Table of Contents

If you’re viewing this document online, you can click any of the topics below to link directly to that section.

Alternatives to Standardized Educational Assessment. ERIC Digest Series Number EA 40 ......................................................... 2
WHAT ARE THE MAIN USES OF STANDARDIZED TESTING IN AMERICAN ................................................................. 2
WHAT PROBLEMS HAVE ARISEN AS A RESULT OF WIDESPREAD USE OF ........................................................................ 2
WHAT ALTERNATIVES TO STANDARDIZED TESTING HAVE BEEN SUGGESTED? .......................................................... 3
CAN PERFORMANCE-BASED ASSESSMENTS BE USED TO COMPARE STUDENTS ......................................................... 3
HAVE THERE BEEN ANY STATEWIDE EFFORTS TO PROVIDE ALTERNATIVES ............................................................. 4
WHAT IS THE PROGNOSIS FOR A GENERAL SHIFT AWAY FROM ..................................................................................... 4
RESOURCES ................................................................................................................................................................. 5
Alternatives to Standardized Educational Assessment. ERIC Digest Series Number EA 40.

WHAT ARE THE MAIN USES OF STANDARDIZED TESTING IN AMERICAN PUBLIC SCHOOLS?

Advocates of standardized testing assert that it simply achieves more efficiently and fairly many of the purposes for which grading and other traditional assessment procedures were designed. Even critics of standardized testing acknowledge that it has filled a vacuum. As Grant Wiggins (1989a) puts it, "Mass assessment resulted from legitimate concern about the failure of schools to set clear, justifiable, and consistent standards to which it would hold its graduates and teachers accountable."

Standardized testing is currently used to fulfill (1) the administrative function of providing comparative scores for individual students so that placement decisions can be made; (2) the guidance function of indicating a student's strengths or weaknesses so that he or she may make appropriate decisions regarding a future course of study; and, more recently, (3) the accountability function of using student scores to assess the effectiveness of teachers, schools, and even entire districts (Robinson and Craver 1989).

WHAT PROBLEMS HAVE ARISEN AS A RESULT OF WIDESPREAD USE OF STANDARDIZED TESTING?

The phrase "test-driven curriculum" (Livingston, Castle, and Nations 1989) captures the essence of the major controversy surrounding standardized testing. When test scores are used on a comparative basis not only to determine the educational fate of individual students, but also to assess the relative...
"quality" of teachers, schools, and school districts, it is no wonder that "teaching to the test" is becoming a common practice in our nation's schools. This would not necessarily be a problem if standardized tests provided a comprehensive, indepth assessment of the knowledge and skills that indicate mastery of a given subject matter. However, the main purpose of standardized testing is to sort large numbers of students in as efficient a manner as possible. This limited goal, quite naturally, gives rise to short-answer, multiple-choice questions. When tests are constructed in this manner, active skills, such as writing, speaking, acting, drawing, constructing, repairing, or any of a number of other skills that can and should be taught in schools are automatically relegated to a second-class status.

WHAT ALTERNATIVES TO STANDARDIZED TESTING HAVE BEEN SUGGESTED?

It is reasonable to assume that the demand for test results that can be compared across student populations will remain strong. The critical question is whether such results can be obtained from tests that attempt a more comprehensive assessment of student abilities than the present standardized tests are capable of providing. An ancillary, but equally critical, question is whether such tests are too costly to be widely administered. Suggested alternatives are based on the concept of a "performance-based" assessment. Depending on the subject matter being tested, the performance may consist of demonstrating any of the active skills mentioned above. For example, in the area of writing, drawing, or any of the "artistic expression" skills, it has been suggested that a "portfolio assessment," involving the ongoing evaluation of a cumulative collection of creative works, is the best approach (Wolf 1989). For subjects that require the organization of facts and theories into an integrated and persuasive whole (for example, sciences and social sciences), an assessment modelled after the oral defense required of doctoral candidates has been suggested (Wiggins 1989a).

A third approach, which might be termed the "problem solving model," can be adapted to almost any knowledge-based discipline. It involves the presentation of a problematic scenario that can be resolved only through the application of certain major principles (theories, formulae) that are central to the discipline under examination (Archbald and Newmann 1988).

CAN PERFORMANCE-BASED ASSESSMENTS BE USED TO COMPARE STUDENTS

ACROSS DIFFERENT SETTINGS? Performance-based assessment is more easily scored using a criterion-referenced, rather than a norm-referenced approach. Instead of placing a student's score along a normal distribution of scores from students all taking the same test, a criterion-referenced approach focuses on whether a student's
performance meets a criterion level, normally reflecting mastery of the skills being tested.

How can such an assessment be reliably compared to similar assessments made by other teachers in other settings? It has been suggested that American educators adopt the "exemplary system" being called for in Great Britain. In this system, teachers involved in scoring meet regularly "to compare and balance results on their own and national tests" (Wiggins 1989b), thus increasing reliability across settings. Clearly, however, such an approach (similar to the approach currently in use for the scoring of Advanced Placement essay exams) could be prohibitively expensive if carried out on a large scale. A key question is whether the costs associated with this labor intensive scoring system would be offset by the presumed instructional gains obtained from an assessment model that rewarded a more thorough and holistic approach to instruction.

HAVE THERE BEEN ANY STATEWIDE EFFORTS TO PROVIDE ALTERNATIVES

TO STANDARDIZED TESTING? California has probably made the greatest effort in this direction, beginning in 1987 with its statewide writing test and continuing with its current development of performance-based assessment in science and history (Massey 1989). The Connecticut Assessment of Educational Progress Program uses a variety of performance tasks in its assessment of science, foreign languages, and business education (Baron 1989). (However, this assessment includes only a sample of students at any given grade level, and, in addition, every year there is change in the subjects for which performance tasks are required.) Vermont education officials are currently seeking legislative approval for funds to pursue a portfolio assessment approach in addition to the current standardized testing (Massey 1989).

WHAT IS THE PROGNOSIS FOR A GENERAL SHIFT AWAY FROM

STANDARDIZED TESTING AND TOWARD PERFORMANCE-BASED TESTING? In psychometric terms, the tradeoff in such a shift is to sacrifice reliability for validity. That is, performance-based tests do not lend themselves to a cost- and time-efficient method of scoring that, in addition, provides reliable results. On the other hand, they actually test what the educational system is presumably responsible for teaching, namely, the skills prerequisite for performing in the real world. The additional costs involved in producing reliable results across different settings for performance-based tests are unknown.

The question is whether a majority of educators will echo the sentiments of George Madaus, director of the Center for the Study of Testing, Evaluation, and Educational
Policy, who believes that performance-based testing "is not efficient; it's expensive; it doesn't lend itself to mass testing with quick turnaround time--but it's the way to go" (Brandt 1989).

RESOURCES


This publication was prepared with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract No. OERI R188062004. The ideas and opinions expressed in this Digest do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of OERI, ED, or the Clearinghouse. This Digest is in the public domain and may be freely reproduced.
Title: Alternatives to Standardized Educational Assessment. ERIC Digest Series Number EA 40.

Document Type: Information Analyses---ERIC Information Analysis Products (IAPs) (071); Information Analyses---ERIC Digests (Selected) in Full Text (073);

Available From: Publication Sales, ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, University of Oregon, 1787 Agate Street, Eugene, OR 97403 ($2.50 prepaid postage and handling).


Identifiers: ERIC Digests

###