

ASSESSMENT: A FORWARD LOOK

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IT SELDOM happens that a person is asked to take a forward look at a forward look. It seems, however, that such is the assignment of this writer.

The initiators of the idea for assessing educational progress took a forward look more than three years ago when the project was conceived. That their vision was forward is attested by the fact that the progress of American education has never been adequately measured by any of the programs for testing school pupils, any of the surveys or evaluations of the schools, any of the compilations of data on salaries of teachers, costs of education, and quality of school plants, or any such indirect, but negative, indices as the incidence of criminality, delinquency, and job failures.

The assessment project is designed to obtain evidence about the progress of American education that will parallel the information presently supplied by an economic index, the Gross National Product, concerning the production of goods and services by American enterprises. The Carnegie Corporation

believes that if an educational index, the Gross Educational Product, can be constructed, much more can be learned about American education than is at present available from any source or combination of sources.

Resistance to Change

It is well known that many persons strongly defend the *status quo*, especially when change is proposed in some formal matter and when attitudes and emotions are involved. A graphic illustration of resistance to change is shown by the recent opposition in the U.S. Congress and elsewhere to adoption of the metric system, despite the fact that it is employed in 90 percent of modern countries and in many U.S. industries.

The American public has often shown a sensitivity to change in school and educational affairs, as illustrated by the frequently expressed preference for the three Rs rather than a modern curriculum and for essay rather than objective tests. Continued resistance to the assessment project after it becomes operative can be expected for a similar reason.

Misinterpretation of Educational Assessment

In a testing program, each pupil receives a test score which, as a measure of individual differences among pupils, then serves as a basis for classifying him among his fellows, for placing him in a certain school class or grade, and for counseling him in various ways. In the assessment project, on the other hand, no school pupil or adult is expected to take a *test*; instead, each participant will respond to a short series of exercises or questions not in themselves necessarily and obviously different from test items.

Results are to be stated separately for each of the 192 populations, or groupings, to be involved in the analysis in a form readily understandable by laymen rather than in terms of pupil scores or average scores for pupil groups. The differences to be depicted are primarily among fields of knowledge, population groups, socioeconomic levels, and regions of the country.

The distinction between an assessment of the educational program and a national testing program has not yet been widely accepted by educational administrators or even by some educational psychologists. Hence, it seems certain that the confusion will persist, especially because of the great number and varying purposes of both nationwide and state-wide testing programs.

Moreover, it is inevitable that the projected cost-effectiveness study of the U. S. Office of Education, planned to involve some 300,000 preschool children to college students in the fall of 1968, will be a new and major source of confusion. Even though not a cen-

tral purpose of the project, testing will be carried on and it may well involve the pupils who participated in the national assessment project.

A second distinction, between an assessment of the educational program of the country and an appraisal of the schools, or of the school system, is not likely to be clearly understood by laymen or even by all educators. Since the school and, more broadly, the educational system of the country can be held directly accountable for only a portion, even though probably a large portion, of the behaviors children acquire, it is easily possible that the schools will be blamed unjustifiably for some areas of weakness shown and will receive undeserved credit for some fields in which strengths are apparent. Psychologists desisted some years ago from the futile practice of trying to separate the effects of heredity and environment in the child. The situation may well be similar for influences of the school and out-of-school environments upon the learner.

Modification of Assessment Procedures

The announced method of presenting results from the assessment project is to show the percentage of persons who have demonstrated ability to perform each specified and illustrated task successfully. If such results are presented for each of the 192 populations scheduled for separate assessment and for each assigned task, the mere mass of data and the space required to present findings in print will present troublesome if not insoluble problems.

Moreover, periodic assessments for determination of progress must depend

on a more sophisticated quantification of findings than percentages of success. Hence, a second method of presenting results so that they can be used effectively for other purposes than general information of the public and so that a quantitative growth "ladder" or "yardstick" can be employed in measuring growth over a period of time seems to be essential. Moreover, the highly desirable Gross Educational Product envisioned by the Carnegie Corporation, and implied in other discussions of the project, would necessarily be an overall quantitative index.

It is easy to predict that changes in the character of American education over a period of time will necessitate modifications in the assessment procedures and that improvements in assessment techniques will make further changes desirable, although any attempt to predict the specific nature of such changes would be injudicious. Need has been found, for example, for frequent modifications in the similar index of Gross National Product and the related Consumer Price Index.

The announced areas in which assessment exercises are to be used consist of the basic skill and content subjects plus citizenship, fine arts, and vocational education. It is expected, however, that other important areas and such outcomes as interests, habits and practices will be included on later occasions. Plans for the first cycle emphasize the subject-centered types of learning and assessments are planned only for those tasks that are considered to be important by scholars, deemed to be desirable by leading lay persons, and accepted as a responsibility by the schools.

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However, the educational system produces types of behavior in children and adults that the schools do not include in lists of objectives and that may be antisocial, undesirable or trivial. A comprehensive assessment of behaviors developed by the entire educational system of the United States must recognize the importance of what may be termed societal outcomes, as well as subject-centered and other school-oriented outcomes, by obtaining evidence concerning all types of behavior, desirable or undesirable, sought or unsought, social or antisocial.

Uses of Assessment Results

Not the least important of the ways in which results from the national assessment of educational progress are expected to be used is for informing the public. The misunderstandings, misinterpretations and unfounded beliefs that have for generations distorted the thinking of many citizens concerning the schools and the educational program should have little foundation for continuance after the assessment project becomes functional. An incidental although not unimportant by-product may well be the development of a higher level of confidence in teachers and other educators by the public than has typically existed in the past.

There are at least three ways in which constructive action or fact-finding programs can be based on assessment results. School boards and school administrators should be better able than they are at present to plan programs and allocate funds. Legislators at both state and national levels should be able to take more effective action

than is possible today on issues directly and indirectly affecting the American system of education. Researchers should have increased possibilities by the use of modern computer technology in analyzing assessment results and external data to develop new understandings about the dynamics of human learning and about how to solve crucial educational and social problems. To be effective, however, these uses depend on provision of a quantitative measurement scale that can be employed in quite precise depictions of status and growth.

Many lay persons and some educators will unquestionably continue to fear that federal control of the curriculum will be a result of the assessment project. Many educational administrators will doubtless continue to be apprehensive concerning the possibility that results will be presented in such a way as to bring about the same types of unrealistic pressures for better schools that have been forcefully expressed in many communities in past years.

In summary, the forward look taken in this article must end long before the initiators and planners of the assessment project have passed the stage of looking forward to the first cycle. Present plans call for an initial tryout of assessment techniques late in 1966 and inauguration of the project itself in the fall of 1967. Many things that are still in a planning stage or that at least have not been announced will doubtless be reported between now and the time when results from the first real attempt at the assessment of educational progress in America become available to the public.

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