructional leaders have a set of mind frames that impact their actions (Hattie, 2015). Among those mind sets, Hattie (2015) explains that principals who effectively serve as instructional leaders "understand the need to focus on learning and the impact of teaching" (Hattie, 2015, p. 38) and "believe that success and failure in student learning is about what they, as teachers or leaders, did or didn't do. They see themselves as change agents", (Hattie, 2015, p. 38).

"Leadership is second only to classroom instruction among school-related factors that affect student learning", (The Wallace Foundation, 2011, p. 3). However, instructional leadership only begins with the campus principal. The principal has the responsibility to empower teachers and other instructional personnel to become learners and leaders in their schools. Instructional leaders who significantly impact learning create a school culture of learning, where everyone learns, and create teams that work together (Hattie, 2015). Empowering teachers to be leaders within their schools while the principals model effective instructional leadership can have a significant and positive impact on student achievement (Seashore Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom & Anderson, 2010).

High-Stakes Testing

Regardless of the testing discourse principals agree with; the reality is that the public, parents, school boards, and central administrators continue to use high-stakes testing, such as STAAR, to measure schools' effectiveness. The use of standardized tests as a measure of Texas schools' success began back in 1979 when the first assessment program was implemented after the 66th Texas Legislature (Texas Education Agency, 2012). The first administration of the Texas Assessment of Basic Skills (TABS) took place 1980 (Texas Education Agency, 2012); since then the Texas assessment program has undergone a number of revisions. The changes culminated with the development and implementation of the latest assessment program, the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR), which was first administered in 2012. Some argue that the cognitive level of the STAAR tests is higher than any other assessment program in the history of Texas accountability and high-stakes testing. The level of rigor of the STAAR tests has increased the pressure and stress among teachers and educational leaders as they aim to produce high student scores. The demands of the accountability system and the mandates to increase students' academic performance on state tests increase the principals' stress level and add pressure to an already overwhelming job (Sogunro, 2012).

In spite of lacking research to support the use of tests to determine the effectiveness of the education system, "high-stakes testing has become the reform of choice for U.S. public schools" (Jones, Jones and Hargrove, 2003, p. 1). The increasing pressure teachers feel to improve student achievement as measured by high-stakes testing has resulted in a growing trend in classrooms around the nation; teachers feel compelled to teach to the test. Teaching to the test implies teachers are altering instructional practices with the sole purpose of helping students do well on the tests, with no consideration to authentic learning of the subject matter (Firestone et al., 2004; McCollum, 2011). Firestone et al. (2004) have labeled this practice as *decontextualized test preparation*, "the planning and teaching of lessons that are loosely related to the curriculum and mainly focused on the test (page ?)." Researchers advise about the danger of using high-stakes testing as a measure of school effectiveness.

Irrespective of the principals' beliefs regarding testing and test preparation, school administrators face the reality that testing and accountability indisputably impact their jobs. Studies have found that principals can have a positive impact on students' learning and achievement (Coelli & Green, 2012; The Wallace Foundation, 2011; Seashore Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom & Anderson, 2010). However, it is up to each principal to decide how to manage and balance the fundamental responsibilities associated with school accountability, and inevitably high-stakes testing, along with the duties as instructional leaders. Yet, it is unclear how the pressure of producing high scores has impacted principals' leadership and the instructional practices implemented in their schools. It is the purpose of this study to begin to shed light onto this enigma.

Purpose and Significance of the Study

"Numerous studies spanning the past three decades link high-quality leadership with positive school outcomes" (Hornig & Loeb, 2010, p. 66). Instructional leadership has a positive impact on teacher effectiveness and student learning. However, the implementation of STAAR seems to

have taken principals' attention away from instructional leadership. Although an important component of instructional leadership is data-driving instructional decision-making, the intensifying focus on student scores appears to require that campus leaders become data managers. Although advocates of instructional leadership suggest that principals must "free themselves from bureaucratic tasks and focus their efforts toward improving teaching and learning" (Jenkins, 2009, p. 37); the increasing value placed upon test results might be having an opposing effect. In an effort to understand the impact STAAR has on principals' leadership and their efforts toward instructional leadership, a mixed methods study was conducted among Texas principals. The study was driven by two main questions. (1) How has the implementation of STAAR changed your leadership style? (2) How do you believe the implementation of STAAR has impacted the education Texas students are receiving?

The results of the study begin to shed light onto the reality of Texas schools. The issues broached by the participating principals ought to be considered by educational leadership programs when designing principal preparation courses. With the increasing focus on STAAR results, educational leadership programs must ensure aspiring principals are well prepared to handle the pressure and challenges they will face as these principals enter educational administration in an era when the principal's success and the school's effectiveness are largely measured by test scores.

Methodology

A mixed methods study was conducted early in 2015. In a mixed method design, "the combination of quantitative and qualitative methods presents a more enhanced insight into the research problem(s) and question(s) than using one of the methods independently" (Creswell, 2012; Frels & Onwuegbuzie, 2013; Hong & Espelage, 2011, as cited in Caruth, 2013, p. 113). A random group of principals from four large school districts across Texas completed a survey designed to understand the principals' perceptions regarding the impact STAAR testing implementation has had on their leadership, their priorities and education in general. Twenty principals voluntarily participated; the participants' years of experience as campus principals ranged from first-year to veteran principals with over 15 years of experience. Principals were asked to answer questions using a Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree (one), disagree, agree, and strongly agree (four). In addition, an open-ended question was included to give principals the opportunity to share their thoughts about the changes principals have experienced as leaders since the implementation of the latest testing program in Texas: STAAR.

In an effort to validate the survey findings and further delve into the principals' perspectives, follow-up interviews were conducted. Convenience sampling (Creswell, 2013) was used given the availability and willingness of some survey participants to be interviewed. Five experienced principals, with three to fifteen years of principal experience, shared their experiences and thoughts regarding STAAR testing and the impact the implementation of such a rigorous test has had on their leadership. The information gathered through the survey was analyzed using Qualtrics. The open-ended question and interview answers were analyzed in search for patterns among the principals' responses.

Results

The mean scores for survey questions are presented in Table 1. The Likert scale ranged from one representing strongly disagree to four being strongly agree. The questions are presented from the highest mean score, representing the highest degree of agreement with the statement, to the lowest mean score. When reading the questions and the mean scores, it is important to notice that the statement “The pressure of having high STAAR scores has had NO impact on the way I lead” was reverse scored.

Table 1: All Principals - Mean Scores per Survey Question

Survey Question	Mean Score
I feel that the importance given to the STAAR test has damaged the quality of instruction in our classrooms.	3.5
This year, my focus continues to be improving instruction because good instruction will take care of the scores.	3.2
This year, I worried about data and scores more than any other year in my career as a school administrator.	3.2
Because of the pressure I’m under to produce high STAAR scores, I have made decisions that I would not have made in my previous years as a school administrator	3.0
I regularly worry that I might lose my job due to my students’ STAAR scores.	2.8
The pressure of having high STAAR scores has had NO impact on the way I lead.	1.6*

*The statement was reverse scored.

The statement with the highest mean was “I feel that the importance given to the STAAR test has damaged the quality of instruction in our classrooms” with a mean score of 3.5; only one out of the participating principals (n=20) disagreed with the statement and none strongly disagreed. Similarly, a high number of principals indicated that they believe that the pressure of producing high STAAR scores has impacted the way they lead. The statement “The pressure of having high STAAR scores has had NO impact on the way I lead”, which was a reverse score, had a low mean score (1.6) or a reverse mean score of 3.4 with only one principal agreeing with the statement “The pressure of having high STAAR scores has had NO impact on the way I lead”.

Whereas the majority of the principals surveyed believe the implementation of STAAR has damaged the quality of instruction in the classrooms of their district, and the pressure of producing high STAAR scores has impacted principals’ leadership, 18 principals (90 percent) agreed or strongly agreed that by focusing on improving instruction, the scores will take care of themselves, with a mean score of 3.2. Likewise, the statement “In 2014-2015, I worried about data and scores more than any other year in my career as a school administrator” had a mean score of 3.2. Although not as high a mean score, “because of the pressure I’m under to produce high STAAR scores, I have made decisions that I would not have made in my previous years as a school administrator” had a mean of 3.0. Sixty-five percent of principals agreed or strongly agreed that the pressure of producing high STAAR scores impacted principals’ decisions and influenced their actions. On a related issue, 60 percent of the principals indicated they agreed or

strongly agreed with the statement “I regularly worry that I might lose my job due to my students’ STAAR scores,” resulting on a mean of 2.8.

Some of the participating principals provided clarifying statements as they answered the open-ended question, “If your leadership style or your focus as a school administrator has changed since the implementation of STAAR, please explain how.” A principal wrote, “While I am still very instructionally focused, I find myself losing time with students and with teachers while I am looking at data.” Another principal explained the implementation of STAAR has put “Much more pressure on staff to assure that students are successful and much more time trying to figure out how to keep the pressure from ‘killing’ all of us”. A veteran principal answered the open-ended question by stating:

I have the wisdom of experience to know how to appropriately balance the two (the high demands and level of stress with ensuring that my staff utilizes best practices for daily instruction). However, I still feel pressured to drive my teachers, sometimes to the point of exhaustion, just to get better scores. They give up everything, including family time, so they can continue to work with students to produce better scores so our school will not be labeled as a failure. I simply can't ask them to give any more than they are already giving.

The same principal, on her thirteen year as the principal of a large Title 1 school, added:

I feel that I have to constantly work on ensuring that my staff feels confident and supported just so they don't burn out and give up. The joy has been sucked right out of teaching because of the high demands of the test. Accountability is needed and is good. It does force us to work more diligently, but it has reached extreme levels.

Another veteran principal on her eleventh year as a principal simply stated, “One test cannot measure quality teaching and learning.”

In an effort to delve deeper into the principals’ perceptions and in an effort to gain a better understanding of their reasoning behind their agreement with the statements with higher means, interviews were conducted. Patterns were easily identified across the principals’ reflections.

How Testing has Impacted Instruction

The importance of accountability was understood and regarded as an important component of the education system; however, principals considered the disproportionate weight put on the tests as a measure of educational excellence and success damaging to education. A participant in her fourth year as a campus principal said:

STAAR has damaged the quality of instruction by putting too much focus on a single data source instead of a portfolio of learning activities and formative, summative assessments, or other diagnostic tools that can help teachers help students progress. Students, parents and teachers experience undue stress about one test which leads to burn out.

A principal in her seventh year as a principal said “I definitely think the importance given to STAAR has damaged the quality of instruction. The emphasis has become only about getting students to pass.”

Another principal, in her third year as campus principal, explained her thinking regarding the impact STAAR has had on instruction by saying:

The focus on testing and on-going assessment is taking the joy out of learning for the students and the joy out of teaching for the teachers. It is the elephant in the room (when allowed to enter) steps on everything and makes a huge mess in the process.

When asked to further explain why she thought the focus on STAAR has damaged the quality of instruction, the same principal explained:

It seems that when a community focuses on assessment, they use excessive assessment progress monitor. We become obsessed with the ability to mark mastery on each TEKS (the state’s standard) rather than having a deep understanding of the objectives and determining best practices on how to teach the objective for mastery. We force ourselves to believe that we have to use a paper and pencil test to measure growth, when there are so many other alternatives for formative and summative assessments that would achieve the same goal but allow students to express their learning in more creative and individual ways, for example, portfolio's, project's, blogging, visual arts, debate, etc.

The pattern is clear; principals believe the pressure related to STAAR appears to have taken the joy out teaching as a result of the increasing pressure to produce high scores on a one-day assessment, which might not measure all content students have learned and deepened knowledge of over the school year. It is important to notice that none of the participants expressed disagreement with the importance of assessment and accountability, but rather with the disproportionate weight the state assessments carry within the school system.

Instructional Leaders

All interviewed principals expressed their commitment to serving as instructional leaders and shared how these principals managed to balance their duties while monitoring and holding teachers accountable for student achievement. All the principals discussed the value they place on instructional leadership. One explained her efforts by saying:

At the beginning of the year we put our new teachers into groups based on the number of years of experience. Cohort 1 were our new teachers, cohort 2 were in their second year of teaching, and Cohort 3 were our teachers with 3-4 years of teaching experience. We planned out different professional development topics to cover with each of the groups. Some of the weeks cohorts attended the same professional development. However, we knew each group had different needs so we tried our best to meet those needs.

While another principal shared that her administrative team conducted over 1,300 walk-through classroom visits, in an effort to meet the district’s expectations of a weekly minimum number of

walk-throughs, the principal placed the value in the follow-up conversations about teaching and learning her team had with teachers following some of the observations. All the interviewed principals indicated that their efforts to serve as their campus instructional leader were unquestionably impacted by STAAR. They shared that they heavily focused on coaching and supporting STAAR-tested grade levels and content areas, even though they recognize the importance all content areas and grade levels have on the school's success. One of the participants indicated:

We worked with individual teachers and gave constant feedback but the push was in grades 3-5. We did pour extra support into the rooms and had all extra bodies working with small groups and providing tutoring outside the instructional day.

Mrs. White, an interview participant, is a well-respected, successful veteran principal, who was known for producing high test scores while coaching teachers to implement research-based instructional practices. Although still successful and young, Mrs. White decided to retire at the end of the 2014-2015 due to the unreasonable pressure to produce high-scores. She expressed her frustration by stating:

The pressure has reached a level that is driving good teachers and administrators to leave the profession. How will that benefit our students when all they ever have is a teacher who is in their first to fifth year of teaching because teachers burn out after a few years and leave? If we lose all of the veteran teachers and administrators there is no one to help grow the incoming educators. It is all too much. One test should not be the sole identifying factor of a child's education, the determinant of their future, and the sole accountability factor of whether or not a teacher or school is successful.

All principals shared Mrs. White's frustration and concerns about the future of education and educational leadership. They are troubled by the increasing focus on test scores and worry that it will only continue to increase with time.

Recommendations for Current School Leaders

Although there are limitations in this study due to the size of sample population, there is an unquestionable agreement among the participating principals that the implementation of the STAAR tests has negatively impacted their leadership and the instructional practices being implemented in their schools. The influence the tests and the accountability system have on principals and their role as instructional leaders should not be dismissed by current administrators and principal preparation programs. Educational leaders must find a balance between the pressure to produce high scores and their responsibility as instructional experts in charge of building capacity among district teachers. Similarly, educational leadership programs must find ways to address and prepare aspiring principals for the inherent pressure and responsibility related to the STAAR tests and the Texas accountability system.

The principals who participated in this study understand the pressure all campus principals are under to produce high scores. However, the interviewed principals have made it their mission to find ways to work under the pressure of the new accountability system, and continue to promote

good instruction and what is right for children, without succumbing to the innate pressure of high-stakes testing. Some skeptics might say it is easier said than done; however, all the interviewed participants have found a way to establish that balance. Their schools have met or exceeded the state's accountability standards while staying true to their educational and instructional beliefs. Throughout the interviews, the principals shared how they have successfully found a way to balance their roles as principals in an era of accountability. Based on the findings of the study, the recommendations for current school administrators include: 1) establish systems that facilitate data analysis, 2) build principals' and teachers' instructional leadership capacity to enable shared responsibility and leadership, and 3) establish systems to monitor student performance and facilitate targeted instructional interventions.

Recommendation 1.

Principals need to develop systems in which data can be analyzed and used to guide instruction keeping in mind research-based instructional and assessment practices. Principals must build capacity among teachers to develop authentic assessments that measure the students' mastery of the standards without overly relying on multiple-choice test. The analysis of the data should facilitate instructional discourse between teachers and campus administrators with the goal of developing strong instructional plans and targeted interventions. By promoting data-driven decisions that support standards-based instruction, principals can monitor teachers' and students' performance and intervene when appropriately. A well designed data-analysis system allows teachers and administrators to engage in conversations throughout the year to ensure close standards-alignment and student success.

Recommendation 2.

Principals should take their own professional development as seriously as principals take teachers' development. Principals must find ways to build their own capacity to serve as an instructional leader to help teachers understand the importance of standards alignment and the use of research-based instructional practices. As instructional leaders, principals should serve as coaches to their teachers. When visiting classrooms, they should provide meaningful feedback for teachers to develop their instructional skills. Principals must be cognizant that "a teacher's effectiveness (is) the most important factor for schools in improving student achievement", (Weisberg et al., 2009, p. 3), as well as the impact their efforts as instructional leaders have on student learning. "Highly effective principals raise the achievement of a typical student in their schools by between two and seven months of learning in a single school year", (Branch, Hanushek, & Rivkin, 2013, p. 63). Therefore, principals must take their responsibility to develop their teachers' instructional skills seriously. In order to avoid the management of the school getting in the way of instructional leadership, campus leaders ought to develop a schedule to protect their time with teachers.

Instructional leadership goes beyond visiting classrooms and using data to drive instruction. Instructional leaders empower their teachers to be leaders and share the leadership responsibilities. Teacher leaders bring an irreplaceable set of skills that principals should leverage. Principals should not be the only instructional leader on campus; they must rely on teachers' expertise. Instructional leaders ought to empower teachers to lead and help each other.

Principals should establish leadership teams and empower teachers by developing their leadership and instructional skills, involving them in the decision-making process, so that the teacher leaders can in turn empower their colleagues.

Recommendation 3.

In an era of accountability, successful principals must also establish systems to monitor student performance. Not only should principals monitor the performance on assessments but observe students' performance in class and their educational history. It should be the principal's responsibility to oversee the intervention teachers are implementing to help struggling students. Additionally, principals should support teachers when students are struggling, particularly when the teachers are at a loss for what to do to support the students and help them be successful. The responsibility of identifying ways to help struggling students should not be the teachers' sole responsibility; as instructional leader, the principal should support teachers in the effort to close the performance gap of struggling students.

Although the impact of STAAR on the principals' leadership cannot be dismissed, the participating principals have successfully managed the pressure of the test and their role as instructional leaders by implementing the aforementioned recommendations. However, an important detail mentioned by the interviewed principals was the fact that they do not work in isolation. They all work with strong teams on their campuses and are all part of principal professional learning communities in their districts. Whether or not the district provides a structure for collaboration among principals, principals ought to take the initiative to reach out to others and develop collegial relationships among principals to support each other in their quest for educational excellence under the insurmountable amount of pressure to produce high scores.

Recommendations for Educational Leadership Programs

Aspiring principals must enter school administration with an awareness of the realities they will face as school principals. Although educational leadership programs cannot dictate the type of data monitoring a future principal implements, the quality of his/her instructional leadership, or the way he/she monitors student performance, educational leadership instructors ought to help aspiring principals understand the importance of the previously mentioned recommendations. The implications of the impact of STAAR and state accountability have on the job of the principal cannot be overlooked by educational leadership programs. In an effort to begin creating an awareness and develop the required skills to succeed as a principal in the current education system, educational leadership programs should consider the following recommendations.

Educational leadership programs must educate aspiring principals in the current accountability system so they go into their first administrative job with an awareness of the implications the STAAR results have on their job and their schools. Future principals must understand the importance of the accountability system but also understand how to leverage the data received from the state to positively impact student learning and achievement.

While creating an awareness and understanding of the accountability system is critical to the

success of any future principal, educational leadership programs must also develop aspiring principals' instructional leadership skills. Principal preparation programs must develop future educational leaders who understand and are capable of balancing the pressure of producing high test scores with the implementation of research-based instructional strategies, while avoiding the excessive use of the “*decontextualized test preparation*”. Educational leadership programs can develop aspiring principals' skills by providing them with learning opportunities to develop a strong understanding of instructional models proven to prepare students for the future as well as for the tests. Future educational leaders need a strong curriculum and instruction background and it is the principal preparation programs' responsibility to develop such a foundation.

All principal preparation programs in the state of Texas aim to prepare future leaders for the state principal certification exam and the duties of the principalship. However, educational leadership instructors must find a way to prepare aspiring principals for the test while preparing them for the reality of job. We cannot ignore the heavy impact the STAAR test and the accountability system have on the principalship. Therefore, educational leadership programs must prepare principals to serve as instructional leaders. In 2016-2017, teachers and principals across the state of Texas will be evaluated using the new state evaluation systems. The Texas Teacher Evaluation and Support System (T-TESS), and the Texas Principal Evaluation and Support System (T-PESS), will require principals to serve as instructional leaders. The success of the principal as measured on the new evaluation system will not heavily rely to STAAR scores or the accountability system; principals will be evaluated based on personal goal performance as set by the principal and the supervisor. Educational leadership programs must prepare future principals to serve and succeed in an education system valuing both instructional leadership and test scores.

By providing aspiring principals with opportunities to engage in the analysis of scenarios, the analysis of assessment and teacher observation data, educational leadership programs could begin to develop the future leaders' critical thinking and instructional leadership skills. If future leaders are going to be successful campus administrators, they must leave educational leadership programs with a strong understanding of effective instructional practices. Educational leaders must enter the field confident in their abilities to find a balance between the pressure of producing high scores and serving as instructional leaders.

Ultimately, educational leadership programs must find a balance as well. Aspiring principals deserve to be prepared for the principal certification test while experiencing meaningful, relevant learning opportunities that prepare them for educational leadership in an era when principals' and schools' success will be measured by state tests. If educational leadership programs succeed, future educational leaders will successfully balance the pressure of the job under a test-driven accountability system while advocating for children by promoting research-based instructional practices.

Closing Thoughts

Current and aspiring principals must develop their knowledge and skills to effectively find a balance between testing and best practices of curriculum and instruction. Students enter school with a wide range of needs only addressable when teachers and school leaders focus on good instruction and what educators know is good for children. While relying on “*decontextualized*

test preparation” materials might prepare students for the tests, educational leaders have the ethical responsibility to answer the following question: Are we truly preparing students for the future by succumbing to the pressure of the tests and excessively relying on test preparation materials?

In order for principals to grow teachers and help teachers improve instruction, principals must find the balance referenced throughout this work. School accountability has its place in the education system; however, educational leadership programs and current school leaders must find ways to diminish the negative impact the pressure of producing high scores has on principals’ leadership styles and the instructional practices valued and implemented in their classrooms. Educational leadership programs have the responsibility to prepare aspiring principals for the reality of the job so principals do not find themselves asking an advanced academics teacher to stop instruction to practice for a test when the instructional leader strongly believes those practices are not in the students’ best interest. The STAAR tests and the accountability systems are here to stay. Educational leaders must find the way to succeed while continuing to advocate for students, keeping in mind the true reasons for the decision to become educators so many years ago. One would be hard pressed to find an educator who went into teaching to prepare students for a test!

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