Standardized Testing: Does it Measure Student Preparation for College & Work?

by

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Abstract

How can schools effectively prepare students for life after high school? With the

accountability standards set forth by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), there

are many theories regarding standardized testing. Many schools today are

adopting the goal of preparing all students for the college or the workplace. This

review of current literature and best practices will provide the educator-

practitioner a concise summary of how to encourage the instructional process to

go beyond procedural knowledge. However, it takes time and training to change

instructional practices. A focus on conceptual knowledge must be attained

through alignment of curriculum and assessment to meet these goals. To assist

districts with this alignment process there are a variety of resources available

from software programs to private consultants who will assist with practices such

as curriculum mapping. The final goal must be for students to demonstrate the

ability to apply their learning and meet their goals of entering the workforce or the

college of their choice. Beginning with this goal and working backward to design

curriculum and assessment may help districts see improvements in student

achievement.

Standardized Testing: Does it Measure Student Preparation for College &

Work?

How can schools effectively prepare students for life after high school?

Are standardized tests measuring actual preparation? There is a wealth of

literature on the use of standardized tests. With the accountability standards set

forth by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), all stakeholders have an opinion

and many of them are strongly expressed. Most of the literature indicates that

there is a need to measure our public schools' success in preparing the whole

child; however, there is not widespread agreement regarding what tool to use for

this measurement and who should make the decision regarding the tool what will

be used. More and more schools today are adopting the goal of preparing all

students for the college or the workplace.

We live and work in a data driven world that wants quantitative proof that

our public schools are meeting the expectations of the stakeholders. This places

a tremendous burden on our educational leaders to prove they are meeting a set

of objectives. This is true regardless of whether the objectives are set at the

national, state, or local level. School districts nationwide have the burden to

demonstrate their students' successful preparation based on a single measure,

the state standardized test. Additionally, many schools have set high standards

for themselves by adopting the mottos such as "all students college and

workplace prepared" (Voltz, 2004, p. 2). To demonstrate their success in

reaching this goal, many schools in Illinois have adopted the use of the ACT

results. Some districts utilize two standardized tests that are available at the high

school level to measure their students' success; one is the Illinois mandated test, the Prairie State Achievement Exam (PSAE) and the other is mandated by several districts statewide, the ACT.

Robert Linn (2000) illustrated how in the past five decades we have based education reform on test accountability. Linn stated "There are several reasons for the great appeal of assessment to policymakers as an agent for reform" (p. 4). He concluded that 1) "tests and assessments are relatively inexpensive" 2) "can be externally mandated" 3) "rapidly implemented" and 4) "results are visible" (p. 4).

Have you noticed that the first year a standardized test is administered the lowest results are gained? Then, each successive year the scores are higher because the teachers and administrators re-align their lessons and curricula to better match the test objectives. This situation appears to illustrate that the policymaker's reform was effective. Unfortunately, the scores usually plateau, though that won't necessarily be the policymaker's concern because it is likely that he or she will no longer be serving in public office. Are the students better prepared through this reform? Probably not.

W. James Popham (2002), a professor emeritus in the UCLA Graduate School of Education, expresses his opinion that "it is wrong to evaluate a school by how well its students perform on standardized achievement tests" (¶ 1). He contends that standardized tests are constructed from the Army Alpha test, which was used during World War I to identify possible officer-training candidates. The Alpha test was designed to measure the aptitude of the candidates and to

identify those candidates who are superior intellectually within the group of test-takers. The Alpha test rank-ordered the test-takers based on their aptitude. Currently, tests in the public schools are intended to measure student achievement, not aptitude. However, because the current standardized tests are based on the Alpha test model, they actually measure achievement as a student's relative standing within the test group and not the acquired knowledge or actual preparation of a student.

The ACT core assessment system, which includes the EXPLORE, PLAN, and ACT assessments, are based on standards, administered in a specifically stated format, and are objectively scored and interpreted. The ACT core assessment system is a series of standardized achievement tests that rank-order the test-takers as most likely to least likely to succeed in college. Is it a perfect assessment system? No, but it may actually indicate student preparation more effectively than other types of standardized testing.

ACT (2005) states their "guiding purpose is to help people achieve their education and career goals by providing information for life's transitions" (p. 5). They do this by providing "assessment, research, information, and program management services in the broad areas of education planning, career planning, and workforce development" (ACT, 2005, p. 5). The ACT core assessment system provides more than standards-based, rank-ordered information. This system, which includes an interest inventory, also provides information to the school about the types of classes students should enroll in to be better prepared for college or the workplace depending the individual's goals after high school.

"ACT research shows that far too few graduates are ready for college-level work in English, math, or science—or for the workplace, where the same skills are now being expected of those who do not attend college" (ACT, 2005, p. 11). This assessment system can provide assistance to school districts in identifying the effectiveness of instructional programming and coursework at the high school level in preparing their students for college or the workplace.

Some school districts use the ACT accountability system to effectively measure their success in assisting all students in preparation for college and the workplace. ACT believes that the skills needed for college readiness are the same skills necessary for entrance into workforce training programs (ACT, 2006).

How do districts use the results from standardized tests? In November 2000, John Easton reported the results from a random sample study conducted by the Consortium on Chicago School Research and the Illinois Business Roundtable. For the study, curriculum directors or superintendents were interviewed by telephone from 60 districts. A total of 75 districts completed an assessment survey. One of the research questions was "what do districts do with their test results?" (Easton, 2000, p.1). Easton's reported results were that about 77 percent of the districts rated "evaluating school improvement" (p. 3) as the greatest reason for the use of standardized test results. Evaluating district programs and evaluating students were also highly rated for actual usage of test scores. The types of tests administered in Illinois districts for these purposes are achievement tests at 91 percent, aptitude at 32 percent, and career planning/college prep and local assessments each identified at 23 percent.

The ACT series is identified as a career planning and college prep assessment. Many Illinois school districts are currently using the ACT series to assist in the preparation of all students for college and the workplace. Based on the research reported by ACT, it is an effective tool to evaluate the effectiveness of instructional programs and students at the high school level (ACT, 2005). Many schools reported results similar to the ACT literature.

Evaluating student and school performance are not the only ways assessment results are currently used. They are still used to reach political goals (McDonnell, 2004). Elected officials have used assessments "to influence classroom instruction through their choice of what knowledge and which skills are tested on state assessments" (McDonnell, 2004, p. 3). While McDonnell states this from a state perspective, it is also true at the local level.

Current research has several theories on best practices for the use of standardized tests results. Naomi Chudowsky, an educational testing consultant and James Pellegrino (2003), a professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago, believe that in order for standardized tests to support learning, the underlying constructs of the test must be aligned to support the aspects of thinking and learning. To do this, four steps must be accomplished:

1. An effort that is collaborative in academic content, learning, and assessment must be sustained.

2. Classroom instruction must be appropriately distributed so that the essential standards are met. The instructional materials must be in alignment with the appropriate standards.

3. Formative assessments must be created that are aligned to the standards.

4. Teachers must have allocated planning time that is collaborative in nature. This collaborated planning time will ensure coordinated instruction and the sharing of ideas related to classroom teaching.

Carl Chafin (2004), a research and planning specialist, states his conclusions for the best use of standardized test results based on his 25 years in the educational field. In his opinion, test results should not be used purely for accountability purposes, which is an expected use in our era of data-driven decision-making. Test results should be disaggregated to identify patterns to gain a better understanding of the test and the results to identify ways to improve instruction. Instructional improvement will then guide student preparation for either college or the workplace.

The AERA reported from a federal study that there are two important elements that have the greatest effect on changing instructional practices (Resnick, 2005). These are to focus professional development on content knowledge and on coherence. Coherence involves "aligning professional development with state and district standards and assessment, and encouraging communication among teachers who are striving to reform their instruction in similar ways" (Resnick, 2005, p. 3). Today's standards and instruction must go beyond procedural knowledge; they must be focused on conceptual knowledge. It takes time and training to change instructional practices. Effective collaboration can help a staff move beyond their training knowledge to changing

their instruction by discussing and formulating new ideas on how to implement what they have learned from their professional development experiences.

Many schools across the country like Poway Unified School District in California have adopted the goal of preparing all students for college. Donald Phillips, superintendent, and Kevin Skelly (2006), associate superintendent, stated the importance of aligning the curriculum from the college readiness expectations down through the kindergarten expectations. They explained that if the students are to be ready for college when they graduate from the Poway district as the final goal, then their "instructional program should be designed backwards from this goal" (p. 3). Another strategy they employ is to make the college-prep curriculum the default curriculum; therefore, "students, rather than opting into this rigorous curriculum, must now opt out" (p. 4). The ACT series defines the skills students need and the rigorous coursework students should take to be ready for college and the workplace. With the use of this assessment tool, a district should be able to align and implement instructional programs to meet their college and workforce readiness goal.

To help districts with this alignment process there are a variety of resources available from software programs to private consultants. Curriculum mapping may promote clear communication about the skills students learn within a class or grade-level and throughout their academic experience in the district. Curriculum maps demonstrate alignment of the district's standards, assessments and curriculum, thereby ensuring that students are receiving the best

instructional programs to prepare them for college and the workplace (Jacobs, 1997).

Another way to complete an alignment process is to work with an outside agency, such as the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO). THE CCSSO works with school districts to "identify the content standard objectives that match each assessment item" (2006, p.2). For goal-oriented districts, this facilitates informed decision-making regarding current assessments and standards. This process can also be used by a district as an effective communication tool to educators and stakeholders to illustrate their current alignment status and the steps that need to be taken to reach complete alignment.

Standardized tests are used for a variety of purposes today and there are strong opponents for this usage. However, the fact remains that educators must use standardized tests to demonstrate that all students are learning the state standards. Additionally, many districts choose a district-wide assessment to measure progress toward their local goals. How an administrator responds to these policy mandates is predictive of how much a school will progress in meeting its stated goals. It is beneficial when a district chooses to discover creative and productive ways to use assessments for improvement in preparing students to meet the demands of life after high school.

According to researchers, best practices for the use of assessment tools are to focus on the alignment of standards, assessments, and curriculum. Educators must understand the constructs of a test to support thinking and

learning. Instruction must go beyond procedural knowledge and focus on conceptual knowledge so that students are able to demonstrate their learning on a wide scope of standards because they have been taught how to think and problem-solve. To be effective this alignment should not be focused on a specific grade level or subject area, it must align throughout the district so that all stakeholders are aware of the path a student will take to be prepared to reach their intended goals.

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