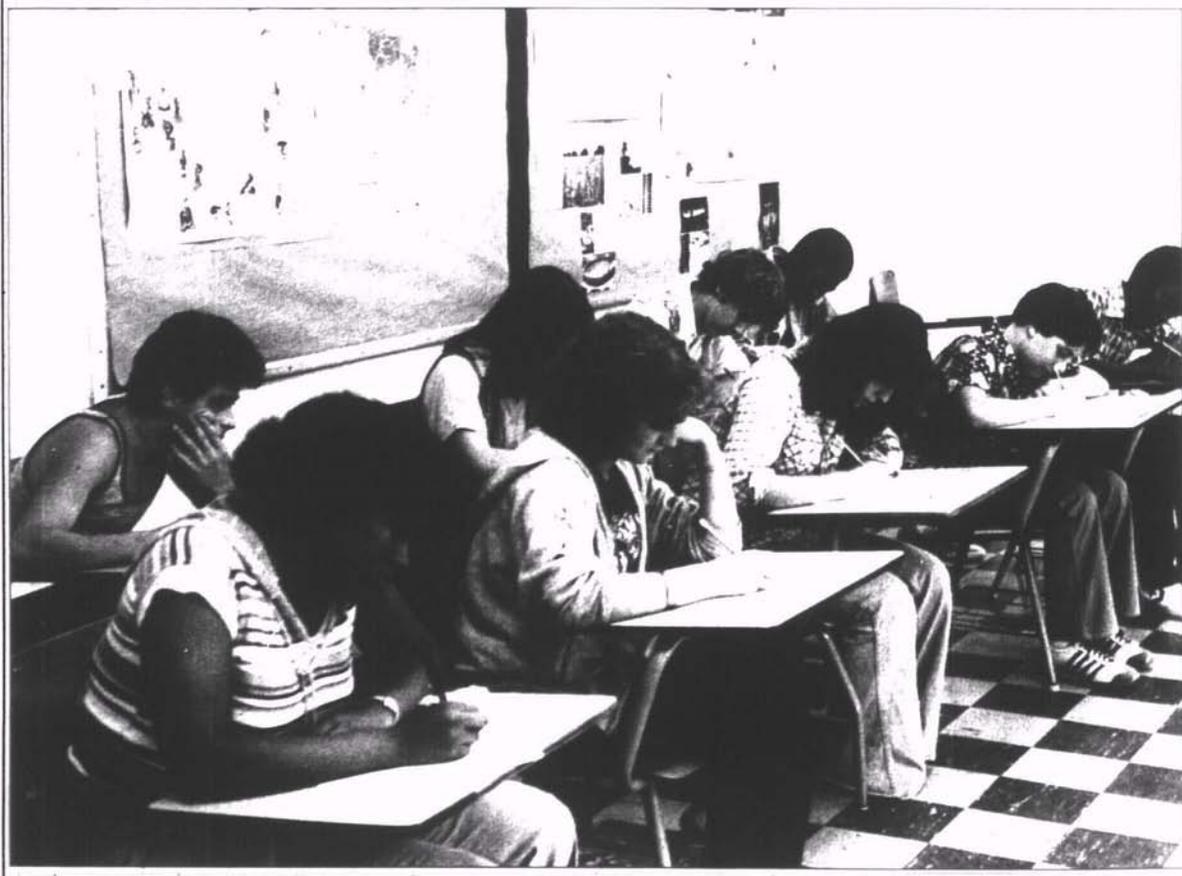


Testing in a Democracy

The heavy dependence on standardized testing in U.S. schools hurts the quality of education and contradicts our democratic goals.

HAROLD BERLAK



The Public Education Information Network is a group of teachers, school administrators, professional educators, student and citizen advocates, writers, and scholars. Like many Americans, we are concerned about the quality of public schools and actively seek reform. But we are deeply worried that many of the current prescriptions for excellence—more testing of students and teachers, more requirements, more homework, more time in school—are failing to improve the quality of our schools and are, ironically, intensifying existing problems.

We have a bias. We believe democratic schools are essential to a democratic nation. What do we mean by this? First, the practice of democracy depends on a system of public education that educates *all* children to the very highest standard. We reject outright the belief that children from any cultural group or socio-economic class have limited potential because of their parents' educational history, social background, or values. Second, in a democracy every person has the right and the responsibility to participate directly in the control and reform of public institutions.

This means that citizens, parents, and public officials have the right to know how well schools are fulfilling their responsibilities. Teachers, education officials, and ordinary citizens need reliable information if they are to make informed decisions. The question is not whether we should test and evaluate performance, but what forms these assessments should take.

More than any other developed nation on earth, the U.S. takes data generated by mass administration of centrally produced objective tests as the single most meaningful indicator of school quality, teacher competence, and student achievement. The aura of science that surrounds these tests hinders local efforts to develop evaluations that serve individual and social needs. Objective tests have serious problems. Most reduce learning to multiple-choice test items that trivialize knowledge and learning. Many are written by testing experts remote from classrooms and students, and uneducated in the subject fields. Virtually all standardized achievement and competency test batteries ignore significant aspects of the school curriculum—

most notably writing, the graphic and performing arts, and the ability to use critical thought and to engage in subtle and complex interpretation and analysis.

Teachers are spending more and more time teaching for tests. Where standardized tests dominate the curriculum, they dictate the content and reduce the method of instruction to a set of routines, and teachers become mere functionaries in a bureaucratic system. Professional testmakers and publishers in effect are making curriculum and pedagogical decisions that properly belong to teachers, principals, and others.

We believe the heavy dependence on these forms of evaluation contributes to the deterioration of educational standards, teacher passivity, and a lack of student involvement in academic studies. The greatest problem of using standardized achievement and competency test scores as the measure of the effectiveness of school reforms is that test scores can rise at the same time that the quality of the educational experiences in classrooms diminishes. The point of reading instruction is, after all, not higher test scores, but children who can read books for a purpose and for enjoyment. And the tests are becoming a barrier to the expansion of writing—the most neglected of the basic academic skills.

More Appropriate Evaluation

The question of what forms of testing and evaluation are appropriate should be reopened at every level. In *each case* we must ask whether resources expended on an externally mandated test could be better spent on forms of evaluation that encourage closer collaboration between teachers and students and lead more directly to improvement in student motivation and learning.

Standardized achievement and competency tests need not be totally eliminated, but their use should be drastically curtailed. Resources should be diverted to development and use of more subtle, sensitive, and educationally useful forms of assessment. The need for comparative performance data for various public policy purposes (such as monitoring federal and state equity requirements and allocating grants and financial aid) could be

met in ways that do not carry the massive human and financial costs of large scale centralized state or district-wide testing programs.

Many systematic forms of empirical evaluation and testing have been developed and are in use in this and other technologically advanced nations. To be considered are:

Portfolios and profiles. These require a systematic plan for collecting and assessing documentary evidence and testimony of student performance and achievements.

School site evaluation teams. These may be composed of a designated group of teachers, parents, and subject-matter experts from area colleges and consultants in curriculum and pedagogy. Their evaluations would depend on interviews and on systematic observation, recording, and analysis of curriculum, pedagogy, and the teaching and learning environment.

Group and individual diagnoses of student achievement and potential. These may include diagnostic tests, structured and unstructured observations of student performance, and interviews.

We appreciate that testing can be a lever to make previously unaccountable schools and even whole systems accountable, especially for the children of minorities. We understand that testing is part of the way school systems in many places are trying to restore good faith and a measure of order in what were chaotic and irresponsible systems. However, we believe there are better and more convincing ways to evaluate school and individual progress. □

This statement is excerpted from *Equity and Excellence: Toward an Agenda for School Reform* (St. Louis, Mo.: The Public Education Network, 1985. Copyright 1985 by the Public Education Information Network), endorsed by 200 educators and scholars nationwide (names provided on request).

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