

should parallel what standards dictate be learned and, simultaneously, should prepare students for their annual achievement tests, which ideally should be aimed at higher-order skills instead of at de-contextualized, isolated, discrete knowledge (Shepard). In the case of alignment, no explicit teaching to the test would be necessary other than basic preparation to familiarize students with the test format and structure; in fact, quality classroom instruction would, in and of itself, serve as teaching to the state achievement test. If the standards and curricula are well-written, challenging, and comprehensive, then all the ingredients are in place for effective public-school accountability, complete with high standards, well-constructed assessments, and daily classroom experiences. In this way, adopting “tests worth teaching to” lends itself to teaching to the test that encourages a focus on those standards-backed skills that society wants students to learn (Kober, “Teaching”).

Such standards-curriculum-assessment alignment must have as its base quality classroom-level instruction. As testing experts emphasize, “There is a need to make the teaching and learning process an integral part of standards-based reform and to recognize that testing should be in the service, rather than in control, of this process” (Clarke et al.). That is, let a strong locally developed curriculum and effective classroom teaching determine what is tested rather than permitting state-imposed tests to determine what is covered in the classroom.

Once alignment is assured, educational interest groups offer several specific recommendations for building testing policies that foster, not impede, learning. For one thing, teachers cannot allow tests to dominate the entire classroom experience; it is not fair for students to spend their entire classroom experience preparing for and taking tests, for tests and test-prep activities tend to include only rote, unimaginative, individual tasks. As discovered in an aforementioned study, test-focused teaching can beget declining interest in school, heightened anxiety, frustration for struggling students, and, consequentially, higher high-school dropout rates (Clarke et al.). Teachers, not tests, can create fun, hands-on, group-oriented classroom activities that are applicable to students’ lives outside of school.

States also would be well-advised to measure students’ academic progress or improvement in achievement over time as opposed to their level of absolute achievement: Kentucky and Tennessee, for example, “focus on student progress rather than their absolute level of performance in order to ensure that everyone is learning more, the best students as well as the worst.” That is, over several years of testing, set standards for how much schools should be improving over previous years’ scores rather than designating an absolute level of achievement that schools should meet. The advantage of such an approach lies in its recognition of “the different starting points of poor and affluent students” and in its acknowledgement that “some teachers

begin with low-performing students and teach in difficult conditions, including high student mobility.” Such a policy structure also “draws attention to the quality of teaching,” because test results will be used to reward those educators whose students show increasing achievement, regardless of their students’ starting points. However, there is a potential drawback to the absence of absolute standards: disadvantaged students might be held to a different and lower standard of absolute achievement than other students, thus creating a two-tiered set of academic goals. Should policymakers be satisfied when poor students meet a standard that marks an increase in achievement over time but that is still inferior to other students’ achievement? Most would respond negatively, and therefore a secondary, long-term goal should be that all students end up achieving at a high level, to be pursued after the primary goal that all students enjoy increasing achievement has been met—in the language of educational policy, the plan is to realize adequacy in achievement first, to be followed by equity. A preliminary focus on improvement abrogates the need to set an absolute standard of student achievement and thus circumvents the debate between administering low-standards tests that most students can pass without having learned much (à la the minimum-competency tests of the 1970s) and making use of high-standards tests that entail sophisticated skills and that many students, especially socio-economically disadvantaged ones, will fail (Hochschild and Scovronick 101).

Along these lines, states should make an effort to get all students—including inner-city children, non-native speakers, and disabled students—prepared to meet or exceed standards. Schools should first teach all students well—with good resources, effective teachers, and sufficient time to learn—and only then test them. A delay in administration of tests until schools are given the opportunity to modify their practices in accordance with standards would be especially beneficial for disadvantaged students, who, unlike their well-off counterparts, might fail without reformed classroom instruction. Although generally advocates of the standards movement as a means of improving education and making schools more accountable and proponents of testing as a “way to measure the impact of reform,” Hochschild and Scovronick note that students “cannot learn without adequate resources, sufficient time, appropriate curricula, and good instructors. Once these things are available, students can justifiably be punished or rewarded” based on their performance on a statewide standards-based test. Until all students enjoy access to appropriate resources and good teachers, poor students will continue to fail standardized tests at a higher rate than rich students, and thus the tests scores will serve to reinforce the SES and racial gaps in achievement, punishing poverty and rewarding privilege” (Hochschild and Scovronick 199-200). Richard Kahlenberg of the Century Foundation is more critical of the adoption of a “common core of standards and expectations for all

schools,” but he voices a similar criticism to Hochschild and Scovronick’s, claiming that the standards movement “will spawn high-stakes assessments...without providing the poor with a means, to pass, in which case large numbers of poor and minority children will simply fail” (Kahlenberg 78). All three authors thus call for a more equitable distribution of educational resources before assessment can be used for all students, rich and poor, white and non-white; without an even allocation of resources, the tests will not be fair for underprivileged pupils, who are more likely to fail due to their inferior schools, resources, teachers, and classmates. In this spirit of inclusion and unity, schools must also provide appropriate accommodations for English-language learners and disabled students so that they, too, can be included in the test (Langenfeld et al.). Special-needs students’ inclusion will mean that school averages accurately reflect the achievement of a school’s entire student body, and their individual scores will provide information on how these special-education pupils are progressing—just as test scores help illustrate traditional-classroom students’ progress.

The state must do more than simply set appropriately challenging standards; it must also take action to help schools educate their students well enough to meet those standards. Such action is predominantly financial, as states usually must increase school expenditures in order to facilitate achievement up to standards; this is especially true in the case of inner-city schools that are responsible for the education of many students who are most at risk of failing the tests. Thus, after the standards are set, the states must “provide the means to meet expectations” (Lewis). Besides targeted funding reforms, states are advised to complement the administration of tests with an informational campaign aimed at teachers, students, and parents in order to communicate what the tests are, when they will be administered, why they are being used, what the standards and goals are, what the results will be used for, and how students can best be prepared for test success. Finally, on top of financial support and publicity, more substantive preparation on the part of the tests should include professional development programs for school staff, “curriculum frameworks” that facilitate high scores, pre-tests, and other preparatory materials (Darling-Hammond). Without such comprehensive preparation for teachers, administrators, parents, and students, the state would merely be setting lofty standards that some schools may fail right off the bat, without any chance to succeed. With the states taking the lead in providing the means for preparing pupils for success, all schools and students can gradually be brought up to standards, and in turn standards can be increased, giving schools even loftier goals for which to shoot.

After the Assessment: Recommendations for the Usage of Test Scores

Once states have reformed their test design and administration procedures, experts believe that much can be learned from assessment without excessively interfering with students’ classroom experiences. The next logical question, then, would ask how results of these reformed tests ought to be used. With regard to the assessment of schools as collective bodies, schools should avoid using test results to make high-stakes funding decisions, nor should they view the introduction of a testing program as an effective measure to improve schools; instead, assessments should be carried out mainly for research purposes—specifically, to see where reform is needed and which reforms work. The implementation of an assessment package, educational policymakers must keep in mind, is not a reform by itself; testing is, rather, a way to gather information about the effects of reform, with test results often providing the impetus needed before policymakers are willing to enact costly but effective school reforms (Linn). Federal officials behind the NCLB Act seem to understand this key point. Extolling the virtues of standardized assessment, U.S. Education Secretary Roderick R. Paige certified that “tests provide irrefutable data about which kids are learning what” (Fletcher). Similarly, “Testing provides information” is a recurrent catchphrase on the official NCLB website (“No Child” [a]). It is thus at the state level that testing programs are too often employed as the be-all and end-all of educational reform, leading one Manhattan parent, frustrated with the heavy emphasis placed on the passage of the New York Regents Exams, to remind the governor that “a test is a measure; it is not a reform” (Fletcher).

If states do insist on invoking test scores in funds distribution, officials should be careful not to use scores to punish low-achieving schools but rather to identify such schools as facilities in need of additional achievement-promoting resources; at the same time, there should exist modest incentives to take the tests seriously—that is, rewards for high-scoring schools. However, it is essential that rewards for successful schools do not come at the expense of struggling schools; a “reverse Robin Hood” policy, whereby schools in need of improvement lose funds to those already performing well, surely will not raise the achievement of students in schools whose funding is cut. In general, then, an ideal, albeit expensive, way to use test scores for school-evaluative purposes would be to reward high-scoring schools with additional funding and positive publicity but also to assist problem schools with supplementary funding, more experienced teachers, administrative overhauls, curricular reforms, and other changes necessary to remedy the schools’ problems. The key here is to assist failing schools rather than simply subscribing to the NCLB motto that warns, “Failure will be sanctioned” (Lutton).

When tests are used for comparison and ranking purposes, their results

should not be used “to compare teachers and schools unless student demographics and schools resources are equated and the latter are adequate to produce high student performance” (Clarke et al.). Comparisons are only meaningful when apples are compared with fellow apples—not with other types of fruits that are inherently unequal to apples.

Regarding assessment of individual student achievement, states must be sure to rely on more than just standardized test scores as a measure of student worth that is considered when making high-stakes decisions about students' educational status; tests should be one of multiple relevant factors considered in making tracking, promotion, and graduation decisions. In addition to objective test scores, other illustrative measures of student performance include teachers' and parents' recommendations and grades—all of which are more subjective than test scores (Linn).

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