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ABSTRACT

This serial offers a collection of articles on academic standards, while focusing on whether it is possible to ensure both equity and high standards in education. It looks at ways to close the achievement gap between students in high-poverty schools and their middle-class peers, and offers a chart that outlines what various stakeholders can do to provide lower class students the help that they need to succeed. Some of the strategies that are discussed here include blue-ribbon schools, charter schools, accountability, local control, and assimilation. The text outlines the need for stringent professional standards, the value of one-stop assessment-reform resources, the use of alternative transcripts for college admissions, and the growing emphasis on competency rather than "seat time." It describes the risks of high-stakes tests and argues that the classroom teacher should have a voice in student assessment. Some other equity and high standards issues are included in short pieces that examine students who rejected a standardized test, the challenges and opportunities afforded by bilingual students, the fallibility of test-driven education, and some alternatives to standardized testing. (Contains 13 references and 11 resources.) (RJM)

LAB Education Notes

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Equity and high standards: Can we have it both ways?

Having a high standard for American education is—philosophically—a worthwhile goal. Defining education standards and holding students, educators, and schools responsible for achieving them is much more complicated politically, however.

Both this past decade's loud public call for high educational standards, high-stakes assessment, and educator accountability and its more muted call for educational equity have antecedents in the education reform movement of the 1980s. The widely-read 1983 report *A Nation at Risk* induced a mood of public doubt about the efficacy of public schools that still lingers. Two contradictory responses to this doubt are at the heart of the standards movement: one is a call to increase the professionalism and public recognition of educators; the other is a call for politicians to become more accountable for the performance of schools.

Based on a belief that the problem with education is a lack of clear goals, the first call trusts that expert classroom teachers can choose the best path to the goals that the standards movement establishes. Classroom instructors are identified as the key to adapting pedagogy and curriculum so that learners with different backgrounds and learning styles can gain mastery over standards-defined content and skills. Because choosing the best instructional and curricular paths presents a complex, ongoing challenge, substantial spending on professional development makes sense as part of this vision.

Based on a more critical assessment of educator professionalism, the second call insists that education needs external accountability mechanisms to improve success. In this vision, because teachers' professional competence is too often insufficient, political leaders need to micro-manage educational systems. While this second vision does not necessarily oppose professional development, it emphasizes increased investment in student assessment and educator accountability measures. Highly publicized results of this mode of reform include state

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THE EDUCATION ALLIANCE
Northeast and Islands Regional Educational Laboratory At Brown University
222 Richmond Street, Suite 300 Providence, RI 02903-4226
Phone: (401) 274-9548 or 1-800-521-9550 ○ Fax: (401) 421-7650
www.lab.brown.edu

Closing the achievement gap

Much has been written about the achievement gap between students in high-poverty schools and their middle class peers. Many plausible reasons—and some excuses—have been given as to why this has occurred. No further research is needed to tell us that there is a gap. The real questions are: "What can we do to narrow the gap? What have we learned from studying the data that can lead us to change our practices and enjoy high achievement for all kids? Are we seriously committed to addressing this issue?"

According to Zeichner (1995), the literature suggests that the key elements to enable all students to achieve to high standards are

- High expectations for all students
- Cultural congruence in instruction
- Teacher knowledge and respect for cultural traditions
- Teaching strategies that promote meaningful participation

However, these four elements alone cannot "fix" the problem. Societal, economic, technological, and political issues of equity, resource allocation, and attitudes affect student performance in schools. The types of people we recruit and admit into teacher preparation programs is almost as important as the programs themselves. It is particularly important to seek out candidates who have the desire and ability to teach in urban settings, or capable adults who can enter the profession through alternate routes.

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takeovers of school districts and the dissolution of poorly performing schools. In many cases, this second vision of reform has run directly contrary to the first, decreasing autonomy for educators and increasing public skepticism about their professional competence.

Quality rather than equity is the frequent focus of both trends, yet advocates of each argue that their vision is consistent with the goal of educational equity. According to the first, pro-professional development camp, educational equity will result from four key elements that educators need:

- **Training** in how to address the cultural contexts and backgrounds of less successful students
- **Clarity** about standards to which all children should be held
- Guided **reflection** about classroom practice
- **Classroom autonomy** to incorporate the learning from training, experience, and reflection

Those advocating external management of schools, however, see equity as something that results when political leaders have the power to close—or force radical restructuring of—schools where certain groups of children consistently do not meet established standards. In this view, educational inequity is a product of educators' uneven expectations and their tolerance of the disproportionate failure of some groups of students.

Equity and high standards coexist uneasily for reasons that are varied and complex. This issue of *Education Notes* discusses a number of these reasons and points to resources for further reading and productive discussion.

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In 1995, the Laboratory Network produced a paper entitled *Closing the Achievement Gap: A Vision to Guide Change in Beliefs and Practice*. Within that document, several specific strategies are identified to address the complex issues that contribute to this gap:

PARTICIPANTS	ACTIONS
Legislators	• Support an alignment of federal, state, and community policy and legislation that recognizes the many dynamics affecting urban communities • Focus and integrate resources • Identify and support alternatives to the segregation of students according to race, ethnicity, socio-economics, and ability • Support comprehensive long-range planning
Teacher preparation institutes	• Incorporate program content and field experiences that increase teacher understanding of the definition and impact of culture on the personal development of students • Develop strategies for acquiring information about the cultural community, family, and student knowledge, activities, and abilities • Integrate strategies for developing higher-order thinking abilities through meaningful, authentic presentations of the formal curriculum • Commit to increased faculty investment in urban schools and communities
Educators	• Provide increased and ongoing time for professional development • Develop authentic curricula, instruction, and assessment that are relevant to the lives of students • Provide a safe and caring learning environment • Employ instructional strategies appropriate for the class
Community leaders and families	• Identify and integrate community services and resources with instructional projects and activities • Provide meaningful parent involvement in schools
Educational researchers	• Focus on unanswered questions

A copy of the synthesis containing the complete list of recommendations can be requested from the Information Center at the LAB, e-mail: info@lab.brown.edu or 1-800-521-9550.

Blue Ribbon Schools

Since 1982, the U.S. Department of Education's Blue Ribbon Schools Program has celebrated many of America's most successful schools, those that are models of excellence and equity, and that demonstrate a strong commitment to educational excellence for all students.

Each school's quality is judged by how effectively it has defined and is meeting its own goals, and how well it serves students, their families, and the local community. Additionally, schools must show significant progress in meeting state and national educational goals. Blue Ribbon Schools offer instructional programs that meet the highest academic standards, have supportive and learning-centered school environments, and demonstrate student results that are significantly above the average for demographically comparable schools. Winning schools demonstrate excellence in many areas, but sustained high achievement or steady progress in assessment measures is important.

Schools must meet eight categories of excellence:

- student focus and support
- school organization and culture
- challenging standards and curriculum
- active teaching and learning
- professional community
- leadership and educational vitality
- school, family, and community partnerships
- indicators of success.

Award-winning schools show evidence of coherent and comprehensive school-wide assessment strategies that align with the school's stated purposes and curriculum and that provide outcome data for subgroups and individuals. The schools demonstrate that teachers and administrators monitor and continually use assessment data to improve instruction, and modify school policies and practices. Data that have been broken out to reflect divisions along gender, race, ethnic, and language lines show high levels of success for all students, and there is evidence that progress has been made in reducing or eliminating disparities between groups. Blue Ribbon Schools regularly communicate assessment results to the community in order to promote understanding of the schools' progress in achieving established standards.

Charter schools and accountability

Charter schools are public, independent, accountable, have distinct missions, and are schools of choice. They operate free of bureaucracy and red tape. The number of charter schools is increasing dramatically as parents and teachers have latched onto this concept with a passion that has not been seen in education circles in many decades. Reasons for establishing charter schools vary, from the desire to provide services to special populations to establishing a learning environment free from many constraining regulations, but with the goal of improved student achievement.

Families and students choose these schools as alternatives to the status quo. Teachers choose these schools because the non-traditional atmosphere allows freedom from the many rules and regulations that teachers see as making schools unresponsive to needs. Small numbers of students, attention from many adults, and the will to make it possible for all students to succeed is what keeps charter schools going.

A charter gives educators the right to open a school and operate it on their

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"Behind every score there's a kid with all the issues associated with growing up in Boston....[But] you can't use it as an excuse, and we're not."

— Thomas Hennessey, Headmaster, Boston High School (Yaekel, 2000)

Accountability or control?

A House Resolution (H-6757) introduced in January in the Rhode Island General Assembly by Majority Leader Gerald Martineau created "a permanent Standing House Committee on Education Accountability." The committee is meant to have two responsibilities: First, "the committee shall conduct hearings, review, make findings and evaluate all aspects of all levels of education, including, but not limited to, funding, student performance, expenditures, governance, programming, teacher preparation and planning, as well as the work and operation of all state agencies regarding all levels of education, make findings and recommend policy initiatives and other actions to the General Assembly." Second, "the committee shall also, on a continuing basis exercise oversight in relation to the implementation of all legislation and grants of authority relating to all levels of public education in the state by all agencies, state and local, charged and empowered by the General Assembly in relation to all levels of public education."

New York Governor George Pataki, in his 2000 State of the State

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own terms. In exchange for this autonomy, the educators assume full responsibility for their "chartered" school and are *held accountable* by the issuing body. The educators must attract students, teachers, and parents to their school; they must develop a curriculum; they must take care of financial and building issues; and, most importantly, *they must show that the students are learning.*

Charter schools are given the autonomy to set their own rules and to do what "is best for their students." However, they are also schools that promise to meet the goal of increased student achievement. What happens if a school is not meeting expectations? The legislation varies from state to state. However, most laws require charter schools to operate under a time-limited, performance-based contract which specifies student achievement goals, standards, or outcomes. These schools must deliver on that promise or lose their charter.

For more information about charter schools and accountability, including the LAB publication, *Charter Schools: The Other Public Schools*, e-mail info@lab.brown.edu.

"If we allow our education officials to make a student's fate rest on a single test, the likely result over the next few years will be nothing short of catastrophic, resembling what might without exaggeration be described as an educational ethnic cleansing." — Alfie Kohn

"Accountability or Control" . . . continued from page 3

address and executive budget address to legislators, neglected to mention several provisions that were identified by the Albany, New York, *Times Union* as proposals to shift control away from the State Education Department. The proposals included "slashing some of the Education Department's staff, personally choosing the department's commissioner, as well as its controlling board, the Board of Regents and the Regents' Chancellor," and cutting $250,000 in charter school money.

Similar initiatives appear to be developing in other states, including Vermont and Massachusetts. The effects these types of initiatives will have on local policy makers and local school boards need to be followed closely. At the very least, these initiatives add another layer of bureaucracy and challenge local control.

Pluribus et unum?

Is the main goal of schooling for culturally and linguistically diverse student populations assimilation or cultural pluralism? With learning standards and high-stakes testing becoming an increasing part of American public education, how we answer this question can profoundly affect educational equity.

Since the end of the 19th century, schools have been a societal vehicle for the realization of the *e pluribus unum* American creed (Tyack, 1974; Kliebard, 1987). A similar ethic informs the current standards movement, which seeks to base curriculum upon what every student needs to know and to use high-stakes assessments to appraise how well schools teach the standards-defined curriculum to each student. Many proponents of standards consider it discriminatory to fail to hold all students to equal standards. Their logic is incomplete, however.

Whatever our tests aim to assess, they cannot help placing more value on some content knowledge and complex performances of skills or "ways of knowing" (Heath, 1983) than on others. While some students' knowledge matches what is covered by high-stakes tests, other students find that what they know best is not adequately assessed. And yet, some of this knowledge might be very valuable within the context of a student's life. Considering the intimate connection between a student's circumstances and knowledge, we need to reevaluate the equity of standards-based curriculum, teaching, and assessment.

When we assess common culture without considering the value of a student's "uncommon knowledge," we lose valuable information about student learning. Margaret Gibson (1997) proposes that schools should promote *additive biculturalism*, encouraging students to acquire new cultural literacies without discounting the value of students' existing cultural knowledge. Educators who draw upon information about what a student knows gain a better understanding of the student's identity, accomplishments, and capabilities.

The personal circumstances of a student who speaks Portuguese at home with his monolingual parents make knowledge of this language a key element of what he knows. Few would advocate for a standardized assessment of Portuguese abilities, but for this student no appraisal of his knowledge and skills can be complete if it does not account for his facility

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with this language. Further, schools might want to encourage their students to become bicultural and biliterate. How then can it be fair to assess the common—but not the uncommon—knowledge of such a student?

Standards are important but incomplete. Perhaps public education needs a new American creed—*pluribus et unum*. Even as we cultivate student mastery of a common culture (*unum*), we also need to nurture students' local, organic, contextual ways of knowing (*pluribus*). Schools need encouragement in promoting diverse kinds of student knowledge. By recognizing and celebrating students' acquisition of "*pluribus* knowledge," we help students master the "*unum* knowledge" defined by standards.

One-stop assessment reform resources

Mary Ann Lachat of the Center for Resource Management (CRM), a LAB partner organization, has written comprehensive research overviews for those interested in the role assessment reform plays in the education of English language learners. *What Policymakers and School Administrators Need to Know about Assessment Reform for English Language Learners* and *Standards, Equity and Cultural Diversity* are available from the LAB; visit the Web site at www.lab.brown.edu/public/pubs/catalog.taf for ordering information.

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Professional development is a key to standards implementation

LAB researchers Nancy Clair and Carolyn Temple Adger worked with the Lowell, Massachusetts, schools on a three-year applied research project for implementing high standards in culturally diverse middle schools. In an ERIC Digest on professional development (www.cal.org/ERICCLL/digest/profdvpt.html), they noted:

> [P]rofessional development involves four sustainable strategies: standards analysis, student work, peer visitation, and discussion of professional literature. These strategies hold promise for ongoing reform at the school level, because with practice they can be used independently. The goal is for teachers to adapt these strategies for use in school-based groups. (Clair & Adger, 2000)

To order a free copy of *Implementing Standards with English Language Learners: Initial Findings from Four Middle Schools*, an early report from this project's work, visit the LAB Web site at www.lab.brown.edu/public/pubs/catalog.taf.

Alternative transcripts and college admissions

Every state now has a set of standards that determine what students should be able to do before graduation. These requirements are increasingly based on competency rather than "seat time." As more high schools move to set performance requirements for graduation and make use of internships and other nontraditional modes of learning, some are also re-evaluating how well this approach is reflected in their high school transcripts. One outgrowth is the development of competency-based admissions requirements for college.

It is generally beyond the purview of state departments of education to control admissions requirements. However, many educators believe there is more than one way to demonstrate that an applicant has met those requirements. The New Hampshire Department of Education, in collaboration with LAB partner organization Jobs for the Future, has developed a competency-based high school transcript which captures student learning that has taken place both inside and outside the classroom. The LAB will follow and assess the impact of the use of these transcripts, which are being piloted this year.

In Rhode Island, high school principals have the authority to convert nontraditional evidence of learning into a common language for college admissions. That is, if a student attends an alternative high school that has student work portfolios but no grades, a high school administrator can help quantify the learning using a standardized form. This policy, which will affect students enrolling in college in fall 2000, was developed with the help of practitioners, admissions officers, and faculty at the University of Rhode Island and Rhode Island College. Students using these transcripts will be tracked over a period of years to assess whether their achievement rates differ from those of other students.

The state departments of education in Connecticut and Maine are also exploring alternative ways of presenting student competencies. The LAB has been invited to help determine recommendations for the Connecticut commissioner of education.

High-stakes tests provide little real information: Reflections from a classroom teacher

Julia Nora taught in the Providence, Rhode Island, public school system until January 2000, when she joined the LAB as a research specialist. She reflects here on her students' experience with a high-stakes test and considers its relevance for English language learners.

For seven months I anticipated the results of a high-stakes, state-mandated, English language arts reference exam that my eighth-grade students had taken the year before. My classroom had been the site of action research that investigated whether my explicit teaching of a standards-based curriculum would improve the performance of my English language learning students on a standards-based assessment. Now I would finally be able to compare the "official" results with what I had learned through my own research. Anticipation quickly turned to disappointment as I read the reports, yet it wasn't the results themselves that disappointed me. I had predicted that most students' performance would not be at or above "standard"; in fact, three students were listed as having achieved standard, and twelve were below the standard. What made the results such a letdown was the combination of their useless lateness and coarse labeling of students whom I knew to be successful learners. The scores provided very little meaningful information. I wanted to know much more. How did each student do on each section? How many and which questions did they miss?

My experience confirmed my concerns about high-stakes assessments and how they are reported, particularly with regard to English language learners. Appearing seven months after the assessment was administered, these results couldn't help me adjust my instruction of students whom I no longer teach. In addition, assessment results that lumped students in three categories offered little meaningful distinction among students who fall on a continuum of English language development. In contrast, my classroom-based research last year yielded pages of information about the significant progress these ESL students made toward "meeting the standard" and other useful knowledge they had gained and demonstrated—all of which wasn't a formal part of any standard. Unfortunately, none of this was evident in the label "below standard" that appeared next to nearly every student's name.

Which will have the more lasting impact on these students—the data from my classroom research or from the official report? Unfortunately, the "below standard" label will likely have greater permanence than will the richer results of my classroom research—not only in their school files but in their minds.

MCAS and bilingual students: challenges and opportunities

Non-native English speakers face myriad challenges as they navigate the American education system. The adoption of high-stakes assessment instruments by school districts nationwide can add anxiety to an already difficult journey. But at least one Massachusetts school district is tackling the challenge head-on.

Beginning in 2003, students in Massachusetts must pass the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) tests in order to graduate from high school. Although the MCAS tests can be administered in Spanish, only those students who have been in this country for three or less years qualify for taking the test in Spanish. The MCAS does not allow for administration in any other languages besides English and Spanish.

Of the approximately 40 bilingual students at Taunton High School in southeastern Massachusetts, less than half qualify to take the tests in Spanish. (Spanish and Portuguese are the two primary languages spoken by bilingual students at Taunton HS.) Bilingual students can attend intensive before- and after-school classes and summer programs designed to help them

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Some Massachusetts students reject standardized tests

School districts and classroom teachers aren't alone in their concern about standardized tests. Students don't like their high school graduations depending on their performance on one test, either. And some Massachusetts young people are fighting back.

Students at Monument Mountain High School in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, were featured in a recent *Boston Globe* article for their efforts to "bring down a test" (the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System—MCAS) that they feel "undervalues" their knowledge. They've formed the Student Coalition for Alternatives to MCAS, or SCAM. They've launched their own Web site, and with members across the state, they hope to orchestrate a boycott of the April 2000 administration of the test. Will Greene, one of the student organizers, believes the MCAS will test his "knowledge of math and science and English, but ignores the music he loves and can never measure the creativity he learns from his best teachers." Students in the group complain that MCAS "robs teachers of flexibility, which...has already made the classroom a duller place," and that "they are not being tested on all their abilities, but are expected to know things they haven't yet learned in the classroom." Greene says the group's "main goals are to bring students together to discuss how the MCAS is ting their education and to encourage state leaders to devise better ways to judge student performance." (Vigue, 2000)

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succeed on the MCAS tests. They work on reading, writing, science, and critical thinking skills, and their classroom teachers spend time every day on aspects of the test.

But Dionisio DaCosta, bilingual guidance counselor at Taunton HS, is concerned that even with the extra programs, his bilingual students will have difficulty passing the MCAS tests. "We know that [bilingual] kids can function in English after one, two, or three years, but the research tells us that they need five, six, or seven years to be as proficient as a monolingual, American-born student." He doubts that students are well-prepared after only three years to score well in the language areas of the tests.

Despite the challenges, Teresa Torres, Taunton specialist in bilingual special education, believes that "having high expectations has done wonders" for the bilingual students. She is amazed at the results, and stresses that the key is good partnerships between bilingual and monolingual teachers. She also emphasizes the importance of involving parents in the effort. The district has already held parent meetings at which the staff informs parents about the MCAS tests and how important it is that their children participate in the summer program.

Dionisio DaCosta sees the MCAS tests as ultimately bringing about some good things for the bilingual program and its students. Because of the pressure to achieve high standards, he believes there is, of necessity, more interaction among bilingual teachers, monolingual teachers, and students. He also believes that the MCAS tests are a stimulus to learn as much as possible, especially in terms of critical thinking skills, listening, reading, speaking, and writing.

CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS ISSUE

Tom Crochunis
Melissa DaPonte
Susan Erdey
Ferrance
Ted Hamann
Julie Nora
Harvey Press
Jessica Swedlow

FairTest flunks test-driven education

U.S. public schools administer over 100 million standardized exams each year and devote enormous sums of time and money to assessment. But the proliferation of standardized tests will neither establish high standards nor help students, argues FairTest, the National Center for Fair and Open Testing.

Established in 1985 and based in Cambridge, Massachusetts, FairTest is an advocacy organization that works to end misuses and abuses of standardized testing and to ensure that evaluation of students is fair, open, and educationally sound. FairTest emphasizes the elimination of racial, class, gender, and cultural barriers to equal opportunity posed by standardized testing.

"One-size-fits-all standardized exams assume that every child learns in the same way at the same time," says FairTest executive director Monty Neill, "but young people have diverse learning styles, multiple intelligences that standardized tests do not measure." In particular, he notes, minorities, immigrants, and low-income children are at risk because fast-paced exams fail to measure their learning accurately. Too often, standardized tests may be used to exclude English language learners and students with disabilities from "gifted and talented" programs and to track them into special education classes where they receive an inferior education.

While proponents of standardized testing claim that tests help teachers to regulate curriculum and students to learn more, FairTest argues that in practice, teachers "teach to the test" in ways that narrow curriculum and eliminate real learning. Instead, the nonprofit organization advocates for actively involved, "genuine" accountability and more comprehensive performance assessment through student projects, portfolios, and exhibitions.

The organization works with the Assessment Reform Network (ARN), a group facilitating information exchange among teachers, parents, students, education reformers and civil rights activists. FairTest publishes *The Examiner,* a quarterly newsletter, and comments on testing issues in local and national media and at conferences and hearings. A full catalog of materials on both K-12 and university testing and numerous free fact sheets about standardized testing and alternative assessment methods are available. FairTest's Web site is www.fairtest.org.

Alternatives to standardized testing

Emily Lynch Gómez, a researcher with the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL—a LAB partner organization) describes assessment portfolios in *Assessment Portfolios and English Language Learners: Frequently Asked Questions and a Case Study of the Brooklyn International High School:*

> Portfolios can provide a continuous picture of student progress, rather than a snapshot of student achievement that single-occasion tests provide. Depending on school or district requirements, portfolios can include performance-based assessments, such as writing samples that illustrate different genres; solutions to math problems that show problem-solving ability; lab reports demonstrating an understanding of a scientific approach; or social studies research reports demonstrating the ability to use multiple sources. (Gómez, 1999)

For more information about assessment portfolios or to order a free copy of *Assessment Portfolios and English Language Learners*, visit the LAB Web site at www.lab.brown.edu/public/pubs/catalog.taf.

The Education Alliance
Northeast and Islands
Regional Educational Laboratory
at Brown University
222 Richmond Street, Suite 300
Providence, RI 02903-4226

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