

T E S T I N G

Setting
the Record
STRAIGHT



Despite the claims of critics, testing can and does play a vital role in improving teaching and learning. States that are serious about raising standards and achievement in schools are implementing new, more challenging tests. These tests promote better instruction and provide essential information about student performance that helps everyone in the system improve. States face significant challenges in ensuring that their standards and tests are as good as they need to be, but the way to achieve the goals we share is to make tests better, not get rid of them or put off using them until they are perfect.





T E S T I N G

Setting the Record STRAIGHT

Newspaper readers these days must think that the most serious problem in education today is an epidemic of standardized testing. Tests have been blamed for all sorts of ills, from poor teaching to a shortage of principals to an outbreak of cheating.

The *real* problem in American education, of course, is the fact that too many students suffer from low expectations and their performance is not at the level it needs to be. The reforms that most states are putting in place are designed to respond to this problem by raising the standards for what children should learn and holding schools accountable for helping students reach those standards. Tests are vital components in such reforms.

As higher standards and accountability measures have taken hold in schools across the country, the tests states are using have been scrutinized. This is to be expected. But despite what we hear from some of the more vocal critics, the tests that a growing number of states are implementing are far different from the old style “standardized tests” that many adults remember taking when they were in school. The new tests are designed to exert a strong positive effect on schooling and the information they provide can be extremely valuable to teachers, students and their parents.

The new generation of tests does not exist in every state, and even where more sophisticated tests are in place, key challenges remain if schools are going help students achieve the standards that have been set. States that are serious about closing the achievement gap will need to continue to rely on tests and the tests will need to be improved over time. Without tests, states have no way of knowing

which students and schools are succeeding and which need additional help. Eliminating tests, or eliminating the consequences tied to them, as some critics seem to want, would simply reinforce the status quo and consign millions of students to uncertain futures.

HOW WE GOT HERE

Testing has always been a feature of American education, but the use of tests has increased rapidly since the 1970s. And with this dramatic rise in testing came a storm of criticism and a chorus calling for reform in the way student achievement is measured.

Two forces helped fuel the demand for test reform. First, research on student learning showed that tests could in fact measure students’ abilities to solve complex problems, and that these new tests could help all students develop their understanding of challenging subject matter. At the same time, education researchers began to amass evidence to show that the growing use of tests and the increased attention paid to them in schools was narrowing the curriculum down to low-level knowledge and skills. Thus, while the potential for putting tests to good use was becoming apparent, serious questions were being raised about the effects of traditional testing on instruction.

Responding to these concerns, states began to reform tests, and the drive for reform accelerated with the advent of the standards movement. Beginning in the late 1980s, professional associations and states responded to public pressure and began to develop explicit statements about what all students should know and be able to do in core

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subjects. These standards in turn demanded new types of tests to measure student progress against the standards.

Throughout the 1990s, nearly all states redesigned their education systems with standards as the linchpin of their efforts. They realized that high standards — and ways to measure progress against high standards — are essential to ensuring that all students have access to the kind of high-quality learning experiences that many young people had not been receiving. Other countries, where many more students perform at high levels, in mathematics and science in particular, rely on common high expectations for all students and complex tests that challenge them to use their knowledge and show their understanding. Common standards are particularly necessary in a culturally diverse and transient country like the United States, to ensure that expectations are high for all students, no matter where they live.

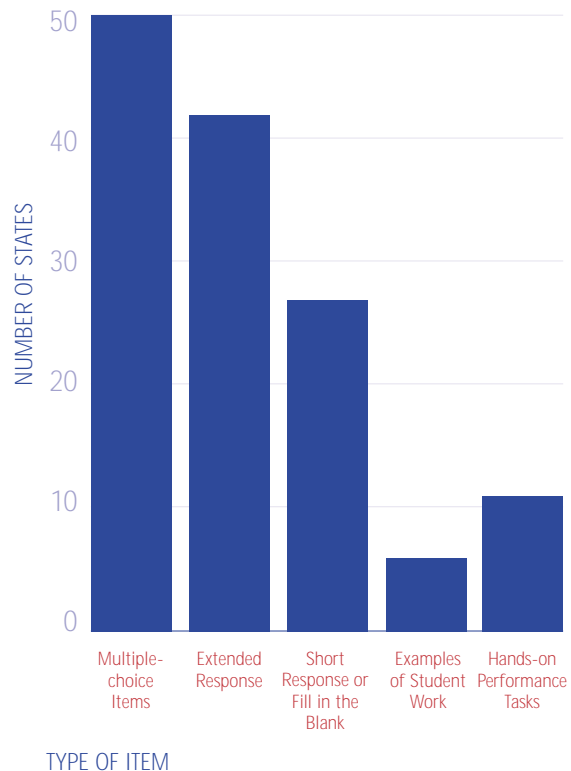
THE NEW GENERATION OF TESTS

During the last decade, nearly every state instituted a new testing system or revised their existing one, in efforts to measure whether students are meeting standards. Of the 48 states with statewide testing programs in 2000 (all but Iowa and Nebraska), most are working to align their tests to standards. And states are not finished with the job: Achieve's review of the 43 state action plans developed after the 1999 National Education Summit showed that 16 of these states plan to revise their tests in the near future.

Although state practices vary widely, many of the new tests represent what might be called a “new generation” in testing, one that differs sharply from the “standardized” tests of the past. How are the new tests different?

More Than Just Multiple Choice

While nearly all state tests include multiple-choice questions, most have moved beyond a sole reliance on such items. To measure standards, tests now also include items that ask students to write their own answers. Some ask for samples of classroom work or ask students to complete a task, such as a science experiment.



Source: Council of Chief State School Officers, 1998



The current achievement data show clearly that many students, particularly those from low-income homes, are being denied educational opportunities right now, without high-stakes testing.

- *The results show if students meet standards.*

They indicate what students know and are able to do, not just how they compare with other students or with a “national average.” In that way, the tests help pinpoint where students need additional help and where policymakers and teachers should direct their resources and energies.

- *The tests are based on standards, and the standards are public.*

What students are expected to know and be able to do — and in some cases actual questions used on earlier tests — are disseminated widely, so that schools can help students prepare. In the past, such standards were “state secrets,” which meant that preparation focused on getting ready to take tests, not primarily on learning content.

- *Students taught well can do well.* The tests are linked to standards, which, in turn, guide the curriculum schools use, so students in good programs who work hard to learn the curriculum should do well on the tests. As a result, test scores don’t fall into a bell-shaped curve; all students can do well on the new tests — provided that states face the challenges required to help all students reach high standards.

- *The tests employ a mix of formats.* Rather than rely solely on multiple-choice questions, the tests include short-answer questions as well as problems that ask students to use their knowledge to write essays or solve complex mathematics problems. Of course, the type of test question doesn’t guarantee that the test is of high quality, but a mix of formats permits students to demonstrate a range of abilities — and encourages teachers to use creative lessons to enable students to develop such abilities.

WHAT THE NEW TESTS DO — AND DON’T DO

Some critics have contended that high-stakes tests could be harmful to children by narrowing the curriculum down to strictly what is tested. If the tests focused on low-level skills or random lists of knowledge, that might be true. But as the examples on the following page show, the new kinds of tests demand a lot from students — and from teachers. Right now, too many students are burdened by low expectations and rarely have the opportunity to engage in the kind of challenging, creative lessons that would enable them to do well on the new tests. Schools where curriculum is aligned with the standards and tests will be teaching what we expect all students to learn — and what many students now are not being taught.

Do the new tests drive other subjects out of school? They shouldn’t. Science, history, art, music, foreign languages and other subjects are vital components of education. While state tests have focused on English language arts and mathematics as the essential core subjects, there is ample time during the school day and school year for other important subjects. If some students need additional time in particular areas, extra help can be provided after school and during the summer.

Some critics also have argued that the high stakes connected to test results can lead teachers and administrators to do whatever it takes to raise scores - including cheat. Cheating is inexcusable, and states and districts are right to root it out and punish the offenders. But to blame tests for cheating is like blaming red lights for traffic violators. Getting rid of traffic lights would make streets less

safe, and getting rid of tests would eliminate an important source of information that helps schools and students improve academic performance.

Perhaps the most serious questions about tests and accountability relate to issues of fairness and equity. Some critics suggest that tests are being used to deny opportunities to some students. But the current achievement data show clearly that many students, particularly those from low-income homes, are being denied educational opportunities *right now*, without high-stakes testing. Tests based on common standards can, in fact, do a *better* job than the current system in fostering equity by providing

common expectations for all students. The data also provide valuable information that schools and parents can use to guide systemic changes and improvements in teaching and learning. Without tests, the inequities likely would persist, without state policymakers, teachers, parents and the public knowing about them. Without consequences tied to test results, there would be little incentive for schools to deal with the current gaps in achievement.

To say that accountability systems place unfair consequences on student performance ignores the fact that students face consequences all the time — for example, when they get out of high school and

find they lack the preparation for college or a career. For too many young people, the education system has been a path toward closed doors. By contrast, the efforts states are undertaking to set challenging standards for all students, measure their progress against those standards and hold schools accountable for students' performance are aimed at opening doors for all students. Making sure all students are prepared to walk through those doors will be difficult, but most people agree that the effort to do so is eminently worthwhile.

The New Generation of Tests: Two Examples

In a Massachusetts high school writing test (right), students read the opening paragraphs of a James Joyce story and write an essay predicting the rest of the story. In an Oregon eighth-grade mathematics test (below), students use algebra to solve a problem they might encounter outside of school. Both test items represent the new kinds of tests states are implementing: They ask students to demonstrate their knowledge and show they have met challenging standards, and both encourage teachers to employ challenging, creative lessons that will enable students to meet the standards.

Oregon

"DJ" — Algebraic Relationships
Grade 8

Jolene and Jake are in charge of hiring the Disc Jockey (DJ) for the Spring Dance. The DJ from radio station KDOT charges \$150 plus \$2 per person. The DJ from radio station KBOP charges \$250 plus \$1 per person. Since most of the students like the DJ from KBOP better, show how many students would need to attend the dance to make KBOP cost the same as KDOT.

Source: Oregon Department of Education, 1999-2000, Grade 8, Mathematics Problem Solving

Massachusetts

In many literary works, the opening paragraphs provide clues for what is yet to come. Based on your analysis of these two opening paragraphs, predict how the story might develop. Write a carefully reasoned essay that includes at least four of the following elements of fiction:

- meaning of the first sentence
- imagery (clear, vivid description that appeals to our sense of sight, smell, touch, sound, or taste)
- word choice (vocabulary and word combinations that further the effect of the writing)
- point of view (angle from which a writer tells a story — first person, second person, third person, etc.)
- tone (writer's attitude toward the subject matter)
- mood (creation of atmosphere in descriptive writing)
- setting (time, place, environment, background, or surroundings established by an author)
- characterization (creation of people involved in the action)

Write the first draft of your composition on the paper provided by the teacher. You have the remainder of Session 1 (45 minutes) to complete your draft. You may wish to refer to the Student Directions and Scoring Guidelines as you write.

Source: Guide to the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System: English Language Arts, Grade 10



States Address Challenges

States remain committed to standards-based reform and are attacking the challenges that they face in making the promise of the reforms — improved student performance — a reality. As evidence of this commitment, 43 states have submitted plans that outline how they are addressing the issues of improving educator quality, helping all students achieve, and strengthening accountability.

The plans were developed following the 1999 National Education Summit, a meeting in which governors, business leaders and educators pledged to carry out a specific set of steps to make high academic standards a daily reality in every classroom. The plans show above all that states are staying the course in the reform effort.

In the area of teacher quality, states are raising standards for new teachers and providing incentives to recruit top-quality people into the profession, especially to low-income or shortage areas. In addition, 13 states plan programs to reward schools for high performance and 15 reward the highly accomplished teachers who have earned certification from the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards.

To help students achieve high standards, 10 states are launching initiatives to provide additional learning time for low-achieving students, and 16 states report efforts to ensure that all students can read in the early grades.

To strengthen accountability, eight states reported adding standards or improving existing standards, and 16 states are designing or revamping their assessments.

In addition, 12 states are improving the report cards on school performance, and 15 states are taking steps to ensure that no child is trapped in a failing school, on top of the 14 who already have existing efforts in this area.

The full plans, along with a more complete summary, are available on the Achieve Web site, www.achieve.org.

ARE WE THERE YET?

Although some of the most vocal critics may be calling for the abolition of standards and tests, a more reasonable set of concerns are being raised by teachers and parents who believe that students should reach high standards and that state systems should be improved to help students attain that goal. These are the voices to which state and school district officials must listen as they work to improve performance and close the achievement gap. What are the challenges states face?

- *The need to strengthen standards.* In some states, standards do not reflect clear expectations for student learning that are as challenging as those of high-performing states and nations. At the same time, states need to ensure that standards are reasonable.
- *The need to align tests to standards.* Some tests do not adequately measure what the standards expect. These tests are unlikely to have a positive influence on classroom instruction, and it is unfair to hold schools accountable for tests not aligned to state standards.
- *A continued reliance on old-style tests.* Despite the promise of a new generation of tests, some states continue to use off-the-shelf tests that were not designed to measure whether children are meeting the state standards. While these tests may be cheaper and easier to develop, they do not take advantage of the potential offered by the newer tests.
- *The need to help teachers prepare students to meet high standards.* In some states, the requirements for beginning teachers and the professional development teachers receive do not ensure that teachers have the knowledge and skills needed to teach to the standards for students. Moreover, few states or districts have developed curricula aligned to standards to guide teachers adequately.
- *The need to support students.* There is a growing recognition that students who are struggling

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to meet challenging standards need tutoring support and extended learning time. As yet, few states have instituted comprehensive programs providing such support, although an increasing number of states plan to do so in the near future.

WHAT STATES ARE DOING

All of these problems are serious and require concerted effort on the part of states, districts and schools in order to be addressed. The good news is that a growing number of states are facing up to the challenges and are improving their standards, tests and accountability systems so that they do what they are intended to do — improve learning for all students.

The states are tackling the hard issues on a range of fronts. To take just a few examples:

- Nine states — **Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, New Jersey, North Carolina, Oregon, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin** — have sought Achieve’s help to benchmark their standards against the best, and analyze the match between their tests and their expectations they have set for students.
- **Texas** provides reports on how different racial and economic groups perform on state tests, so that the public can see how well all students are being educated. This information has helped reduce the achievement gap between white students and their African American and Hispanic peers.
- **California** has created Professional Development Institutes, which train teachers from low-performing schools to offer instruction aligned to state standards. The first institute was in reading; the state plans to add an Algebra Academy as well.
- **Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Kentucky, Maryland, Massachusetts, Vermont and Washington** are using

technology-based tools to provide teachers with access to high-quality lesson plans and teaching materials aligned with state standards.

- **Kentucky** provides professional development to help teachers understand how to use test data to make instructional decisions. The state department of education is measuring schools’ use of test data as one indicator of the effectiveness of the department in providing support to schools.

- **Maryland** has put in place a comprehensive academic intervention plan for students at risk of failing to meet state standards. The plan requires schools to develop individual learning plans, including extended learning time for students who are behind in reading or math.

To be sure, these efforts, while significant, do not mean that states have met all the challenges posed by higher standards. States recognize that they have more work to do to achieve their goal. But they are committed to getting it right.

Critics of standards and accountability point out the problems but seldom offer solutions — except perhaps to suggest putting the systems on hold until the “perfect” tests are on hand. But children can’t wait. They deserve challenging expectations. Teachers need better information to improve their instruction. The public wants schools to be more accountable for results. The response to challenges posed by higher standards is not to lower the standards or do away with testing — but to improve them and use them to give all students the kind of education we know they must have.

Achieve Policy Briefs are bimonthly reports on critical issues in education reform. They are designed to help policy makers, business leaders, educators and others address the challenges they face in improving the nation's schools.

Achieve is an independent, bipartisan, nonprofit organization created by governors and corporate leaders to help raise standards and performance in American schools. Achieve was founded at the 1996 National Education Summit and subsequently sponsored another Summit in the fall of 1999 that brought together more than 100 governors, business leaders and educators from around the nation.

Achieve's principal purposes are to:

- provide sustained public leadership and advocacy for the movement to raise standards and improve student performance;
- help states benchmark their standards, assessments and accountability systems against the best in the country and the world;
- build partnerships that allow states to work together to improve teaching and learning and raise student achievement; and
- serve as a national clearinghouse on education standards and school reform.

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