

## STUDENTS—AND SCHOOL BOARDS—AT RISK\*

W. James Popham

University California, Los Angeles

Several significant assessment-related requirements of the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLBA) are likely to make local educators appear ineffective and, worse, to reduce the quality of education provided to public school students. Whether such dismal consequences occur, however, depends almost completely on how those requirements are satisfied in each state. If a state's NCLBA's assessment requirements are satisfied *legally but unwisely*, the new law will have an adverse impact on the education offered by that state's schools.

*Three key assessment-related requirements.* The new law calls for *annual academic assessments* of students in grades 3-8, and once in grades 10-12, in reading and mathematics no later than the 2005-06 school year. These tests are to be *state-determined* assessments based on a state's challenging content standards (that is, the state's curricular aims). Because students' performances on these tests is so central in NCLBA's way of judging educational quality, the nature of the tests is enormously important.

Public schools, and school districts, must also demonstrate *adequate yearly progress* (AYP) each year based dominantly on students' performances on the state's NCLB tests. Using procedures specified in the new law, each school and district is going to be required to increase the annual proportion of its students who are, based chiefly on those students' NCLBA test-scores, classified as proficient. Relying on currently available test data, officials in most states estimate that to satisfy their AYP requirements, about 5-7 percent more proficient students will be needed each year. These increases in the proportions of proficient-level students must be attained for students as a whole and also for several student subgroups designated in NCLBA. Schools or districts that do not meet these annual expectations will have *failed* AYP.

Finally, NCLBA calls for parents to be given district-issued *annual report cards* regarding the quality of their children's schools. The most important factor in these school-focused report cards must be a school's success in satisfactorily meeting its AYP targets. School districts failing AYP will be identified in a state-issued annual report card. Schools and districts receiving NCLBA Title I funds, if they fail AYP for two consecutive years, are placed on a sanction-laden improvement track that becomes increasingly serious over time.

*Overriding importance of a state's NCLBA tests.* Given the substantially increased pressure on teachers to raise their students' test scores, it is imperative that a state's NCLBA tests be *instructionally sensitive*, that is, capable of detecting improvements in teachers' instructional efforts if such improvements have, in fact, taken place. If a state's NCLBA tests, however, are *instructionally insensitive*, many teachers may be driven to employ classroom procedures intended to boost students' scores yet, unfortunately, will actually erode educational quality. Regrettably, such classroom practices were widely seen in our nation's classrooms even before the arrival of NCLBA. Now, however, if a state chooses instructionally insensitive tests to satisfy the new law, those unsound classroom practices are almost assuredly going to multiply.

---

\* An analysis presented at the 2003 NSBA Leadership Conference, Washington, DC, January 31, 2003.

A state whose officials have opted for instructionally insensitive NCLBA tests will have set up that state's educators, and the local board members who govern them, for near-certain failure according to the new law. Students will have failed to make sufficient progress on tests that, by their very nature, preclude the detection of such progress.

*Three assessment options.* There are three assessment approaches available to a state's educational policymakers when implementing NCLBA. Only one of those approaches offers students, educators, and board members any genuine hope of success.

First, *traditionally constructed standardized achievement tests*, such as the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills, are intended to provide comparative interpretations about students' performances. Such tests are useful for identifying students' relative strengths and weaknesses in relationship to the performances of other students in a norm group. However, in order to produce the amount of score-spread necessary to make sufficiently fine-grained comparative interpretations, test-construction procedures are used that, of necessity, render these tests inappropriate for evaluating educational quality. Such tests are instructionally insensitive.

A number of states currently employ *standards-based tests* for their state-level accountability programs. Unfortunately, because these tests are typically based on far too many, state-approved content standards (many of which are ill-defined), the tests also turn out to be instructionally insensitive. Because there are so many curricular targets to assess each year, and insufficient testing time to assess them all, what's to be covered on each year's tests typically turns into a guessing game—and teachers often guess wrong about which content standards will be assessed. Moreover, today's standards-based tests rarely provide score-based reports that let teachers, parents, and students know *which* curricular aims have or have not been achieved. These tests are little better than traditional standardized tests for evaluating schools.

Finally, *instructionally supportive tests* have been proposed by an independent commission of measurement specialists. This fundamentally new approach to large-scale testing deliberately sets out to supply the kind of accountability information called for in NCLBA, but is also designed to support instruction. These tests accurately assess a state's *highest -priority* content standards, yet report students' results in a way that helps teachers make better classroom instructional decisions. Clearly, such accountability tests are intended to be instructionally sensitive. By becoming familiar with the nine requirements set forth by the Commission on Instructionally Supportive Assessment, members of local board members will understand what sorts of tests are needed to make certain the NCLBA has a positive rather than negative effect on education in their state.\*

*Political clout to be used.* Local school boards in any state possess substantial education-related political power because they represent a broad range of stakeholders who are vitally concerned with the quality of public schools. The next few months, therefore, represent a period in which local school boards could attempt to influence their state's officials (the persons who will be instrumental in determining the nature of the state's NCLBA tests) so that instructionally sensitive NCLBA tests will be installed. The most appropriate methods to employ, and the individuals to be involved, are obviously state-specific. In a few states it may already seem to be too late. Yet, given sufficient reason, many apparently already-made decisions are still yet-reversible. This is not a time for passivity. It is a time for action.

---

\* Available online at [http://www.aasa.org/issues\\_and\\_insights/assessment/Building\\_Tests.pdf](http://www.aasa.org/issues_and_insights/assessment/Building_Tests.pdf).