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ABSTRACT

Prepared by four specialists who have personally dealt with educational assessment programs and communications in both state departments and local school districts, this guide takes the reader through the steps of getting the word out: analyzing goals and audience needs; planning activities and resources--human and financial; putting plans into action; and evaluating results. Included are examples of ideas, timeliness, surveys, news releases, and other practical, use-tested details. All levels of educational organization--state departments to local staff-should be involved in the dissemination process. Although state departments can offer strategic advice and encourage media support, it's the action of the local districts that most critically influences students, parents, taxpayers, and staff. Suggestions are included for briefing staff and media so they can reinforce, rather than undercut, the program's purpose. And, finally, how a specific school handles the facts and figures in its own report to parents and the community is examined in detail. (Author)

Releasing Test Scores:

Educational Assessment Programs, How To Tell the Public

A Publication of the
National School Public Relations Association

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Releasing Test Scores:

Educational Assessment Programs— HOW TO TELL THE PUBLIC

One of the touchiest jobs facing state and local educators is explaining the results of assessment programs to parents, principals, teachers and staff members, community leaders, legislators and other publics.

Unfortunately, efforts to communicate this often explosive information are generally ill conceived, poorly timed and based on little if any audience research.

Releasing Test Scores: Educational Assessment Programs, How to Tell the Public, a new book by four experts in this field, contains a wealth of practical, experience-tested advice. It includes:

- 12 basic principles of assessment communication, with techniques for carrying them out.
- 18 activities used to publicize Michigan's 1973 Assessment Program locally, with a time schedule and costs.
- how Maryland's Dept. of Education helped local school people understand and publicize test results.
- how to handle tough questions from the media.

"The battle over test scores will be won or lost in the local trenches," says the book, as it points out mistakes local educators often make in timing their publicity, and in responding to hot community reaction. It tells superintendents how to provide [illegible]ming for principals, who often bear the bru[illegible]blic feelings.

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Acknowledgment

Releasing Test Scores: Educational Assessment Programs, How To Tell the Public is a special National School Public Relations Association publication designed to further the development of good school/community relations. The release to the public of the results of educational assessment programs whether at the state or local school district level is one of the touchiest school public relations problems and one which must be carefully planned, implemented and evaluated.

The book was written by four school community relations specialists with extensive practical experience in both educational assessment programs and communications. William J. Banach, communications coordinator, Macomb Intermediate School District, Mt. Clemens, Mich., spent two years working as a public relations consultant to the Michigan Dept. of Education's educational assessment program and has conducted workshops for the Maryland State Dept. of Education on releasing test scores. Thomas Fisher, a research, assessment and evaluation specialist with the Michigan Dept. of Education, has authored numerous assessment and dissemination publications. Gus A. Crenson, special assistant to the superintendent, Maryland Dept. of Education, serves as the superintendent's assistant for public affairs. Donald L. Hymes, director of publications, Montgomery County (Md.) Schools, currently writes TRENDS for the Secondary School Principal, a bi-monthly NSPRA newsletter.

As publisher of *Releasing Test Scores,* the National School Public Relations Association is also indebted to the following for their part in production of the book: Virginia M. Ross and Cynthia C. Menand of the NSPRA staff for editorial assistance; to Joan L. Wolfe, Debbie Lucckese and Virginia McAllister for production services and to Brooke Todd and Associates of Arlington, Va., for graphics.

Overview

When educational historians recall the significant issues of the mid-1900s, the advent of educational assessment certainly will be remembered. *How* it will be remembered is the real question.

If these programs get good marks, it will be because they contributed in an obvious way to the improvement of education. But if assessment is remembered unfavorably, a failure in communication – not in assessment itself – will likely be the culprit.

To help avoid the latter fate, this book provides some insights into assessment's communication problems and offers suggestions for those people responsible for dissemination of test results and other phases of assessment and accountability.

The purpose is not to judge assessment programs individually or collectively. Assessment as one component of accountability makes good sense. We are much more concerned with the communication activities that will make a good assessment program acceptable to those affected by it than with the design of such programs.

The quality of assessment communication, to this point, has been largely disappointing. Most programs have been given only marginal communication support by their originators. *Quantity* of information rather than *quality* has been the norm. And where information exists in quantity, it appears poorly developed, poorly timed and based on little – if any – *audience research.*

It is well known that people don't accept – much less support – programs that are unfamiliar or suspect. Yet assessment-related communication from state departments of education and school districts to their many publics ranges from embarrassing at worst, to promising at best. For example, in one state assessment program, teachers are among the last to see the results. How, then,

can they be expected to fully appreciate and support the program? How can they possibly prepare themselves to explain to parents what the numbers in the newspapers mean?

At the local school district level, the quality of assessment communication to parents, staff members, community leaders and other important publics has been generally sub-par, even non-existent.

Although we cannot determine what long-term effects assessment will have on education, it seems clear that the activities of today's educational communicator will greatly influence assessment programs of the future.

This book is intended to help educators at all levels do a better job of communicating with their constituents. There are no panaceas. Nor can we guarantee to head off angry citizens before they reach the boardroom door.

What is presented is a look at some good communication efforts – programs and practices that have worked at both state and local levels to meet the dissemination challenges of educational assessment programs and the release of test scores.

CHAPTER 1.

Assessment Programs: A Perspective

Although different states and school districts have divergent approaches to educational assessment, all assessment programs have a common goal – to gather data about the achievement of students in schools. Through assessment, states and districts have assumed responsibility for assessing the levels of achievement in certain basic skill areas and reporting these findings to legislators, educators and citizens. The assumption has been that statistics help create a better information base to use in making educational decisions, and indeed, in funding improved educational programs.

Individual states have taken divergent positions in the use of assessment programs. Some states use their assessment programs solely to determine the broad educational needs of children. They assess academic areas for educational goals they consider to have the highest priority (e.g., reading and mathematics skills).

Others have programs with overtones of school evaluation. These states attempt to judge how effectively the school or school district is delivering services to its students and community.

Most assessment programs have a research component that attempts to relate student achievement to other factors such as student attitudes, socioeconomic status of the community, class size, and drop-out rates, to name a few.

In many cases, educational assessment programs have been irretrievably intertwined with the issue of educational accountability. Accountability programs have become prominent during the last decade for a number of reasons: the increasing costs of educational services, concern over the inequality of educational opportunity for minorities, an urge to increase the schools' "efficiency."

As accountability programs were formulated, the demands for data on student achievement and on selected related factors

emerged. But, state and federal leaders found little such data available. State and district assessment programs were begun, in some cases, to provide this missing information.

The advent of assessment programs was given additional impetus by the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. Titles I and III of this act made large amounts of money available to states and local school districts. Recipients had to make a commitment to allocate these funds on a proven "need" basis and to evaluate the effectiveness of the expenditures with reliable data. (Title III in fact required a needs assessment as a basis for fund allocation decisions.) The need for data provided an incentive for many states to begin assessment activities.

Since state assessment programs differ in important ways, it is impossible to predict which program will have to face which specific obstacles. Yet experience reported across the country uncovered a number of common factors that have created serious concerns. These are:

1. Generation and publication of rankings (percentiles) of school and school district scores;
2. Use of socioeconomic data gathered from students (even from anonymous surveys);
3. Use of student attitude surveys (attitude toward self, toward others, toward school, etc.);
4. Use of assessment data to allocate funds to selected schools or districts;
5. Fear of teachers that their performance is being judged by the students' scores;
6. Accusations made by minority groups that the tests are biased;
7. Accusations made by districts that the tests are not valid (or are not reliable); and, the list can continue endlessly.

The following four chapters deal with *analyzing* the problem of disseminating the results of assessment programs, *planning* such a program, *implementing* the program and finally, of crucial importance, the evaluating of these efforts. Twelve basic principles on which effective dissemination programs must be based are highlighted and discussed.

CHAPTER 2.

Analysis: The First Step

Dissemination relating to educational assessment programs cannot be created in a vacuum. It must be based on analysis and help achieve a purpose. It must directly modify, in some way, a receiver's knowledge, attitudes, or ability to do some task.

State departments of education and school districts should not think of communicating educational assessment information to the "public" but to *various* publics. These publics should be rank ordered because different publics can contribute in different degrees to the success of an educational assessment program (or because different people have different needs for assessment information). Proper consideration of the audiences will help assure better understanding of the assessment program through successful communication.

The material presented in the next several pages is partially the result of Michigan's involvement in the Cooperative Accountability Project (CAP). Through CAP, the Michigan Dept. of Education worked with Erwin Bettinghaus and Gerald Miller of Michigan State U. in producing *A Dissemination System for State Accountability Programs.*

> 1 Assessment programs tend to be controversial. The inadequacy of assessment communication has helped illustrate that there is more anger about ideas not understood than there is about bad ideas.

Of course, in some cases there may be valid reason for questioning a test's reliability, statistical analysis techniques or a particular student questionnaire. And there may be people who

simply do not agree philosophically with the use of large scale assessment tests in schools. More often than not, however, such arguments are simply a human reaction to something not completely understood – namely, the objectives and methods of implementing an educational assessment program.

2 **Dissemination must have a purpose. Goals and objectives for dissemination must be clearly stated, and the "targets" of the messages must be pinpointed.**

In theory, communication takes place whenever a source sends some message through some channel to a receiver. This definition, however, is incomplete because it omits a critical consideration: communication usually has a purpose. The sender wants the receiver to react to what has been communicated. In fact, the desired outcome is usually some behaviour modification, whether a change in awareness, knowledge, attitude or ability to do a task.

Dissemination, like communication, should be undertaken with a purpose. It should help accomplish some end. More specifically information disseminated about assessment programs should be designed to directly influence groups of people to do specific things. Assessment-related dissemination should be persuasive in nature.

3 **Dissemination is more than telling people about something. It is an essential process which uses involvement to create a link of understanding between the assessment program and people it affects.**

Within the context of what assessment is all about – the improvement of educational services – the production of persuasive information is both reasonable and desirable. This does not mean "news management" or "propaganda." Instead, it means state departments of education and school districts should make an honest attempt to *market* their assessment programs. Deliberate dissemination efforts should be launched to help people understand the assessment program, to help them relate to the planning function in education, and to help them understand and/or utilize assessment results.

Dissemination is far more than the wide dispersion of test scores (a comparatively simple task). It should be viewed as the total process of implementing an innovation in a social situation. Dissemination does not begin after the tests have been scored. It begins, rather, when an assessment program is first proposed, and includes efforts to involve people in the total process from beginning to end. If dissemination is not seen this way, the problems that accompany lack of commitment to, and support for, an informational effort will surface.

4 **Audiences of an assessment dissemination program are diverse and important for different reasons. Critical audiences should be identified, prioritized and related to the crucial dissemination tasks.**

All too often, those involved in dissemination think of the public as one faceless monolith. This is a mistake, for in reality there are many publics. An educational assessment program affects several distinctly different publics in very different ways . . . and each may require a unique communication effort.

Among the many publics that might be addressed are:

1. Local school superintendents
2. Building principals
3. Teachers of the students tested
4. All teachers in public schools
5. Nonteaching school employes
6. Statewide curriculum groups
7. Educational associations and unions
8. College professors
9. State board of education
10. Legislators

11. Executive branch of government

12. Citizen groups

13. Parent-teacher associations

14. The press

15. Advisory councils

16. State department of education staff

17. Other governmental agencies

18. Parents of students tested

19. Students.

The list is lengthy but by no means inclusive. It could be expanded quite easily, or each public shown could be subdivided. For example, most states (not to mention the number of publics in a large urban school district) have many professional educator associations. Michigan's roster demonstrates the diversity (and underlines the challenge facing a disseminator of assessment information):

1. Michigan Assn. of School Boards

2. Michigan Assn. of School Administrators

3. Michigan Assn. for Supervision and Curriculum Development

4. Michigan Elementary School Principals' Assn.

5. Michigan Secondary School Principals' Assn.

6. Michigan Reading Assn.

7. Michigan Council of Teachers of Mathematics

8. Michigan Assn. of Professors of Educational Administration

9. Michigan Educational Research Assn.

10. Regional associations

11. Associations in other curriculum areas.

Such a substantial list raises a very logical question: "Which publics should we serve?" The answer is not easy because it relates to an understanding of the change process itself. First, a determination must be made on which publics are *most important* to the success of the assessment program. Obviously, all are not equal. Some have to understand what is happening or the data will not be properly collected. Others have to understand what the data means, or there will be no impact on school instruction. Still others have to believe in what is being done, or there will be no funds to do it! The task is to *identify the critical publics in some order of importance.* Then – and only then – can disseminators organize their efforts to make sure priority publics get appropriate information.

5 **Different audiences have different informational needs. These audiences and needs must be identified and accommodated.**

If communication is to be successful – particularly in a persuasive sense – the sender must put himself in the place of the receiver. This means communication efforts should be designed *after* a proper consideration of the characteristics and informational needs of the receivers.

Obviously, publics will differ, sometimes dramatically, when an issue as sensitive as educational assessment is being considered. That is why the communicator has to begin by asking a few key questions:

1. What information does each audience now possess?

2. Is this information correct?

3. What attitude does each audience have toward assessment?

4. Who else is talking to each audience about assessment?

5. How does each audience feel about the state department of education or local school district as a source of information?

6. Does each audience and the state department of education/local school district share the same basic definitions of terms?

To ignore answers to such questions is to guarantee an ineffective dissemination effort.

Depending on the circumstances, it may or may not be difficult to gather the information needed to answer these questions. A speaker in a workshop situation or an instructor for a small college class would find it relatively simple to design a written survey or even quiz the audience verbally to assess knowledge and feelings.

In other situations, it may be necessary to gather the data on an impromptu basis or to use secondary sources. For example, to prepare communications for an audience of school superintendents who have been involved with the assessment program in some detail, a good start might be to review past communication efforts for content and timing. Next, contact a few superintendents to discuss whether their colleagues are likely to understand the information you want to communicate to them. Or review the superintendents' association publication to see if it reveals the membership's attitudes toward assessment.

In summary there must be a deliberate attempt to learn the receivers' current attitudes and knowledge – to become receiver-oriented. Whether the effort to gather the necessary information is highly structured, moderately intensive, or even hit-and-miss, it's obviously better to gather some data than to shoot in the dark.

CHAPTER 3.

Planning a Dissemination Program

Without diligent planning and the application of the right resources, there cannot be adequate dissemination. And without adequate dissemination even the very best educational assessment program has no impact. More likely, it will collapse, a victim of its own communication weakness.

> 6 **Determine the dissemination objectives before designing the communication activities.**

Start planning dissemination by considering what the purpose of communicating with a particular public will be – or, in other words, what behavior change is desired in whom.

Unfortunately, many disseminators never think about behavior change. They give speeches, mail letters, issue reports and conduct conferences with no idea of what they really want to accomplish. If the publics and their needs are varied, which of course they are, then what is communicated should depend on which public is being addressed.

In most educational assessment dissemination programs, the **four basic goals** are to:

1. Make people *aware*
2. Help people be able to *cooperate*
3. Convince people to *support*
4. Assist people to *utilize.*

These goals, of course, apply to different publics in differing degrees. Some audiences are important because they help generate

the data; others because they utilize the results in one way or another. For example, it is very important that school principals *comply* with the established procedures for collecting student achievement data and returning them to the test processor. On the other hand, it is unnecessary for a local Parent Teacher Association to *comply* with assessment procedures, but it is very important that the members be *aware* of the program. It is not too important that superintendents be knowledgeable about the details of test construction, but it is vital that they *support* the assessment effort. It is imperative, therefore, to match audiences and goals by asking, **"What does this audience need to do or know for the assessment program to succeed?"**

The four communication-oriented goals are admittedly broad, but they can easily be subdivided into specific objectives for each audience. Properly constructed objectives will specify what the audience is, what the given conditions are, what behavior is expected, and how it will be determined if behavior is changed.

7 **A dissemination program should help build common meanings for terms.**

The construction of communication objectives has an interesting side benefit: it is somewhat sobering because the objectives tend to reveal how little is really accomplished, in a behavioral sense, by the dissemination steps constructed so laboriously. For example, the carefully prepared speech to 100 teachers may really boil down to only one objective – prodding those teachers who are opinion leaders to support the assessment program.

But on the very same day the dissemination specialist may face another situation requiring a detailed set of communication objectives. School principals participating in a workshop on the interpretation of report forms must gain a comprehension of what the statistical results mean. The construction of objectives describing these essential elements will be very helpful in planning such workshops.

Problems of Definition

One of the difficulties encountered most often in any communication situation is the misunderstanding of terms. This

problem is frequently brushed aside – assuming the publics all talk the same language – but confusion over terms is a real stumbling block with assessment programs.

All words have definitions in the dictionary. Unfortunately, many words have several definitions. Shared definitions must be established and adequate time must be allowed for them to sink in. In fact specific messages must be generated by those responsible for interpretation and dissemination solely to establish common definitions for key words among *all* the publics.

8 Who talks makes a difference. The credibility of informational sources is a critical consideration for dissemination planners.

Who talks is critical because different sources generate different responses.

For example, there are several potential sources of information about a state assessment program including:

1. The state department of education as an arm of state government;
2. The chief state school officer or his assistants;
3. The assessment program supervisor; and,
4. The individual consultants who work for the program.

The problem is that all of these sources do not have the same credibility. The state department's official pronouncements may be received with skepticism by a public that refuses to believe "government" can speak with candor and honesty. To a certain extent, this reaction will extend to department staff members if the public believes they are mouthing the "company line." And school districts experience the same problem.

This phenomenon cannot be ignored. All other considerations notwithstanding, the only thing that matters in the final analysis is whether the receiver believes the communication is honest. Therefore, the communicator must determine what the audience thinks of all potential sources as the dissemination steps are designed. And sources must be chosen with care.

An individual acting as a spokesman about assessment should be regarded by the audience as competent and trustworthy. This should be an important consideration any time a speaker is

selected for a particular engagement, any time a letter is sent to school superintendents, principals or parents and any time someone has to answer a telephoned question. Obviously, the assessment program will be ahead of the game if its director is perceived as competent and trustworthy.

9 **Involvement of key people and groups heightens commitment.**

It is not necessarily possible to communicate everything to everyone. Instead, specific messages should be sent to different publics for different purposes. While all audiences are not equally vital to the success of the assessment program, some people *must* be supportive or *nothing* will get done.

It is all too common when introducing new programs to pay attention only to those who are *formal* approvers – persons with the power within a bureaucracy to allow a program to exist or not to exist. Yet the *informal* approvers – a key university professor, a respected superintendent, or, in a given school district, key teachers – are often even more important. As powerful opinion leaders, they can aid or handicap an assessment dissemination program. They cannot be ignored.

Key opinion leaders are likely to support an assessment program if they are involved. Besides, their involvement gives a department of education or school district the chance to get professional advice and creates a feedback loop to help judge the effectiveness of the program.

Involvement can appear at many levels and in many forms. Here, for example, are a few suggestions for state departments which with adaptations could help school districts:

1. Establish an advisory council composed of ten to fifteen key persons to meet monthly with assessment staff to hear about and react to program plans.

2. Establish a technical advisory group of three to five people from colleges and local school districts to help with technical problems.

3. Use local districts to help develop learner objectives and test items for use in the assessment program.

4. Establish a research support unit to help college professors and students use the data being collected.

5. Involve state and regional level curriculum groups in the interpretation of data generated by the program.

6. Include local school personnel in presentations made to educators about the assessment program.

Some disseminators avoid involving other people because: (1) it takes effort; (2) they do not want the "family skeletons" to be revealed; and/or (3) they do not want the advisors to think they are being given formal approval power.

Involvement, of course, does take effort, but it is well worth it. Family skeletons tend to be revealed to a certain extent, but the old adage about "honesty pays" still holds. There is no reason why advisors cannot live with the fact that they are not final decisionmakers as long as they are told this at the beginning and reminded once in a while throughout their period of involvement.

10 **Assessment program disseminators should establish an early working relationship with public relations staff members or consultants.**

Most state departments of education and an increasing number of school districts have a public information office that specializes in communication, distributes news releases and produces a wide variety of publications. Such an office can be a significant asset in the dissemination effort. Yet it should be remembered that dissemination (as defined in this book) involves more than just reaching publics through the mass media. Therefore, it is best for those responsible for assessment program dissemination to establish early a working relationship with the information office. Answering key questions, such as the ones following, can help assure a cooperative effort by clearly establishing ground rules.

1. Who can distribute an assessment press release?

2. Who should compose the assessment press release?

3. Who should approve an assessment press release?

4. Who can authorize the composition and publication of an assessment report?

5. Who can authorize the creation and distribution of audiovisual materials relevant to the assessment program?

6. Who controls the speakers' bureau on assessment affairs?

7. Who has authority to call a press conference to discuss assessment results?

The answers should help establish a positive working relationship between the assessment program staff and the public information office.

11 Effective dissemination requires adequate human and financial resources.

Dissemination is an important part of any assessment program. It must be given attention and it must be given adequate resources – time, money, materials, and people.

To a certain extent, most staff members are involved in dissemination whenever they answer a letter, return a telephone call or make a speech. But there is a need in a state education department and most large school districts for a staff person to be ultimately responsible for all dissemination activities. A good beginning point might be one dissemination person for every four assessment staff members.

Looking at the potential scope of a statewide effort, it has to be recognized that particular state characteristics have a bearing on the size of the dissemination staff and its operating style. Hawaii, as a one-district state, would operate much differently from Michigan with almost 600 districts. The state assessment program staff cannot be expected to contact directly all of the state's teachers, principals or superintendents. They must, instead, train intermediate or regional-level people who can, in turn, train others.

The train-the-trainer method is well known and has been applied in many different situations. An assessment coordinator in each local district can serve as the link between the state department and the local school staff. The coordinator would

receive the various publications and attend workshops to become trained in assessment matters. Or else an intermediate district staff person, if an intermediate school district or regional school office exists, can be trained to assist the local assessment coordinators.

Although this method has the advantage of extending the capability of the assessment staff to reach large numbers of people, it risks introducing error into the system. The trickle-down effect can apply to the extent that the integrity of the information can be assured through, perhaps, two levels. Beyond that things begin to get a little muddled.

This can be avoided to some degree by producing printed and/or audiovisual materials for the local or regional person to use in training sessions. This will at least help preserve the accuracy of basic facts.

There is no fixed guideline to use for dissemination expenditures. It depends upon the state, the length of time the program has been in operation, its goals and its complexity. A reasonable figure for an ongoing assessment program, not including personnel costs, might be 10% to 15% of the program's budget, exclusive of developmental costs. So, if it costs $300,000 to print tests, score answer sheets, generate printouts, ship materials, and produce statistical summaries, it would be reasonable to spend from $30,000 to $45,000 more on reports, AV materials, letters, travel, etc. The overall expenditure is a trade-off; if you spend less than necessary, you will sacrifice effectiveness.

The very best tests, the most accurate scoring and analysis, and the most efficient method of packing and shipping will mean nothing if the assessment program is not understood, appreciated, and utilized – and on schedule. These are all dissemination-related, but their importance is all too often ignored when resources are allocated.

In summary, when planning a dissemination program, attention should be focused on:

1. Building communication objectives that clarify what specific effect is desired for each particular audience;

2. Helping audiences understand what assessment means (because words mean different things to different people);

3. Selecting trusted, well-known sources to originate messages;

4. Involving key people and groups to increase the likelihood of their commitment;

5. Building good relationships with the public information office;

6. Providing adequate human and financial resources to support the dissemination efforts.

CHAPTER 4.

The Communication Phase: Plans Into Action

The general principles of dissemination discussed in the previous pages were well tested in 1973 when the Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP) switched from norm-referenced to objective-referenced tests. The new program was a dramatic departure from the old one and dictated that various publics acquire new skills, attitudes, and understanding. FIGURE 1 on page 25 shows some of the contrasts between the new program and the one used from 1969 through 1973.

The dissemination staff generally operated under the four broad goals previously outlined:

- **To raise awareness;**
- **To elicit support;**
- **To obtain compliance;**
- **To encourage utilization.**

The primary audience for Michigan's dissemination efforts was the local school district staffs. These were the people who would be collecting the data and utilizing the feedback.

Existing Preliminary Structure

The 1973 dissemination efforts did not begin in a vacuum. Disseminators built on an existing structure and were able to capitalize on the products of previous years, including:

- An advisory council that had met approximately monthly. Membership background was varied.

- An existing structure of publications: *Objectives and Procedures* (outlined program plans); *Individual Student Report* (interpretation of public data); *School and District Report* (interpretation of school and district data); *Technical Report; Local District Results* (listing of scores for each district).

- Each district had been *required* to appoint a local assessment coordinator to implement the collection of data and reporting of results.

- Routine workshops for local district administrators had been held at least twice each year across the state.

- The state's curriculum specialists in reading and mathematics had been involved in constructing the performance objectives.

- Several local districts had been involved in constructing and validating the items that comprised the new tests.

And, although not necessarily a welcome fact, the Michigan assessment program had gained considerable attention during the past few years. It seemed everyone was interested in discovering how (or whether) the new tests would work.

Michigan's 1973 Assessment Dissemination Program

The assessment staff designed the dissemination program to give people enough time to become aware of the changes in the program and to learn the new vocabulary of objective-referenced tests. The local assessment coordinators trained local teachers with aids provided by the Michigan Dept. of Education. The dissemination effort was also aimed at teachers not directly involved in the testing and at parents of the students tested. These efforts did not stop with the collection of data. They extended, in fact, through the utilization phases of the program.

The dissemination plan adopted by the Michigan assessment staff called for a variety of activities. To help the reader benefit from some of the ideas tried in Michigan, they have been listed below with a brief explanation:

FIGURE 1

Revised Michigan Educational Assessment Program

Old Program (1969-1973)	New Program (1973-1974)
Content: Word Relationships Mathematics Reading Mechanics of Written English	Content: Word Relationships Mathematics Reading
Tests: Norm-referenced Timed	Tests: Objective-referenced Untimed
Scoring Systems: T-scores	Scoring Systems: Attainment of objectives T-scores (Word Relationships only)
Reporting Systems: Student means & percentiles School means & percentiles District means & percentiles	Reporting Systems: Percent attainment for objectives for students, schools, districts, state Student, school, & district means and percentiles for Word Relationships
Grades Tested: Four & Seven	Grades Tested: Four & Seven
Testing Date: January	Testing Date: Late September

1. A one-page letter was sent to all superintendents from the state superintendent alerting them to forthcoming changes in the program.

2. A letter was sent to superintendents and local coordinators from the department's research director with an attachment describing the new program in brief. Recipients of the letter were encouraged to reproduce the attachment and share it with building principals and teachers.

3. An eight-minute color, narrated filmstrip was developed for local administrators to use with all teachers in early September. The filmstrip gave a general introduction to the new program. Copies were distributed to each school district.

4. A 4- x 8-inch information card was printed and provided with the filmstrip for distribution to all teachers. This card summarized the filmstrip content.

5. Several news releases were sent out and articles were printed in state education media.

6. Staff members made countless presentations and speeches about the new tests to various educator groups across the state.

7. Briefings were held for local assessment coordinators in early September.

8. On test day, take-home cards (4- x 6-inch) which capsulized the purpose of the assessment program were provided to each local district. Students were to give the cards to their parents on the day the tests were administered.

9. An 18-minute color, narrated filmstrip was developed for use with fourth- and seventh-grade teachers to instruct them in how to interpret the test results. Copies were distributed to all school districts.

10. In-depth interpretation workshops were held in November across the state. These sessions were conducted by selected local educators and department staff members. They were

attended by key local staff members (in most cases a curriculum coordinator, key principal or selected teachers) chosen by each district superintendent.

11. "Brief-folios" were produced for the workshop participants. These informational packets included detailed material on interpretation of data as well as other handouts.

12. Several communications were directed to the state Board of Education, including use of the filmstrip described in (3) above.

13. "Regular" publications were developed and distributed. An exception was the *Local District Results,* which was replaced by a new report titled *Statewide Summary.* No comprehensive district-by-district listing of scores was published by the state.

14. Contacts were established with Michigan reading and mathematics curriculum groups to help the department interpret the statewide test data and critique the test items and objectives.

15. Statewide results were communicated to state legislators by the department's legislative aide.

16. Data were made available to researchers across the nation for use in educational studies.

17. Briefings were conducted for Department of Education staff members not involved in the assessment program.

18. Innumerable individual telephone contacts, correspondence and on-site consultations were conducted by staff members.

The number of communication activities dictated that the dissemination program be carefully timed. Consequently, a detailed time-line was developed to show the beginning and ending dates of each activity (see Figure II, page 29). The importance of such a planning chart should not be underestimated. The dissemination steps must take place in a logical sequence, and must be related to other phases of the assessment program. The

two key points in the illustration are the test administration dates and the date of receipt of test results by the local districts. The major dissemination tasks revolved around these two dates.

Resources Required for Michigan's Dissemination Program

The 18 dissemination steps used in Michigan cannot easily be assigned dollar costs. In some cases, the tasks were included in the regular responsibilities of a staff member. In other cases, an outside consultant was hired. Costs have been outlined where possible.

1. **Program Reports.** The basic program reports were composed by staff members and printed by either the department or the test support contractor. Some were distributed by the department; others by the test support contractor with the test materials.

2. **Magazine articles.** Articles and newsletter announcements were composed by staff members as part of their regular duties.

3. **Filmstrips.** A master negative of a color filmstrip with 135 frames was commercially produced for about $3,500 (including the narration). Packaging, mailing, and duplication costs were about $4.50 per set.

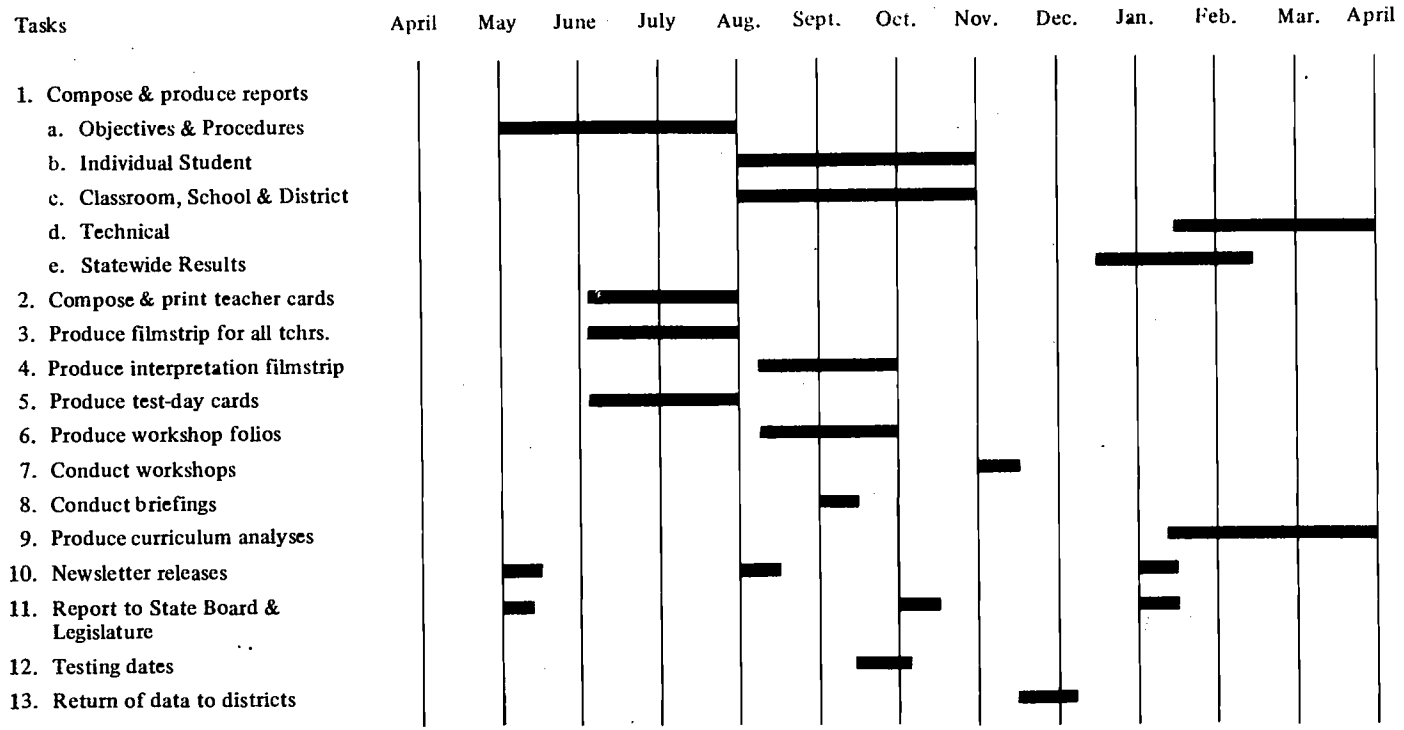
4. **Test-day Take-home Cards.** The test-day take-home cards were printed on 65# cover stock, 4 x 6 inches. They were composed and printed commercially for $2,500 (320,000 copies).

5. **Teacher-Cards.** The 4- x 8-inch teacher cards to accompany the filmstrip were printed commercially on 65# cover stock for approximately $1,600 (100,000 copies).

6. **Workshop Brief-Folios** (information kits). The assembly and printing of workshop materials (composed by department staff) were done commercially for about $500 (1,000 copies). This packet contained about 15 sheets, printed on both sides, and glued on one edge.

Figure II

Timeline for Dissemination



7. **Workshops.** The department staff conducted seven briefings and eight workshops for assessment coordinators. Costs were minimal, consisting only of the usual travel expenses.

8. **Utilization Studies.** Two contracts for $1,500 each were awarded for the interpretation of assessment data to two statewide curriculum groups. The $1,500 did not completely cover their costs. Both organizations had to rely upon membership generosity to help offset the actual costs of producing the analysis.

9. **Staff Resources.** In 1973, the Michigan Educational Assessment Program staff included a director, three consultants, one analyst and three secretaries. One consultant was assigned dissemination duties and was assisted by the other persons as necessary. (The staff has since been expanded.)

Result-of-Experience Ideas

The dissemination program undertaken by the Michigan Educational Assessment Program in 1973 was effective in many ways. Educators, for example, were well aware of the changes in the program and completed the tasks required of them. Some educators followed department suggestions and tried to weave the test data into their own testing programs and use the data to improve instruction. Other school officials, unfortunately, did not, and, in fact, limited MEAP's impact by restricting use of the data.

A review of the process showed that dissemination to legislators, the State Board of Education and parents was inefficient. It also became apparent that improvement was needed in the reporting procedures to teachers whose students were tested. Appropriate modifications were made in 1974, and further changes are planned for the future. Some of the following result-of-experience ideas are being added to the Michigan dissemination effort:

- A "test results folder" can be developed and used to transmit data to teachers about their students and classrooms. This folder, attractively composed and printed, should contain essential information about how to read

the data and utilize it. The folder would eliminate the need for a teacher having to resort to reading a booklet every time he or she wishes to review the data.

- Different types of reports of the statewide data can be prepared for the three most important audiences of the assessment program – the legislators, the state board of education, and the local district administrators. The first two reports should be brief and nontechnical with great use of visual displays of the data.

- Specialized report summaries should be prepared for teachers to use with parents. The usual computer printed format given to teachers is too imposing for parents. A simple summary would be preferred.

- Special efforts can be made to communicate with university teachers about the assessment program. These people can benefit from the data in their research efforts. Generally, they have not been fully aware of what data existed.

- Attempts should also be made to make instructors in colleges of education knowledgeable about the assessment program so they can communicate accurate information to their students. It is not unusual to find a misinformed college teacher passing along erroneous information about the assessment program to hundreds of public school teachers and administrators in a year.

- The state department of education should prepare training materials and workshops to help local administrators learn how to release test data to various publics. Most administrators are not knowledgeable in this area and do not know how to make their test data understandable to parents – nor do they necessarily know how to help teachers use the data properly.

- State department of education personnel should attempt to use local school district personnel in training sessions. Such people might even serve as authors of reports or special interpretations of the assessment data. These activities would help get people "involved" and their

contributions generally will increase the department's credibility. For example, instead of having department personnel discuss statewide math test results with the press, it would be better to have the president of the state mathematics association do it.

Of course, there are many other suggestions that would improve a given dissemination effort. Perhaps the ones listed above will serve as mind ticklers so the reader can generate others.

A good dissemination program does not concern itself solely with the reporting of test data. It includes all the steps taken to involve people, to inform them, and to help assure that the test data is used to improve educational programs.

CHAPTER 5.

Evaluation

12 Effective dissemination activities need strong evaluation components.

Throughout this book, the need for varied dissemination approaches for different types of audiences to meet varied communication objectives is stressed. And continuous evaluations are necessary to determine whether or not the objectives were met for the particular audience.

The use of feedback (evaluations) in a communication setting should not be a new concept for anyone. Everyone uses feedback daily as they talk to their friends and coworkers. Facial expressions or the tone of voice allow the listener and speaker to determine subtleties in a conversation. Ignoring such feedback guarantees ineffective communication.

Advertising firms constantly use evaluations to determine the effect of their campaigns. Most persons have received a phone call from a survey company wanting to know how they felt about a particular product or advertisement.

Evaluation of communication is not something strange or new. Yet educators often act as if they don't need it. Speeches are given, workshops are conducted, and thousands of reports are written without ever asking the key question, "Is this effort accomplishing the objective?"

In fact, to make matters actually worse, far too many evaluations focus solely on how many messages were sent. This means that a "good" dissemination campaign is one that generates a lot of newspaper clippings and several thick reports. Such "evaluations" are worthless. Forget the volume of messages — concentrate instead on the effects on the receivers.

Educational evaluators today talk about "formative" and "summative" evaluations. In the simplest terms, the former refers to the gathering of data to modify, if necessary, a program as it is being developed. The latter designates a judgment about the final effects of a program. Both approaches can be used in the evaluation of dissemination programs.

Formative Evaluation

Most writers revise and edit a manuscript several times themselves before submitting it to others for their comments and revisions. This is formative evaluation in a very basic sense. Or, as another example, consider the state assessment staff that plans a workshop for local school principals. If the staff members are wise, they will at least discuss their plans and materials with some key advisors, or, better still, actually conduct a try-out session for a small group of principals. More information can be obtained by asking workshop participants to complete a survey immediately following the sessions. Such feedback can help identify problem areas that were not detected during preparation.

It is wise to gather input from others while developing each activity in a dissemination program. The input is particularly valuable when it comes from a sampling of the audience you are trying to reach. Depending on circumstances, it may be advisable to repeat this cycle several times.

Summative Evaluation

An evaluation at the end of a particular dissemination activity or program should determine whether specified objectives were attained. For example, if the program was designed to help local district assessment coordinators comply with required tasks, there should be some means of determining whether they did. This could involve monitoring test administration in several local schools, tabulating errors detected by the test processing company, or surveying the coordinators to determine if they felt they were adequately prepared. Each of these three approaches has its merits and liabilities. The important thing is to try to learn whether objectives were attained.

In a larger context, a complete dissemination campaign might be directed at school superintendents (or some other public) over a long period of time to gain support for the assessment program. In this case, a statewide public opinion survey utilizing personal interviews of several hundred people could be taken. While this method can be quite expensive, it yields data that can be invaluable.

A less expensive method would be to utilize a doctoral student or staff person to conduct a mail survey. Such surveys can be completed for minimal costs; e.g., paper, postage, and processing.

The Michigan Dept. of Education found all three methods to be useful. Samples are featured on pp. 36-39. Also included is an evaluation form used to survey parents in the Madison, Wis., schools on their knowledge and opinions of testing in the district. The form was the inside back cover of the February 1974 issue of the school district's publication, *The Learning Tree.* The issue focused on testing and evaluation. (See p. 40.)

Summary

Dissemination programs should be evaluated as they are being devised, as they are implemented, and when they have been completed. Evaluations should be done in terms of the original objectives to determine whether the desired behavioral changes were accomplished for the audience in question. Without such evaluations, one can only guess about effectiveness or merely count messages. Neither is appropriate.

RA-3087
4/74

Michigan Department of Education
Research, Evaluation and Assessment Services

MICHIGAN EDUCATIONAL ASSESSMENT PROGRAM (MEAP)

Box 420, Lansing, Michigan 48902

1973–74 MEAP SUPERINTENDENT'S FEEDBACK SURVEY

1. Please indicate the total enrollment of your school district by checking the appropriate box.

   a. ☐10,000 and above b. ☐4,500 to 9,999 c. ☐below 4,500

Each of the following statements or questions pertains to the 1973-74 Michigan Educational Assessment Program. Please CHECK a box below each statement which best describes the DEGREE to which you feel the statement applies to your district.

2. The 1973-74 objective-referenced test results are MORE USEFUL than those of the past four years.

☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
1	2	3	4	5
less useful				more useful

3. The objectives TESTED are generally ACCEPTABLE in my district.

☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
1	2	3	4	5
acceptable				not acceptable

4. I am generally SUPPORTIVE of the new objective-referenced tests used by the MEAP.

☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
1	2	3	4	5
not supportive				supportive

5. My school board is generally SUPPORTIVE of the new objective-referenced tests used by the MEAP.

☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
1	2	3	4	5
not supportive				supportive

6. My fourth and seventh grade teachers generally regard the objective-referenced individual pupil results in Reading and Mathematics as a VALUABLE tool.

☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
1	2	3	4	5
very valuable				of no value

7. My fourth and seventh grade teachers generally regard the individual pupil results on Word Relationships as a VALUABLE tool.

☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
1	2	3	4	5
very valuable				of no value

8. The district and school results on Word Relationships are VALUABLE tools.

☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
1	2	3	4	5
of no value				very valuable

9. Do you support the inclusion of the Word Relationships test in future assessment batteries?
(Check ALL that apply.)
   a. ☐ NO
   b. ☐ YES, at fourth grade ONLY
   c. ☐ YES, at seventh grade ONLY
   d. ☐ YES, at local district OPTION
   e. ☐ YES, on a pupil SAMPLING basis

10. The 8-minute filmstrip, "Michigan's New Teacher Aid," was designed to present general information about the MEAP to all teachers. Please estimate the PERCENT OF TEACHERS in your district who SAW this filmstrip.

    a. ☐0–25% b. ☐26–50% c. ☐51–75% d. ☐76–100%

11. Did you feel this filmstrip, "Michigan's New Teacher Aid," was helpful to your staff?

    a. ☐YES b. ☐NO

12. The 18-minute filmstrip, "Interpreting the Results of the 1973–74 MEAP," was designed to provide specific information about the MEAP tests to fourth and seventh grade teachers. Please estimate the PERCENT of FOURTH and SEVENTH GRADE TEACHERS in your district who SAW this filmstrip.

    a. ☐0–25% b. ☐26–50% c. ☐51–75% d. ☐76–100%

13. Did you feel this filmstrip, "Interpreting the Results of the 1973–74 MEAP," was helpful to your staff?

    a. ☐YES b. ☐NO

RA-3079
1/74

Michigan Department of Education
RESEARCH, EVALUATION AND ASSESSMENT SERVICES
Michigan Educational Assessment Program
Box 420, Lansing, Michigan 48902

ASSESSMENT COORDINATOR'S FEEDBACK SURVEY

1. Please indicate by CHECKING the appropriate box the total ENROLLMENT of your school district.
   - ☐ a. 10,000 and above
   - ☐ b. 4,500 to 9,999
   - ☐ c. below 4,500

2. Please CIRCLE the number below which best describes the DEGREE to which you feel you were informed through the Michigan Educational Assessment Program workshops, manuals, magazine articles, etc. about the changes in the Program and the new test administration procedures.

   1 2 3 4 5 6 7

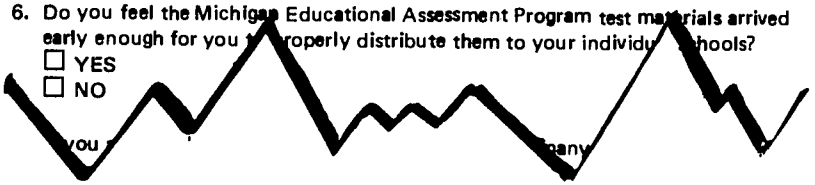
   Inadequate Adequate

3. Please indicate in the space below any particular educational assessment information NEEDS you had which were not met by the Department's efforts.

4. Did you receive sufficient quantities of the materials to properly administer the assessment tests?
   - ☐ YES
   - ☐ NO

5. If you answered "No" to the previous question, were you able to obtain the necessary materials from the intermediate school district offices?
   - ☐ a. Yes; all I needed
   - ☐ b. Some of them
   - ☐ c. None

6. Do you feel the Michigan Educational Assessment Program test materials arrived early enough for you to properly distribute them to your individual schools?
   - ☐ YES
   - ☐ NO



TEACHER ATTITUDES
1974-75 MICHIGAN EDUCATIONAL ASSESSMENT PROGRAM
TEST RESULTS

A Paper Submitted to the Staff of the
Michigan Educational Assessment Program
by Anthony Aquino

1. Which category best describes the location of your school?
   - Tri-county Metropolitan Area (Wayne, Oakland and Macomb counties)
   - Lower Peninsula, excluding Tri-county Metropolitan Area
   - Upper Peninsula

2. Which instructional area do you have as primary teaching responsibility? (Check both if responsibility is equal.)
   - Reading-English
   - Mathematics

3. Which assessment test reports have you received from the testing session conducted in the fall of 1974? (Check ALL that apply.)
   - Individual Student Report (Computer Printout)
   - Classroom Listing Report (Computer Printout)
   - Classroom Summary Report (Computer Printout)
   - Individual Student and Classroom Reports – Explanatory Materials
   - None of the Above

4. When did you receive the MAJORITY of these reports listed in Item 3? (Check ONE only.)
   - November 1974
   - December 1974
   - January 1975
   - February 1975
   - March 1975
   - I have not received any of these materials.

5. Have you studied the assessment test results for your students?
   - Yes
   - No

6. How well prepared are you to make use of the assessment test results?
   - Very well prepared
   - Well prepared
   - Not very well prepared

7. Do you have access to the total set of state minimal objectives for mathematics and/or communication skills (either your own copy or a building copy)? (Check the appropriate bo[illegible] a. and b.)
   - Mathematics
     - Yes
     - No
   - [illegible]mmunicati[illegible]

PARENTS ARE ASKED TO RESPOND HERE

to determine what you know about testing and if you want any changes

The following survey is being taken to determine what parents know about their child's school testing program and what changes, if any, they feel should be made in the evaluation process. Fill in the questionnaire and send it to:

Public Information Office
Testing Survey
Madison Public Schools
545 West Dayton
Madison, WI 53703

The results will be discussed in a future issue of The Learning Tree.

CLIP AND MAIL

Please Circle or Check Your Responses

1. What type of testing program is used at your child's school?
   A. Criterion-Reference
   B. Traditional Examination
   C. Combination
2. Has your child ever been involved with any other type of testing program? Yes____ No____
   What method?_____
3. Has your child taken standardized tests given by the school?
   Yes____ No____
4. What do you expect a standardized test to reveal?
   A. How much you child knows.
   B. How well your child can learn.
   C. How well your child is doing compared to the other children.
   D. Other_____
5. What do you expect a classroom test to reveal?
   A. How much your child knows.
   B. How well your child can learn.
   C. How well your child is doing compared to the other children.
   D. Other_____
6. Do you think that there should be more/less standardized testing?_____
   _____
7. Do you think classroom exams should test: A. Content knowledge B. Concepts C. Combination
8. Are you satisfied with your child's testing program at his school? Yes_____ No_____
9. In what ways do you think your child's testing program can be improved?_____
   _____
10. What school does your child attend? _____

CHAPTER 6.

Regional Training: One State's Story

Note: The following chapter is a series of recollections, impressions, and assessments by the authors of their experiences during the first-time release of statewide test scores in Maryland. It is written in that style and reflects their personal as well as objective views of this experience.

After the first man ate an oyster and lived, those who followed were able to go through the experience with substantially less trauma. If assessment can be related to an oyster, we (the Maryland State Dept. of Ed.) ate the oyster.

Quite candidly, those associated with the Maryland Dept. of Education in 1974 approached the first-time release of test results in panic. This decidedly negative attitude largely resulted from Maryland's accountability program being initiated under a legislative gun. The state's education establishment had had little to say about the original legislation.

Although the law provided two years of lead time, it soon became apparent that development of a full-blown accountability program would take longer than the time allowed. When the deadline for assessment neared, there was little choice. During the first year assessment would mean standardized tests.

The department proceeded on the assumption that scores would be low where they ought to be high, and lower still where they ought to be just low, and that some people would not be satisfied no matter what the results.

There were three ways – all chilling – in which the data could have been presented; the *statewide summary,* the *district-by-district report,* and the *school-by-school* report. The most detailed

report has the deepest pitfalls. Invidious comparisons ("best school in the state," "worst school in the state") would result in media comment. Other potential nightmares included demands by many of parents that their children be transferred from this "dumb" school to that "smart" one, or that this principal or that superintendent seek other employment.

Under circumstances like these, panic was entirely rational. But state agencies have leadership responsibilities, and leadership is what they must offer. Here's how Maryland's Dept. of Education worked regionally to help local district representatives understand their test results and prepare for dissemination:

> **The single most effective piece of advice a state education official can offer local school systems is that they release their school test scores as soon after they get them as possible . . . and before the state department of education does it.**

The payoffs for this strategy are manifold:

- Random advance release by local school systems reduces the likelihood of system-by-system comparison.

- Advance release gives local school districts the advantage of initiative. Waiting for statewide release puts the district in the uncomfortable position of simply reacting to questions — questions that can often amplify trivia and ignore substance.

- Local system release helps develop a greater sophistication among reporters and the public about test results. It also reduces the likelihood of public panic when the state report comes out.

Local release places a heavy burden on principals to explain the test results. Unfortunately, some districts just cut them loose to make the best of it, and it's no wonder most principals were petrified by the prospect. In all cases principals are entitled to all the support they can get.

The Maryland State Dept. of Education held a series of regional workshops, each just half a day long. A limited number of principals from each local school system — at least one representing elementary, middle, and secondary schools — were invited.

Central office administrators were involved in the program and the information specialists of the districts that had one also took part.

Participants were told **what, when** and **how** test results would be released by the State Department of Education. This provided background and served to stimulate interest in the workshop.

An outside consultant discussed techniques for the local release of test results. The presentation centered on the public relations aspects of assessment dissemination. Participants were given insight into what the public knew about the program, what types of information they would want, and the best channels of communication for delivering the information.

The consultant also used the small group approach to help participants identify key publics in their local districts and the most promising communication techniques for reaching each.

Advance copies of district test scores were distributed for review by the participants. A member of the National School Public Relations Assn. (NSPRA) worked with each group (district). Potential problem areas were identified and evaluated from a communicator's point of view.

Using their own test scores, participants worked to isolate the messages that would go to key audiences. The messages, channel of communication and timeline were reported district-by-district to the entire audience. (This was feasible because only 5-10 districts were represented at each workshop.) The session ended with questions on both communication and testing mechanics.

For this process to work, the participants had to go home and share their new-found expertise with their colleagues. As they were dismissed, they were urged to repeat this program at staff meetings back home.

One of the insights gained from experience was that principals are often unfamiliar with the "numbers game" called test data interpretation.

Beware of Statisticians

The natural impulse in attacking such a problem is to assemble the test specialists and statisticians to explain. **But beware of this seemingly simple approach.** Statisticians and test specialists enjoy talking to one another, and they do that very well. But they have trouble with educators. The evidence: Everything goes well until somebody asks a question. It's all downhill from there.

If you have a test specialist or statistician on your staff who

can popularize the presentation, you are in proximity to a rare jewel. If not, have them work very closely with your information specialists as they prepare their explanations.

A local districtwide release, on the heels of local school release, requires planning. Local districts with public information specialists are well equipped to handle that planning. In Maryland, local public information specialists offered a hand to school systems lacking such expertise.

Some local superintendents seek "standard" fill-in-the-blanks news releases. Reflection suggests that is not a particularly good idea. It carries with it a degree of news orchestration that is inconsistent with developing public confidence. More importantly, standardized releases prevent the tailoring of local information to local audiences. But the development of a statewide fact sheet is very much in order. How many kids were tested, in which grades, in which subject? When? At what cost? For what purpose? Statewide uniformity in reporting basic information of this type suggests good communications, not good collusion.

One serious problem in dealing with media is that test results yield only performance data. Reporters will, of course, take a bead on the weakest performance areas and ask, "Why?" Educators will be inclined to speculate defensively, or to philosophize on the limitations of standardized tests, which comes down to the same thing.

Move carefully. It won't do to say you don't know what the results mean or why they are what they are. On the other hand, you risk the charge of "ALIBI" in a big headline if you fill the air with explanations. Try to limit explanations or comments on the results to statements you can document – and be ready to supply the documentation.

The Message

If your test results sag in places, your message needs to contain the same information, whether you are a principal, a local superintendent, or a state superintendent:

1. These are the test results
2. Here is where we did well
3. Here is where we didn't do as well
4. This is what we're doing about that (Don't say this unless you mean it!)

This is not to suggest that the information officer ought to fabricate some public relations gossamer to satisfy the need of number four. *This is one of those instances when, if the school administration doesn't perceive the need to take that step, the public information officer must use full resources to influence policy.* He or she might argue this way: If the tests show that kids in the third grade at Crenson Elementary are doing poorly in reading comprehension, the very least the school can do is give parents reason to hope the situation will improve.

A corollary message that must be put across is this: release of test data is not an end in itself. As part of a larger accountability program, it is a component of a comprehensive effort to upgrade schools because the results give direction to many plans for the future. There is a need to say this early (assuming that it's true, which it was in Maryland). People are going to send letters to the "editor" (and educators and legislators) complaining that the publication of test results is a sterile exercise that costs a lot of money and doesn't help children. It's helpful to be able to point to your earlier statement when these charges pop up.

One problem encountered in Maryland may also bedevil others. As local school systems began releasing their data, they made it known that this was to be part of a larger report to be released later by the state. Enterprising reporters called the state department asking for copies now! They began leaning on the department staff in mid-November, when local system reports began to appear. (The statewide report was not to be presented to the governor, as required by law, until mid-January.) We stood behind our decision to report first to the governor.

The Media

In our survival of this confrontation, there was a message for everyone: How you handle a problem like this depends to a large extent on your ongoing relationship with news media representatives. If you have always been candid and helpful, you can emerge from this experience without damage to your long-term relationship with reporters. A detailed press briefing was scheduled in January, and long before that day the state department staff had tried to anticipate every conceivable line of inquiry. Two university authorities on testing who had nothing to do with the program were brought in to offer their independent interpretations of the meaning of the test results.

The department established a hold-for-release-embargo of 36 hours to avoid having reporters dash off "half-baked and semi-digested" stories. Office *and* home telephone numbers of staff people who could answer questions were given to all reporters. The result – accurate stories and no embargo violations.

Reporters criticized the state's failure to provide analytical or summary data on a report that ran over 600 pages. This material, however, had been omitted deliberately because it would have had to include a comparison of school systems, something we wished to avoid. But the data for comparison were there, and a few reporters went to the trouble of digging out the facts for tabular presentations in rank order. The story that went on the wire service, however, was not one of these, and most school systems were spared public comparison.

Strategies

This report appears to have been concerned more with strategies than techniques. That is not to say that public information techniques and processes should be treated casually. The Maryland State Dept. of Education did organize a tight and careful calendar of activities. It did develop an internal communications system that included superintendents, central office staff, and principals, working through the school systems themselves and through statewide professional organizations. It did organize regional workshops to explain to principals and others: (1) how to understand the test data, (2) what the public would want to know; and, (3) how to develop generally better information attitudes. It did employ to the fullest the available professional resources in the state. It did plan in detail how to serve media people, staff, parents and other key publics.

Would the information strategy have been different if the test results had been better? Probably not. But in all likelihood the department would not have worked so hard to prepare the way for final statewide release. It would not have involved so many people. It would not have helped develop the heightened interest that was generated within local school systems. It would not have swallowed so many aspirins.

In the end, telling the public about assessment results is nothing more than good informational policy applied with a measure of intelligence, or, failing that, sensitivity.

CHAPTER 7.

Local District Dissemination: Preparation, Not Prayer

The state may help the media understand assessment and may even satisfy the information needs of the politicians. And the people at the intermediate or regional level may contribute further to these efforts. But the accountability war and the battles over test scores are won or lost at the local level.

For the school district, and even the local school itself, assessment can be a no-win situation no matter how the scores turn out. If they're low, community reaction is predictable (What's wrong?). If they're high, the immediate question may be, "How come they weren't higher?" In other words, whatever the situation, it is very risky to release test scores without first preparing the community.

Some educators have argued forcefully that assessment test scores are an insignificant measure of student achievement. (Such arguments generally follow the presentation of low scores.) This "cop-out" approach to assessment just doesn't work. As far as the "outside world" is concerned, tests wouldn't be used if they didn't mean anything. So, on the premise that the scores are important to everybody, begin your dissemination efforts by analyzing your publics and understanding what the scores mean to each of them:

- *The students* – it's their scores.
- *The parents* – it's their kids.
- *The taxpayers* – it's their money.
- *The staff* – it's their jobs.

And what about the media? Ordinarily, they are considered a prime "audience" for a message, but in reporting assessment scores they are critical for another reason: the media serve as a funnel, and often a filter, to your other publics. How you approach the

media, therefore, depends on what you need to tell your other publics. All of this may sound overly complex for public relations neophytes, but it need not be. With some intelligent preplanning and preparation, the media will work with you and enhance communication through other channels.

In planning dissemination efforts, first consider *where* the various publics will most likely get the word.

Parents and other citizens will probably hear about it first from the media. For the non-parents, this is usually the end of the dissemination process. If you lose them here, you may have lost them for good.

Parents, however, have another place to turn. That place is the local school. What would be more logical than for the parent who has read about test scores in the paper to call or visit the child's school for confirmation or explanation? And what would be more disastrous to the program than a secretary or teacher who says, "The what?" in response to the inquiry?

Dissemination Begins at Home

Therefore, the dissemination plan, like charity, should begin at home. Before alerting the media, make sure the staff – and that means **all school employes** – understands what student assessment is and what the resulting scores mean. Reporters have been known to zero in immediately on a school whose scores were particularly high – or low. The principal or teachers who shrug off the interviewer with an"Oh, we're not worried about that Mickey Mouse program" will undercut whatever communication efforts are made by the central office (or the immediate district or the state).

The staff component of dissemination planning should begin months before the tests are given. At that time, all members of the staff should be informed about the nature of the educational assessment program, what the tests are supposed to show and what they will not show, and what will be done with the results. (Don't depend on the media coverage the district or state may have received when the assessment program was first adopted to do that job for you. It's surprising how fast people forget.) Be sure that when the scores are released, the staff will know where they came from and what they mean.

When test results become available, another staff briefing should be conducted before scores are presented to the media. Think how your faculty would feel if they first read about the scores in the newspapers.

However, the scores themselves should not be given to staff members so early that results will be gossiped about and leaked out before you're ready for the media. The task is to develop a time line that provides a logical dissemination sequence and gets the test data in the hands of staff as rapidly as possible. After all, the purpose of assessment is to provide information that will help teachers improve instruction. This basic fact alone should dictate placing teachers early in the dissemination timeline.

Following the staff briefings, each principal can begin individual efforts to inform the school community. Then the central office can call a news conference and put the district newsletter to press. Ideally, it can all happen within a week. Utopia would be for each school to make its report to its community coincide with the district-wide release, because the real credibility lies at the local school level.

Once you understand your publics and you've drawn up the dissemination plans, it's time to think about what, and how, you're going to communicate.

First, the Staff

As soon as the scores are available, the central office should hold a detailed briefing for principals. This should include an explanation of the entire program and a thorough analysis of the results, complete with charts and tables. The principals become, in effect, the first line of PR, because they must go back to their schools to conduct detailed briefings of their own. So before they leave, they should be well-versed in the facts as well as the PR "line" the district wants to take. There's a great responsibility here for the person who conducts the briefing to make sure the principals understand how important a proper attitude is to the success or failure of the entire program. Some will grasp it quickly; others will have to be persuaded.

Now it's the principals' turn to take the explanations, the charts, and the peptalks back to their schools and conduct similar sessions for their staffs. And this doesn't mean just the faculty, either. The secretary who answers the phone and the custodian who chats with his neighbor in the barber shop are also part of the school family. They cannot be ignored.

They should not be expected, of course, to master all the educational implications of the scores, but they should have a general picture and understand the significance and purpose of assessment. Remember, to neighbors and casual acquaintances,

they work for the school, and consequently their opinions carry a lot of authority in their social groups. The principal, therefore, should give the entire school staff a general briefing, outlining the major implications so that if any employe is confronted by a citizen in the supermarket, he will be able to respond confidently,

> *"Yes, we've already made plans to beef up our reading instruction, but generally we were pretty pleased with the results." (Note that when they're involved in a program, it's "we." When they're left out, more often than not, it's "they.")*

The teachers, however, need and should want a deeper understanding of the testing program and its ramifications to prepare them for the parents who want to know what all this means to their children. If the scores are below average, does this mean theirs is a "bad" school? How do their children's scores compare with the school's or the district's? Once again, the teacher can destroy the credibility of the entire program if he or she responds, "Oh, we don't pay any attention to that sort of thing" or "Test scores don't mean anything." To parents, test scores mean a lot. They represent concrete evidence. They "show" whether kids are learning or not learning. Downplaying their importance will only sound like an effort to evade responsibility, and it will backfire.

Finally, preferably in a give-and-take session, the faculty should come up with a plan of action based directly on the scores. Thus, when a parent asks, "What do you have to say about those low reading scores?" the answer won't be, "But look how high the math scores were!"

If the scores are low, everybody shouldn't sit around wringing their hands, but should think in terms of what can be done to bring them up. If they're high, the public relations problem is considerably lessened, but this should not be a cue to take bows. Staff response, rather, should be in terms of what they intend to do to keep them high.

Now, the Media

Now that the entire staff is fully informed, it's time to give the story to the media. A news conference is the best vehicle. Actually, it can be held just about the time the school staffs are

being briefed. Since the chances are the material is too complex for the press to digest and write comprehensive, accurate stories for the next day's paper or that night's broadcast, you can, and should, put an embargo on the release. As long as it's no more than two or three days, the press will both honor and appreciate it. (If the embargo is too long, you may have a problem with leaks.) This way you can assure that the story will appear in the papers just a day or two after your staffs have been prepared for whatever reaction the press reports may stimulate.

Even if its scores are low, your school district can come out of a news conference with its head high if you follow a few basic rules:

- Give the media everything you have. Don't hide anything. They'll probably find out anyway, and then you'll be in real trouble.

- Don't belittle or downgrade any of the data.

- Prepare charts or tables to hand out. Without distorting the data, you may be able to arrange the statistics in a more easily understood format.

- Don't let the reporters get you on the defensive. Once they do, it's downhill the rest of the way.

To illustrate the last point, imagine a news conference where the reporters are handed a volume of test scores, are given five minutes or so to scan it, and then are invited to ask questions.

"Tell me, Dr. So-and-so," asks a reporter who has managed to spot an interesting figure, "what do you intend to do about those horrible reading scores in the fifth grade?"

At that point, Dr. So-and-so must launch a long discourse to explain that those scores aren't really "horrible," but it all comes out sounding like rationalizing.

"We've known for a long time," he adds gamely, "that there was a problem in reading achievement in the fifth grade."

"Oh," parries a reporter as he and his colleagues move in. "Why didn't you do anything about it back then?"

If the doctor is articulate, he may end up getting across all the points he intended to. But he has lost control of the situation. The ideal news conference from the superintendent's point of view is one in which he controls the mood, the attitude and the direction the questions take. And he can do it by understanding the needs of the reporters.

Thus the administrator, who is schooled in the ways of media, has a brief summary prepared and hands it out to the reporters, even before he gives them the test reports. He does not read from the summary. He reviews it verbally.

"On the whole," he may say, "we are very pleased with the results of the assessment program. The report does, however, point up some weaknesses, such as in fifth-grade reading and seventh-grade arithmetic. Believe me, ladies and gentlemen, as soon as we received these results we went right to work in these areas. We've got specialists working in the elementary and junior high schools to get to the roots of these problems and solve them."

In 30 seconds, the superintendent has taken all the ammunition out of the reporters' guns and set the stage for a positive approach. The school system, it turns out, is taking all this in stride, has the situation well in hand, and is pleased to share it with the world. A simple remark that the report contains no surprises will deflate a reporter looking to puff up the story. And that really is the goal of the district's public information effort: to make sure everybody takes the report seriously.

Please note it was the superintendent who took charge of the news conference, not the public relations officer or testing director. The superintendent can and should defer to the experts when the questions get technical, but the superintendent is the spokesman the media want. If he/she is not there, and even if the other officials acquitted themselves admirably, the media will still want comments from the superintendent.

After this initial press briefing, the superintendent should identify a single spokesperson on assessment. This individual should be charged with quickly and accurately responding to assessment-related questions or inquiries and should be prepared to answer the telephone at home at any hour.

The initial splash will come from the media.

Radio and television, of course, will boil it down to a minute or two at the most, probably ignoring all of the qualifications and warnings carefully emphasized in the briefing. But that's the nature of the medium. On the other hand, this "incomplete" coverage won't do harm if you have reached key audiences and opinion leaders earlier.

The newspapers can serve to fill in the blanks left by the electronic media. You probably had ample opportunity to clarify things further as reporters labored over their stories during the embargo period. They should be encouraged to keep calling if there is still something they don't understand. Some districts, in

news

Montgomery County Public Schools
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FOR RELEASE: OCTOBER 2, 1974 -- P.M.

COUNTYWIDE TEST SCORES RELEASED

Montgomery County public school students scored well above the national average on every standardized aptitude and achievement test administered last year, according to countywide test results released this week.

Composite scores for students given the IOWA Test of Basic Skills in grades 3, 5, 7, and 9 ranged from 10 to 21 percentile points above the national norm, according to the Annual Test Report, which goes to the Board of Education Oct. 8.

Median scores for 11th grade students, who were given the Tests for Academic Progress, ranged from 57 in literature to 71 in mathematics. The national norm for all tests is 50.

In grades 3 and 5, the composite score (generally considered the most reliable measure of over-all student achievement) and the scores on each subtest were pretty much the same as last year.

Achievement scores in Grade 3 ranged from 57 on reference materials to a high of 73 on punctuation and a composite score of 71. Fifth grade achievement scores spread between 59 on math problem solving and 65 on English usage, graphs and tables, and math concepts. The fifth grade composite score was 64.

At the junior high school level, composite scores decreased from 68 to 60 in Grade 7 and from 65 to 62 in Grade 9. Some of this decline was attributed by school officials to a change in the testing time required by the state accountability law. Another state requirement that may have influenced scores was giving tests for the first time to many special education students.

Grade 7 achievement scores ranged from 53 in punctuation to 62 in graphs and tables. Ninth grade achievement scores went from a 54 in spelling to a high of 68 in map reading--all still well above the national average of 50.

fact, work with the press for months to make sure every aspect of the program is clear.

Enter the Public

Now you have to brace for the impact of the news on your external publics.

As noted earlier, at this stage the parents take their questions to the school staff. They may even ask their children, so a smart principal won't overlook that audience either.

Think how much a parent's mind would be eased if 12-year-old Jimmy would come home and say, "We got our test scores back today and our teacher said we did pretty well except in arithmetic so we worked on a lot of problems and I think I understand it better." Scratch one worried mother.

For the most part, however, the school will feel the impact of parent concerns, while the central office will get it from the rest of the community and perhaps even from local government officials. And it won't take long to find out how well you did in your public relations planning. If you did a good job, expect things to be quiet. But if you didn't, the phone may ring off the hook.

Since the release of test scores as part of an accountability program is a continuing effort, it is advisable to keep close tabs on the reaction to all dissemination activities. That way, patterns of questions or misunderstandings can be identified to give you an idea of what loopholes need plugging. And don't be casual about it. Keep logs of telephone calls with a notation of the questions raised, and keep a letter file. Canvass the schools for reports of the reactions there. And, of course, clip the newspapers and summarize the radio and TV reports.

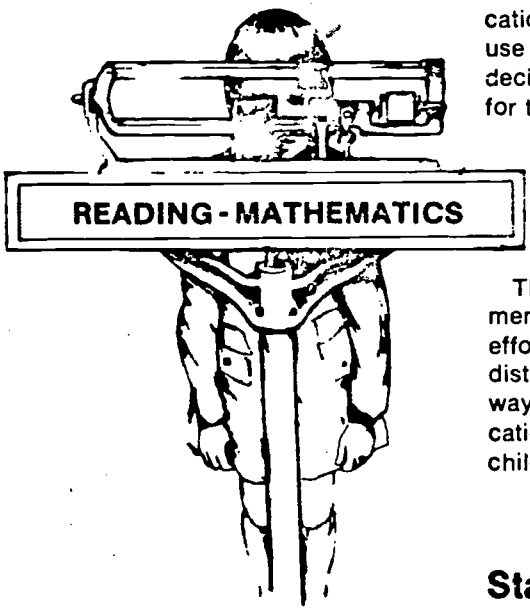
If you left a big hole in your information effort, it will show. Information weaknesses will surface in the form of the same misunderstandings again and again, giving you strong clues to what you should concentrate on next year.

Of course, it's advisable to do follow-up reporting on assessment. Some apprehensions about test results can be accommodated weeks after the initial release of information. That's why wise disseminators work with their building principals to distribute follow-up material showing what is being done with assessment results to improve school programs. It is *always* appropriate to show the public – and particularly parents – that you are working to improve their child's education.

"In School Today We Got on the Scales..."

We took some tests to see "how well we are growing" educationally.

These tests were begun by the Michigan State Board of Education to see how well children are progressing in school.



Educational assessment tests have been offered to about 320,000 Michigan 4th grade and 7th grade students every year since 1970.

The test results are sent back to each local school district within a few weeks. The information is available for each student, classroom, school. and district.

Local educators can study the results to see if the students have learned certain basic reading and mathematics skills—that is, if certain educational "needs" exist. Then, they can use the results with parents to help decide on the best educational program for the students.

This educational "needs assessment" is one part of a cooperative effort between the state, local school districts, and citizens to search for ways to improve the quality of education for all of Michigan's school children.

Michigan State Board of Education

Where Needs Assessment Is An Important Step In Accountability

The above is an announcement sent home with each student taking part in the Michigan State Dept. of Education program.

CHAPTER 8.

Assessment Scores: The Principal's Problem

As the first line of public information and relations at the individual school level, the principal has to be ready – and willing – to take an active role. The media coverage resulting from the central office information effort, except in very small districts, will concentrate on systemwide results. Individual schools with unusually high – or low – scores may find themselves bombarded by reporters, but the majority of the buildings will be generally uncovered except for a cryptic column of numbers in a statistical summary. The parents of the children who attend those schools, however, are no less concerned, so it's up to each principal to answer their questions in a satisfactory way.

A school-based information program is a must. It should be aimed at parents – those who read the district-wide results in the papers and wonder how their schools fared, and at those who don't read the papers at all. The latter group is larger than is generally acknowledged, and it is the most susceptible to back-fence gossip. In either case, the information is received most favorably when it comes voluntarily from the school, not in response to an angry protest.

The wise superintendent will not send his principals out into the wilderness without some sort of survival training. The topic should be high on the agenda of a principals' meeting at least several weeks before the release date, and the superintendent and testing director should spend as much time as necessary explaining what all the scores mean, and how and to which audiences the *district* will explain them.

The session should be divided into three distinct parts. First, the superintendent should set the stage by stressing the importance of the report to the school system and insisting that all principals – no matter what the nature of individual results, take

them seriously. The superintendent should also state clearly and forcefully what the overall district information policy is going to be – whether we are pleased, heartened, concerned, and so forth – and what steps are being taken at the district level to correct the weaknesses uncovered by the tests.

Next the testing director should explain (with plenty of handouts and AV support) what the tests showed and what the various numbers mean. This part of the program may be technical, but the principals need a thorough understanding of the entire assessment program. They need to know what the tests prove and do not prove, and how their individual schools fit into the district and state picture. Ideally, the school-by-school scores should have been distributed to the principals a few days earlier to provide background for this meeting. If this is not possible, distribute results that day, but near the end of the meeting so principals don't study them and compare notes with their neighbors while ignoring the speakers.

The third part of the meeting should be devoted to the public information aspects of the assessment report. It should be conducted by the public information specialist if the district has one, a public information consultant if the district can afford one, or someone with some familiarity with the public information process. This is a critical phase of the meeting, because it is a fact of life that many educators are totally oblivious to the PR implications of such a report. Some of the principals will grasp the situation readily. Others will have to be sold on the importance of a local school information effort. And they'll all need some help in formulating their individual plans and in phrasing their messages.

The person conducting this part of the meeting would do well to have prepared a *Test Score Survival Kit.* (See below)

1. A sample of the district's proposed news release.
2. A clear, concise explanation of the entire assessment program, including why it was started, what it shows, and what will be done with the results. It would probably be helpful if it were prepared in question-and-answer form, including those questions the general public will be most likely to ask. The answers should be written so the public can understand them, avoiding technical language and "educationese."
3. For those who will communicate their results in writing, such as in a community newsletter, a sample

narrative to illustrate the writing style and vocabulary that will make the program comprehensible to the reader.

Principals should have time to plan and polish their information program, to meet with staff members to explain the test results, and to outline everyone's role in the program. And principals ought to give serious thought to turning the release of test scores into a full-fledged public relations/information campaign.

An assessment program is, in fact, an ideal vehicle for establishing an accountability dialogue with the community. Educators may argue that a single listing of test results doesn't really tell much about an educational program, but they will have a difficult time convincing the community. So why not take advantage of the requirement to issue a report by incorporating it into a broader information package that tells where you've been, where you are, and where you hope to go.

Ideally, this should evolve into an annual effort, because any report on school objectives should center on the year's progress toward attaining them. It sounds like a big project, and it is. But since it will require the involvement of the entire faculty in setting the objectives for the school, it will pay off instructionally as well as in good public relations.

The Montgomery County (Md.) Board of Education mandated in 1974 that each of the district's 202 schools issue annual school progress reports each October. Rather than leave the contents to each principal's whim, the board issued detailed guidelines. The first go-around was very successful. PTA's devoted entire meetings to discussing the reports, and many parents used them to back up their requests at budget hearings.

On the whole, the board felt that the program came very close in only one year to achieving its primary purpose: informing parents of the needs and strengths of their school, and involving them in planning to meet the unique objectives of that school. The program was renewed for 1975 with only minor changes.

Each report is to be divided into five major sections:

1. Community – a description of the characteristics of the attendance area of the school, and a statement of the major community concerns as expressed by the PTA, advisory groups, letters and phone calls and surveys.

2. **Enrollment** – pertinent statistics showing trends and characteristics of the student body. Here is where the results of the standardized tests are reported, including an emphasis on those areas where the school scored a certain amount above, or below, the norm. This section can also include information on tests administered by the school, performance on college admission tests, results of any follow-up study that may have been done on graduates, and so forth.

3. Staff – the number of full-time staff, both professional and supporting, their years of experience and level of training, and their assignments in the type of organizational plan used by the school.

4. Building – a description of the school plant itself – the capacity, number of rooms, special facilities, etc., with a description of how the building design affects the organization or program. Immediate plans for renovations or additions should be reviewed.

5. Objectives – for the past year, a list of the objectives and a discussion of how well the school did in attaining them; for the current year, a description of each objective, the strategy for attaining it, and the evidence that will indicate success. The guidelines caution principals that the setting of objectives requires the involvement of staff and community, and that each school objective should be related to the information in the previous sections of the report.

As a part of an annual report, test scores are more than just an isolated column of numbers. They can become an important step in a dynamic process of setting objectives, involving parents, and assuring accountability. And that, of course, was the reason for most assessment programs in the first place.

The central office in Montgomery County prepared a detailed set of guidelines for each principal, including a prototype report – actually the report of Brookview Elementary School, which was submitted early and rewritten by the system's director of information.

One of the most useful sections of this 16-page sample report was a discussion of Brookview's test scores in simple, everyday language that parents could understand. Although Brookview's

scores were, on the whole, very high, the language in the narrative still serves as an excellent example of style for all schools, no matter what their standing. The following pages feature excerpts from that report.

Brookview Elementary School
Montgomery Co., Md.
Annual Report 1974

During April-May, third- and fifth-year students in all county schools are given two batteries of tests. The CAT (Cognitive Abilities Test) gives an indication of our youngsters' learning aptitudes and the ITBS (Iowa Tests of Basic Skills) provides a measure of academic progress in certain skills. While standardized tests measure only a small part of all the learning that occurs in school, they are important indicators of individual pupil progress, as well as the success of some aspects of the school and school system's educational program.

Each fall, Brookview teachers study the test data to pinpoint the strengths and weaknesses of each child. It is important information to use for setting objectives and planning instruction in the coming year. Each fall, also, the *Test Report to Parents,* which shows each child's test scores, is mailed to parents. Teachers interpret these reports at a conference with the parents.

How Did Brookview Do?

A table on p. 61 shows Brookview's aptitude and achievement scores in percentiles. The table compares the verbal aptitude percentile of the CAT and the composite achievement percentile of the ITBS. The fact that these two percentile scores are the same indicates that the third graders are learning just about as their abilities would lead us to expect.

All the third grade scores are very good, except for reading comprehension. The score here is 10 points below the verbal aptitude. On the other hand, in relation to aptitude, this score is 8 percentile

Brookview Elementary School
Test Information

Median National Percentile Scores

1973-74

	Grade 3		Grade 5	
	School	Comparable MCPS Schools	School	Comparable MCPS Schools
Scholastic Aptitude				
Verbal	88	87	71	71
Quantitative	97		67	
Nonverbal	81		65	
Achievement				
Vocabulary	84	82	65	65
Reading Comprehension	78	78	62	60
Spelling	90	83	54	62
Capitalization	88	81	55	62
Punctuation	87	84	54	61
Language Usage	80	80	57	63
Map Reading	87	83	58	63
Reading Graphs & Tables	88	81	57	65
Knowledge and Use of Reference Materials	87	76	66	64
Mathematics Concepts	87	79	67	67
Mathematics Problem Solving	85	79	55	59
Composite Achievement	88	86	62	67

points higher than it was last year, and the vocabulary score is 16 points better than last year. This suggests that our efforts to improve our language arts program have been effective, and we will be continuing our focus on objectives to develop better comprehension skills.

The test results at the fifth-year level do not look as good. These youngsters are not doing as well as we expect them to do. Spelling and punctuation are the weakest areas, with capitalization and usuage close behind. Map reading and use of graphs and tables need concentrated attention as well as math problem skills. There is an improvement of 7 percentile points in reading comprehension since last year. Vocabulary remains about the same. We have our work cut out for us in terms of upper level program improvement.

To improve these programs, the staff worked during the teacher orientation days in August to identify the underachievers. We used test score data to pinpoint these students and consulted with the teachers they had last year. We began identifying the specific skill areas in which these children need help and began setting objectives for them for this year. Further assessment, diagnosis, and objective-setting will continue throughout the year.

An important thing to remember is that third-year achievement test results are not just a measure of what was taught in the third year – they are indicators of the sum total of your child's learning through his third year of school. The same is true for fifth-year students. So it takes more than a year for the impact of program improvements to show up in test results.

What Do the Numbers on the Table Mean?

Tests were given last school year to all pupils in the grade(s) indicated. These tests were scored according to instructions from the test publisher. Each number on the table represents the midpoint of the scores of all youngsters at this grade level in the school. For example, a score of 60 means that half

the pupils got scores higher than 60, while half got lower scores.

Each number is expressed as a "percentile," which permits comparison of the pupils in this school with pupils at the same grade level in schools across the United States. The national midpoint on any test, by definition, is the 50th percentile – meaning that half the students across the nation get scores higher than 50, while half get lower. If the school percentile score is higher than 50, it means the students are doing better than the national average; if the number is lower than 50, they aren't doing as well. A school percentile score of 80 would mean that half the pupils at that grade in the school got scores higher than 80 percent of their classmates across the nation.

The objectives that follow this discussion relate directly to the needs pointed up by the test scores. One goal, for example, is "to improve reading comprehension with specific emphasis on its application to mathematics problem solving." This will be done, it goes on, through the use by each child of a card file containing mathematics terms, and other strategies.

"We looked at our teaching–the reading and interpreting of maps, tables, graphs, and pictures–and were not satisfied," the report went on. "Test results confirm our concern. Therefore, we wrote a third objective, as follows: To improve skills of reading and interpreting maps, tables, graphs and pictures."

This illustrates how the test scores can become an integral part of the entire instructional effort in the school rather than just a miscellaneous piece of information that relates to nothing. The idea of issuing annual school reports was a good idea before assessment. It's a better idea now.

CHAPTER 9.

One Last Time

If nothing else, the preceding pages should have demonstrated that telling the public about assessment results does not have to be a traumatic experience. When handled properly, the dissemination of test results can provide an excellent opportunity to build a bridge between the schools and the community.

Experienced practitioners of school public relations have probably recognized the approach advocated here as no more and no less than sensible application of basic PR techniques. And one doesn't have to be schooled in the PR specialty to see the need for dissemination founded on a policy of openness and supported with large does of common sense and sensitivity.

One purpose of any educational accountability program should be to help the schools become more responsive to the needs of their publics. And this is impossible unless those publics know, and understand, how the entire education "family" is working to improve education. The component of accountability known as assessment is vital to *both* educational and public understanding.

When those involved with assessment programs realize that assessment dissemination can be a cornerstone in building understanding, they will have taken a large step along the road to the ultimate objective – doing a better job of helping kids learn.