

STATEWIDE STANDARDIZED ASSESSMENTS AND THEIR IMPACT ON ESL STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

Schools in the Houston Independent School District (HISD) are required to administer standardized assessments to measure student achievement in core academic areas. The assessments are administered in English. Student scores are used to rank schools in defined categories of performance ranging from Underperforming to Exemplary. A significant percentage of HISD's student population is English Language Learners (ELL). Due to informal, voluntary segregation, these students are not evenly distributed among HISD schools. Since these students have more difficulty hurdling standardized assessments because they are given in a language that they may lack academic proficiency in, schools that have more English Language Learners are handicapped from getting a favorable ranking. It is proposed that the ELL student population be considered in ranking school performance, and that more culturally neutral assessments be developed to avoid unintended variance in the measurement of school performance.

BACKGROUND

Public schools are under close scrutiny. Since they are supported by public funds, there is an increasing demand for accountability. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) now requires all students to be accounted for in any state's assessment system, although that has not always been the case (Abedi, 2004). School districts are now required to clearly demonstrate that they deserve, and effectively utilize public funding. In itself, this is not a disturbing trend. Institutions that are wholly or partly supported by tax money should be accountable to the public that they have been created to serve. This is essentially a consequence of democracy. A government that is created by, and for the people, is so unlike an aristocracy that is not required to serve a constituency beyond the guarantee of protection from marauders or invading armies. The system of government that we have empowers the government to undertake measures that guarantee the common good. This goes beyond the guarantee of physical safety, since the term "common good" has a wider application, and implies a calculated sensitivity to every citizen's pursuit of happiness. Thus, while education is not categorized as a fundamental right, it is perceived as primary among a bundle of values essential for every person's quest for fulfillment and happiness. This explains why there is little argument about whether the government should be involved in education at all, and whether this is an endeavor better left to the private sector.

The government's involvement in the serious business of education opens a wide avenue for the analysis and evaluation of results. In today's world, it is not enough that public schools have adequate facilities, although this constitutes one level of analysis. It is important that schools are safe and teachers are qualified, although in the hierarchy of priorities considered for evaluating schools, these outcomes are not standard. Schools are judged principally based on the amount of learning that takes place in their classrooms, and being an internal act, the evidence of learning is culled from scores students obtain in standardized assessments.

ISSUE

Are standardized assessments administered only in English, in a community that is linguistically and culturally diverse, and in schools with significantly varying numbers of English Language Learners, accurate measurements of student achievement, such that the results may be taken, by itself, as a valid gauge for ranking school performance?

ARGUMENT

School performance rankings need to be determined based on evidence of student achievement in a valid, and culturally neutral assessments, and with due regard given to the diverse, and inherently unequal distribution among schools of students who are testing, and who are learning English as a second language.

STATEMENT OF FACTS

Schools in the Houston Independent School District are required to administer a battery of tests to measure their students' yearly achievement. The Texas Assessment of Knowledge Skills (TAKS) is given to every student at designated grade levels to determine their eligibility for promotion. The collective scores obtained by students then determine whether a school is Exemplary, Recognized, Acceptable, or Underperforming. These labels have fiscal and administrative consequences.

Students who qualify for Special Education may be allowed to take alternative assessments in lieu of the TAKS. It is interesting to note that while the number of African-American students and Hispanic students are over-represented in Special Education, about eight to nine percent of ELLs are identified as receiving Special Education services in the US (D'Emilio, 2003, June; Zehler, Fleischman, Hopstock, Pendzick, & Stepherson, 2003). While these assessments are not on grade level, schools are expected to demonstrate that, based on students' scores on alternative assessments, improvement in academic performance is taking place.

Students who are classified as ELLs take the TAKS. Although some teachers have reported that their ELLs can reach the high standards set for them, they may need more time than other students (Hood, 2003). They may have difficulty appreciating the cultural nuances that are attendant in some questions included in the assessments, or they may take more time deciphering an unfamiliar idiom, or interpreting a novel turn of phrase, still, they are expected to perform in a similar fashion as students who learned English as a first language.

Schools are judged based on how their students perform in standardized assessments. Demographic data is not considered in these evaluations. Thus, schools with a predominantly Hispanic student population will be judged and evaluated in the same way as a school with a predominantly White student population. It does not matter that one school has a greater percentage of students who have English as a second language than the other, and thus may be handicapped insofar as assessments in English are concerned.

The results of student assessments affect the morale of students. Certainly, poor test scores or poorly explained assessment systems can result in decreased student motivation (Lane & Stone, 2002). The ranking which a school receives based on students' performance affect administration and student morale. Labeling schools can have an impact on teacher and student morale (Anderson, 2004).

Moreover, these school rankings can influence parents of better-performing students to transfer to zones with exemplary schools. This makes the rankings and the labels they carry stubbornly sticky, and once acquired, the labels can be self-perpetuating.

DISCUSSION

Basically, the issue concerning the uniform assessment of students irrespective of whether they are native speakers of English or ELLs is brought about by the informal and self-imposed segregation that persists in many communities, including Houston. Testing cannot be divorced from socio-cultural, economic, and psychological issues (Solano-Flores & Trumbull, 2003). Hispanics, African Americans, White Anglo-Americans, and Asians have created their own enclaves. This phenomenon has encouraged the rise of cultural niches, which can be detected in art, music, cuisine, and other discernible cultural imprints. If we live in an ideal world where ethnic groups are evenly distributed among communities, then the question whether schools are judged based on the results of these assessments might be a moot point. However, students attend schools where they are zoned, and this leads to some schools serving one predominant ethnic group.

Thus, schools that are located in zones with a predominantly Hispanic community will have more students who have limited fluency in English. Since ESL students may not score any differently in an assessment even when allowed to use a dictionary (Albus, Thurlow, Bielinski, 2005), this may create problems because students in these schools will take the same tests as students who are proficient in English, and who might constitute a dominant group in other schools. This cultural construct renders school rankings flawed to a certain extent since they become less accurate as a measure of the faculty and administration's performance. Instead, they become unintended indicators of the ethnicity of the students to which schools cater.

Moreover, since school rankings affect student and faculty morale, they serve more as a force for the preservation of the status quo, than a force that drive improvement in student performance. Thus, a school that works hard to ensure that learning occurs, and that their students progress academically, but which has a larger proportion of ELLs, will risk being ranked as underperforming because the measure used to evaluate its performance is blind to this important demographic fact.

Finally, it deserves to be examined whether this prevailing method of evaluating school performance is fair. In a sense, it reflects the reluctance, and even failure of some ethnic groups to assimilate into American society. Where language is viewed as a factor of identity, it is possible that minority groups are insistent on retaining their ethnic language, as their "first", and hold English proficiency more as an elective instead of an indispensable tool, learning which might render life in their adopted society only as slightly more convenient. If this is the case, schools are being held accountable for the consequences of a socio-cultural phenomenon which is beyond their limited powers to address.

CONCLUSION

It is important that schools be held accountable, and that their performance be evaluated based on how well they succeed in teaching their students the basic set of knowledge and skills which they will need to become productive members of society. While this point is conceded, serious consideration should be given to the validity of assessments to measure student achievement, and to artificial societal constructs which prevent schools being ranked from competing on an equal footing. If schools are going to be evaluated based on student achievement scores, it should be analyzed whether the assessments used are culturally neutral, and whether, for purposes of establishing parity in benchmarks, schools are dealing with students who are more or less equally equipped to handle the assessments. In a district where schools have distinct ethnic compositions, and a disparate and incongruous distribution of students who are proficient in the language in which the assessment is given, it would be difficult to justify ranking which are blind to this overwhelming demographic data.

The Houston Independent School District should endeavor to develop valid student assessments, and should consider every school's student composition as important factors in measuring their performance. It is only when school rankings are perceived to be fair, that they can be held as responsive to the demand for greater accountability.

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