

Testing—Its Impact on Expectations, Practice, Accountability

Norman R. Dixon

This author holds that professional education organizations "should form a national research and development consortium to produce new assessment procedures which are appropriate for today's schools. This could do a great deal to eliminate the unwarranted impact flawed standardized tests have on the public schools."

Standardized testing has exerted (and continues to exert) an alarmingly widespread and often harmful impact on expectations, school practice, and accountability. Often, students, parents, teachers, counselors, administrators, and the general public bow daily in almost idolatrous worship of standardized tests because of what they believe such instruments can do. These tests have acquired tyrannical power over the lives of students and frequently contort classes into blanched exercises in acquisition of facts. Perhaps, most dangerous of all impacts is the widespread use of standardized test results to shape educational policies. Only in recent years has there been any systematic rebellion against the tyranny of testing. There is a crucial need for public debate on such matters as the control, construction, dissemination, and use of standardized tests in American education. Whatever can be done to hasten and sustain public debate should immediately be undertaken.

To identify the sources of power of standardized tests provides an agenda for study and public debate on testing. Some sources of the power of standardized tests are the desire for objective means to assess student achievement, general ignorance of the public and many pro-



Photo: Michael J. Sexton, Texas A&M University.

professionals regarding the limitations of standardized tests, current myths about tests, and the power of corporations controlling test production. Other sources of tests' power are the desire of many citizens and educators to procreate an intellectual elite, the desire to compare one student with another for labeling and sorting purposes, the confirmation tests give to racists who believe blacks are innately inferior to whites, the need of certain citizens and educators for defensible data to allocate resources on a top priority basis to upper- and middle-class students, and personnel in the mass media (columnists, reporters, editors, managers, programmers) who are possessed with the myths of testing. With the exception of the Association of Black Psychologists and the National Association of Elementary School Principals, no national professional organizations have seriously fought to break the half-nelson grip that testing has on American schools. This is indeed a sad commentary.

Impact of Testing on Expectations

The following tests are those that have had score declines: Scholastic Aptitude Test; American College Test; Preliminary Scholastic Aptitude Test; Minnesota Scholastic Aptitude Test; Iowa Tests of Educational Development; Comprehen-

sive Tests of Basic Skills; National Assessment of Educational Progress; The Stanford-Binet; and Iowa Tests of Basic Skills. As a consequence of the reported test scores drop, there has been an unending flood of newspaper editorials, news columns, magazine articles, radio broadcasts, and television broadcasts bemoaning the ignorance of young test takers and the ineffectiveness of public schools. Add to these jeremiads hundreds of public school, college committee, and faculty meetings, and dozens of local, state, and national conferences convened to study the present crisis in the cognitive growth of the young.

Apparently, the greatest expectation from the schools and the public is that students who take certain standardized tests earn higher scores than students who took these tests in preceding years. In general, teachers, students, counselors, administrators, and parents look to the schools "to help students pass standardized tests with flying colors," as one parent stated. This expectation is widespread both in and outside the schools.

Educators across America cite the nationally renowned case of the valedictorian of the 1976 graduating class of Western High School, Washington, D. C., who scored 320 (out of 800) on the verbal section of the SAT and 280 (out of 800) on the mathematics section of the SAT. The

One impact of standardized testing "is that it has led to labeling and tracking students in the schools and in society," leading to "punitive educational discrimination for blacks, other ethnics, and poor children." Photo: Michael J. Sexton, Texas A&M University.



indisputable, unchanging expectation was that the valedictorian should score at least 500-600 on each section of the test. Such test performance would confirm the high quality of the school and the excellence of this student's scholarship.

Since the student did not earn the expected scores, this was clearly irrefutable evidence that (a) there were poor curricula and instruction at Western High School; (b) there was certainly something exceedingly weak about the student's academic achievement; and (c) the valedictorian's test scores predict poor performance in college. To the best of my knowledge, no one ever publicly suggested that the SAT itself was the flawed instrument that it is. This would be a vulgar, ignorant, unwarranted attack upon the most cherished idol of the College Board, ETS, quality high schools and colleges, and all the test-making world. No puny mortal should dare make such an attack. That is a task for gods, not men. So, standardized tests go on to shape expectations that schools do whatever is necessary to produce effective test-takers.

Impact of Standardized Tests on School Practice

Since the great expectation is that students should be prepared to score well on selected standardized tests, school practice tends to conform to that expectation. Standardized tests have become the tail that wags the dog. Being a profession that possesses little national respectability and political clout (even though they like to believe they exert great power), public school educators seek to retain their jobs by bowing to testing pressures rather than intellectually challenging them. Teachers are often heard to say, "We don't want to make too loud a noise against testing because the public will say we are trying to hide our weaknesses."

So, week after week, month after month, and year after year, the schools go on shaping themselves to the dimensions of standardized tests—the real policymakers for the schools. Sometimes out of fear, candor, courage, or an instinctive desire for self-preservation, a teacher, counselor, or administrator will warn students, "You'd better learn that; it's *very* important. It will appear on the standardized test you're going to take." Out of fear that their students will perform

poorly on a given standardized test, or, conversely, to maximize the probability that their students will perform well on a given test, teachers will directly teach test content. This occurs because teacher effectiveness and school quality depend, often, upon student performance on standardized tests.

Specifically, standardized tests influence what is taught in the schools, when it is taught, and at what level of difficulty, and what is added to or deleted from the school curriculum. The loud cry of "back-to-basics" is due in large part to those who are responding to the news of a drop in test scores. There are signs that some schools are overreacting to alarmists and doom-sayers who see a dangerous threat to American civilization in the fourteen-year student performance record on flawed tests that are accorded an unduly sacred place in American life.

The current stampede to the "basics" is being done without careful study and definition of what the basics are. There also needs to be open public debate on what are the basics for young people who are destined to spend a large part of their lives in the twenty-first century. Surely, students should learn to read, write, spell, and compute; but these are not all the important areas of schooling. They should develop competencies in reflective thinking and should also learn to develop and live by a sound value system. Among many other competencies, they must develop scientific literacy. This too may be defined as one of the basics. New values are emerging in American society—values that the tests ignore.

Another impact of standardized testing is that it has led to labeling and tracking students in the schools and in society. These tests have led to punitive educational discrimination for blacks, other ethnics, and the children of the poor. In one middle school in Pittsburgh, 90 percent of the students in the classes on mental retardation are black, and 10 percent of the students are white. In the classes for the gifted, 90 percent of the students are white, and 10 percent of the students are black. (About 60 percent of the student body in the school are black, and 40 percent are white.) Figures approximating those cited above may be found in classes in large cities throughout America.

Still another impact of testing is the de-emphasis on elective courses—many of which are considered too easy or just plain frills. In the current frenzied return to the basics we may well see many nonbasic, yet highly valuable courses, summarily liquidated.

In assessing student achievement, standardized tests rely heavily on multiple choice items. This has led to the same emphasis in teacher-made tests. Add to this emphasis true-false and completion test items. Wider, longer, and more frequent use of carefully prepared essay test items would be highly profitable in developing and improving written expression. Owing to the forceful impact of standardized testing, essay tests are pariahs in school testing programs.

Impact of Standardized Tests on Accountability

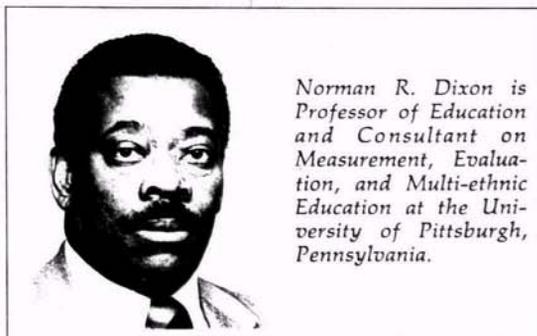
American public schools must be held strictly accountable for their assignment in educating students. Community expectations of education, expressed in laws and customs, must be shouldered by the public schools. Sound procedures must be invented for assessing the degree to which the public schools are achieving their objectives. Student achievement should be assessed by the most effective means possible. Across the years, erroneously, standardized tests have been installed as the appropriate means for determining whether, and to what extent, schools are serving community needs as expressed in laws and customs. The accountability of schools should never be based on pencil and paper tests. There is always the question of the degree of congruence between instructional objectives and test objectives in using standardized achievement tests.

In general, standardized tests assess those cognitive skills that are easiest to assess. Too often this notion produces tests that assess narrow intellectual functions and omit so much that is critically important in both school and life. In addition, in different communities, different emphasis may be placed on the same objectives. Culturally and geographically, many communities differ markedly. It is extremely doubtful that any individual, or group of individuals, now possesses the necessary wisdom to construct a standardized achievement test that is equally fair

to all students under all conditions at all times in America. It is sheer folly to assume that such tests can be constructed. Yet, such tests are used to assess school accountability.

Schools should be held accountable for attainments much broader and more vital for successful living than the data of norm-referenced tests. Psychomotor skills (athletic ability), values, creative ability, motivation, interpersonal and intercultural skills, and coping skills—among others—are areas for which schools have some accountability. These areas should be assessed, but current standardized tests are too narrow and too ineffective to deal with them. Thus, standardized tests have led to a distortedly narrow interpretation of school accountability. More and more stress needs to be placed on teacher-made tests and school district tests. This must be done to loosen the strangle-hold standardized tests have on school accountability. We have no unified, single national school system. We have no national, uniform school objectives. We have no national school curriculum. We have no national standards for the use of instructional media. We have no national standards for buildings and equipment. We have no national standards for teacher certification. In the presence of these facts, it invokes an impossible feat of psychometric legerdemain to produce national tests.

Professional organizations like ASCD, the NEA, NAESP, NASSP, ACEI, and others should form a national research and development consortium to produce new assessment procedures that are appropriate for today's schools. This could do a great deal to eliminate the unwarranted impact flawed standardized tests have on the public schools. [E]



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