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ABSTRACT

In recent months the idea of a single national test seems to have lost some of its momentum, while use of national standards to which voluntary regional or state tests would be indexed seems to have gained support. Nationally, there does not seem to be any organized attempt to fuse the national education goals into the state process beyond the ceremonial announcement about America 2000. Three possible scenarios for federal action with regard to a national test are: (1) a Republican win in November and a new push for a national test; (2) a redirection of energy into national standards, allowing states to develop the tests; and (3) development of a program of national goals and standards by using ideas from successful state activity. Surveys of state testing activities demonstrate that the current national picture is very complex. Possible scenarios for state action include a move toward more local assessment decisions or, on the other hand, a renewed effort to reach out for federal help by anticipating a national test. It is also possible that neither of the above would happen, and that traditional models would change very little. The future is not clear concerning national testing. (SLD)

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The Impact of a National Test at the State Level

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Education Commission of the States

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***Educational Assessment: Are the
Politicians Winning?***

THE IMPACT OF A NATIONAL TEST AT THE STATE LEVEL

Presented by Chris Pipho
at the American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting
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The anticipation of a national test coming out of the mist from Foggy Bottom on the Potomac has probably caused more concern among educators than the whole issue warrants. The danger that a single national test will be layered on top of state and local testing already underway is (at least in the spring of 1992) probably not great .

In 1991 many were concerned that the push for a national test was coming from several groups and that the issue would be mandated on states without any debate. In an April 1991 Kappan *Stateline* column, *The Unbridled, Undebated National Test*, six groups were described as pushing the national test concept. Over the past 12 months, the National Education Goals Panel and the National Council on Education Standards and Testing have initiated a great deal of debate. The idea of a single national test seems to have lost some of its momentum, while use of national standards to which voluntary regional or state tests would be indexed seems to have gained support.

Speculating on the impact of this undecided process on states is at best risky, because action at both the national and state level is very fluid. Benjamin Disraeli probably best described the situation when he said, "What we anticipate seldom occurs; what we least expect generally happens."

Federal Scenarios

The political process is built on compromise. On an issue such as national testing, however, most educators see little room for compromise. To them the issue is clear cut. Worst case scenarios are used to emphasize that any move in the direction of a national test or standards is a step towards a national curriculum that would kill the public schools. Politicians generally see the issue as one of accountability or the need to improve the public schools. To them, national testing is one of a wide array of solutions leading to this goal. If one approach isn't possible, accepting an alternative tangent is preferable to no movement at all.

For the most part, the need for a national test has been associated with measuring progress on the national goals. Led by President Bush and the National Governors' Association, the goals have been given considerable visibility. The Department of Education's *America 2000* effort currently reports that 41 states and 1,100 communities have signed onto the program to support the national goals. These numbers would lead one to believe the national goals have been embraced by schools across the country, and that measuring progress towards their achievement is the logical next step.

However, Paul Jung, American Association of School Administrators' (AASA) Superintendent of the Year, has reported that in his travels he frequently asks parents, teachers and administrators to name the national goals and finds that few are able to even name one of them. This was also substantiated by the National PTA/Chrysler survey that revealed that 76% of parents are unaware of the national education goals. Others report that the national goals are not visible in school classrooms, buildings or in board rooms. The national goals do not appear to be part of school district discussions on curriculum or textbook adoption, nor does one hear of their use in staff development programs or in teacher training.

In short, there does not appear to be any organized attempt to fuse the national goals into the state education process beyond the ceremonial announcement about America 2000. Further, there doesn't seem to be any linkage of the goals with state testing and assessment programs. If a national test is needed to measure progress on the national goals, it would seem evident that use of the national education goals by the total education establishment would be an important prerequisite.

Given the fact that the National Council on Education Standards and Testing has voted in favor of developing national education standards in five subject areas, what might happen at the federal level?

Scenario #1. The White House and Department of Education could decide that the national goals will be used by schools only when a test forces their use. A Republican win in November could, if Secretary Alexander views a presidential bid as a possibility in four years, put Bush on the fast track to becoming the education president. Many new programs, some new money, lots of publicity around the New American Schools Development Corporation and the "break the mold" schools and a national test could pick up lots of support and be put back in the mix.

Scenario #2. The White House and Department of Education could realize that a single national test will never be accepted and could put all energy into national standards, allowing the states to develop tests to measure attainment of these standards. If the Feds can find the money, standards development could be put on the fast track through incentive grants to states and a wide variety of public and private groups.

Scenario #3. The White House and Department of Education could make a thorough study of state testing and assessment activity and try to build a program to support a program of national goals and standards by using ideas from successful state activity. Use of the California Curriculum Guidelines and Frameworks is already getting some attention at OERI. The "Common Core" of learning as used by Connecticut and other states could also be a likely candidate. If the New American Schools Development Corporation "break the mold" schools proposals come up with some interesting assessment/testing ideas, these could swing support behind innovative thinking already underway in the states. However, if some of the 686 proposals contain strong ideas

for a single national test, and those ideas are acceptable enough to fund, the whole focus could swing back to Scenario #1. Clearly, the New American Schools Development Corporation could be a new force driving the national testing/assessment scene in the next few years. The "least expected" part of the scenario could be organized opposition to the "break the mold" schools.

The State Scene

Mandated testing at the state level has been on the increase in the last decade. Many new variations on competency testing, along with performance and outcomes assessment and work portfolios, add to the maze of state testing. If one adds norm-referenced testing at the local level and end-of-course/department tests in larger school districts to the mix, it is easier to understand the likelihood that no one has a clear view of testing at the state level.

The *Annual Survey of Large Scale Assessment Programs* completed by Edward Roeber of the Council of Chief State School Officers is probably the best overall compilation of state testing programs available. The 1991 survey reported detailed testing activity in no less than 36 states, but no reference was made on the remaining 14 states, many of which just probably failed to return the survey, since most of those have state testing programs.

A 1990 *Survey of Performance Assessment in the States* conducted by Pelavin Associates, Inc. for the Council of Chief State School Officers reported that 40 states were planning or were already carrying out some form of portfolio, performance or enhanced multiple choice assessment program.

Add to this the 20 or 30 states still doing some form of minimum competency testing—with at least 17 still using it as a requirement for high school graduation—and the testing picture grows even more complex.

National testing programs such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) carried on in whole or in part in states, state-by-state comparisons of NAEP's results, the SAT and ACT tests used for college entrance and a bevy of workforce preparation tests already in place and proposed add even more confusion to the state scene.

When all existing state and local district testing is added up, the total has prodded some states to hold legislative hearings on how to reduce the 5 to 15 school days lost to testing. The federal government's assumption that nothing is going on at the state level and that a single national test is needed to improve American education borders on folly. State reaction to the national test movement will not be uniform. Some possible scenarios might include the following:

Scenario #1. States are moving to embrace "outcomes" in a variety of forms. The current Pennsylvania proposal to abolish Carnegie Units for high school graduation may encourage other states to move away from traditional input models and could

encourage less reliance on state testing programs and allow more local assessment decisions. Site based management models, school-to-work transition programs and restructuring models such as the Re:Learning/Sizer (Coalition of Essential Schools) program could also push testing and assessment decisions to the local level.

National curricular standards, if developed by broad coalitions of curricular experts, might be useful to these new state efforts.

Scenario #2. The "outcomes" movement could falter if attacks from right wing groups increase and/or parents revolt against outcomes that are too complex and amount to what one parent called "edubabble." Opposition to restructuring of schools and site based management is also increasingly visible. Cutbacks in state funding could contribute to inadequate staff development programs, and poor leadership from state agencies or schools could find states caught between reform and tradition. If this happens in a large number of states, there could be a renewed effort to reach out for help from the federal government in the form of accepting a national test.

Scenario #3. None of the above could happen. Reform, restructuring and outcomes could inch along with a few gains, but the traditional model of schooling and testing would change very little. Parents could continue to demand the SAT and ACT for college entrance, higher education could oblige, and teacher training programs could continue in their own isolated world, assuming that the 1960's brand of school is the most acceptable model. Commercial testing companies could eye the balance sheet and push existing testing programs, thus putting the "slows" on any change until they can get to the front of the development pipeline. Anti-test forces and right wingers could add their share of rigor mortis to the state scene, and choice, vouchers and charter schools could simultaneously pull schools back to the traditional and forward to the innovative. Ten more years of this would set the stage for another **Nation at Risk** report in the year 2003.

Given the state and local testing scene and the many proposals for national tests and standards, a serious discussion is needed to coordinate and consolidate student testing in this country. Who will initiate the discussion? Who should participate? Can the final decision be imposed on all states and school districts? What about the commercial test vendors? And what about students and teachers? Does all of this portend an inching towards a national ministry of education? What if "outcomes" replace Carnegie Units—will the *Common Core of Learning* become the minimum competency test of the 1990s?

The impact of a national test on the states could be so complex that nothing will happen, or it could change our heritage of state and local control of education forever. The national testing crystal ball is not clear. Disraeli's "*what we least expect*" may be the order of the next decade.