

## PRESSURED TO MAKE PROGRESS

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Forced by the fearsome accountability provisions in a new federal education law, American teachers must now cope with unprecedented pressure to boost their students' test scores. This pressure arises because, according to the requirements of the *No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)*, schools that fail to demonstrate "adequate yearly progress" (AYP) will initially be labeled as losers and then, later on, face a series of increasingly stringent negative sanctions.

### An Ambitious Aspiration

The *progress* that's supposed to be made is tied directly to students' improved test performances. And the tests employed to assess such progress must measure students' mastery of the skills and knowledge embodied in a state's curriculum (that is, its officially approved *content standards*). However, the new law calls for fully *100 percent* of a state's students to display test-based "proficiency" in 12 years or less. Moreover, the movement of a state's schools toward that praiseworthy, albeit ambitious, target is to take place in several two-year or three-year AYP leaps that must, by federal law, be *equal!* Clearly, the test-measured progress that must be made by any school's staff to attain these equal-size intervals must be substantial.

So, in a nutshell, unless a state's educators promote students' *sizeable* improvements on a state's accountability tests, scads of those educators are going to be regarded as instructional failures.

And yet, largely because of widespread *assessment illiteracy* among most state-level educational policymakers, many state officials plan to employ accountability tests that are inherently *insensitive* to detecting educational progress even if such progress were actually taking place. Thus, because insensitive tests will typically be used to gauge educators' instructional progress, a state's educators might as well start lining up right now to receive their annual dunce-cap designations.

It is a *lose-lose* game, both for teachers and for school administrators. But, more importantly, because of the pressures on educators to raise test scores at all costs, these new AYP requirements are apt to incline many teachers to distort their classroom instructional practices merely to raise scores on tests—tests that, by their very nature, defy legitimate score-raising. As a consequence, the real "losers" in this no-win accountability extravaganza will be a state's badly taught students.

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\* A version of this essay appeared in the September 2002 issue of *Education Assessment Insider*, Vol. 1, No. 6, pp. 5-12.

## Traditional Achievement Tests

Many states, in their efforts to satisfy the *NCLB* law, appear headed toward the use either of (1) off-the-shelf nationally standardized achievement tests or (2) a “standards-based” test ostensibly measuring students’ mastery of the skills and knowledge set forth in a state’s content standards. Typically, both kinds of tests are constructed according to a traditional (norm-referenced) measurement model wherein one test-taker’s performance is compared to the performances of previous test-takers who constitute the test’s norm-group. Unfortunately, because a traditional measurement model requires considerable spread in students’ test scores, many of the items employed essentially transform traditional achievement tests into measures of students’ socioeconomic status rather than measures of what has been taught in school.\*

And even most of today’s so-called “standards-based” tests fail to do a truly satisfactory job of assessing students’ mastery of a state’s content standards. To make matters worse, results of those tests are reported in a general, often amorphous manner that’s altogether unsuitable for teachers to tell what they’re taught well and what they’re taught badly. Most of the nation’s current standards-based tests, in my view, should be sent to the shredder.

## Appropriate Tests

The solution to this serious educational problem is deceptively simple. All we have to do is *use the right kinds of tests*. It is eminently possible to build large-scale tests that can simultaneously provide accurate accountability evidence, yet also supply meaningful instructional support for a state’s educators. The nature of such tests is described in a readily accessible October 2001 report of the Commission on Instructionally Supportive Assessment.\* Those Commission-endorsed tests are completely in accord with the provisions of the new *NCLB* law, yet can provide rigorous accountability data while still enhancing the instructional process.

Illustrative of the kinds of large-scale tests that this Commission endorses are the writing samples so widely used these days in the U.S. to assess students’ composition skills. Those tests accurately assess a student’s writing skills, yet do so in a manner that leads to improved classroom instruction. Commission-endorsed tests contain either constructed-response tasks (as in a writing sample) or selected-response tasks (as in multiple-choice items). If a state’s education officials want such tests, those kinds of tests can be built by the same firms that now provide only traditional, comparison-focused assessments.

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\* For a more complete explanation of this issue, see Popham, W. James, *The Truth About Testing: An Educator’s Call to Action*, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, Alexandria, Virginia, 2001.

\* Commission on Instructionally Supportive Assessment. *Building Tests That Support Instruction and Accountability: A Guide for Policymakers*. Washington, DC: Author, 2001. 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).

## **Pressure's Payoffs**

Pressure can be a good thing, especially if there's a constructive way of responding to it. Fortunately, there is a way to respond constructively to the AYP pressures of *NCLB*. But, unless a truly constructive assessment approach is adopted by a state's educational policymakers, then that state's educators will be unfairly vilified at the same time that its students are being educationally harmed. We must abandon traditionally constructed tests and use, instead, the kinds of tests that will help teachers and students.