

Secrecy in Testing Must End

William D. Corbett

During my 30 years as a public school teacher and principal I have had twinges of conscience before, during, and after the administration of standardized achievement tests. They were caused not by concern about the scores my students would gain but by the secrecy associated with the tests. With the press of other matters, however, the twinges faded and left.

Then an incident occurred in my family that jarred me into a more sustained focus on testing practices. My son took the Medical College Aptitude Test in 1978. Shortly after he received his scores, an item appeared in the *Boston Globe* (May 23, 1978):

Ninety percent of the 27,300 individuals who took a day-long medical school admission test administered by the American College Testing Program on April 15th received lower grades than they should have," said a spokesman for the Association of American Medical Colleges.

The organization represents all 122 medical schools in the United States. The spokesman said all medical schools have been notified of the error and students will receive notification by June 10th. The mistake was described as "human error."

The error was indeed found; revised scores with a letter of limited explanation were sent to all candidates; and medical schools were advised to ignore the first sets of scores. A serious problem was averted, but one shudders at the injustice that could have occurred had the error not been found.

A New Policy

At about the same time, the Massachusetts State Board of Edu-



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cation was completing its plan for "competency" testing. No longer apathetic in test matters, I asked to address the Board and proposed an amendment giving parents and students the right to view the test questions used and the scored answer sheets. After some follow-up testimony by me and others, the Board adopted the following regulation:

After an evaluation of a student's achievement of minimum standards, each public school district shall give the student and his or her parent the opportunity to review the evaluation instruments used and the complete record of the student's achievement level. The complete record of a student's achievement level shall include, but not necessarily be limited to, the corrected responses of the student on the evaluation instruments used, and shall be maintained as part of the student's temporary record pursuant to the Student Records Regulations as adopted by the Board of Education.

At my request, Massachusetts Senator Carol Amick has now introduced two bills to reinforce

this concept at elementary and secondary levels as well as in tests used for college and professional school entrance. The establishment of full test openness will not come easily—but it will come.

Conditioned to Secrecy

Why is it difficult for people to accept the idea that students should be free to examine the evidence by which they are judged when it is an established and revered practice in our judicial system? Perhaps it is simply the paternalistic traditions of test companies. Young people are conditioned to an unnecessary practice, so they become easy prey to the secrecy that occurs in testing for college, for professional schools, and for employment.

Regardless of the reasons for test secrecy in the past—parents, educators, and students are now working together to end it. We believe:

- Students should be able to see where their errors were made and have an opportunity to correct them.

- Students should be able to check scored answers for possible errors in test correction.

- Test questions should be available for public scrutiny.

Educational futures are being entrusted, without questioning, to machines subject to mechanical error that are fed by attendants subject to human error. That must not be. The results of standardized testing are too important to the lives of young people for the process to be cloaked in secrecy. *ET*

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