



STANDARDIZED TESTING IN EDUCATION

For years, the focus in education in America was on funding, curriculum content and other resources going *into* the education system. Now, the emphasis is turning toward the *output* of the education system, or more specifically, student learning and achievement. The change in emphasis brings with it the question of how to determine student achievement in a manner that is fair and accurate. That is where testing comes into play.

The history of standardized tests

Standardized tests have been a feature of public schools for decades. Fifty years ago, the tests compared schools and students to a standard set by the testing company. As time progressed, interest grew in testing students for minimum competency in various skills and subject matters. In the eighties, the testing more often became tied to accountability. Never before, however, have tests been administered so frequently or carried as much weight as they do now. Testing abounds, and the stakes attached to it are increasing year after year.

Varieties of standardized tests

In 2000, every state except Iowa administered at least one form of standardized test.¹ The types of testing vary dramatically among the states. Some of the states administer norm-

referenced tests that measure the progress of students against students from across the country. Some states administer criterion-referenced tests that measure student performance against specific content standards. Statewide content standards exist in all states in at least one subject area. They are benchmarks for what students should know and be able to do at each grade level. Some states use both the norm-referenced and criterion-referenced tests or they couple one or the other with tests that require written responses instead of just choosing answers.

Testing in South Dakota

In South Dakota, students take the Stanford Achievement Test, a norm-referenced test, in grades two, four, eight, and eleven. They are tested to assess writing skills in grades five and nine. Beginning in the spring of 2002, students in this state will also take a criterion-referenced test to determine proficiency in meeting state standards in grades three, six, and ten. The tests will be designed by the state and will be administered exclusively over the Internet. The tests have already been administered on a pilot basis to some students in the state. The South Dakota Department of Education and Cultural Affairs contracted with Ed Vision, a computerized testing company in San Diego, to develop and administer the pilot tests. Since every classroom in this

state is wired, South Dakota is one of the first states equipped to offer such a test solely online. It is expected to make distributing, conducting, and scoring the tests much easier.ⁱⁱ

The cost of testing

South Dakota spent just over \$540,000 in FY 2001 on testing. That figure includes the two existing tests required by law and also the money spent on the contract with Ed Vision. A recent survey of education officials in all 50 states revealed that states are collectively spending approximately \$400 million a year on testing. State spending ranged from nothing in Iowa, which has no statewide testing program, to \$44 million in California.ⁱⁱⁱ In addition to the money that states are spending on administering and scoring the tests, they are also spending money to collect and store testing data. If a federally mandated testing program becomes a reality, some states will spend even more.

Whether or not all these tests are worth the money devoted to them, however, is still a matter of debate. To most people, using testing to monitor students' academic progress and to provide them with the help they need makes perfect sense. Using testing for other purposes, however, often leads to controversy, and that is exactly what many states are doing.

High-stakes testing

The tests administered in a lot of the states are "high-stakes"; they carry a lot of consequences. Georgia, for example, passed the A-plus Education Reform Act in 2000 that grades schools from A to F based on student performance on statewide assessments. The schools receive both awards and sanctions

based upon those grades.^{iv} In Florida, the state also assigns letter grades to schools based on their students' performance on prescribed achievement tests. Students in schools that receive failing grades for two out of four years qualify to receive state-financed vouchers to help cover the cost of attending private schools.^v Students in twenty-four states must pass an assessment with a minimum score in order to graduate. In some instances this involves taking a single "exit exam" and for others it involves passing a series of "end of course" tests.^{vi}

Support for high-stakes testing

Currently, support for such testing can be found in most places where public policy is made, including the White House, halls of Congress, governors' offices, and state legislatures. Proponents believe that the testing creates incentives for students, schools, and school districts to focus on student achievement and continuous progress. They feel the tests lead to changes in the curriculum that improves the education system overall. President Bush's plan calls for annual testing of students in grades three through eight in both reading and math. It is based on the testing system that is currently in place in Texas, a state that has devoted considerable resources to testing its students over the last few years. The President says his plan will augment the testing programs already in place across the country and make sure that teachers are being held to local standards. He feels his testing regimen will most benefit low-income and minority students who have often been failed by public schools.^{vii}

Resistance to high-stakes testing

Not everyone, however, agrees with the Bush plan or with the concept of high-stakes testing in general. Resistance to such proposals is scattered, but often quite vocal. Detractors have a long list of reasons why annual testing is not such a good idea. Whether or not the states will receive adequate federal funding remains in doubt as the President's plan works its way through the Congress. Therefore, education officials in a lot of states wonder from where the money will come to pay for the testing. Only 15 states are currently testing at the level called for in the Bush plan, so the other states would experience cost increases.

In addition, some question the need for a federally mandated testing program when the states have already spent a lot of time and resources on their own individual testing programs. They also say that drawing comparisons among the states will be difficult at best in light of the fact that each state has found a different way to define what it means for students or schools to succeed and uses different indicators to determine that success.

Furthermore, a lot of opponents think that so much testing creates undue pressure on the students as well as the teachers and administrators who are judged on test outcomes. There is also some concern that teachers have begun "teaching to the test" rather than focusing on a broad curriculum that will best serve the students in the long term. Members of the National Education Association at their annual meeting recently voiced this concern, in particular. While they are not opposed to standardized testing across the board, they are concerned about tests they say carry too much weight. They fear that

high-stakes testing stifles creativity in teaching and uses time and resources that could be put to better use. The group has gone so far as to endorse parental opt-out laws that, if enacted, would allow parents to exempt their children from the testing requirements.^{viii}

Opposition in the states

A political backlash has already arisen in several of the states that have a high stakes testing program in place. In states such as California, Massachusetts, Michigan, and Ohio, grassroots opposition campaigns urging parents to keep their children home on test days are in full swing.^{ix} Parents in Massachusetts are angry because many children who earn passing grades are failing tests that will soon be used to determine whether or not students can graduate. In other instances, disabled students and minority students are finding the tests too big a hurdle to overcome, and their specific needs are not being addressed. Several states are also facing lawsuits. Civil rights groups contend that schools in poor neighborhoods are slow to implement the curriculum and staff development necessary to teach children what they need to know to receive passing scores on proficiency exams. Thus, the students who go to those schools are receiving low scores through no fault of their own.

The opposition campaigns in some areas of the country have succeeded, at least temporarily. In Ohio, for example, a new law overhauls the state's proficiency testing. The law limits the tests' use in determining whether students will be promoted to the next grade or earn a high school diploma.^x Other states are attaching stakes to their testing a little slower than they had originally planned or they are providing

increased opportunities for students to retake the exams on which they receive low scores. California, for example, administered the state's first high school exit exam on a trial basis this year. Among those who took the exam, less than 45 percent received a passing score in both mathematics and reading. Receiving passing scores on the exam will be a requirement for high school graduation there, but not until 2004.^{xi}

Combining testing with other indicators

While test scores are clearly an indication of how a school or school district is performing, they perhaps do not tell the whole story. That is why some states are using a variety of indicators to rank or categorize schools. A few states use complex formulas to determine performance, while others rely on a simple set of indicators. The states look at such statistics as the dropout rates, graduation rates, and the numbers of graduates who pursue higher education. They also examine student-teacher ratios, teacher qualifications, the safety records of schools, and how their money is spent. In that way, testing is still a significant factor in holding schools accountable, but it is not the only measure.^{xii}

The National Parent-Teacher Association also takes the position that testing is only one facet of a strong system of education accountability.^{xiii} The group favors testing when it is used to enhance teacher instruction and learning and to provide parents with insight into the academic progress of their children. However, the PTA opposes it when it is mandated by the federal government or used to compare states or even school districts within a state. Members of the organization feel strongly that local control is an important component of any worthwhile testing program.

Conclusion

Despite the public's enthusiasm for holding schools and students accountable for student learning and achievement, the recent surge in high-stakes testing is raising questions and concerns. As more tests are administered and more tests start to carry consequences, the dialog is certain to continue. In the meantime, policymakers will likely keep searching for the best way to measure student performance and for the best ways to put that measure to use. It is a difficult challenge.

ⁱ Shelby Samuelsen and Julie Bell, "Education Program: Accountability Reform," National Conference of State Legislatures; available to members of NCSL registered to use the NCSL web site at <http://www.ncsl.org/programs/educ/StandAcc.htm>; accessed June 14, 2001.

ⁱⁱ Michelle Galley, "South Dakota Aims To Put Online Assessment to the Test," *Education Week*, March 7, 2001; available at <http://www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=25sd.h20&keywords=online%20assessment>; accessed June 14, 2001.

ⁱⁱⁱ Tiffany Danitz, "SPECIAL REPORT: States Pay \$400 Million For Tests In 2001," *Stateline.org*, February 27, 2001; available at <http://stateline.org/story.cfm?StoryID=116627>; accessed June 14, 2001.

^{iv} Shelby Samuelsen and Julie Bell, "Education Program: Accountability Reform," National Conference of State Legislatures; available to members of NCSL registered to use the NCSL web site at <http://www.ncsl.org/programs/educ/StandAcc.htm>; accessed June 14, 2001.

^v Jessica L. Sandham, "Study Finds 'Voucher Effect' In Fla. Test Gains," *Education Week*, February 21, 2001; available at <http://www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=23florida.h20>; accessed June 14, 2001.

^{vi} "States Conducting Student Competency Testing for High School Graduation," *ECS StateNotes: Assessment & Secondary Education*, August 2000, Education Commission of the States; available at <http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/15/52/1552.htm>; accessed June 14, 2001.

^{vii} Jodi Wilgoren, "State School Chiefs Fret Over U.S. Plan to Require Testing," *The New York Times*, July 17, 2001; available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/07/17/national/17EDUC.html>; accessed July 18, 2001.

^{viii} Julie Blair and Jeff Archer, "NEA Members Denounce High-Stakes Testing," *Education Week*, July 11, 2001; available at http://www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=42neatest_web.h20; accessed July 30, 2001.

^{ix} Issues Index—Accountability," *Education Week*, July 26, 2001; available at <http://www.edweek.org/context/topics/issuespage.cfm?id=49>; accessed July 27, 2001.

^x "Ohio Changes Testing Focus," *Cincinnati Enquirer*, June 14, 2001; available from the Education Commission of the States e-Clips web site at <http://www.ecs.org/ecs/e-clips>; accessed June 14, 2001.

^{xi} Kathleen Kennedy Manzo, "More Than Half of California 9th Graders Flunk Exit Exam," *Education Week*; June 20, 2001; available at <http://www.edweek.org/ew/ewstory.cfm?slug=41calif.h20&keywords=testing>; accessed July 30, 2001.

^{xii} "Performance-Based Accountability: Public Rankings, Profiles or Categorization of Schools/Districts-State Policies," *ECS StateNotes: Accountability-Rewards/Sanctions*, Education Commission of the States, December 1999; available at <http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/13/86/1386.htm>; accessed August 2, 2001.

^{xiii} Carolyn Henrich, "National PTA Background Brief: Testing," National Parent-Teacher Association, January 2001; available at <http://www.pta.org/programs/bbtesting.htm>; accessed August 6, 2001.

This issue memorandum was written by Clare Cholik, Senior Research Analyst and Legislative Librarian for the Legislative Research Council. It is designed to supply background information on the subject and is not a policy statement made by the Legislative Research Council.
