

# Testing and Curriculum Reform: One School's Experience

Teachers at Westwood School in Dalton, Georgia, have found that the powerful influence of standardized tests hampers their efforts to teach a developmentally sound curriculum.

Photograph by Jean Este



*Westwood teachers reclassified objectives in the state-mandated curriculum as developmental tasks Appropriate, Inappropriate, or Missing for their primary students, then began the slow process of trying to mesh the requirements with the kinds of lessons they know to be good for young children, such as mathematics with manipulatives, as illustrated here.*

The experiences of the faculty of Westwood School, a K-2 school in Dalton, Georgia, illustrate the effects of standardized testing on our efforts to achieve educational excellence. In one sense, this faculty is typical: they struggle with the day-to-day consequences of mandates in their classrooms and school, and thus they represent thousands of educators around the nation. In another sense, though, the Westwood faculty is exemplary: they embody the spirit of collegial school-based restructuring.

## Faculty-Led Curriculum Reform

The Westwood faculty is in its fourth year of participation in the NEA Mastery In Learning Project (MILP), a faculty-led, site-based school reform initiative (see, for example, Lee and Obermeyer 1986, McClure 1988).

The Westwood faculty were concerned about the developmental appropriateness of the state-mandated curriculum. They noted logical inconsistencies among the approved textbooks, the mandated curriculum, and the mandated standardized tests.

So, during their first year in MILP, Westwood created a curriculum committee to address this problem. Members included the principal, the lead teacher, and teacher representatives from each grade.

The committee decided to focus efforts on one curriculum area at a time and began with mathematics despite high test scores in that area. They selected mathematics because of concern about depth of student understanding, student attitudes, curriculum narrowness, and text-bound instruction. The committee discovered a program called Mathematics Their Way and coordinated its study, adoption, and implementation.

The committee continued to work to reconcile developmentally sound curriculum and instruction with district and state requirements. They analyzed state-mandated curriculum for appropriate, inappropriate, and missing developmental tasks and worked to mesh the textbook, curriculum, and tests with developmentally sound teaching methods and manipulative materials. Teachers responded favorably to the manipulative activities and soon noted improvement in students' attitudes and learning in mathematics.

As implementation proceeded, however, the state's emphasis on standardized tests became troublesome. The teachers knew they were teaching more ably and appropriately. Yet they were concerned that the content and format of the standardized tests might not reflect the students' developmentally sound learning experiences. Therefore, in practice, the teachers saw curriculum and instruction constrained by the need to "teach to the test."

### Negative Aspects of Testing

As they reflected on their third year in MILP, the curriculum committee described the negative aspects of standardized testing.

- *Test-driven curriculum.* State-mandated standardized tests have a profound influence on the curriculum, they asserted. Textbooks are geared to the test objectives, and teachers are teaching those objectives, even when they are not appropriate. As one teacher put it, "Getting kids to perform well on the test

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is the top priority. In Georgia, test scores are published and schools and systems are compared by their scores." The message from the public, policymakers, and the central administration has been to raise test scores. In short, the test "actually is the foundation of our curriculum."

- *Efficiency and cost-effectiveness.* Committee members considered the test-driven curriculum an ineffective focus of time and money for improving schools. The cost of the testing movement—for tests, monitors, observational instruments, handbooks, videotapes, and trainers—is high. Inconsistencies in test administration inevitably occur with young children, and the validity of test results is doubtful when test content and format are directly taught. Further, valuable instructional time is lost to test preparation and to testing itself.

- *Teaching with schizophrenia.* Westwood teachers are "worn out" trying to work within the system; moreover, doing so is not always ethical or developmentally sound. Teachers try to stand by their principles when they teach, but the influence of the tests is great.

A first-year teacher described her experience: "I was petrified that my class would do so poorly that I wouldn't be back next year. So I taught what the other teachers recom-

mended to get them ready for the test. After the test I started teaching, good teaching. The class enjoyed it, and I think they learned more the last three weeks of school than they did the first six months, because I was more relaxed, the students were more relaxed, and I was able to hone in on those areas where they needed help."

- *Deprofessionalization.* Committee members contended that deprofessionalization of teaching occurs when teacher judgment and yearlong documentation of student progress can be invalidated by a single test score. Once test scores were merely one indication of a student's learning, now parents view them as absolute indicators. Now, the standardized test score is inconsistent with the student's yearlong performance, teachers find themselves in an awkward position.

An experienced teacher conceded that, although she loves children and teaching, "Testing makes me want to get out of the classroom. If they had started this 10 years ago, I might have quit and substituted full-time just so I wouldn't have had to teach to these tests."

- *Effect on students.* Committee members pointed out that only rote learning takes place when teachers "pound" information and skills into students who lack readiness. Testing students on skills for which they lack readiness causes failure. Repeated failure breeds low self-esteem and negative attitudes toward learning, perhaps causing some students to drop out. Students become bored with repeated testing; some become cavalier about taking tests, increasing their likelihood of school failure.

### Faculty Commitment Continues

Westwood's spring 1988 mathematics achievement test scores were the highest to date. Although these scores cannot be attributed solely to the developmental curriculum effort, they surely increased faculty confidence in the program. Needless to say, the teachers' confidence stemmed not from faith in the test scores but from knowledge of the realities of administrative and public pressure. Rightly or wrongly, the improved test scores

would mean continued support for their efforts.

Westwood teachers and instructional aides continued their training throughout the summer in preparation for full implementation of Mathematics Their Way this school year. The faculty is committed to developmental teaching, with nervous faith that test scores will continue to rise. But, as a committee member confided, instruction will remain rooted in both camps; teachers will attempt to teach the developmentally appropriate curriculum and the test-driven curriculum simultaneously.

### An Impediment to Reform

Like the high school teachers described by McNeil (1988), the Westwood faculty is attempting to overcome the inadequacies of a controlling system through "double entry" curriculum and instruction. They are standing with one foot in the developmental approach and the other in the curriculum of test preparation. How effective can even exemplary teachers be in this schizophrenic environment?

The public, the media, and policy-makers will continue to demand accountability from the schools (Florio 1988, Frazier 1987). But such mandates have not solved the nation's educational woes, despite amassed statistics of improved test scores. If these stakeholders broaden their conception of effective schools, perhaps over-

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reliance on testing will diminish and education reform can proceed.

We must actively seek and promote alternative forms of assessment and accountability. Educators at all levels must work to create an awareness within the profession and among the public that the multiple goals of schooling we espouse (see, for example, Goodlad 1984) are not adequately reflected in standardized test scores alone. □

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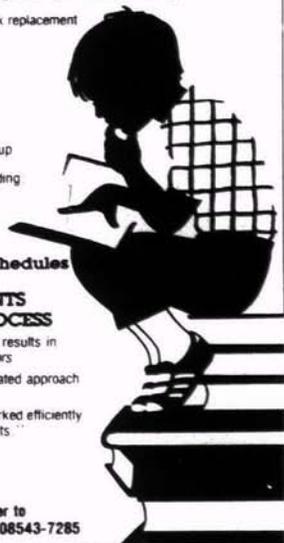
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