Education -

Mandatory Testing

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Summary

- **The federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 aims to dramatically increase the use and importance of standardized tests.**
- **In fact, standardized tests are poor yardsticks to measure student achievement.**
- **An emphasis on standardized testing encourages teaching to the test, skews school programs and priorities, and drives quality teachers out of the profession.**
- **Since standardized test scores can fluctuate rapidly, they are virtually useless for comparing a school's progress from one year to the next.**
- **The Comprehensive School Assessment Act reduces the state's reliance on standardized testing.**
- **The School Testing Right to Know Act highlights the primary causes of low student achievement.**

The federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 aims to dramatically increase the use and importance of standardized tests.

President Bush's No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, also known as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, requires annual "assessments" of all students in grades 3-8 in reading and math, beginning in the 2005-06 school year. Periodic science assessments will be added in 2007-08. These assessments will be used to measure each school's Adequate Yearly Progress toward the goal of making every public school student "proficient" in these subjects within 12 years. Schools that fail to make the required progress are declared "low performing" and are subject to sanctions.

In fact, standardized tests are poor yardsticks to measure student achievement.

Standardized tests reward the ability to quickly answer superficial questions that do not require critical thinking or genuine analysis. They do not measure the ability to write; to understand math, scientific methods, or reasoning; or to grasp social science concepts. They cannot adequately measure thinking skills or assess what students can do when presented with real-world tasks.

An emphasis on standardized testing encourages teaching to the test.

The higher the stakes, the more schools focus instruction on standardized tests. Because they are under the most pressure to increase test scores, schools in low-income neighborhoods are most actively teaching to the test, dumbing down both curriculum and instruction. Entire subjects are dropped, and skills that cannot be measured with standardized tests, such as writing research papers or conducting laboratory experiments, are neglected. Instruction starts to look like the tests. For example, reading is reduced to short passages followed by multiple-choice questions, a kind of "reading" that neither exists in the real world nor improves actual comprehension skills, which are key to successful literacy. Writing becomes a series of lessons to master the "five-paragraph essay," a form useless outside of standardized tests. The major consequence of teaching to the test is that students are, in fact, left behind—they are not taught the knowledge and skills required to be successful in life.

An emphasis on standardized testing skews school programs and priorities.

Under pressure to increase test scores, schools reach for quick fixes. Incessant drills and practice tests waste valuable classroom time that should be devoted to increasing students' real knowledge and skills. Library budgets are spent on test prep materials. Teachers are converted to test-taking coaches, giving tips like "what to do with only one minute left," and professional development is reduced to training teachers to be better test coaches.

An emphasis on standardized testing drives quality teachers out of the profession and turns off bright students.

Good teachers and bright students are often discouraged, even disgusted, by an overemphasis on testing. Many excellent teachers leave the profession. It is

absurd to believe that the "best and brightest" will want to become teachers when teaching is reduced to test prep.

Since standardized test scores can fluctuate rapidly, they are virtually useless for comparing a school's progress from one year to the next.

Even at the very best schools, standardized test scores never consistently rise every year. They fluctuate from year to year based on any number of factors, including student turnover, new teachers, or even a bad flu season. An in-depth study of test scores in North Carolina elementary schools found, for example, that 70 percent of the year-to-year change in average test scores was caused by external factors, rather than actual change in student performance.[1] At the same time, a growing number of research studies have shown that, because of statistical margins of error based on the number of children tested at a given school, the scores used to judge schools are often inaccurate. This means that some satisfactory schools are punished for inaccurate bad scores while some unsatisfactory schools are rewarded for inaccurate good scores. Furthermore, a student's mastery of content and skills can only be accurately measured through testing if the assessment is closely aligned with state and district content standards, which is not always the case. The result is that students are tested on material that is not in the curriculum. This is all the more reason why any accountability program must use multiple measures of student learning, and not just rely on one standardized test.

The Comprehensive School Assessment Act reduces the state's reliance on standardized testing.

The No Child Left Behind Act does not specifically mandate annual statewide standardized tests. It requires "yearly student academic assessments."[2] A number of states are seeking to satisfy the requirements of federal law without resorting to standardized tests. The Comprehensive School Assessment Act, based on a model written by parents and educators in Massachusetts, holds the state Board of Education responsible for defining the core body of knowledge and skills that students should acquire. It also directs local school boards to create assessment systems that meet the needs of their student populations and provide fair and comprehensive assessments of student learning. Each assessment system must be approved by the state education authorities and be consistent with uniform statewide standards.

The School Testing Right to Know Act highlights the primary causes of low student achievement.

Despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, President Bush's No Child Left Behind Act is based on the assumption that student achievement is primarily the result of the instruction children receive in their current school. This premise focuses the blame for low-performing schools on teachers and school administrators, and distracts attention from the major causes of low student achievement: the special challenges faced by low-income students and a lack of resources available to meet those challenges. The School Testing Right to Know Act requires that whenever a government entity releases standardized test scores, it must simultaneously release school-specific data on key factors that affect test scores, including the percentage of students who qualify for free or reduced-price meals, per-pupil expenditures, and average class size. With this information, both policymakers and the public will have a more accurate idea of what real problems need to be addressed so that our schoolchildren can succeed.

This policy summary relies in large part on information from the National Center for Fair & Open Testing (FairTest).

Endnotes

[1] Tom Kane and Douglas Staiger, "Volatility in School Test Scores," 2001.

[2] 20 U.S.C. Sec. 6311(a)(3).

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For more information...

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1201 16th Street NW
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Public Education Network
601 Thirteenth Street NW, Suite 900
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School Testing Right to Know Act

SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE

This Act shall be called the "School Testing Right to Know Act."

SECTION 2. FINDINGS AND PURPOSE

(A) FINDINGS – The legislature finds that:

1. The federal No Child Left Behind Act aims to dramatically increase the use and importance of primary and secondary school standardized tests.

2. However, standardized test scores do not accurately assess the causes of low student achievement. Instead, they distract attention from the major causes of low academic performance: poverty and the lack of resources available to meet low-income students' needs.

3. When standardized test scores are released to the public, policymakers, parents and taxpayers have the right to know all relevant data relating to these scores.

(B) PURPOSE – This law is enacted to provide policymakers and the public with accurate information with which to make future decisions about the direction of education policy in this state.

SECTION 3. SCHOOL TESTING RIGHT TO KNOW

After section XXX, the following new section XXX shall be inserted:

No agency of the state, or any governmental entity within the state, shall release any school-by-school or district-by-district listing of primary or secondary school standardized test scores to the public without simultaneously listing the following information for the same schools or districts:

1. Percentage of students who qualify for free or reduced-price meals.

2. Student mobility rate, that is, a measure of students who enter or leave a school during the school year.

3. Per-student expenditure by school, not including district-wide administrative costs.

4. Average class size.

5. For students who enter a school after grade 3, the percentage whose skills are assessed at below basic upon entering the school.

6. Percentage of students who qualify for special education services.

SECTION 4. EFFECTIVE DATE

This Act shall take effect on July 1, 2004.

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Comprehensive School Assessment Act

SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE

This Act shall be called the "Comprehensive School Assessment Act."

SECTION 2. FINDINGS AND PURPOSE

(A) FINDINGS – The legislature finds that:

1. The federal No Child Left Behind Act requires "yearly student academic assessments" in public school grades 3-8 beginning in the 2005-06 school year. The Act does not specifically mandate annual statewide standardized tests.

2. An emphasis on standardized testing results in teaching to the test, it skews school programs and priorities, and it discourages quality teachers, sometimes driving them out of the profession. As a result, it will inhibit, rather than support, high-quality learning, and may well cause more students to be left behind.

3. The best, most accurate school assessment system is one that is locally created and operated following established guidelines for the development and use of multiple assessment measures.

(B) PURPOSE – This law is enacted to meet the requirements of federal law while providing [STATE] schools and schoolchildren with the highest quality assessment system.

SECTION 3. COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOL ASSESSMENT

After section XXX, the following new section XXX shall be inserted:

(A) COMPREHENSIVE ASSESSMENTS BASED ON STATEWIDE STANDARDS

1. The state [Board of Education] shall adopt statewide academic standards embodied in curriculum frameworks in the areas of English, mathematics, science and technology, history and social science, foreign languages, and the arts. Such standards shall delineate essential knowledge and skills, that, taken as a whole will not require more than [one half / two-thirds] of typical instructional time to enable students to meet, thereby allowing time and opportunity for individual student interests and school or district standards designed to meet special interests (e.g., an arts school) or local interests (e.g., agricultural science). State standards and frameworks for each subject area shall be approved by the relevant professional body of educators.

2. Each school district shall develop and adopt a system for assessing on an annual basis the extent to which the district, and every public school within the district, succeeded in improving or failed to improve student performance. Student performance shall be measured as the acquisition of the skills, competencies and knowledge called for by the statewide academic standards and curriculum frameworks, as well as local school and district standards and expectations, and the assessment of student progress toward areas of their own particular interest.

3. Each assessment system shall be designed to fairly and comprehensively measure outcomes and results regarding student performance, including complex and higher order thinking and application, and extended

student work, and to improve the effectiveness of curriculum and instruction. In its design and application, each assessment system shall employ a variety of assessment instruments, including classroom-based and teacher-made assessments, using either comprehensive or statistically valid sampling. Each school or district shall include in its plan a description of how it will use assessment information to improve teaching and guide professional development, and how information will be summarized for public reporting purposes.

4. Instruments used as part of the assessment system shall be criterion referenced, assessing whether students are meeting the statewide academic standards. Such instruments shall include work samples, projects, and portfolios based on regular student classroom work to facilitate authentic and direct gauges of student performance.

5. The state [Board of Education] shall provide technical assistance to schools and school districts to design and implement the evaluation systems required by this section, including the development of models for local evaluation systems.

(B) STATE APPROVAL OF ASSESSMENT SYSTEMS

Every school district shall submit a written description of its proposed assessment system to the state [Board of Education] for review and approval prior to implementation. Each assessment system shall include data on student achievement based on state standards that can be compared from district to district and reported in a uniform manner on forms designed by the state [Board of Education]. The state [Board of Education] shall not approve an assessment system unless it meets or exceeds the requirements of Section 1111(a)(3) of the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, 20 U.S.C. Sec. 6311(a)(3).

(C) PUBLIC REPORTING OF ASSESSMENT RESULTS

Each school district shall annually report to the public how its students performed under the assessment system established by the district. The report shall be in a format approved by the state [Board of Education], and shall break down the data by school, race, gender, special education, or transitional bilingual education status and such other categories as are required by the state [Board of Education], provided that data will not allow identification of individual students.

SECTION 4. EFFECTIVE DATE

This Act shall take effect on July 1, 2004.