

## AN IMPENDING AVALANCHE OF ACHIEVEMENT TESTING

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American educators will soon find themselves inundated by a profusion of state-level achievement tests soon to be spawned by the recently enacted *No Child Left Behind Act*. Signed into law by President Bush in January, this significant new federal statute calls for a dramatic expansion of state-level achievement testing in math and reading at grades 3-8. Such increased assessments, if appropriate, could help our nation's children learn what they ought to be learning. It is more likely, however, that this enlargement of statewide achievement testing will only heighten the harmful effects that most of today's state-level achievement tests are having on children.

### Crucial Months Ahead

Whether the new, federally mandated achievement tests, turn out to have a positive or negative impact on a given state's students will depend almost totally on the types of tests that a state's educational decision-makers choose to install. If traditionally constructed achievement tests are used—tests akin to those now widely employed—then we will surely witness a continued test-triggered erosion of educational quality. In contrast, if more suitable state-level achievement tests are installed, then their impact on instruction could be quite positive.

Even now, as a state's educational leaders are awaiting the issuance of federal guidance regarding how to implement the *No Child Left Behind Act*, preliminary decisions are apt to be made regarding what sorts of achievement tests should be adopted. Those early-on decisions will typically have a powerful influence on the kinds of statewide achievement tests ultimately employed.

It is absolutely *urgent*, therefore, that all relevant stakeholders immediately let their state's educational leaders know that the new achievement tests should be designed so they have a positive impact on schooling. Federal regulations and guidelines for the new law are scheduled to be released later this year—in late summer or early fall. But, because the new tests must be up and running by the 2005-2006 school year, it is apparent that a state's education officials must soon get cracking about what sorts of assessments they should adopt to satisfy the new law's requirements. The next few months are critical. Will state policymakers opt for the same-old, same-old achievement tests, or will tests be chosen that truly support instruction?

### Harmful Tests

Currently, statewide achievement tests are administered annually in almost every state, typically at several grade levels. Students' performances on these tests often play a prominent role in evaluating the effectiveness of educators at both the district and school levels. Newspaper rankings of school-by-school scores on these achievement

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tests, for example, are used by citizens to determine which schools are wonderful and which schools are woeful.

Moreover, students' test performances in many states can also have serious consequences for individual students (such as the denial of a high school diploma or grade-to-grade retention). It should be apparent, then, that statewide achievement tests are important assessment instruments. Is it any wonder that such assessments are often referred to as "high-stakes tests?" Yet, these high-stakes assessment instruments are typically having a decisively *negative* impact on the quality of schooling provided to a state's students.

First off, there is rampant *curricular reductionism* wherein teachers tend to reduce the instructional attention they give to any skills or knowledge not assessed on a statewide achievement test. Curricular content not addressed on a statewide achievement test is curricular content apt to be given short shrift in the state's classrooms.

Because educators are under such pressure to boost their students' scores on accountability tests, many teachers steer clear of any curricular content that's not likely to contribute to the needed score-boosting. Yet, a curricularly short-changed student is a miseducated student. And today's state-level achievement tests are triggering the kind of curricular construction that miseducates massive numbers of our nation's children.

A second harmful consequence of today's statewide accountability tests is that they foster *excessive test-focused drilling*. Many teachers these days are being pushed so hard to raise their students' scores on statewide accountability tests that their classrooms have been transformed into drill-dominated, test-preparation factories.

Most teachers, of course, are familiar with the research evidence showing if teachers provide their students with ample "time-on-task" practice (on tasks similar to those found on a test), students' scores will rise. There is, however, no evidence to support the instructional payoff of "eternity-on-task!" And that's what many students feel they've been put through after enduring seemingly endless hours of test-preparation drills. Such drilling, of course, can stamp out the joy that students ought to be deriving from learning. Education can be, and often should be, genuinely exciting. But the only excitement in a drill-dominated classroom takes place when the end-of-period buzzer goes off.

Finally, a third harmful impact of today's statewide accountability tests is that they often lead to two forms of *outright dishonesty* on the part of accountability-pressured teachers. Some teachers, thankfully not all that many yet, have seriously bent prescribed test-administration rules so that their students will score better. Students get more than the stipulated test-completion time. Students are given on-the-spot suggestions by a room-roving teacher to "re-think" incorrect answers. Even more blatantly, some teachers have actually been apprehended in the midst of giving

students, prior to a high-stakes test, a list of per-item correct answers. If we truly want our teachers to function *in loco parentis*, how can we permit these proxy parents to be modeling dishonesty for our children?

Equally serious is the sort of unethical test-preparation that some teachers provide to their students before the administration of a statewide achievement test. Students are provided with practice items that are nearly identical (or, in some cases, *are* identical) to the actual items on the statewide test. Then, later, when students take the actual test and encounter such already practiced items, students realize that they have been made unwilling conspirators in a teacher-contrived fraud. After such an experience, how will students be apt to regard their teachers in the future? Dishonesty breeds dishonesty, on either side of the teacher's desk.

In sum, statewide accountability tests, although often installed with the best of intentions, are having at least the three negative consequences identified here, namely, curricular reductionism, excessive test-focused drilling, and the modeling of dishonesty. Clearly, such tests are harming, not helping education.

### **Permanent Tests**

But statewide accountability tests are not going to go away. Indeed, even if the *No Child Left Behind Act* had never made it to the President's desk, there would still be accountability tests almost everywhere in the U.S. And that's because our nation's citizens, and the policymakers who represent them, have lost confidence in our public schools. The only way that this widespread erosion in public confidence can be turned around is with *evidence*, lots of it, that American schools are truly worth the tax dollars we pour into them.

We do not have statewide accountability tests because educators yearned for them. On the contrary, educational accountability tests were installed by skeptical policymakers who, often over heated protests from the education profession, wanted the nation's educators to supply some solid test-based proof that our public schools were working. Today, therefore, no amount of rhetoric from educators, however persuasive, is going to substitute for test-based evidence that our schools are successful. All this would be true even *without* a new federal law calling for the marked expansion of statewide achievement testing.

Anyone arguing for the abolition of high-stakes accountability tests these days might as well be whistling into a hurricane. Statewide accountability tests—in ever greater numbers—are here to stay.

### **What's to be Done?**

All right, I've argued that today's statewide accountability tests are diminishing educational quality, but that statewide accountability tests are not going to disappear in the foreseeable future. That sounds like a pretty gloomy prophecy. But there's a

solution-strategy that we can employ. We simply need to use more *appropriate* state-level achievement tests.

The reason that we see today's state-level tests having such an adverse impact on American education is that those tests are not suitable for the evaluation of educational quality. And yet, of course, the evaluation of educational quality is the cornerstone of any state-level accountability system.

Today's achievement tests have been constructed according to a traditional measurement model that's focused on providing comparative interpretations of examinees' test performances. In order to create the amount of score spread necessary to yield meaningful comparisons, based on the modest time available for such testing, a traditional test's items need to do a super job in spreading out students' scores. Many of the items in today's state-level achievement tests, because of the overpowering need for score-spread, are linked directly to students' socioeconomic status (SES) or to students' inherited academic aptitudes (such as children's innate verbal, quantitative, and spatial potentials). SES-linked items and inheritance-linked items do a good job in spreading out students' scores. *But such items assess what students bring to school, not what they learn there.*

Traditional achievement tests do have an important measurement mission, namely, to allow both teachers and parents to see how a student's performance compares to that of other students in a normative group. That's useful information. But such comparative information is *not* suitable for the evaluation of schools.

Statewide achievement tests need not be built according to a traditional, comparison-focused measurement model. It is possible to create *instructionally supportive* accountability tests that not only supply accurate, credible evidence regarding the educational effectiveness of our schools, but also help teachers do a better job of instructing their students.

The nature of such dual-purpose tests is described in a pair of reports recently issued by the Commission on Instructionally Supportive Assessment.\* This independent commission's reports are available online. I hope you read them. Those reports offer a way out of what seems to be an insoluble dilemma. As both Commission reports make clear, state-level, high-stakes achievement tests *can* be constructed so they provide solid accountability evidence, yet are also instructionally supportive.

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\* The Commission on Instructionally Supportive Assessment. (1) *Building Tests That Support Instruction and Accountability: A Guide for Policymakers*; (2) *Illustrative Language for an RFP to Build Tests That Support Instruction and Accountability*. Washington, DC: Author, 2001. The Commission on Instructionally Supportive Assessment was convened by the American Association of School Administrators, the National Association of Elementary School Principals, the National Association of Secondary School Principals, the National Education Association, and the National Middle School Association. It's reports are available online at [www.aasa.org](http://www.aasa.org), [www.naesp.org](http://www.naesp.org), [www.principals.org](http://www.principals.org), [www.nea.org](http://www.nea.org), [www.nmsa.org](http://www.nmsa.org).

During the approaching months, when state-level decision-makers are determining how to best satisfy the brand new federal assessment requirements, we have a marvelous opportunity to modify our outmoded measurement approaches and turn, instead, to the creation of statewide achievement tests that can benefit our students.

If it turns out that tomorrow's avalanche of statewide achievement tests are the same as today's statewide achievement tests, then we will surely have muffed it.