

Getting a Better Perspective on Testing



We all know students who just want to figure out what it takes to make the grade. Ask them, “What do you want to get out of this class?” and their answer is, “An A,” or maybe just a passing mark. The downside to this bottom-line mindset is that the value of learning takes a backseat or may not matter at all. Too often, this report card mentality means that students leave our schools with an accumulation of grades or credits, but not an accumulation of knowledge.

As the No Child Left Behind Act has increased the pressure on schools across the country to meet the multi-pronged definition of “adequate yearly progress,” the single-minded emphasis on making the grade is a temptation for school leaders as well.

Our challenge in school systems and classrooms is to find better ways to balance measuring what students know and how schools are performing with practices that reinforce deeper learning and real progress. We need an accountability system that encourages learning and instills a culture in our schools that values the comprehension and mastery of concepts and skills.

Envisioning a Stronger System

A starting point for thinking seriously about testing is understanding and being able to explain what the assessments we’re now using can—and cannot—do. The standardized, multiple-choice exams most states administer under the No Child Left Behind requirements measure only a narrow band of student knowledge and a very limited set of skills. We should start moving toward assessments that promise a much fuller picture of what students know and can do.

For example, portfolios of students’ best classroom work offer a glimpse of their knowledge and ability, and open-ended questions that require students to answer with short essays demonstrate how they can develop ideas and think through a challenge or issue. Tests made up solely of multiple-choice items are certainly fast and easy, but when they’re used in a high-stakes environment to render judgment on schools, fast and easy is almost certainly not the way to go.

Another limit of most high-stakes tests is that they meas-

ure and compare the skills of different groups of students each year. Testing experts have recognized this problem and are working on a new generation of tests that would measure the same students over multiple years to show how much more they are learning from year to year.

Rediscovering Professional Judgment

The real issue, however, is not just building a better assessment system; it’s realizing the gravity of the old adage that

what we measure is what we value. Clear and challenging standards and assessments that give students more ways to demonstrate what they know help point to the importance of a richer and deeper kind of schooling. Using standardized multiple-choice reading and math tests to define adequate yearly progress often narrows what is being taught, minimizing important subjects like science, social studies, and the arts. Too often, weeks before a high-stakes test are spent drilling on the low-level math and reading skills that such tests usually measure.

In today’s environment, it would serve school leaders well to remember a couple of basic principles:

First, it is important for children to have a broad experience of learning at the elementary school level, and for the teaching and learning to lead to experiences of discovery that, in turn, kindle further curiosity and learning.

Second, there is more to testing than just paper and pencil. The best kinds of assessment are built into classroom instruction that measures students frequently—not just at the end of a unit or grading period—to show teachers what some students need to go back and learn, perhaps in a different way than they tried the first time.

Our job is providing high-quality education, not just achieving adequate yearly progress. We should keep working to create classrooms where talented teachers challenge students to meet high academic standards, and where we trust teachers’ professional ability to make judgments about students’ proficiency. ■

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