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How Important Should One Test Be?

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Education World continues its series on high-stakes testing today. What do the experts, national teacher organizations, and presidential candidates have to say about these tests?

Tests aren't just tests anymore -- at least not high-stakes tests, which are being used in some states to determine which students stay back a grade, which high school seniors receive diplomas, which teachers get bonuses, and more. High-stakes tests are changing public education.

Although tests are entrenched in public education as a long-standing method of measuring the job done by teachers and their students, high-stakes tests are a new breed of tests that affect students and their teachers far greater than tests did in the past.

TESTS MISUSED AS SCORECARDS

"High-stakes testing is being driven by a very understandable desire to see how kids are doing," said Maureen DiMarco, vice president of Houghton Mifflin Co., which owns Riverside Publishing, one of the nation's leading test publishers.

"It really is a political and policy decision to attach high stakes to standardized tests," DiMarco told Education World. "I can speak for all test publishers and say that we are concerned whenever one event, such as a high-stakes test, is used to make important decisions about a student's future." Tests should be only one part of a student's evaluation, she said.

Although it's politically attractive to point to test scores as a way of determining whether tax dollars are well spent, DiMarco said, many school districts are wasting their money and time by using tests only as scorecards.

"Most schools haven't used the precious amount of information from test results that would help teachers offer the most effective way to help their students," she said. It is unfortunate because tests are an important, objective tool for schools to evaluate how students are doing, but too often schools miss the opportunity to fully use them.

One of the common problems is that test results are released too late in the school year or after students have left for the summer to be useful to the classroom teacher. Instead, the tests categorize students instead of being used as a detailed prescription of areas individual students need help in.

"These tests should be a wonderful tool for their important information, not just a hammer to hit [teachers, principals, and students] on the head with at the end of the year," DiMarco said. "I am constantly disheartened when teachers say the tests are useless to them. They've had no guidance on how to use the scores."



Are High-Stakes Tests the Answer?

Are standardized tests, especially high-stakes tests that link grade promotion and graduation, a Band-Aid to fix what is ailing schools? Many people think tests are a way to make educators -- and students -- accountable. Others disagree, saying one test is just that -- one test, only one indicator of what students have learned. Share with us your opinions about high-stakes testing on our [message board](#).

30 PERCENT ALIGNMENT BETWEEN TESTS AND INSTRUCTION

Much of the criticism about high-stakes tests is that teachers teach to the test. That's just not so, according to a study of a small sampling of schools and teachers in six states. Researchers looked at teacher instruction and how much of that instruction was assessed on state standardized tests.

The study, "Alignment of State Testing Programs, NAEP and Reports of Teacher Practice in Mathematics and Science in Grades 4 and 8," by Andrew C. Porter and John L. Smithson, found that about 30 percent of instruction is tested on standardized tests.

Smithson, project director for the University of Wisconsin-Madison Center for Education Research, characterized the results of the study as provocative. Their analysis suggests that standards-based reform has not yet brought instruction into alignment with state tests, he said.

"We hesitate to call these 'findings' because the sample was relatively small," Smithson told Education World. "However, this is a pretty good indication that teacher instruction covers a lot more than what is on these tests."

"To us, it looks like there is another influence in teacher instruction and that is the curriculum framework or standards," he said. The study compared the content of each state's standardized test with classroom instruction for science and math. The study is part of a larger, 11-state study funded by the National Science Foundation and Council of Chief State School Officers. The purpose is to present new tools to conduct evaluations of standards-based reforms in math and science.

TEXAS CREDITS TESTS FOR IMPROVING EDUCATION

High-stakes testing seems to have found a friend with Republican presidential candidate [George W. Bush](#). "Governor Bush bases his policy agenda on what he thinks is right, not on public opinion polls or politics," said Ray Sullivan, spokesman for Bush.

"Here in Texas, strong assessment and accountability measures have reformed our education system and increased student performance," Sullivan told Education World.

Bush favors high-stakes testing as a method of ending social promotion. Texas requires seniors to pass an exit exam in reading and math in order to receive their diplomas. "Under Governor Bush social promotion was ended, but he phased in additional teacher training, reading instruction, and assessment tools to identify learning problems early so they could be corrected," Sullivan said.

GORE: TEST JUST ONE PART OF A PUZZLE

Vice President and Democratic presidential nominee Al Gore also supports testing as a way of measuring what students have learned. "Vice President Gore supports exit exams, but it is up to the individual states because the bottom line is that states should have worked out a way to make sure that the diploma students have in their hands means that they can read and do math at the high school level," explained Jano Cabrera, spokesperson for Gore.

However, the vice president encourages that these exams be only one part of the students' evaluation, Cabrera told Education World. Gore believes that tests can be useful tools for parents and educators. In his education platform, [Al Gore](#) recommends a voluntary national standardized test for fourth-grade students in reading and for eighth-grade students in math.

LINES DRAWN IN THE SAND OVER

What Makes a Good Test?

Four basic elements make a good test, according to Maureen DiMarco, vice president of Houghton Mifflin Co., which owns Riverside Publishing, one of the leading test publishers in the nation. Those four basic elements are the following:

- **Reliability.** Tests should be an accurate measure of what the student is learning each time the student takes that test. In other words, if the same test were administered to the student on multiple occasions, the test would be considered reliable if the results were similar.
- **Validity.** Tests should measure what you think you are measuring. For example, a test question intended to measure the student's ability to solve a math word problem should not include words or concepts that a student will not understand. If the question is to measure the student's ability to add, the question should ask that specifically.
- **Fairness.** Tests must be neutral and not include any bias factors. They must avoid any bias that favors any geographical area, gender, or ethnicity.
- **Feasibility.** The test must be doable and practical. For example, it is not feasible to test every single state standard in a

TESTING

Both the [American Federation of Teachers \(AFT\)](#) and the [National Education Association \(NEA\)](#) support standards and assessment.

However, the two national education associations take a different view about how much the assessment should be weighted in determining the student's overall evaluation.

The 2.5 million-member NEA does not believe one test should be the only measurement to determine grade promotion or graduation from high school. The AFT, unlike the NEA, supports exit exams and believes students should not be promoted or graduate unless they can demonstrate mastery of certain skills through an assessment on a standardized test.

"We're not against assessment," said Glen Cutlip, senior policy analyst for the NEA.

"Testing is essential. But when you add high stakes to it, we have problems with it. No single test can do everything, and that's what they are saying high-stakes tests can do.

"We think that what's happening is that there is too much emphasis placed on one test as a total measure of what a child has learned in school," Cutlip told Education World. "Assessing children should be based on many measures over time, including classroom observation and teacher-made tests."

The NEA policy is that high-stakes tests do not serve students or their teachers. He said grading the tests is a lengthy process, and test scores provide limited feedback to teachers several months after the test has been administered.

The AFT supports exit exams, but it believes states need to work on matching its tests with its standards better. Not any test will do. "These off-the-shelf-tests don't reflect what is being taught in the school system," Jamie Horwitz said. Horwitz is a spokesperson for the AFT, which has a million members.

"We're saying, set the bar higher and create consequences strongly tied to the evaluation of students," Horwitz said.

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test. A good test selects the most pivotal skills that need to be evaluated and provides questions that actually evaluate the skill.