High-Stakes Misfits

It started out like any normal day—that is, until 3:15 p.m., when I went to pick up our three boys from school. I left my office and picked up sixth grader Dominic first. Next, I headed to get kindergartner Gabriel and then Luke, who is in the third grade. As they jumped into the car, my heart sank as Luke asked his older brother, “Dominic, do you have to pass the EOGs to get into middle school?”

I was dumbstruck.

Luke was referring to the end-of-grade assessments (EOGs). Like all states, North Carolina created an assessment system as the metric of school success as per the No Child Left Behind Act. As a result, North Carolina became a high-stakes testing state, where students are not promoted or do not receive a diploma without meeting the EOG requirements.

An Educator’s Impotence

I had such a visceral reaction to Luke’s question because I knew what it meant. As an educator and researcher, I am aware of the research on high-stakes testing. Students are anxious over testing and clear signs of depression are becoming common. Reports indicate that students as early as elementary school begin lying about test results, commence asking siblings how they did on tests, and start showing more traditional signs of test anxiety such as stomachaches and fear.

Perhaps I was over-reacting. When I worked as a school principal, I too created a data-driven environment for my teachers, and now as a university professor I teach future school leaders how to achieve data-based leadership. I conduct research on the thoughtful, meaningful, and efficient use of school data to drive decision-making in leadership and pedagogy.

While we know these assessments are increasing anxiety and stress, states continue to promote the test as unavoidable, and administrators capitalize by pressuring teachers to prepare their students and by encouraging test performance as early as elementary school. In fact, Luke recently brought home a flier publicizing an “EOG Power Night” that stated, “We will be sharing strategies to prepare your child mentally and emotionally for the EOGs.” Even Gabe’s kindergarten class is decorating and wearing shirts to support EOG week. T-shirts and mental and emotional preparation—are we still talking about early elementary education?

A Researcher’s Dilemma

So, what’s the alternative? Tests that fit. Through my own research on the form and function of assessment systems in schools, I discovered the importance of “fit,” meaning the purpose of an assessment (e.g., psychometric properties) and the intended uses by local educators (e.g., informed lesson planning, student placement, student growth). When assessment characteristics do not match use, there is a misfit.

This is the case in North Carolina. The EOGs are given at the end of the academic year and provide data that are not useful. North Carolina is not the only place guilty of this type of misfit. My work in Michigan and Massachusetts and my research on California, Florida, New Jersey, New Mexico, and Texas also indicate that many teachers are pressed to use data to inform their pedagogy—and they most often reach for the data that are most readily available: state assessment results. This use is considered a misfit for two reasons: it is old data since results are from a teacher’s previous year’s students, often referred to as “autopsy” data; and the results are not designed to provide local educators with enough item-level detail to make pedagogical adjustments. In other words, the data are not statistically designed to be used for day-to-day pedagogical decision-making.

Thus, these results are most useful to policymakers as political weaponry to wage battles (see arguments for charter schools, vouchers, and merit pay). All might be legitimate and worthwhile debates, but should our students be the anvils as such policies are forged?

What are assessments that fit? For policymakers, the answer is assessments that provide statistically reliable data about student achievement. For local educators, the answer is assessments that generate real-time, student-level diagnostic data. Can assessments do both? In 2001, the National Research Council made a compelling case that such assessments can and should be created. In Knowing What Students Know, the council calls for assessments designed around modern principles of learning and rooted in strong statistical standards.

A Father’s Fear

As a father, I felt fear because of Luke’s comment. Luke expresses stress with thoughtful inquiry; I knew the test was haunting him. What, then, were my options? My first reaction was to push Luke from the test. I called the school and was told, “We never had a student not take the tests.” I next began reading the myriad reports from the Department of Public Instruction. North Carolina law states that the EOGs are mandatory. Students who fail to meet a certain level must retake the EOG. If the student again fails to meet the standard, he or she will receive targeted intervention (determined by each school) before another test. Then I found an out: A review committee of teachers (from a different school) can be requested to review samples of the student’s work to make a recommendation to the school principal regarding promotion.

Was boycotting the test truly the best solution? I had to ask myself whether I was waging this righteous fight vicariously through my 8-year-old child. I also wondered how other parents, with less access and experi-
Some of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act stimulus money has been earmarked for states to further refine their assessment systems. If data are conceived of holistically and not just focused on one large-scale achievement test, and if classroom-level teachers and parents are provided with information about student performance that can be used for immediate improvement, there is a chance that assessment can be used to improve teaching in order to affect student achievement. We must not miss this opportunity to reinvest in our assessment systems. This will mean assessments that are designed on modern principles of learning should fulfill the federal testing mandates of NCLB. Rather than adding another test, cognitive diagnostic assessments should replace current state assessments. Instead of only working with assessment companies and the psychometric community, policymakers should seek input from what the cognitive psychological community has to offer and what local school educators say they need. Perhaps then, students will see and appreciate the use of the assessments as a teaching tool, not as barrier to the next grade that breeds insecurity and anxiety.

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**HERE’S YOUR CHANCE TO SPEAK OUT**

The author feels conflicted about high-stakes testing because although NCLB requires it and principals are expected to use the resulting data to inform their decision-making, the process adds undue stress to students and the data from a single achievement test are not representative of a student’s abilities. What’s your take on the issue? Submit your thoughts at www.naesp.org/blog and click on “Speaking Out.”