

# CURRICULUM CONTROL?

## "We Can Get It for You Wholesale"

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BEGINNING in the 1930's, standardized testing of mental ability and academic achievement of children took a firm grip upon the educational process in public and private schools across the nation. During the 1960's a vast acceleration of standardized testing has engulfed the public schools. Forces which have stimulated this action may be briefly summarized.

### Resurgence of Testing

1. "Sputnik" triggered a period of fear that engulfed the American people. A scapegoat was sought and the schools began to receive a national attention by the Federal Government that they had never before "merited."

2. The Supreme Court Decision on the Desegregation of Public Schools, 1954, placed upon the schools what, in effect, became the responsibility for solving the vast spectrum of social and economic ills of the community.

3. The rise of the current Civil Rights Movement resulted in the recognition of education as the chief means of enabling minorities to enter the mainstream of American life.

4. Inequality of educational opportunities for minorities in all sections of the nation, but particularly for those affecting the Negro, gave rise to a vastly expanding federal interest in and financial support of education.

The end result of this legitimate concern with education as a means to an end culminated in the passage of a number of Congressional Acts designed to improve education, correct imbalances in the quality of education, and provide the necessary federal funds to do the job. The National Defense Education Act, The Equal Opportunities Act (Civil Rights), and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act were among the many public laws following each other in quick succession during the late 1950's and the 1960's.

A quite reasonable expectation of the need for the demonstration of the effective use of millions of American tax dollars became a necessary corollary of government funding of educational projects submitted by local and state school officers. And we find a quite reasonable reliance upon a deeply rooted standardized testing "establishment" to

become the means of providing evidence of tax dollars well spent.

Objective evidence through standardized testing became a built-in requirement in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Furthermore, it was stipulated that upon this evidence depended refunding, each year, of projects encompassed in the Act.

### **National Assessment or National Testing?**

Out of the matrix of national concerns for education there emerged a new "first" for the public schools. A private foundation, with the cooperation of the U.S. Office of Education, has assumed the function of instituting a National Assessment Program.

One of the most interesting aspects of this development was the secrecy with which it was enshrouded. Few educators and no professional educational organizations were involved in the preliminary stages. In a period of a few months, from a small group of outstanding citizens, including a few educators, only one of whom was connected with public education, there came, not the study of feasibility of National Assessment for which this committee was charged, but a full-blown plan with contracts let to several established test makers for the development of standardized testing instruments for a sampling of the national population.

Once disclosed to the profession, through first-class detective work by an outstanding educator, the battle has been fought publicly and widely, not to prevent genuine assessment, but to prevent inevitable regression of education should the plan proceed as initially intended. Many educators have taken

the position, which Madame Chiang ascribed to her country when she spoke to the U.S. Congress in February 1943, ". . . it is the better part of wisdom not to accept failure with ignominy but to risk it gloriously." And the battle rages.

### **Testing and Curriculum Control**

Perhaps the greatest fear of educators centers in their concern that National Assessment (Testing) will lead to curriculum controls and standardized curriculum for all children and youth, for all communities across the land.

In analyzing the effect of testing on the nature and quality of the curriculum, and on the selection of teaching methods, it is important to keep in mind several components.

1. Control, in and of itself, is not necessarily "good" or "bad." In the interest of children and national goals, it may be necessary to establish outside controls (i.e., the Federal Government), where local or state educational systems have demonstrated lack of fitness to do the job. It should not be assumed, however, that outside controls must be blanket controls in all school systems.

Nor should it be assumed that objective standardized test scores, on a small segment of the total population, should be the sole determinant of the ability of a local school system to establish its own controls. Similarly, it cannot be assumed that federal controls, exercised through bureaucratic red-tape, may be any better in producing a high quality of education than can even the poorest school system.

2. It has been determined by count-

less studies in many parts of the country, that the educationally disadvantaged child, frequently a child of a minority group, has severe handicaps which must be overcome before academic success, the kind measured through standardized tests, can become a reality for him.

—Can a standardized test measure the schools' attempts to help a child overcome a self-image, brought to school at 5, which has convinced him that he is worthless, incapable of achieving?

—Can a standardized achievement test reveal a child's response to a teacher who demonstrates that he believes in him and in his potential for becoming a person who can live with himself?

—Can a standardized achievement test measure a child's growing appreciation of a more satisfying life, provided for him only in school, where he is having a first experience with orderliness in life, clean and wholesome surroundings, adequate food?

—Can a standardized test reveal a child's changing behavior which turns rejection to acceptance by others?

—Can a standardized test measure a child's discovery of the delight in books, formerly unknown to him, or his growing appreciation of literature, art, music?

—Can a standardized test reveal changes in the child's motivation to learn and in his family's motivation to aspire for him?

Those who have worked with the educationally disadvantaged, crowding the inner cities, know that before a

child can achieve academically, the school must create a climate of support, challenge to learn, of freedom and stimulation to discover. A child's achievement in any aspect of education is directly related to the teacher's professional image of himself.

Where great emphasis is placed upon standardized test scores, the usual teacher inevitably places greater attention and time on preparing the child to succeed in the test. Where federal funding of needed projects is dependent on "results" in required standardized testing, the situation becomes a matter of economic survival for the teacher, for he fears his professional status, his job, is at stake.

The "bits and pieces" of a standardized test, however skillfully selected and organized by competent test makers, represent a minute amount of the possible content which may be selected from an almost overwhelming resource of content in the various subject fields. Yet to do well in the tests the same "bits and pieces" must be mastered by all children in all public schools. Conformity of curriculum would inevitably result. Is this the purpose of education?

### **The "Feds" as Evaluators**

The proposed national standardized achievement testing program, devised within the framework of National Assessment, not only threatens educational innovation and experimentation through the curriculum; it is a serious threat to teacher morale and an assault upon the integrity of educators, for federal funding is directly related to assessment; let no one be unrealistic enough to think otherwise—conform or go unfunded will be the rule.

And many of us who have already become involved in federally sponsored projects have become disenchanting with the federal processes of evaluation. Experiences encountered, only a few of which are cited, increase our concern for what will ultimately be the use to be made of standardized test results by federal agencies.

- In the fall of 1965, under the authority of Title IV of the Civil Rights Act, the U.S. Office of Education initiated "a survey to determine lack of availability of equal educational opportunity." Schools, pre-selected by federal personnel, were asked to participate in the examination, through standard tests, of a hoped-for 900,000 youngsters in first, third, sixth, ninth and twelfth grades.

About a fourth of 160 questions administered to sixth grades, for example, dealt with personal and family matters. Twenty cities across the nation refused to participate, claiming invasion of privacy for children and their families. A federal representative commented to one school official, "Participation was voluntary this time. Next time you will be *required* to participate, for this provision will be built into all future acts."

- Many teachers in the Head Start Program of 1965 found little time to teach. Feeding, medical examinations, and extensive standardized testing by officials sent in by the federal office consumed a large part of many days. When one school official asked if the test results would be made available for school use in planning programs for these children as kindergartners the following year, he was told, "No; you wouldn't understand them."

In the early fall of 1965, Illinois Congressman Robert H. Michel made a remarkable speech in the House. Mr. Michel produced a confidential memorandum of an Office of Education executive group meeting of August 26, 1965. The memo revealed that the Federal Government is considering the establishment of a National Research and Training Center for State Educational Agency Development. This agency will "be developing specifications for curriculum development and overall concepts of training State education agency personnel."

Other "straws in the wind" include items for the development of a national curriculum. The *Congressional Record* can reveal the validity of efforts geared toward federal involvement in planning a national curriculum.

When National Assessment (Standardized Testing) plans, requirements for standardized testing in federally funded projects, and experiences in past federal testing are looked at as parts of a "constellation," within the context of such revelations as Congressman Michel made to the House, only one of which is reported here, it does not take deep insight to discover the directions which are intended for curriculum development in the foreseeable future. It is doubtful that Congressmen intended to hamstring their local communities by a constricting conformity in education. Federal agencies, delegated the responsibility of implementing the Acts, may find that the "We can get it for you wholesale" approach to educational improvement may backfire.

Those who believe in a national program of standardized testing have charged that educators who resist are

motivated by fear of what will be revealed, their own inadequacies reflected in low-academic achievement of children. In all probability fear is an element in some educators' reactions. But the record would indicate that numerous educators themselves have revealed their problems.

School systems have been the first to point to the critical educational needs of the deprived. They have asked for help to enrich the experience of the children, to open doors to new worlds for them through the development of motivation and aspiration, to change staff attitudes toward victims of deprivation, and to seek new avenues to academic achievement.

Standardized tests measure experiences many children have never had, for there are no genuinely "culture-free" tests. Children so measured frequently emerge with a label reflecting low potential and low achievement. The resurgence of emphasis upon standardized testing, under these circumstances, says to the teacher, "This narrow world of the test is the measure of your success as a teacher." It follows that the curriculum will be shaped to the test. The child unable to meet the demands of the test, learns to fail in school, and professional educators are castigated as unequal to their task.

When standardized tests are used by the teacher to check his judgment of a child's educational needs, when they are used as one instrument among many to help the teacher develop a curriculum tailor-made to the needs of a specific

group of children and their families, living in a specific community, they contribute to the educational process. When they are used in a climate of threat, nobody wins the real educational battle.

A boy, a junior in a vocational education program, was a real hell-raiser in school and a failing student. At his request, his teacher obtained a job for him over the summer.

Next fall, the lad appeared for his senior year, alert, courteous, interested, well-groomed, amazing his teacher. By mid-year, the teacher was convinced that the change was genuine. The boy was at the top of his class in spite of holding his former summer job part-time. One day, in his office, the teacher said, "John, I'm puzzled. Last year you were such a hell-raiser we couldn't stand you. What's happened?" Thoughtfully, the boy said, "I guess I was just hungry, Mr. Hollingsworth." Twelve years of standardized testing had never revealed the human needs of this lad.

Despite the efforts of the "hurry-up" boys, there is still no royal road to learning. For those who have been victims of man's inhumanity to man for three hundred years, no miracles will happen in a single generation. Standardized testing misused or overemphasized simply puts ceilings on a child's learning. If we shape curriculum on false test labels, the child will grow in the image of his label, and the attainment of "The Great Society" will be but a figment of the imagination. ❧



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