Standardized testing has become the accepted means of measuring a school’s quality. However, the associated rise in test-based accountability creates incentives for schools, teachers, and students to manipulate test scores. Illicit behavior may also occur in institutional settings where performance standards are weak. These issues are important because inaccurate measurement of student achievement leads to poor or ineffective policy conclusions. The consequences of mismeasured student achievement for policy conclusions have been documented in many institutional contexts in Europe and North America, and guidelines can be devised for the future.

Manipulation distorts the accuracy of student achievement indicators, calling into question their validity as a tool for evaluating teacher performance and to enforce school accountability policies. Evidence of compromised scores can be obtained using simple indicators, but these rarely reveal (with certainty) who manipulated test scores or the reasons for this behavior. The most compelling evidence on manipulation comes from controlled retesting of students and from random assignment of monitors to classrooms. These procedures should be part of any testing protocol in contexts where manipulation is a serious threat to the fidelity of results.

Note: Data are for 2007 Key Stage 2 assessments, national standardized tests taken by students in the UK when graduating primary school. “Borderlining” involves re-grading tests just below the pass threshold.
Source: Based on Figure 1.