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October 1985

Volume 43

Number 2

Educational Leadership is intended primarily for leaders in elementary, middle, and secondary education but is also for anyone interested in curriculum, instruction, supervision, and leadership in schools. ASCD publications present a variety of viewpoints. The views expressed or implied in this publication are not necessarily official positions of the Association. Copyright © 1985 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.

ISSN 0013-1784
Oct. 85 Stock No. 611-85400

The Search for Solutions

“Nobody believes these stupid tests help anyone. Why do we keep on using them?”

“I believe they can be helpful. For one thing, schools and the general public need information about what schools are accomplishing.”

I listened to this conversation over lunch in a college cafeteria a few days ago between a California teacher who has been trying with some success to teach critical thinking to her mostly-minority Chapter 1 students, and Robert Ennis (p. 44), a researcher who has spent much of his life trying to define and measure critical thinking. Their remarks reflect our national ambivalence over testing.

U.S. schools use more standardized tests than schools in other countries, yet the vast majority of teachers and principals who devote hours to preparing for, giving, and interpreting the tests distrust them. They see increasing evidence that the testing tail is wagging the curriculum dog. They feel they are teaching—or would like to teach—much that is not tested. And they are weary of being compared—and having children compared—in ways they consider destructive.

It is regrettable that a profession should be so critical of one of the basic tools of its trade. A contributing factor, I believe, is our system of school governance. We talk a lot about local control, but each level of our many-layered hierarchy has its own ways of trying to make schools accountable. Agencies at national, state, county, district, school, program, and classroom levels devise tests quite independently of one another.

Unfortunately, we cannot expect much change in this pattern, at least not immediately. As a nation, we are not even sure how it *should* be changed—although the tendency is for states to assume more control. Since that is the case, we can expect even greater pressure, as Donald Burnes and Barbara Lindner (p. 18)

remind us, for “indicators” of progress at the state level (p. 21).

You probably agree with Robert Ennis that tests can serve a variety of useful purposes, including the provision of information to program designers and policymakers. You probably applaud people like Walt Hathaway of the Portland Public Schools, who is trying to develop a coherent testing program designed to fulfill many of these purposes simultaneously. But if you're like me, you also agree with the California teacher, who must cope with too many tests, few of which were selected or designed by her and her colleagues to help them fulfill the awesome responsibility of educating individual children.

There is no easy answer to the testing problem, but some things can be done:

1. Reduce the number of separate tests and make better use of test results by developing consolidated assessment programs that serve several functions simultaneously.
2. Make greater use of formative testing aimed at individual and program improvement.
3. Experiment with computerized adaptive testing to get better diagnostic information, reduce student frustration from inappropriate items, save testing time, and have the results immediately.
4. Support budding efforts to measure higher-level thinking as well as more basic facts and skills.
5. Give more attention to teacher-developed classroom assessment.
6. In collaboration with parents and citizens, gather and communicate evidence other than test results that show what students are learning.

Each educator concerned about the testing problem has a part to play in solving it. Ready? You may begin.

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