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Do Schools Test Too Much?

Interview with Daniel Koretz

Daniel Koretz is a professor of education at Harvard. His book *Measuring Up* examines our national obsession with standardized tests.

Parade Magazine "Intelligence Report" - Published Online, January 11, 2009

<http://www.parade.com/news/intelligence-report/archive/do-schools-test-too-much.html>

By Lyric Wallwork Winik

Does U.S. education policy rely too heavily on test scores?

Yes. We need accountability in education, and standardized tests give comparable information from different schools. But tests don't measure things like complex problem-solving ability, creativity, and persistence. High-stakes testing puts pressure on teachers to take shortcuts to raise scores and can give an illusion of progress.

Doesn't an improved score show real progress?

Not necessarily. There are many ways to prepare students too narrowly for a specific test. If you substitute another test designed to measure similar knowledge and skills, the "improvements" sometimes shrink markedly or even vanish altogether. Employers and college professors don't care how students do on a particular math test—they want them to know math.

Should teacher compensation be linked to test scores?

If pay is linked to performance, tests will have to be part of the package, but it would be a mistake to use them as the only criterion. A good teacher keeps students engaged, fosters curiosity, and helps students learn from their mistakes. Test scores alone can't measure that.

Accountability 2.0

By Tony Wagner

President Obama recently declared that¹ "the solution to low test scores is not lowering standards—it's tougher, clearer standards." He also called for a "21st century" education for all students. Here's the problem: When many policymakers, parents, and educators hear the call for "tougher standards," they assume this means requiring students to know more academic content. Most do not understand that merely teaching and testing more subject knowledge will not prepare students for careers and college in this new century. We don't just need tougher standards. We need *different* learning standards and new kinds of tests to ensure our students' success today.

I have reviewed studies on the skills employers consider most important, and interviewed scores of senior executives who work in the high-tech industry, retail, service, manufacturing, and the military. I discovered near-universal agreement on the core competencies that employers need most in today's workplace: the ability to think critically, the capacity to collaborate with others, and effective oral and written communication skills. I also heard frequent complaints from employers about the extent to which these skills are weak, or altogether absent, among new hires— young people just out of high school as well as college graduates. Why do we have such poor results after seven years of dramatically increased accountability requirements for all public schools?

"In the 21st century, core competencies are as important as core knowledge."

What I observe in classrooms all over the country is that, increasingly, there is only one curriculum in our schools: Test Prep. I believe in accountability, but the tests widely used by states to comply with the federal No Child Left Behind Act rely primarily on multiple-choice questions that assess students' ability to recall facts—and little else. And what's

tested is what's taught. As a consequence, much less class time is spent on research projects, text-based discussions, and other activities that teach effective communication and critical thinking. Many students graduate from high school today having never written a paper longer than five paragraphs—the writing format taught to pass state tests—and not knowing how to ask good questions, weigh evidence, reason, analyze, hypothesize, or work with others. Businesses spend nearly \$3 billion a year teaching their employees how to write, while nearly half of the students who pass the MCAS test in Massachusetts—the state that the president held up as a model of success—still need remediation when they go on to college because they lack these skills.

Ensuring students' mastery of core academic knowledge is an essential purpose of education. But if this knowledge is all that's tested, increasingly school will become a high-stakes game of Trivial Pursuit, and we will fall farther behind in the race to develop an innovation economy—one based on the continuous creation of new ideas, products, and services.

In the 21st century, core competencies are as important as core knowledge. Information is changing constantly and doubling at an astounding rate. The best-run companies require every employee to be able to work with others to analyze the most current information and apply it to new problems. What is different about work in the 21st century is the demand that *all* employees be able to think critically, collaborate, and communicate effectively. Young people who want to get and keep a good job in the new global knowledge economy must master core competencies that only a few students have had in the past. And the country that has the greatest number of workers with these skills will create an economy that produces more innovations and so gain an enormous competitive advantage.

The choice is not between teaching and testing core knowledge vs. core competencies. Critical-thinking and communications skills are best learned through in-depth study of challenging academic content. There are a growing number of tests—assessments widely used in other countries—in which students have to show that they can apply their subject-content knowledge to new questions and problems. We urgently need to begin research and development for a next-generation accountability system that assesses the skills that matter most in the 21st century. Our children's future—and the future of our country—are at stake.

Tony Wagner, a former high school English teacher, is the co-director of the Change Leadership Group at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. His most recent book is *The Global Achievement Gap: Why Even Our Best Schools Don't Teach the New Survival Skills Our Children Need—And What We Can Do About It*.

Vol. 28, Issue 35

¹ http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/10/us/politics/10text-obama.html?_r=1

Getting Accountability Right

By Richard Rothstein

The federal No Child Left Behind Act has succeeded in highlighting the poor math and reading skills of disadvantaged children. But on balance, the law has done more harm than good because it has terribly distorted the school curriculum. Modest modifications cannot correct this distortion. Designing a better accountability policy will take time. We cannot and should not abandon school accountability, but it's time to go back to the drawing board to get accountability right.

The first step is to understand today's curricular distortion. It has arisen because No Child Left Behind holds schools accountable for only some of their many goals. When we demand adequate math and reading scores alone, educators rationally respond by transferring resources to math and reading instruction (and drill) from social studies, history,



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science, the arts and music, character development, citizenship education, emotional and physical health, and physical fitness.

This shift has been most severe for the disadvantaged children the law was designed to help, because they are most at risk of failing to meet the math and reading targets. But they are also most at risk of losing curricular opportunities in other domains. In these other areas, NCLB has widened the "achievement gap."

President Barack Obama has vowed to correct this distortion. He has noted that NCLB "has become so reliant on a standardized-test model that ... subjects like history and social studies have gotten pushed aside. Arts and music time is no longer there. So the child is not having the well-rounded educational experience I benefited from and most in my generation benefited from." We must change No Child Left Behind, he has said, "so that the assessment is one that takes into account all the factors that go into a good education."

Although some Democrats and Republicans want to ignore the law's goal distortion, observers with varying policy perspectives share the new president's view that NCLB requires a radical reconsideration. The Center on Education Policy, headed by Jack Jennings (formerly an aide to Democrats on the House education committee), has publicized the loss of instruction in social studies, science, the arts, and physical education, especially for disadvantaged children. Chester E. Finn Jr. and Diane Ravitch, who served as federal education officials in Republican administrations, complain that¹ present policy means only "top private schools and a few suburban systems will stick with education broadly defined." While rich kids study a wide range of subjects in depth, they write, "their poor peers fill in bubbles on test sheets." There is a "zero sum" problem, Finn and Ravitch say², because "more emphasis on some things ... inevitably mean[s] less attention to others." [Download the PDF, "Beyond the Basics" from the Citizens for Public Schools Website under MCAS and High-Stakes Testing]

Yet public discussion of the law's upcoming reauthorization focuses almost entirely on correcting flaws in math and reading measurement: substituting "growth models" for fixed levels, modifying the 2014 deadline for attaining student proficiency, standardizing state definitions of proficiency, modifying "confidence intervals" in reporting. While these steps may improve the sophistication of math and reading data, none addresses the goal distortion caused by exclusive accountability for basic skills.

Designing accountability tools that require satisfactory performance across a balanced set of outcomes requires a significant federal research-and-development effort, which could build on prior experience. When the National Assessment of Educational Progress was developed in the 1960s, it measured a broad range of cognitive and noncognitive knowledge and skills. NAEP abandoned that breadth when its budget was slashed in the 1970s, however, and never restored it.

To see whether students learned to cooperate, for example, the early NAEP program sent trained observers to sampled schools. In teams of four, 9-year-olds were offered prizes (such as yo-yos) for guessing what object was hidden in a box. Students could ask yes-or-no questions, but all team members had to agree on each question asked. NAEP rated the students on whether they suggested new questions, gave reasons for viewpoints, or otherwise demonstrated cooperative problem-solving skills. It then reported to the nation on the percentage of children capable of cooperative problem-solving.

For teenagers, NAEP assessors provided lists of issues about which young people typically had strong opinions. Students had to collaborate in writing recommendations to resolve them. For 13-year-olds, lists included topics such as whether they should have curfews for getting home, and for 17-year-olds, the age eligibility for voting, drinking, or smoking. NAEP rated students on whether they took clear positions, gave reasons for viewpoints, helped organize internal procedures, and defended another's right to disagree.



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Early NAEP understood that teaching civic responsibility involved more than having students memorize historical facts. So in 1969, during the era of the civil rights revolution, the assessment asked teenagers what they felt they should do if they saw black children barred from entering a park. NAEP reported that 82 percent of 13-year-olds and 90 percent of 17-year-olds knew that they should do something constructive, such as tell parents, report it to a civil rights or civil liberties organization, write letters to the newspaper, or take social action such as picketing or leafleting.

The early version of NAEP also assessed 17-year-olds' ability to consider alternative viewpoints, by asking them to state arguments both for and against a heated public issue of the time, such as whether college students should be drafted. It asked 9- and 13-year-olds if something reported in a newspaper might be untrue. It also asked teenagers if they belonged to any nonschool clubs or organizations; interviewers followed up with questions to verify answers' accuracy.

To assess commitment to civil liberties, NAEP asked teenagers if someone should be permitted to say on television that "Russia is better than the United States," that "some races of people are better than others," or that "it is not necessary to believe in God." The assessment reported the discouraging result that only a small minority of the teenagers thought all three statements should be permitted.

The early NAEP program also assessed personal responsibility. Seventeen-year-olds were asked what to do if, when visiting a friend, they noticed her 6-month-old baby was bruised. The correct answer was "suggest that your friend call her baby's doctor." Incorrect choices included "ignore the bruises because they are none of your business." A follow-up prompt said that at a later visit, bruises remain and "you are now suspicious that your friend may have hurt the baby." Students were asked what to do now. The correct choice was "call the local child-health agency and report your suspicions."

Certainly, if school systems were evaluated by such results, not simply by math and reading scores, incentives would shift. National reporting of low scores on the civil liberties questions, for example, could spur demands that schools do a better job on citizenship; then, the incentive to drop cooperative learning in favor of test prep in math and reading would diminish.

Designing a new accountability system will take time and care, because the problems are daunting. Observations of student behavior are not as reliable as standardized tests of basic skills, so we will have to accept that it is better to imperfectly measure a broad set of outcomes than to perfectly measure a narrow set. We will have to resolve contradictory national convictions that schools should teach citizenship and character, but not inquire about students' (and parents') personal opinions. To avoid new distortions, we'll need to make tough decisions about how to weight the measurement of the many goals of education.

The time to start on these difficult tasks is now, but the new administration won't have to begin with a blank slate. Looking back at the early National Assessment of Educational Progress can start us on a better path.

Richard Rothstein (rroth@epi.org) is a research associate of the Economic Policy Institute. This article summarizes an argument from his recent book, co-written with Rebecca Jacobsen and Tamara Wilder, *Grading Education: Getting Accountability Right* (Teachers College Press).

¹ <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB118653759532491305.html>

² http://www.edexcellence.net/doc/Beyond_The_Basics_Final.pdf