

ASSESSMENT FOR EXEMPLARY SCHOOLS  
PRODUCTIVE SCHOOL MANAGEMENT

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## ABSTRACT

The 2001 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), also known as the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, has been called the most far-reaching federal education bill in nearly four decades. The law's comprehensive assessment provisions address areas from school choice to low-performing schools and increased accountability. School testing, however, is the area that has drawn most scrutiny from the states. The authors examine reactions to the assessment features of the legislation, considering what both proponents and critics of the legislation say about federally-mandated educational assessment. The document's authors then link comprehensive assessment with school improvement and productive school management.

## Assessment for Exemplary Schools Productive School Management

By: William L. Johnson, Ed.D. & Annabel M. Johnson, Ph.D.

For over two decades, Texas has been a leader among states in the use of standards, testing, and accountability. From the 1984 reforms recommended by the Perot Commission (including the famous “no pass, no play” rule), to the introduction of the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS), to the annual testing of students in nearly all grades in the 1990s and to the introduction of the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) in 2002, Texas has been a model of educational reform.

Former President George W. Bush used the Texas experience to sell the nation on the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation. The 2001 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), also known as the NCLB legislation, has been called the most far-reaching federal education bill in nearly four decades. The law’s comprehensive assessment provisions address many areas, from school choice to low-performing schools to increased accountability. Testing, however, is the area that is drawing much scrutiny from states.

NCLB requires that states adopt accountability systems that set challenging content and performance standards for all students. Specifically, the law required states to administer tests in reading and mathematics in grades 3-8 by the 2005-2006 school year. States also must test students at least once in grades 10-12 in reading and mathematics. Science tests were phased in at least once in grades 3-5, 6-9 and 10-12 by 2007-2008.

States must establish goals for performance on the tests and track performance for all students and subgroups of students, including racial and ethnic groups, students with disabilities, and migrant students. By 2014, all schools are required to reach 100-percent proficiency – that is, all children must pass the state test. Schools that fail to make adequate yearly progress toward this federal goal will face escalating sanctions over time, such as being required to offer school choice, to accept a lesser role in decision-making, to reconstitute school staff, to institute a new curriculum, to extend the school year or school day, or to appoint an outside expert to advise the school.

States must also make sure tests are aligned with the state standards. When reporting test scores, the results must explain how well students are meeting standards (for example, exemplary, recognized, acceptable, or unacceptable). Also, states must disaggregate test scores in several categories including gender, race, ethnicity and migrant status.

The results of mathematics and reading assessments are the primary indicators of whether schools and districts have made “adequate yearly progress.” If a school fails to make adequate progress for two consecutive years, the district must require the school to develop an improvement plan and provide students with the opportunity to attend other schools in the district. Corrective actions continue to mount if a school fails to make progress for a third year and beyond.

Obviously, many school administrators are very displeased with provisions of NCLB. School administrators contend it's one thing to comply with provisions of the Texas Education Code (e.g., Sections 11.252, 28.001, 28.002 and 28.0211); however, it's quite another to impose such restrictive federal legislation. Administrators are especially critical of high-stakes test-based accountability provisions that affect teaching and learning. Administrators contend that when test scores are linked to high-stakes tangible consequences, the tests can weaken the learning experiences of students, transform teaching into test preparation and taint the test itself. Many administrators advocate that schools provide a multitude of opportunities for students to demonstrate their knowledge and skills instead of linking important education decisions to an isolated test score.

It is in this context that the authors will examine the positive and negative contentions related to high-stakes assessment. We will then offer recommendations pertaining to assessment for exemplary schools.

### What's Good About Assessment

The idea of educational accountability and assessment promised high educational standards and a common equitable curriculum for all students, tests that measured progress toward the standards, special attention for children struggling to reach the standards, instructional materials and professional development based on the curriculum (bringing the quality of our educational system in line with those of other high-achieving countries), and an accountability system that targeted resources and attention where they were most needed. Schools that are unhampered by public standards and accountability can act neglectfully, especially toward the least advantaged. Assessment has come about at the state and federal levels because some schools have not really been educating students properly. Therefore, assessment provides a systematic way to guarantee that what's known about good instruction gets to all schools. Also, the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) ratings in NCLB will identify schools that are failing and not doing their job of educating students.

Furthermore, consider the following that argues for genuine assessment. Unlike past industrial and agrarian eras in the United States, the ability to create wealth meant that one moved to the areas of the country that had those raw resources (agrarian- land, water, cattle, children; industrial – labor, fuel, timber, water, minerals). But now that we're in a knowledge-based economy, it takes 20 years to educate students. Schools that don't do their jobs and provide an excellent education for their students will become poorer economically. The students will move away and not come back to their communities because there won't be jobs. Real estate values will fall. Recent statistics indicate that the top 10% of taxpayers pay 70% of federal income taxes, while the bottom 50% of taxpayers pay 3.9% of federal taxes. The bottom 37% of taxpayers pay no federal taxes. When that top 10% of taxpayers move out of a community, the ability of the community to fund schools drops significantly.

At the international level, our schools are falling behind other developed nations in responding to the escalating skill requirements of the knowledge economy. America used to lead the world in the percentage of students completing high school, but we now lag behind. And

while other countries, even much poorer countries, are rapidly expanding who is graduating, they are also outpacing us in learning gains as their students advance through the educational system. Our youngest students look good when compared with their counterparts in other countries, but fare comparatively worse as they progress from elementary school through high school. In math and science, our 4<sup>th</sup> graders are among the top students in the world. By 8<sup>th</sup> grade, they are in the middle of the pack. By 12<sup>th</sup> grade, U.S. students are scoring near the bottom of all industrialized nations.

Meanwhile, no other developed country allows family wealth to be more predictive of educational achievement than America. Achievement gaps separating low-income and minority students from others were shrinking in the 1970s but have stopped shrinking or have grown wider since 1988. By the end of high school, African American and Latino students have approximately the same reading and math skills as white students at the end of middle school. Studies show students must have at least a 9<sup>th</sup> grade reading level to “break out of poverty”.

But these achievement gaps are not inevitable. Many Texas public school districts are teaching low-income and minority students at high standards. What remains is to make that level of quality the rule for all students. As a starting point, we have to acknowledge that American public education generally needs to improve and that we need to do a better job educating low-income and minority students in particular. These statistics illustrate how critical educational accountability and assessment are for our schools.

### What Critics Say About Assessment

In spite of the many positive comments about the need for high-stakes testing and assessment, there are critics in abundance. In our review of the assessment literature, we found many more articles critical of high-stakes testing and assessment as contrasted with articles supportive of such.

Critics generally agree that reforms in education have helped to raise reading achievement among the nation’s children in the primary grades. But many children are not moving beyond basic decoding skills (deciphering words and sounding them out) to fluency and comprehension, even as they advance to the 4<sup>th</sup> grade and beyond to tougher classes in history, mathematics and science. This trend is especially troubling because today’s adolescents (defined as students in the 4<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grades) are facing a job market that demands high literacy and critical-thinking skills.

Critics argue that simply mandating standards and conducting testing will not guarantee success. They argue that high scores, not high standards, have become the Holy Grail. They also note that excessive emphasis on testing can lead to low teacher morale, a narrowed curricular focus, teaching the test, meaningless drill, wasted time, demotivating students, less engaging teaching, decreased student motivation, decreased accountability, a diminished sense of professionalism among teachers and unethical placement practices. They note we are not holding the teaching profession accountable for learning but only for achievement on high-stakes tests. Furthermore, the home still accounts for more variance in achievement scores at the elementary school level than does the school itself. Is it fair to hold teachers solely accountable

for student achievement when they don't control approximately 50% of the variance in student's achievement? Shouldn't students themselves bear greater accountability for their academic achievement?

Critics of NCLB maintain that the AYP measure of schools' performance under NCLB does not really identify schools in need of improvement. For one thing, the AYP measure doesn't really measure progress. AYP is about meeting fixed achievement targets at a given grade level, not judging whether a school has made progress with its students. Schools can be making great gains yet fail to make predetermined AYP targets. Other schools can have declining achievement yet still meet their AYP targets.

There are also problems with the criteria for "highly qualified" educators under federal law. For example, Governor Perry with the aid of his appointees at the State Board for Educator Certification, chose to lower state certification standards by creating a certification bypass rather than provide the necessary resources to attract and retain educators who are truly highly qualified. Nationally, about 30% of new teachers leave teaching by the end of their 3<sup>rd</sup> year of teaching, and more than 45% leave after five years. In Texas, 19% of beginning teachers are gone after one year of teaching, and 43% are gone after three years. The estimated cost to Texas is over \$1.6 billion annually. Reasons given for leaving include low salaries and benefits, conditions in the school and classroom, and inadequate preparation socially, professionally and emotionally. The teacher turnover is greatest in Title I schools.

An extensive study titled, "High-Stakes Testing and Student Achievement: Problems for the No Child Left Behind Act," was published by the Education Policy Studies Laboratory at Arizona State University (Nichols, Glass & Berliner, 2005). The study showed that high-stakes testing in Texas and across the nation has had little impact on student achievement and is disproportionately targeting minority students, as evidenced by increased retention and dropout rates. The study, which examined the impact of high-stakes testing in Texas and 24 other states, found "no convincing evidence" that the sanctions associated with high-stakes testing produced better student achievement than would otherwise have been expected.

The study challenged the logic of holding students and educators accountable for learning citing various studies (Klein, Hamilton, McCaffrey & Stecher, 2000). Overall, the study by Nichols, Glass & Berliner (2005), faulted high-stakes testing spun off from the passage of the NCLB federal legislation and concluded there was no convincing evidence that the pressure associated with high-stakes testing led to any important benefits for student achievement. These studies essentially called for a moratorium on politics that force the public education system to rely on high-stakes testing.

Noting both the positive and negative positions regarding assessment, it is evident both sides of the debate are very vocal. Expect more research, challenges and changes to the NCLB legislation. Given the fact that assessment is here to stay, the authors will now present ideas pertaining to "how to proceed with assessment for exemplary schools."

## Proceeding With Productivity Assessment

### State Law and Comprehensive Assessment

Section 11.252 of TEC also states that the district improvement plan must include provisions for a comprehensive needs assessment, measurable district performance objectives, strategies for improvement of student performance, resources needed to implement identified strategies, staff responsible for ensuring the accomplishment of each strategy, timelines for ongoing monitoring of the implementation of each improvement strategy, and formative evaluation criteria for determining periodically whether strategies are resulting in intended improvement of student performance. The State Board of Education developed new rules for state compensatory education in response to the new legislation as evidenced in 19 TAC Chapter 109, Subchapter (b): “Each district shall ensure that supplemental direct costs and personnel attributed to compensatory education and accelerated instruction are identified in district and/or campus improvement.”

The heart of this legislation is meaningful comprehensive assessment. In exemplary schools, assessment is a balanced, seamless and ongoing process that focuses on what students need to know and be able to do. The assessment system provides direction for continuous improvement, effective teaching and learning and the establishment of a positive school culture and climate.

### Assessing School Culture

Our research shows that building and nurturing a positive school culture and climate is one of the most important factors in enhancing student motivation and in turn increasing student achievement. Getting the culture right should always precede programs to raise student achievement. In many schools, this has not been the case. Researchers agree that school culture is a critical missing component of school improvement (Levine & Lezotte, 1995; Peterson & Deal, 1998; Sizer, 1988).

The school research literature indicates that a strong, healthy culture has positive effects on student learning and motivation, as well as teacher satisfaction and productivity. Sergiovanni (2000) wrote of a “lifeworld” or those parts of a school which create school culture. This is contrasted with the “systemsworld” or the management systems of a school. Sergiovanni wrote that both worlds are needed and should support each other. “When social organizations are functioning properly the lifeworld occupies the center position...”(p.6). In other words, the school culture must be the infrastructure for actualizing the goals of the school. Sergiovanni concluded that an analysis of the school culture, whether in-depth or as a cursory preview of need, was essential for all schools as they strove to improve and bring about meaningful change.

School administrators need to assess their school cultures (or climates), then proceed to draft a mission statement and school goals. As we noted before, in many cases this approach has not been used. Some schools have limited school culture assessment data from which to draft their mission statements, policies, school goals and decision-making processes. The result will be governance problems and failures in communication.

## State Assessment Data

Following the assessment of school culture or climate, next comes the challenge of providing high academic standards and standards of the heart. The Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS) report is the heart of assessing the academic strengths and weaknesses of the students and implementing intervention strategies. The school improvement process is based on five questions:

- Where are we now?
- What is our target?
- How will we get there?
- How will we know we're on target?  
What will we do if we're not?
- How will we continue to sustain our efforts?

The AEIS report and additional local achievement and behavior data will help create a process for school improvement efforts. Inherent in this process will be standards, data analysis, continuous school improvement, the best practices/effective school literature, and the numerous other school goals related to the findings of the assessment process.

## Assessment and Effective Schools

This discussion leads to another point. For over two decades, many Texas school districts have relied on the effective schools research as a framework for managing and improving their schools. These correlates are: shared vision and purpose; a safe and orderly environment; instructional leadership; high expectations for students; student time on task; monitoring student progress; and positive home-school relations. For those schools that have implemented the first generation correlates, the second generation correlates represent a step beyond the first generation correlates (Johnson, Johnson & Gilliam, 2003).

The place for districts to begin is to distribute surveys to collect vital information about their school culture that correlates with school achievement. The findings of the surveys and AEIS reports will serve as a springboard for school-planning processes. Following are areas that surveys and AEIS would address: school culture; performance management systems; continuous improvement; curriculum alignment; teacher quality and professional development; extended learning opportunities; advanced coursework; family involvement; student attendance and dropout rate; student education and employment plans; and school facilities. These practices directly impact student achievement. The complexity of these areas to be assessed illustrates that school assessment, setting measurable school goals and devising plans to accomplish those goals will likely be the most positive and most difficult tasks schools will face.



## Summary and Conclusion

In this document, the authors have reexamined state law regarding assessment and looked at the comments of those supporting school assessment and those critical of state and federal legislation mandating school assessment. We examined how to proceed with productive school assessment. We also considered the assessment process mandated by state law and the correlates of effective schools. We emphasized that schools and school districts alike should begin the school improvement process by conducting surveys, collecting data and then asking the following questions:

- What is our vision/mission?
- What are our goals?
- Who are our customers?
- What do our customers value?
- What have been the results of our previous endeavors?
- What is our plan for addressing our school-and-student needs?

We emphasized that setting measurable school goals and devising plans to accomplish those goals will likely be the most positive and the most difficult tasks schools will face. However, all that districts desire to accomplish is possible if there is the will to act on the ideas discussed in this document.

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