

● Letters to the Editor

Contributors: David Turney
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National Assessment—Why All the Fuss?

January 14, 1966.

The Editor, *Educational Leadership*.

Dear Sir:

I wish to express a series of concerns about the present proposal to develop a national program of educational assessment and the relationship of the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development to this proposal.

ASCD, whose responsibility it is to offer affirmative leadership in education, does have an obligation to call attention to potential dangers inherent in any proposal such as this, and this task has been ably performed. We are also, I believe, equally responsible for pointing out the potential values that may accrue from the implementation of such a proposal, and to date, such possibilities have not had comparable treatment in our publications. The influence of a national educational group can only decline if it begins to be viewed as being antagonistic to any scheme for the improvement of education that originates in some external agency.

For these reasons I wish to call attention to a few of the urgent educational needs that might be properly served by a national educational assessment program.

1. The fact of substantial Federal participation in education and the development at long last of a strong Office of Education means that federal policies on education will have to become coherent. The crucial question raised by the assessment proposal is, "Shall federal policy be formed on the basis of the best research data we are able to assemble or shall it be formed on the basis of opinion and personal influence?" While the implementation of a national educational assessment program will not insure that the former process will take place, it would at least make this kind of policy development possible.

2. The ultimate value of a national educational assessment program will probably depend on the ability of those who design it to ask the right questions. If the members of the Association are concerned that the assessment will place too heavy an emphasis on the attainment by pupils of information and cognitive skills, then we as an association should busy ourselves suggesting the kinds of questions that would insure the development of an adequate and useful assessment of our educational system. If we are truly concerned about the effect of educational pressures on youth, then let us request and insist

that the assessment include data on the mental health, self concepts, and ethical conduct of the pupils we instruct.

3. At the present time, we have no way of specifying objectively the point at which local educational programs become so ineffective or damaging to youth that they should no longer be tolerated. Presently, only massive social protest moves us to the repair of such ineffective and damaging systems.

Over the past fifty years, neither the NEA nor any of its constituent parts have proposed any action that would have the effect of placing a floor under the quality of local school systems. The failure of the NEA to propose a sensible program of national assessment at least a generation ago has created a leadership vacuum into which the U.S. Office of Education is almost forced to move. Under the circumstances the NEA and ASCD are called upon to develop affirmative proposals for the conduct of national assessment.

National assessment data should not only help us to identify those systems that are operating below tolerable levels, but also help to pinpoint those phases of a local curriculum most in need of our attention. To object to a proposal that would make possible such a look at our local operations is a bit like saying that we would prefer not to see such information because it might reveal some unpleasant facts that would be painful to contemplate.

4. Additional questions of great importance such as: How shall the results of assessment be interpreted? By whom shall they be interpreted? How shall data and interpretations be disseminated? How shall the results and interpretations of the assessment be

employed for the improvement of education? have not been subject to thoughtful discussion in the Association. The talents, skills, insights and imagination of ASCD members could, if directed to such questions, result in the production of a program assessment that could be truly helpful to curriculum workers everywhere and ultimately to the educational welfare of pupils in our charge.

A national assessment program is not of itself either good or bad. Our proper concern in ASCD is not with the question of whether a national program of assessment should be undertaken, but rather with the possibility that it will do the good it is obviously intended to accomplish.

Sincerely,

DAVID TURNEY

Associate Professor of Education
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December 12, 1965

Editor, *Educational Leadership*

Dear Mr. Editor:

Should we . . . or should we not have a national assessment of American education? If we should, then should we not be about the business of gathering empirical data about the progress of public schooling in the United States? An emerging issue among educators concerns itself with these questions.

From many levels of the professional

hierarchy, considerable alarm is being generated concerning the holocaust that would result in American schooling if an instrument were developed for assessing, empirically, the progress of education. Why all the fuss . . . ?

A brief review of the previous means used for determining the progress of education reveals that in the past, and currently, many methods have been employed to assess the progress of education among the states and within a state. The three examples which follow lend support to this point of view.

Currently, one of the more popular methods used to assess educational progress is on the basis of the amount of money spent for pupils. The more money a state or school district spends the greater is assumed to be the progress. The quality of education is linked with pupil spending. This method, although it provides an expedient means for classifying the financial support given pupils in a state or district, is questionable concerning its ability to assess the progress of education. Do we have empirical evidence to establish this technique as a reliable one? Does a state or school district which spends fifty, seventy-five, or one hundred dollars a year more per pupil have an educational establishment superior to those spending less?

If this is the best method for assessing educational progress, then perhaps there is no further need for developing another instrument; we have had the answer for some time, and therefore further designs for measuring progress are superfluous. One needs merely to determine how much was spent in the past and compare it with what is currently being spent, the difference being

the progress of education—a simple solution to a complex problem. Unfortunately, a higher level of school expenditure does not insure better quality of education.

Another technique used to assess progress has been based upon the rate of illiteracy: the per cent of persons twenty-five years of age and over with less than five years of schooling. (These people were described in 1960 by the census bureau as functional illiterates.) The rate of decline in illiteracy over a period of time would measure the rate of progress in education. If our society were not internally mobile, and if other variables identified within a dynamic society could be eliminated, possibly this technique might have been the answer for measuring the progress of education.

A third method often proposed and used by critics outside the profession has been assessing progress in education in terms of grade level achievement in cognitive and psychomotor skills. This assessment is usually designed to show how American schools compare with those in England, Switzerland, Germany, or the U.S.S.R. (they have not as yet included Communist China in their list of nations) on the basis of pupil achievement in reading or arithmetic in the elementary grades. Of course, to institute this technique would be to put the lid on educational progress; for foreign schools would be placed in the position of setting standards by placing us in competition with them in a few limited areas.

Obviously, we have been and are assessing educational progress through the use of the previously-mentioned as well as other descriptive survey tech-

niques. Independently and collectively we have been assessing the characteristics of public education through examination of a number of variables. Included in this list would be: teacher salaries, classroom teacher-pupil ratio, highest level of school attainment, percentage of school dropouts, number of special services, compulsory attendance laws, etc.; however, all of these could be shown to have significant weaknesses which, although desirable for describing the character of the public schools, are undesirable as means for assessing progress.

Needed: A New Method

If one accepts the notion that there are inherent weaknesses in the current methods of assessment, then it is timely that we design a new method. Furthermore, since there can be little doubt that there have existed means of assessment of educational progress, why the panic over the development of a more effective technique? Why dig out of the attic educational lore to provide arguments opposed to national assessment and designed to appeal to the viscera and not the mind? Why the need to maximize the negative and minimize the positive consequences of a national assessment?

It is apparent that movement is afoot to distort the intent and the design of the projected national assessment to the extent that it is continuously being identified as a series of achievement tests to be given to every child. Unfortunately, upon this erroneous assumption a series of hypothetical consequences have been generated which include, among others, the notions that a national assessment will result in: lead-

ing public schools to the brink of a national curriculum, stifling innovation, destroying teacher morale, making a mockery of our profession, and bringing results so devastating that they are almost beyond imagination.¹

By contrast, the framers of the assessment idea have stated that the instruments to be developed will not be a series of achievement tests but rather a series of exercises given to a population sample.² The purpose of the instrument is not to measure individual achievement but rather to identify what has been accomplished not only in reading and arithmetic skills but also in attitudes and understandings by the nation's public at each of four age levels.³

If we can accept the assumption that the assessment is not a series of achievement tests, we might be in a position to make more positive conjectures about possible results. We might be able to conclude, hypothetically, that the assessment would be capable of identifying the specific areas of progress in education—areas including attitudes and understandings as well as skills.

The findings might provide the evidence necessary to combat those groups which hope to engender popular appeal by debasing public education's progress. Furthermore, the findings might provide the substance for discovering new knowledge about the process of

¹ Harold Hand, "National Assessment Viewed as the Camel's Nose," *Phi Delta Kappan* 47:8-13; September 1965; and Agnes Snyder, "Ready for What?" *Educational Leadership* 23:97; November 1965.

² Ralph W. Tyler, "Assessing the Progress of Education," *Phi Delta Kappan* 47:13-16; September 1965.

³ Jack C. Merwin, "National Evaluation of Educational Progress Underway," *A.E.R.A. Newsletter* 26:3; October 1963.

education. The point is, the whole tone of the assessment need not be construed as a threat. If we were further to extend our hypothesizing through analogy, we could infer that if, as the assessment of teachers' salaries resulted in higher salaries, as assessment of teacher-pupil ratios has sometimes resulted in lower teacher-pupil ratios, as assessment of special services has some-

times resulted in a greater variety of services, then an assessment of educational progress may indeed result in greater educational progress.

Sincerely,

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Elementary School Use of Educational Telephone

In the July 18, 1964, issue of *The Saturday Review*, there is an article entitled "Person-to-Person Teaching," which describes how the telephone has been used at Stephens College to enrich the educational process. The article describes college courses in which prominent figures throughout the world have been brought into the classroom via the magic of modern technology in the telephone industry.

It occurred to me that the telephone, with accompanying microphone and loudspeaker, would have educational value in an elementary school district, grades K-8, such as mine at Ross, California. Whereas college students involved in the study of social philosophy may benefit from person-to-person conversations with such distinguished names as Meade, Commager, and Riesman, elementary and junior high students could profit from communicating with well-informed people on the local scene. For example, a sixth grade social studies class studying conservation could be placed in direct contact with local forest rangers, agricultural experts, and Audubon Society officials. The availability of many resource people with rich backgrounds is nearly unlimited in the San Francisco Bay Area where we are located. While most busy men are unable to find the time to visit a single school let alone a single classroom, the ease of speaking from their own office did seem to appeal to them.

In the summer of 1965, with the cooperation of the telephone company, The Ross School had four classrooms wired for telephones. One portable unit was acquired that could be wheeled into a room and jacked into the telephone socket. The unit consists of a standard telephone, a microphone box, and a small loudspeaker, which incidentally is standard equipment in a good many executive offices. After testing the unit in normal classrooms, it was found that no other special amplifying equipment was needed. The cost of the entire operation for the year was \$150.00, certainly a minimal charge for the educational possibilities.

During the school year, many experts, suggested by the teacher, the students, or the principal, were brought into the classroom. All of the speakers whom we contacted, indicated a willingness to speak to the students and afterwards expressed their belief in the merits of the program. The enthusiastic reaction of the students convinces me that educational telephone provides an economical and practical means of bridging the gap between classroom lessons and the realities of everyday life.

—WILLIAM W. MONAHAN, *Superintendent, Ross School District, Ross, California.*

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