

Public Release of Reading Scores?

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"IF I AM elected, I guarantee to raise the reading levels of the pupils enrolled in the public schools of New Haven."

These fateful words were uttered in 1969 by the Democratic mayoralty candidate in his bid for election. Although no specifics were mentioned concerning how these reading levels would be raised, the candidate listed reading as a top educational priority.

Since reading is, in public esteem, often equated with motherhood, taxpayers were pleased to hear such words. So pleased that the candidate handily defeated his Republican opponent.

Each November, the New Haven public school system administers the Metropolitan Achievement Test (published by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich) in grades 4, 6, and 8. The following February these scores are published school by school in the *New Haven Register*, the local newspaper. No data accompany the release. Since the mayor had promised to raise the reading levels of city youngsters, citizens were curious to see how much the scores had improved over the scores achieved the previous year.

In 1970, the Tests and Measurements Department of the school system decided to administer the 1970 edition of the Metropolitan Test. Previously, the 1959 edition of the test had been used. The new test was decidedly different from the earlier edition.

In addition to revised content, the ceiling had been lowered from 12.0 to 9.9. Although not available at the time, a Table of Equivalent Scores issued by the company later revealed that the 1970 edition of the test varied as much as four months downward from the 1959 edition. The 1970 edition of the Metropolitan Test also introduced separate answer sheets. Many teachers, especially at the fourth grade level, indicated later that this device had confused many children.

In February 1971 the test results were published in the newspaper without comment. The results were devastating. Scores for 32 of New Haven's 33 elementary schools dropped. Angry citizens pointed recriminating fingers at teachers and administrators who had led them to believe that their children were making progress in reading. The mayor also received his share of the criticism and hostility.

Both the superintendent and this author appeared at many meetings in an attempt to explain why the scores had dropped. Although pertinent information had not been made available by the company at the time, we tried to accent the positive strides which had been made in improving the reading program. Despite this approach, many groups were often hostile and foes of the school system used the scores to attack the schools.

In the months before the 1971 mayoral

election, the mayor's campaign promise was resurrected by his Republican opponent and used as a major campaign issue. The Republican candidate took out ads in the newspaper comparing the 1969 and 1970 scores along with the mayor's previous statements regarding a claim to raise reading levels. The Republicans also used a radio spot which started with a boy reading the following statement in a halting, hesitating manner: "The mayor promised that I would read better, yet the children in New York City read better than I do."

The professional staff in the school resented this type of indictment against its school children. The Republican candidate's campaign tactics may have contributed to his resounding defeat.

During the course of the campaign, it was never impressed upon the citizens that no valid comparison between the 1969 and 1970 reading test scores could be made since the editions were different and the scores were not equivalent. Such explanations were considered a "cop-out" by those who wanted to use them for their own political purposes.

Obviously, school systems do not conduct achievement testing programs for the purpose they were being used for in New Haven. Rather, the essential purpose of annual achievement testing is to pinpoint strengths and weaknesses and to plan procedures which will capitalize upon strengths and remedy any deficiencies noted.

In the aftermath of the release of the 1970 reading scores, positive action was taken. As the reading supervisor, I made visitations to every city school to discuss the reading program in depth with the entire school staff and to seek specific ways for improving the reading program. Resource people met with the reading staff to design plans for an evaluation of the reading program. Principals attended meetings to discuss test results and to offer concrete suggestions for effecting needed changes.

Each teacher in the school system has completed a "Reading Achievement Level Form" on which *instructional* (rather than standardized) reading levels are listed for every child in his or her classroom. This

information has proved helpful in encouraging parents to enroll youngsters in the summer school program for intensive reading help and to enroll them in school remedial programs.

Several workshops for parents have been held on a citywide basis to offer specific information on how they can reinforce the school's reading program at home. Last year, a successful ten-week Reading Course for Parents was held as part of the adult education program.

These efforts have resulted in reading achievement gains. When the reading scores were published in February 1972, it was revealed that 25 of the city's 33 elementary schools had gone up, some by as much as eight months, although the average growth city-wide was three months.

Reading scores must be kept in their proper perspective. Based on the author's experience, several safeguards must be taken to avoid the trauma and needless frustration which can occur if test data are released without explanation to an unsophisticated public. Such pertinent data as sampling information, pupil mobility within the school system, and information on what the test purports to test should accompany the release of test scores. In addition to reporting mean scores for each school, the full range of scores per classroom should also be reported since citizens should know that children scored above the reported mean also.

In conclusion, the current emphasis on accountability underscores the need for school personnel to let the public know the effectiveness of school programs. Public release of reading scores is one indication of how well the goals of the reading program are being met. School systems should keep the public fully informed of their progress in achieving a quality reading program. But the release of test data will achieve less than desired results if school personnel allow them to be used in a detrimental and unproductive manner.

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