

Governance by Testing in New Jersey

Damaging labels, not dollars, are being distributed to New Jersey's schools as its state testing program takes another step in becoming a major force in educational governance. The New Jersey Department of Education has heralded the results of statewide Minimum Basic Skills (MBS) tests in reading and math. In a *New York Times* interview last summer, education writer Fred Hechinger quoted Commissioner Fred Burke as saying that "the improvements in those areas . . . were not the result of any magic program or any singular teaching strategy. They were . . . simply proof that accountability is crucial and that, in the past five years, it has paid off in New Jersey."

Analysis of test results reveals that the evidence Burke cites as proof of the virtues of accountability represents a dramatic spurt, rather than a controlled five-year pattern of growth. Even in the three-year period considered in the Department's own report, no growth pattern is established between 1978 and 1979, but a quantum leap is shown between 1979 and 1980.

What variable was introduced to spur the districts to such a high level of performance? It appears as if a system of classification based primarily on test results was sufficient to mobilize New Jersey's schools' interest in scoring well. Commissioner Burke would have been more accurate in his jubilant comments had he shown some concern over the enduring effects of such an apparent educational "quick fix."

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New Jersey's testing program may produce nervous superintendents and a general rise in test scores, but it is not a substitute for sound educational practice.

Figure 1 illustrates the three-year scoring pattern for two of what the New Jersey Department of Education calls "district factor groups." Group A represents districts in the inner cities and the less affluent rural areas of the state; group J represents districts in the affluent suburbs.

An examination of some individual districts reveals great success stories: in math, Atlantic City's sixth graders did 45 percent better than the previous year's class, Trenton's third graders did 26 percent better than the previous year's class. To assert that such test scores represent educational growth is to engage in a leap of logic that would strain the credulity of the average blackjack player.

What has been demonstrated in an awesome manner is the coercive power of mass testing. The New Jersey Department of Education has, over the objections of all of the

state's major educational leadership, instituted a system of school classification which is triggered by the MBS test.

Districts Branded

For a district to escape being publicly branded substandard, with a variety of bureaucratic-sounding but ill-foreboding labels, it must demonstrate that its third, sixth, ninth, and eleventh grade students can satisfy the state's shifting requirements for minimum competency in basic skills. Superintendents, principals, and teachers are also aware that the Department of Education has promulgated evaluation procedures which mandate a review of pupil performance as a central component of the educator's evaluation. (While the State Board of Education decided not to specify "pupil progress" as a specific criterion, it required a review of all available indicators of pupil progress as part of state procedures. Administrators and teachers are attempting to avoid the erroneous use of such data to evaluate practitioner performance.)

To a superintendent whose district is in danger of failing it, the minimum competency test would certainly become a major curriculum imperative. Teachers, reluctant to risk their futures, might also emphasize passing the test as the number one goal for their classes. If teachers' and administrators' jobs and reputations depend on their students' test scores, then it is easy to predict where they will focus their time and energy.

The Department further encourages focus on the test by distributing mini-MBS tests covering the required skills. In many districts, these limited skills have replaced the more concept-oriented math sequence in order not to confuse the teachers with

Figure 1. Percentage of Students Meeting or Exceeding the Proficiency Standard* Grade and Skill (R-Reading; M-Math)

	3R	3M	6R	6M	9R	9M	11R	11M
Group A: inner cities and rural areas								
1978	64	48	49	40	48	41	73	63
1979	66	49	47	41	49	47	64	56
1980	75	64	55	59	54	54	69	64
Group B: affluent suburbs								
1978	97	91	91	89	91	88	97	93
1979	98	91	91	89	90	90	93	89
1980	99	94	96	96	93	93	96	93

* "Proficiency standard": in reading, 75 percent correct; in mathematics, 65 percent correct. Figures have been rounded off in this instance.

countervailing requirements. In addition, the state's regional Educational Improvement Centers continue to sponsor teacher workshops aimed at improving student MBS test-taking and scores. Consequently, in large numbers of the state's schools, unprecedented concentration on narrow subject matter, in defiance of the law of diminishing returns, became the instructional norm for the 1979-80 school year.

Skills Isolated

Anyone trained in education knows there is a great difference between skills and the ability to use those skills. When skills are learned in isolation, the connection between them and their use is tenuous. Creative teachers prefer to employ various instructional techniques so that children can integrate subject matter into their lives. Educational theorists have long held that repetitive drill in basic skills not connected to comprehension or composition is the least efficient way to educate and, in some instances, is even counterproductive.

The educational choice, however, has been taken away from many teachers (and children) during this past year in New Jersey. An overarching concern with classification, and evaluation based on it, has required teachers to act against their training and experience and to accept the state's model for all children.

When one realizes that the great majority of children in New Jersey have no difficulty with the test, one recognizes the enormous intrusion into the teaching and learning process of the many for the doubtful advantage of the few. See Figure 2.

Even assuming that third-grade teachers would be unable to identify

Figure 2. Group A students (urban) achieving 85 percent or better in reading and 80 percent or better in math

Grade	Math	Percentage	Reading	Percentage
3	8,509	40	12,081	57
6	6,486	32	6,943	35
9	5,131	26	6,759	34
11	7,229	48	5,706	37

students who easily exceed the minimum standard, school records could be used so that thousands of sixth, ninth, and eleventh graders would not need to spend two to three days away from their regular school work taking tests that will show what is already known. If this test is such a waste of time for so many in the target population, how much greater is the travesty across the entire state?

Real Costs

The Department of Education announced that development and administration of the test cost \$1.25 per pupil. This figure points out the institutional myopia typical of those who practice education without students. To assume that student time has no value is, perhaps, the greatest insult in the whole testing effort. The average yearly educational cost per pupil in New Jersey is \$2000, an average cost per pupil per day of roughly \$11. The MBS test was administered to approximately 370,000 students. Some 85,000 third graders spent three days testing at an actual cost in pupil time of \$2,829,882. The cost for the sixth, ninth, and eleventh graders was \$6,248,000 for two days of testing at each grade level.

The National Assessment of Educational Progress is able to conduct its nationwide assessment of education on a one percent sample. Its mission, of course, is to determine

how well the schools are doing. The State Department of Education has chosen a different mission for testing—not to assess, but to motivate. It is this approach that has outraged many people who care about education in New Jersey. Everyone should believe in the importance of appropriate testing. Tests are valuable tools of evaluation and all evaluation motivates to some extent. But, a comprehensive, diagnostic assessment program that meets individual student needs is best done at the school or district level.

If the State Department of Education would give extra support in terms of financial and human resources to those schools identified as substandard by its costly and wrong-minded testing practice, one could forgive this assault on sound educational practice. Instead, the state plans to send five-member teams of professionals and laypersons to substandard schools (schools in which one-third of the students fall below the arbitrarily set state standards in reading or math—and which have shown no improvement). Team members will spend at least three days examining district policies and practices in basic skills, discipline, staff development, decision making and staff knowledge, and attitudes toward instructional content and instructional time.

If the Department of Education would use the student time allotted to the MBS to sample educational performance over a wide range of subjects, and if it would focus new financial and curricular resources on a target population that would benefit from the activity, then educational assessment at the state level might make an important contribution to public policy. As long as the present simplistic approach is taken, testing will be endured as a costly political tool and will not improve the state's educational system.

Just as there is no short cut to sound educational practice, there is no merit in depending on an annual cognitive snapshot of one-quarter of the state's public school students to classify schools as approved or substandard. New Jersey's mass testing may produce a few nervous suburban superintendents and a general rise in test scores, but it is a cruel hoax and a paltry substitute for real commitment to education. ■

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