

TESTING IN NEW JERSEY

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Shine and Goldman have raised some concerns about the Minimum Basic Skills (MBS) test and its place in New Jersey's overall evaluation and classification process. In doing so, they equate test results with an educational "quick fix."

They imply that test scores are up because teachers are "teaching to the test" and that the test results are, therefore, artificial. They further imply that MBS test results are being used by the state as the sole criteria by which to measure school and district performance and motivate school improvement.

These assertions are incorrect and reveal a basic lack of understanding about the classification process and how it works.

This year's MBS test results are not distorted. They reflect a true rise in minimum basic skills achievement by students, statewide. Test score increases in the basic skills have been observed in other standardized tests, not just in the MBS tests. This reinforces the state's belief that students are making real progress in basic skills.

There also is no evidence to suggest that teachers are "teaching to the test." To imply this is to say that teachers are not doing their job. We believe legislators, teachers, administrators, board members, parents, and students have worked hard to improve basic skills performance because they recognize the serious consequences to themselves and education if they do not.

Therefore, no "cruel hoax" has

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been perpetrated on the people of New Jersey. However, to understand the truth of this statement, it is necessary to understand the total classification process and the exact role that testing plays in that process. Not to provide readers with such information is to do them a great disservice. For without such a review, readers cannot make a sound, well-informed judgment on the relative importance of testing.

Critics who contend that the Minimum Basic Skills testing program is an inequitable way in which to judge school effectiveness must realize that it was never meant, and has not been used, as the single criterion by which to judge school improvement.

New Jersey's Public School Education Act of 1975 is very specific concerning how schools are to be evaluated. The Commissioner of Education, as chief state school officer, is obligated by law to "develop and administer a uniform statewide system for evaluating the performance of each school." As part of that evaluation process, the Commissioner is required to examine the results of annual testing for achievement in the basic skill areas.

The men and women of the legislature did not act arbitrarily in making this requirement. They were responding to constituent demands for accountability and quality education.

It must be realized that the Commissioner does not act alone in establishing such evaluation procedures. The State Board of Education must approve these procedures and the Joint Committee on the Public Schools must review them.

Testing, as an evaluation instrument, was intended to be one part of a total school improvement process—a process created to meet the educational requirements mandated by the elected representatives of the people of the state and implemented by the Department of Education. Since 1976 the Department of Education has monitored the operations of schools and districts to gather information on their performance. The collection of this information has allowed the department to evaluate and classify schools in three areas: (1) how well they have developed and implemented an educational plan; (2) how adequate their basic skills programs are, and (3) how well they have complied with law and regulation. In each of the three areas, numerous criteria are used for evaluation and classification.

Based on these evaluations, districts are classified as: *approved with recommendations and commendations* (where districts have substantially satisfied all the established criteria); *interim approval* (where certain deficiencies in a school district have been identified, but where a state approved remedial plan is being implemented); and *unapproved* (where a school or a district has not met its obligations to develop or implement an effective remedial plan).

Improvement Plan

The educational plan documents how districts and schools intend to achieve their goals and make program improvements. The criteria simply focus on the implementation of the local planning process required by state regulation and the resulting development and implementation of program improvement activities.

In the area of basic skills, the criteria for evaluating pupil progress cover five broad elements: development and implementation of a basic skills improvement plan, district evaluation of that plan, provision of remedial services, district evaluation of how well its schools have provided those services, and an analysis of the MBS test over a three-year period. Only schools are classified in the basic skills, and schools must meet all five elements to be approved for three years.

Of the five criteria, an understanding of the basic skills improvement

plan is helpful in determining the true value of minimum basic skills tests in relation to the whole school improvement thrust. A basic skills improvement plan is necessary in schools where pupils are not meeting state minimum standards in basic skills as evidenced by the MBS test results.

Failure to conduct any required evaluation, or to follow state guidelines to revise program plans where necessary, may result in a request by the state for a remedial plan.

Program Review Teams

To assist districts with problems in developing remedial plans, the state conducts a comprehensive basic skills program review. The review is necessary for schools in which less than 65 percent of the tested students meet the state minimum standards on the MBS tests and in which the test results have remained stable or declined over a three-year period.

The comprehensive basic skills program review analyzes school policies and practices, staff knowledge and attitudes, methods of instruction, time-on-task, and parent/community involvement.

The program reviews are conducted by internal and external review teams. Internal review teams are selected from within schools and districts. External review teams are selected from nearby districts whose participants have knowledge of effective school practices and basic skills. These teams, composed of administrators, teachers, and parents, are not there to gloat over district weaknesses. They are there to diagnose problems so that the district or school may develop a positive, successful basic skills program.

It is important to remember, however, that districts are also given the opportunity to present additional evidence of pupil achievement in the basic skills or evidence of local improvement efforts to counter a notice of impending program review.

For instance, this year 177 schools were scheduled for a comprehensive basic skills program review as indicated by their MBS test results. Of those schools, 105 submitted rebuttals; 28 were accepted, 39 are still under review, and 38 were rejected.

Thus, no district would be classified as unapproved based solely on MBS test scores. Like the internal

and external review teams, the test is just one more diagnostic tool a school or district can use to evaluate more accurately its performance in improving the quality of education it provides. Such measures allow schools to make appropriate educational assessments and are legitimate ways in which to institute educational change.

Final Criteria

The final criteria applied in the total evaluation process concern how well districts and schools are complying with the laws and regulations found in state and federal statutes. The criteria cover the following programs: adult education auxiliary services to nonpublic schools, bilingual education, child nutrition, curriculum (except for basic skills), equal educational opportunity, school facilities, federal programs, pupil transportation, special education, staff evaluation, vocational technical education, and vocational technical safety.

Viewed as a whole, the three areas discussed will help ensure that local districts can deliver the thorough and efficient education mandated in the state constitution. They will also ensure that a practical evaluation system is devised by which educators can measure whether students are acquiring the skills necessary to function politically, economically, and socially.

In the balanced and wise use of test data, teachers have an elemental diagnostic tool, and schools and districts can build on strengths as they correct weaknesses.

If the state is to be successful in achieving its goal of a thorough and efficient system of education it must be able to target limited resources to provide specific solutions to specific problems. It must be able to identify successful educational practices, reward the practitioners, and allow other schools and districts access to these successful solutions.

Such a system has a life of its own. It stimulates creative tension between local and state authority. It doesn't punish failure, but rather gives success an opportunity to thrive by bringing problems to the attention of the communities involved and by focusing resources in areas of most need.

New Jersey has created such a system—a system that brings about lasting educational reform. ■

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