

TEN THINGS PARENTS WANT TO KNOW ABOUT TESTING

John Fremer, immediate past-president of NCME, used his presidential address to challenge the association to do a better job of explaining testing issues to parents. He identified 10 questions that the public wanted to know about testing that were much more basic than the questions typically of concern to psychometricians (and members of NCME).

His 10 questions were divided into three groups: (1) questions about the test (e.g., purpose, coverage, accommodations, if any, and how a child might best prepare for the test); (2) impact and fairness (e.g., interpretation of scores, effect of doing good or poorly, and fairness to the child); (3) access and use (e.g., preview of test, access to results of the test, use of the score by others, and potential use of the scores by the parent to help their child).

Fremer noted that when parents asked if they could see the test it was not to evaluate its validity or reliability — it was simply to ensure that it reflected material their child had been taught. He urged NCME members to be more helpful in providing parents a more reasonable perspective about the relatively insignificant impact of any particular test. How can NCME members help parents?

- (1) Understand that parents care foremost about their children;
- (2) Listen carefully to the intent of questions parents ask before providing a response;
- (3) Use everyday English to talk with parents.

He also advocated having some commonsense resources available to discuss with parents such as *Educational Assessment: A Primer*; James Popham's *Testing Testing: What Every Parent Should Know About School Tests*; and Michael Kean's, *Education Assessment: A Guide For State Legislators*.

Editor's note: Many thanks to AERA and Jerry Sroufe – a version of this article appeared in the March/April 2001 *Research Policy Notes*.

SEEKING EXCELLENCE IN CLASSROOM ASSESSMENT TRAINING IN TEACHER EDUCATION

The NCME Classroom Assessment Recognition Program and the AERA Classroom Assessment SIG invite Programs of Teacher Education in colleges and universities to submit descriptions of *innovative and effective undergraduate or graduate programs of professional development in classroom assessment*. Outstanding programs will receive recognition awards at the NCME/AERA annual meeting April 2002 in New Orleans. Interested institutions may contact Rick Stiggins, Assessment Training Institute, Portland, for application details at 800-480-3060, ati@assessmentinst.com. The submission deadline is December 31, 2001.

BACKLASH AGAINST TESTING: WILL NEW FEDERAL REQUIREMENTS FUEL THE FIRE?

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Both houses of Congress have passed legislation to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), and differences between the two bills are being worked out in conference committee. Both bills require a significant increase in the amount of testing to be undertaken by states and school districts. The new federal requirements will impact states and school districts differently depending on current policies and practices in each state. This article presents information on the public's attitudes about education reform and testing, summarizes testing requirements under ESEA, and reviews current state and district testing practices. It also reviews anti-testing activities as the nation prepares to implement more testing requirements for all students.

Education has been a top priority for the American public for quite some time, and opinion surveys continue to show that education reform remains the top issue for the American public. In a recent Hart/Teeter survey commissioned by Educational Testing Service (ETS), *A Measured Response: Americans Speak on Education Reform, 2001*, respondents advocated greater accountability in conjunction with additional resources for meaningful education reform. On the issue of testing, the ETS survey found that the public supports testing but does not want to rely on this method too heavily. A balanced approach is desired in terms of using test results in conjunction with other information about student performance. Other recent polls have confirmed this finding. *Reality Check 2001*, a Public Agenda research study, found no desire to turn back the clock on standards and testing. Teachers and parents reported confidence in high-stakes standardized tests to motivate students and identify those who were struggling, but strongly opposed basing promotion or graduation solely on the results of one test. A National Education Association (NEA) sponsored poll conducted by Republican pollster Ed Goeas from the Tarrance Group and Democratic pollster Al Quinlan from Greenberg Quinlan Research found that 69 percent of American voters believe annual testing of student performance is a good idea, but 72 percent believe that testing alone is insufficient in providing parents and policymakers the information they need to make informed decisions about student and school progress.

As part of the reauthorization of the ESEA, the Bush Administration has proposed major new requirements for K–12 student testing. The President believes "if we do not measure, we do not know." The administration's proposal requires states to annually administer state-selected standardized tests in reading and mathematics to all public school students in grades 3–8. It also requires state participation in annual administrations of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) tests in reading and mathematics to a representative sample of each state's 4th and 8th grade students.

Both the House and Senate bills require states participating in Title I to assess student performance in reading and math annually in each of grades 3 through 8 using standards and tests developed by the state. The Senate bill, S. 1 also requires assessments in science, but this requirement does not take effect until the 2007–2008 school year. S.1 also requires states to develop and adopt standards but not assessments in history. The expanded testing requirements in the Senate bill are contingent on federal appropriations of specific amounts for state test development grants. Beginning in 2002–03, each state will also be required to participate

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annually in state NAEP in grades 4 and 8 in reading and mathematics (or in another assessment chosen by the state, per H.R.1). Appropriations for the expansion of NAEP are also included in both bills with \$69 million proposed by the House and \$110 million proposed by the Senate.

The testing requirements in the ESEA will involve testing about 22 million students in grades 3 through 8 every year in reading and math. This works out to 12 tests, one each in reading and math for each of the six grades per state, or 600 tests per year. However, when considering the need for make-up forms, practice tests, and providing some tests in other languages such as Spanish, the actual number of tests needed will be higher. Currently, about 15 states already have tests for students in these subjects and grades. The legislation requires that the tests be aligned with the state's academic standards and only about seven states currently use tests aligned with the state's standards in those subjects for those grades. Eleven more states test in all but one of those grades, and three others test in all but two of those grades. About 21 states test in three or fewer of the six grades and would need to significantly increase the number of students they test annually.

About two-thirds of the states will need to increase the amount of testing in the public schools in order to comply with the new ESEA requirements once they are enacted into law. This projected increase in testing will require a major test creation and administration effort by a number of states. Some are less than enthusiastic about the prospect. In July, the Commissioner of Education in New York and the Chancellor of the N.Y. Board of Regents released a joint analysis of the ESEA provisions and urged federal legislators to allow states to seek a waiver of the annual tests in grades 3–8. In a letter to Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-NY), the New York officials expressed concern that many states will have use their own devices in order to redesign their school improvement, report card, assessment, and data collection procedures, even when they have demonstrated measurable increases in student achievement.

Other state- and district-level officials have expressed concerns that the new federal testing requirements may cause lower standards and ignore the fact that virtually every state has developed comprehensive new standards and testing systems. State and local officials are also concerned about the costs of increased accountability and testing. Both bills include funds to pay for developing new tests, but state and local officials are worried about covering the costs of administration and scoring of the new required tests.

To date, resistance to increased testing at the local level has taken the form of parents boycotting tests by keeping their children home on testing day, marches on state capitols and resolutions by national education groups. The NEA recently adopted a policy allowing the its leadership to advocate for parental opt-out laws in which parents permit their children to be exempted from testing.

It is likely that anti-testing activities will increase when new federal accountability and testing requirements are implemented. The response, however, depends on a variety of factors. These include the final elements of the ESEA legislation, the flexibility granted to states and local districts in complying with the new law, communication with the public for support and understanding of the value of testing, and the investment of adequate resources to support the whole learning enterprise, not just the testing. The current and future debates afford measurement professionals the opportunity to assist states, school districts, policy makers, and others in using test scores appropriately to facilitate improved teaching and learning in our schools.

WHIPLASH FROM BACKLASH? THE TRUTH ABOUT PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR TESTING

*Stephen D. Driesler, Executive Director
School Division, Association of American Publishers*

Over the past 10 to 15 years, educational assessment has emerged as one of the most talked about and hotly debated issues in education. Stories in the news media could lead one to believe there exists a massive public backlash against testing. Last year, the Association of American Publishers (AAP) commissioned a national survey of over 1,000 parents of school-age children to gauge parental perceptions of standardized testing and to learn more about this alleged backlash. This survey found that a clear majority of American parents support standardized testing.

More specifically, the AAP survey found the following:

- 83% of parents surveyed said standardized tests provide very important information.
- 90% of parents surveyed want comparative data about their children and the schools they attend.
- 74% of parents surveyed said they get information about their children's progress from test scores.

These findings demonstrate that parents want and like the information provided by standardized tests. This survey found no evidence of any backlash against testing.

In addition to these points, the survey revealed interesting findings regarding frequency of testing, understanding of test results and the benefits of assessment. For example:

- 67% of parents surveyed said they would like to receive standardized test results for their children in every grade.
- Among those who would like to receive test results at all (89%) – half said tests should be given twice a year.

Around the country, much of the debate about testing revolves around whether or not standardized tests discriminate against, or are somehow unfair to, African Americans and other minorities. However, the AAP survey consistently found African-American and Hispanic parents have stronger support for testing than do their Caucasian counterparts. When asked how often they would like to receive standardized test results for their child, parents responded:

| <u>How Often</u> | <u>Whites</u> | <u>African-Africans</u> | <u>Hispanics</u> |
|------------------|---------------|-------------------------|------------------|
| Every year | 65% | 80% | 80% |
| Twice a year | 47% | 65% | 63% |

When asked how important it was to know how well their child was doing compared to other children in the same grade at school, parents said:

| | <u>Whites</u> | <u>African-Africans</u> | <u>Hispanics</u> |
|----------------|---------------|-------------------------|------------------|
| Very Important | 57% | 79% | 71% |

The survey also found surprising support for standardized testing from lower income households.

Would you say that Standardized Test scores are a fair means of how well your child is doing?

| | <u>< \$15K</u> | <u>\$15-29K</u> | <u>\$30-45K</u> | <u>\$45,000+</u> |
|-----------|-------------------|-----------------|-----------------|------------------|
| More Fair | 35% | 17% | 18% | 14% |

How often would you like to receive Standardized Test results for your child?

| | <u>< \$15K</u> | <u>\$15-29.9K</u> | <u>\$30-45K</u> | <u>\$45,000+</u> |
|-------------|-------------------|-------------------|-----------------|------------------|
| Every grade | 74% | 76% | 71% | 65% |

The AAP survey is not the only one to find no credible evidence of a public backlash against testing. In September 2000, several months after the AAP survey, the Business Roundtable released a national survey of 1,012 U.S. residents aged 18 and older, about half of whom were public school parents. This survey found:

- 65% of parents and 70% of the general public support requiring students to pass a statewide test

before they can graduate from high school, even if they had passing grades in their classes.

- 73% of parents and 76% of the general public favor use of a statewide test in English and Math to get promoted from the fourth to fifth grade, even if pupils had passing grades in their classes.
- Only about one in ten feels there is too much standardized testing in the schools.
- 8 in 10 agree Standardized Tests are useful for:
 - Schools to evaluate students
 - Parents and communities to evaluate schools
 - Parents to keep up with their children’s progress

Also in September 2000, Public Agenda did a national survey of 805 parents of public school students. Among the important findings of this survey were:

- 55% said students take the “right amount” of tests and another 9% said “too few.”
- 75% to 85% said statewide tests are useful for evaluating performance of students, teachers and schools.
- 69% believe students should have to pass a test before graduating from high school.
- 53% believe required high school exit exams measure basic skills vs. 27% who prefer it to measure higher level learning.
- 51% want to tie teacher salaries or bonuses to test scores.

The most recent national survey was completed just last month by Educational Testing Service (ETS). Of 1,054 adults—consisting of 431 parents, 401 educators, and 200 educational policymakers—responding to the survey, the following was observed:

Based on the concerns and benefits you have heard about standardized testing do you support or oppose greater use of testing as part of a broader education initiative?

- 68% Favored Testing
- 22% Opposed Testing

When asked about support for measures to strengthen accountability in our nation’s educational system, testing student achievement and holding teachers and schools responsible was supported by:

- 77% of the general public,
- 61% of Educational policymakers and
- 47% of Educators.

Conclusions. Based on these national surveys and others space does not permit to be included in this article, there is no evidence of a widespread public “backlash” against testing. In fact, all of these independent surveys found there is strong public support for the use of standardized tests. In addition, support for testing is not just from white, upper middle class families. Testing is particularly important to the African-American and Hispanic communities, as well as lower-income parents.

The news media will likely continue to give big headlines to stories about parents and students protesting or boycotting a test. However, the truth is these anti-testing protests only reflect the views of a small, vocal minority of parents and not those of the much larger, assessment-supporting public.

MECD SPECIAL ISSUE ON HIGH STAKES TESTING AND LARGE-SCALE ASSESSMENT ANNOUNCED

The Association for Assessment in Counseling (AAC) is planning to publish a special issue of its journal, *Measurement and Evaluation in Counseling and Development (MECD)*, in 2002–2003. *MECD* is the official journal of AAC, a division of the American Counseling Association (ACA). This special issue will be devoted to the topic of large-scale assessment and high-stakes testing. In recent years, we have seen how educational assessments have changed and how research has had an impact on what we know about assessment in today's world. The scores on today's assessments are often tied to accountability systems where the results might be used to have an impact on teaching and learning. Thus, tests today have very high stakes for all individuals in the educational and counseling process, including students, parents, counselors, teachers, administrators, and the community at large.

The *MECD* editor, Patricia B. Elmore, and the guest editors of this special issue, Patricia Jo McDivitt and James Augustin, invite your ideas for manuscripts concerned with research, theoretical issues, and practical applications in assessment related to the topic of large-scale assessment and high-stakes testing. All manuscripts must have clearly described implications for the counseling field and for practitioners, educators, administrators, researchers, or students.

If you have an idea for a manuscript or if you have written a manuscript dealing with research in the area of large-scale and high-stakes testing, please consider submitting it for review for possible publication in this special issue of the *MECD* journal. The manuscript

should not have been published previously and should not be currently under consideration by another journal. We would also welcome suggestions of individuals who we might contact as potential contributors. Please contact: Patricia Jo McDivitt, pmcdivitt@etsk-12works.com, Phone: 210-841-6251, FAX: 210-832-0791 or James Augustin, augustin@etsk-12works.com, Phone: 210-841-6253, FAX: 210-832-0791

THE TESTING BOON & BOOM: IF WE DEVELOPERS ARE SO POPULAR, WHY AREN'T WE HAPPIER?

Michael D. Beck, BETA, Inc.

By any account, test developers are currently in a golden age. In fact, should a niche mutual fund investing only in assessment companies emerge from the ashes of the investment community, readers are financially well-advised to aggressively purchase shares. At no time in world history have so many people been so assessment-enamored. Yet these are also troubling times in our business. Why? I'll outline four reasons thoughtful psychometricians (not intended as an oxymoron) are uneasy as we revel in our (*business*, not personal) popularity.

1. Recognizing that rhetoric and reason are only moderately correlated (and that relationship is severely attenuated when issuing from politicians), the current testing fad is curious. The banner leading the parade seems something like “If educators simply identify the low-achieving kids, improved achievement will follow.” Says who? Good teachers and administrators seldom have difficulty identifying students who are not meeting quality learning standards. The major quandary educators face is choosing and implementing *treatment* of those falling short. Using a medical analogy, educators rarely need assistance identifying those who are ill; they need help in prescribing and implementing the remedy. Current assessment systems focus overmuch on the identification process and fail to lead to appropriate treatment. If we truly want accountability systems to improve education, they must not end with identification. Schools already know *who* needs treatment – they need help with the *how*.

What to do? States must implement plans to address testing's ever-gnawing “so what?” question. That is, devote attention and resources not simply to establishing new standards, assessment and accountability systems, but meaningfully assist local educators in *using* these systems to improve instruction. It is folly to expect marked improvement in achievement without sustained resource reallocation

from the test to the treatment. Even the best tests can only *identify* problems, not treat them.

2. No clear-thinker, assessment-trained or not, believes that important decisions should be made on the basis of single, isolated pieces of information. Yet the foundation of many accountability programs is overwhelmingly on single test scores. Logically challenged policy-makers have creatively categorized tests that mix multiple-choice and free-response items as “multiple measures” or applied the same label to repeated retestings using parallel versions of the same test. Bah. All of us claiming assessment expertise have been negligent in building systems that invest too much weight on the results of a single instrument. Test building is the *simple* part of constructing a sound, valid accountability system. It is near meaningless for professional organizations—IRA, NCTE, even AERA—to pass inert “resolutions” on this topic. Those involved in building the instrumentation critical to these systems must be more proactive. “Anti-test” sentiment, currently rather diffuse and marginalized, can (and should) spread as quickly as the pro-testing movement if we are unable to establish sound and responsive accountability systems.

3. Those who’ve been visiting other planets over recent years may not yet recognize what everyone even loosely connected to the “assessment business” knows: The industry’s capacity to develop and implement even the current level of assessment systems is overstressed. And Francis Galton help us when the feds come through with the near-guaranteed promise to “help” all states test nearly every breathing student on an annual basis. At one time, test contractors smirked, nay gloated (“professionally” and quietly, of course) at rumors of screw-ups by their competitive peers. No more. Some might attribute this to increased civility. Ha. The quiet is directly attributable to recognition that essentially everyone either recently has or is just about to miss a deadline or make a costly and embarrassing mistake on some important program.

The causes of these problems are simple to identify but difficult to remedy. Too much work is currently occurring in unrealistic timeframes by inexperienced, albeit well-meaning and hard-working staff. These problems pervade both the vendor and client ranks. How can this improve? Somehow, we must convince policy-makers that their timeframes for implementation are unrealistic. Beyond that, it is crucial that contractors and clients view their projects as collaborative ones; trite but true, only by working together can the number and severity of problems be minimized.

4. As the stakes associated with assessment programs grow, so do the pressures on local educators to improve student performance. Thoughtful observers worry about the potential that tests have to dangerously narrow the curriculum. School-level approaches to instructional intervention or remediation too often center on test preparation. Lack of “test-taking” skills does not explain why so many students fail tests. Very few students score poorly because they are unable to take tests well. They fail because they lack the fundamental cognitive skills the tests assess. Again, the excessive emphasis on test preparation arose because schools generally do not know *how* to improve failing students’ performances. Test preparation materials have simply filled this void. Large numbers of students around this country are being ill-served by mindlessly practicing narrowly defined test preparation activities or drilling on materials bearing little relationship to the actual test content, difficulty and cognitive rigor. These students are victims of malpractice. We test professionals have failed to convey to our publics that “test preparation” of any kind generally has less effect on test scores than would an equivalent amount of energy engaging in sound instruction based on the test’s underlying skills and behaviors.

The pockets of generally minor, though vocal, resistance and opposition to assessment programs concern me. I take comfort from the fact that opponents seem to offer no superior alternative. Anti-testing groups seem to be inattentive to the fact that “the public” is currently unwilling to cede back to schools their former power to inform us of how things are going. Until local schools rebuild the public’s confidence in classroom- or district-based decisions about a child’s or school’s performance, large-scale assessments will remain dominant. My worries are that we focus excessively on the mechanics of building tests and remain inattentive to the monumental instructional and social issues surrounding our programs. Next time you leave your test-building work early – say, 7 p.m. or so – or take a two-day “vacation,” give some thought to how we all can do things better, not just struggle to meet the last missed deadline.

MAKING THE GRADE: A REPORT ON SAT I RESULTS IN THE NATION’S URBAN SCHOOLS

Making the Grade: A Report on SAT I Results in the Nation’s Urban Schools is the first comprehensive study to examine SAT I Math and Verbal test results in the nation’s urban schools. The Council of the Great City Schools (CGCS) and The College Board prepared

the report, using SAT results from Council member districts.

The primary purpose of this research was to provide urban educators, and those interested in urban education, with a way to examine student achievement in the Great City Schools (GCS) in the context of rising standards. In addition, the report was prepared to allow urban school district personnel to compare their SAT I Math and Verbal scores to national averages and to other urban school systems facing similar challenges.

The study examines both SAT I Math and Verbal scores. Data on the GCS consist of SAT results from 58 major urban school districts during the 1998-99 school year. The report summarizes average results across cities and SAT scores nationally. It also analyzes SAT Math and Verbal scores using the following variables:

- Number of test-takers
- Race/ethnicity and gender of test-takers
- Percentage of test-takers with core or higher academic preparation
- Mean SAT I Math and Verbal scores
- Mean scores by academic preparation
- Mean scores by gender
- Mean scores of African-American, Asian-American, Hispanic, and White test-takers
- Mean scores by household income
- Achievement gaps by academic preparation
- Achievement gaps by gender
- Achievement gaps by race/ethnicity
- Achievement gaps by household income

The report, *Making the Grade*, found that:

- Approximately one million SAT I Math and Verbal exams were administered nationally during the 1998–99 school year.
- About 10% of all test-takers nationally were from the GCS.
- Test-takers nationally were more likely to be White; test-takers in the GCS were more likely to be African American or Hispanic.
- Female test-takers outnumbered male test-takers nationally and in the GCS; but male test-takers had higher SAT I Math and Verbal scores than females in both settings.
- Average SAT I Verbal and Math scores for students nationally were about 10% higher than for students in the GCS.
- White students, on average, outscored Asian-American, Hispanic, and African-American

students on SAT I Verbal tests nationally and in the GCS.

- African-American students, on average, scored lower than Asian-American, Hispanic, and White students on SAT I Math and Verbal tests nationally and in the GCS.
- White test-takers in the GCS who took core courses scored about the same in SAT I Math and Verbal as White test-takers nationally
- Approximately six out of 10 SAT test-takers nationally and in the GCS had taken core or higher academic coursework.
- White students taking the SAT nationally and in the GCS were more likely to have also taken core or more academic coursework than students from other racial groups.
- African-American, Asian-American, and Hispanic test-takers nationally and in the GCS took core or higher academic coursework at similar rates.
- Approximately 50% of all SAT I Math test-takers nationally and in the GCS had taken four or more years of mathematics coursework; and about 70% of all SAT Verbal test-takers had taken four or more years of English coursework.
- SAT test-takers with four or more years of math or English coursework nationally and in the GCS outscored test-takers with less coursework.
- Average SAT I Math and Verbal scores increased as household incomes increased nationally and in the GCS.
- Average SAT I Verbal scores of test-takers nationally and in the GCS were the same at household incomes of \$100,000 or more.
- Average SAT score differences between the nation and the GCS declined as household income increased.

Editor's note: The preceding was an executive summary of a report recently released by the Council of the Great City Schools. Authors include Michael Casserly, Executive Director; Sharon Lewis, Research Director; Nicole Baker, Research Specialist; and Jack Jepson, Research Specialist. For additional information on this report and others, contact:

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NCME AWARD FOR CAREER CONTRIBUTIONS TO EDUCATIONAL MEASUREMENT

NCME members are encouraged to nominate individuals for the NCME Career Contributions Award. The award honors living persons whose publications, presentations, and professional activities over a career have had a widespread positive impact on the field of educational measurement. These influential contributions may include theoretical or technical developments, service to professional organizations, conceptualizations of educational measurement that have enhanced public understanding of measurement programs, applications of theory that have influenced the nature of educational tests and measurements, or innovative ideas that have significantly affected measurement practices.

Recipients of the award since its inception in 1988 are: Melvin Novick, Ralph Tyler, Frederic Lord, Albert Hieronymus, T. Anne Cleary, Ronald Hambleton, Leonard Feldt, Robert Linn, Jason Millman, William Mehrens, Richard Jaeger, Lorrie Shepard, Robert Brennan, and Sylvia Johnson.

To be considered by the Award Committee, a nomination must include two items: (a) a 1- to 2-page summary of the nature, significance, and impact of the nominee's contributions to the field of educational measurement, and (b) an up-to-date copy of the nominee's vita. Mail nominations to: Cynthia B. Schmeiser, ACT, Inc., 2201 North Dodge Street, Iowa City, IA 52243. Telephone: 319-337-1091; FAX: 319-341-2335; e-mail: schmeis@act.org.

The deadline for receipt of written nominations for the 2002 award is January 11, 2002. The award recipient will be recognized at the Annual Meeting in New Orleans.
