

Separating the Twin Faces of Assessment



FOR SEVERAL YEARS now, we have been advocates for separating assessment for purposes of accountability from assessment for the purpose of informing instruction. Much of the debate over assessments today is due to this lack of separation.

Consequently, we are witnessing an emerging revolution led by students who protest assessments by not showing up for the tests, parents who opt their children out of taking the tests, states that want to broaden the measures of accountability and states that, for political reasons, withdraw from the Common Core assessment program they had originally signed on to.

In places like New Mexico, New Jersey and New York, students and parents are resorting to civil disobedience to get the policymakers' attention regarding what they consider a destructive overemphasis on tests. California's Board of Education voted recently to suspend the use of standardized tests as the primary measure of school quality. New Hampshire was granted approval by the U.S. Department of Education to use a system of competency-based tests to replace the statewide assessments at certain grade levels. Oklahoma and South Carolina have dropped out of Common Core, and other states are rethinking their commitment.

Endangering Progress

Superintendents have been supportive of the Common Core, but, in the surveys done by AASA, many have expressed concern over the tests associated with it, not because they are against testing and accountability, but because of how the test results will be used and interpreted. Even now most teachers express concerns over the

lack of Common Core-aligned instructional materials and the training to teach to the new standards.

Add to that the requirement that the test results be used in the teacher evaluation process. Then you begin to appreciate why teacher groups are backing away from the Common Core and endangering progress toward a national set of higher standards. The inevitable lower scores on the new

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assessments, they argue, will give rise to a new wave of criticism that our public schools are failing and that our teachers are incompetent.

AASA has suggested that a NAEP-like (National Assessment of Educational Progress) process be used for assessment for purposes of accountability. The NAEP is undoubtedly the most valid and reliable national assessment that we have. Indeed, it was NAEP results that identified the inequities between the results obtained in state-administered exams and the same state's results on NAEP. The discrepancy in scores was a sign of a significant difference in the levels of difficulty of the two assessments.

The National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers responded by developing a set of higher education standards now known as the Common Core State Standards. Great pains were taken by the states to claim ownership of the new standards so they would not be viewed as federally imposed. But early in the process, the federal government intervened by funding the creation of the two-test consortia now known as PARCC and Smarter

Balanced, and by inserting in Race to the Top and other competitive grant funding the requirement that states would have to adopt high standards (although the Common Core was not named specifically) and make use of the standardized tests adopted by the states to evaluate teachers. Consequently, the anti-federal intrusion and anti-test groups have managed to totally distort the true meaning and purpose of the Common Core.

Random Sampling

To inform instruction, assessments need to be given on a regular basis. Teachers always have done that, and they have regularly shared results with students and their parents. For purposes of accountability, there is no need to administer a standardized test to every child, every year, in math and language arts. The only reason for doing so is to evaluate the teacher, even though a plethora of evidence suggests the process is cumbersome and not a valid or reliable use of the tests.

Charge the National Assessment Governing Board with the development of a national assessment that, like the current NAEP assessments, will be administered to a random selection of students in every state, calibrated to the Common Core standards and used to hold states accountable for the progress of their students. Administer the test every year if you must, in as many subjects as you like, but to a random sample of students, thus greatly reducing the amount of time that each student must spend taking standardized tests. We would have national standards and a national assessment that may well be the most valid source of accountability.

DANIEL DOMENECH is AASA executive director. E-mail: ddomenech@aasa.org. Twitter: @AASADan