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Portability of State Assessments in a Geographically Mobile Society

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Abstract

Most states do not offer reciprocity for other state assessment tests. That practice has an adverse effect on school-aged, dependent children of military service members. President Clinton's 1997 solution was a national standardized assessment test for public school students. Critics stated it would cost \$96,000,000 to deliver the test. Florida spends $\frac{1}{4}$ of that annually on development and delivery of the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test. National Standardized Basic Skills Web-base testing is a viable alternative. Technology exists to deliver a cost efficient, national assessment test via the internet with portable results. There are numerous difficulties associated with state assessment test results portability faced by transferring students between states coupled with lack of states' failure to grant reciprocity for test results.

As the outcry for accountability in public education reached its crescendo, states all across the country began seeking ways to respond to the statement: “Why Johnny can’t read?” A great many of the multitude of responses came in the form of competency tests. These tests were designed to ensure that students, completing a public education, possessed a basic set of skills (basic skills) that would enable them function in the adult world (States Conducting Student, 2002). It soon became apparent that measuring someone’s knowledge at the end of their education did not identify shortcomings that occurred along the way. Testing at the end of the educational process did not afford adequate time to correct deficiencies. Educators, school districts and states quickly came to realize that it was not only unfair to ask one teacher to resolve years of shortcomings in one final year of school, but an impossible feat to accomplish. The public demanded accountability for the many semi-literate and functionally illiterate graduates of public education. The next logical step was to establish periodic testing throughout the public education process to ensure that adequate instruction was being delivered and meaningful learning taking place along the entire continuum. Now, with the renewed focus on accountability in public education, brought about by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, assessment of public education is, once again, at the forefront of public focus (No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, 2002).

Geographic Mobility in American Society

As is true in most cases, with every new solution there are new problems. Standardized tests measured progress to ensure adequate learning was taking place but, test developers failed to take into consideration the portability of basic skills competency test results. In the United States we have a population that is more transient than ever before in our history. That creates

serious problems for school-aged children. Students may easily change schools several times during their academic years. As long as a student does not move out of the state in which he or she was tested, there is no problem. However, the student who has to move to another state is forced to duplicate all of the mandated testing in their new home state. As stated, each state delivers its own basic skills test. Very few states offer full reciprocity for these types of tests. Attention needs to be drawn to the more than 650,000 school-aged dependents of military service members currently attending public schools (Ronald W. Reagan National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2005). Military service is difficult, at best, particularly since it can require the service member and his or her family to move every several years. The average military family moves about nine times during a twenty year career (Knapp, 2001). Moving to a new community may be one of the most stress-producing experiences a family faces (Tips for Moving, 2003). The lack of ability or desire to grant reciprocity for the results of basic skills tests delivered in other states generally means that the students of military parents have to retake portions, or in some cases, all of the state mandated basic skills tests. This only adds to the stress with which the relocated family is already forced to deal. Take for example, one particular student whose military parents had moved her from Virginia to Florida in conjunction with their permanent change of duty station orders to Pensacola. A teacher of twenty years experience, spanning three different states, who was herself a dependent of a retired military service member explained, in detail, the difficulty faced by the children of military service members, with attempting to transfer in test results from one state to another. She stated, "More often than not, the student has to retake the equivalent test in the state to which he or she has moved" (M. Wood, personal communication, October 21, 2002). Further research turned up some surprising results about how the local school district and the state of Florida did business related to their

basic skills testing. In Florida the basic skills tests are known as the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test or by the acronym FCAT. According to the admissions personnel at the University of West Florida in Pensacola (UWF), the university makes no distinction between high school diplomas from one state over another (UWF unknown admissions counselor, personal communication, 2003). That enlightenment prompted the question, if a university makes no distinction between high school diplomas based on the geographic location of its issuance, then why would individual states make a distinction between basic skills tests, a requirement for receiving a high school diploma, delivered in different geographic locations?

Lowering Standards

An interview with the Escambia School District superintendent charged with the administration and delivery of the FCAT test revealed several very interesting facts as well as some apparent a priori beliefs of this particular individual and perhaps Escambia School District and Florida in general. Questions posed to Dr. Thomas during the interview have their responses listed below: “Florida believes that its basic skills test is superior to all other states”, “Florida spends over 24 million dollars, annually, on development and delivery of the FCAT” and “Florida will not dummy down its standards to accommodate a student from another state” (M. Thomas, personal communication, November 14, 2003). Based on the twenty-one factors used by the Morgan Quitno Press to determine the rankings of the 2005 Smartest State Award, Florida has risen from its 47th position in 2003 to the 36th ranking position in 2005. Virginia is ranked 7th on the same scale (“Results of the 2005,” n.d.). These facts beg the question, who is dummifying down standards for whom? The unfortunate fact of the matter is that the transferring students are caught in the cross fire of this battle of state academic egos.

Innovative Solution in 1997

President Clinton offered the nation a solution to the different tests, different standards and poor portability of test results conundrum during his second term in 1997. He advocated the creation and implementation of a national, standardized basic skills test (MacNeil and Lehrer Productions, n.d.). The test of his proposal would be administered in all fifty states and Department of Defense schools located at overseas military installations around the world. A test of this particular type would make it possible to compare students on a national and international level as well as render the results completely portable among all U. S. schools. When questioned about the concept of a national test and national standards, University of West Florida professor Russell Lee commented, "Without comparable tests we are not comparing apples to apples" (R. L. Lee, personal communication, November 19, 2003). Will National Standardized Testing work? The director of Inservice and Educational Technology for Florida's second highest rated school system, Santa Rosa School District, thinks that "It is a great idea and will probably happen in the next 10 years. Faster results and standardization from state to state would be very good." (V. Beagle, personal communication, November 21, 2003).

Will a National Standardized Basic Skills Test Work?

There are many critics of the national standards and national test concept that have labeled the idea as a being part of an educational system that fails to fully culturalize our students (Zimmerman, 1999/2005). Some question whether or not such a test could be created and administered fairly since a calibration would be needed to compare all students within a system (Davey & Neill, 1991). Although these objections may be considered compelling by some, in

1992 Great Britain began administering a national standard for basic skills test throughout much of the United Kingdom (Quality and Standards, n.d.). This national test of standards is delivered by the traditional paper and pencil method and clearly demonstrates the feasibility of the nationalized standard concept. The United Kingdom's national standards and paper based national standardized tests had already proven that President Clinton's concept was not merely some vague theoretical notion, but a concrete concept already in action elsewhere in the world.

Dollars and Sense

The republican critics of President Clinton's concept complained that it would cost ninety-six million dollars to administer the test and that the price was exorbitant (MacNeil and Lehrer Productions, n.d.). Florida already spends one quarter of that amount annually on the FCAT (M. Thomas, personal communication, November 14, 2003). Taking President Clinton's concept one step further, consider the fact that if all fifty states adopted the Clinton proposal, the cost per state would be roughly two million dollars. Is there any state in the union that develops and delivers its own basic skills test for less than two million dollars annually? The adoption of the Clinton plan would reduce Florida's annual expenditures for their basic skills tests by approximately twenty-two million dollars.

The Reduced Bottom Line

If the nationalization of a standardized test would greatly reduce the funding requirements for each state's basic skills test, imagine how cost effective a web based delivery system for a National Standardized Basic Skills Test would be? A pilot project was conducted in Pennsylvania, and the results published in 1997, that clearly documented the fact that a cost

savings was realized over traditional paper and pencil test delivery methods after only 358 tests were delivered via the internet (Bicanich, Slivinski, Hardwicke, & Kapes, 1997). A public school teacher in Canada developed her own secure website, www.schoolcandy.net, using available freeware and shareware to facilitate web-based testing for her own students (Schoolcandy Online Education, 2005). Her only out of pocket expenses were associated with hardware and the connection of her own server to the web. She began delivering tests via the web and later opened up the site for use by her fellow teachers. Shortly thereafter she made the site available to any teacher anywhere, via the web, and at no cost. The demand was so great, that she began to charge a nominal fee for some of the services available on her online testing site. (J. C. K. Haraga, personal communication, October 27, 2003) Her site clearly proves that with the application of existing software and technology that the cost savings realization mentioned in the Pennsylvania pilot program can become an immediate reality with drastically lower costs than initially believed. The U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) projected a K – 12 student population of 54,907 by this year (NCES, 2005). Based on the Pennsylvania study's cost savings analysis and given the NCES data, the savings would be realized 157 times over. There is a method of delivering basic skills tests that is both cost effective and efficient. With the endless advances in technology and now the addition of the exceptional speeds capable on internet2, the time has never been better to administer basic skills tests via the World Wide Web (Internet2, n.d.).

Student and Teacher Benefits

It has been determined that the national standardized test is cost effective and that web-based testing is cost effective, but web delivery of a national standardized test is also a valuable, time saving tool. "The creation of a web-based test takes the same amount of time as creating a traditional paper test." (M. Wood, personal communication, November 1, 2003). The true time savings is realized in the grading of the completed tests. Web-based testing affords much more rapid grading and therefore much more rapid return of test results for school, district and state authorities. Web-based test administrators in Pennsylvania revealed that "...the Internet-based testing required somewhat less preparation time, effort and class time, as well as substantially less effort for data analysis" (Bicanich, Slivinski, Hardwicke, & Kapes, 1997). Using this resource can provide immediate feedback as well. In the complex world of academia, anything that motivates a student to learn or facilitates the learning process is a definite plus. According to a 1997 web-based testing pilot project conducted in Pennsylvania, the 400 student test group from several secondary and vocational schools clearly communicated their preferences, "Students preferred Internet delivery to paper-and-pencil versions by a 3-to-1 margin (Bicanich, Slivinski, Hardwicke, & Kapes, 1997).

Summary

As the Irish playwright George Farquhar said, "Necessity is the mother of invention". If that statement is indeed true, then the adaptation of existing technology to meet an evident need should likewise be considered an application of the same logic. Web-base testing has already proven to be a valuable asset to the teaching community at large. Numerous universities currently use web-based tests in conjunction with their distance learning programs and many public schools are just beginning to utilize the same available resources. The technology exists, the need exists, the cost savings are evident and both students and teachers will directly benefit

from the application of National Standardized Web-Based Basic Skills testing. With the long standing trend of population mobility, particularly within the military community, and the numerous difficulties associated with state assessment test results portability it is well beyond the reasonable time period to recognize the added difficulties faced by transferring students of public education between states. There are virtually no reciprocity agreements between states to afford recognition of successfully completed state assessments test from outside their own borders.

How can it be possible that each state believes that it alone has a valid public school assessment testing program? Are there no two states that deliver comparable tests? Are not the assessment tests delivered by individual states created by many of the same companies? How much longer will those suffering at the hands of state test administrators tolerate this injustice?

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