

ATTRIBUTES OF CURRICULAR TARGETS FOR NCLB TESTS

Seven attributes of such curricular targets (skills or knowledge, but typically *skills* that subsume students' possession of previously mastered enabling knowledge) are listed below:

Significance. Each skill to be assessed should be an important, powerful skill needed by students both in school and, ideally, in life after school. If a skill is not genuinely significant, it should not be one of the skills eligible to be assessed on a state's NCLB tests.

Perceived Significance. Each skill to be assessed by a state's NCLB tests should be seen by citizens and parents as patently important for children to master. If an instructionally supportive accountability test is destined to assess fewer curricular targets, those targets must be regarded by the world as patently important for children to learn. This is a public-relations imperative.

Teachability. Every skill assessed by a state's NCLB tests must be capable of being successfully taught by a state's teachers (that is, typical teachers, not pedagogical superstars) to their students. In other words, as the nature of each of these assessed skills is initially conceptualized, there must be the clear possibility for the state's teachers to provide instruction that will allow students to master that skill.

Describability. It must be possible to describe the nature of every skill to be assessed on a state's NCLB tests in such a way that teachers will be able to gain an understanding of the nature of each skill their students must master. These "assessment descriptions" must be written so that they are both clear and concise. Such teacher-palatable descriptions of what's to be assessed will prove instructionally invaluable to busy teachers as they devise and implement suitable skill-relevant instructional activities for their students.

Reportability. Sufficient items or tasks must be included in NCLB tests so that it is possible to determine whether each student has mastered each skill assessed. Teachers should receive per-skill mastery reports for each of the classes they teach. Teachers, therefore, will be able to discern from students' reported test performances which skills were well-taught and which skills were not, thus making it possible for those teachers to ameliorate less-than-lustrous instruction. Individual students' skill-mastery reports should also be made available to students and to their parents. The public at large, based on school-aggregated results, should also be apprised of the extent to which all assessed skills have been mastered by each school's students. In most instances, this kind of skill-focused reporting will require that a test contain 7-10 items per-skill rather than 2 or 3 items per-skill---as is often the case currently.

Manageability. It is imperative that there not be so many NCLB assessment targets that a state's teachers will become overwhelmed by the raw numbers of those targets. Thus, for each grade there might be more like 5-10 skills (per subject assessed) that are eligible for assessment rather than 30-40. It will be important to involve teachers in providing reactions to the number of potentially assessable skills on any NCLB test. Indeed, groups of a state's teachers should be interacting continuously with test's developers during the time that instructionally supportive NCLB tests are being devised. If teachers are overwhelmed by any aspect of a state's NCLB assessment program, that program will almost certainly founder.

Across-Grade Articulation. Given the NCLB requirement that NCLB tests must be installed at grades 3 through 8 and once in high school, this presents a marvelous opportunity to identify a small number of grade-appropriate curricular targets across an entire span of grades. If modest numbers of important curricular targets are to be assessed, it is all the more important to make sure that the progression of students' skill-mastery proceeds sensibly from grade to grade.

W. James Popham (March 2004)