

Alternatives to Annual High-Stakes Standardized Testing

Statewide high-stakes assessments required by No Child Left Behind provide little value for the improvement of instructional practice.

- ▶ While NCLB-mandated tests have changed curriculum and instruction, they have done so by narrowing the scope of what is taught, for teachers shift time and attention to those topics that are covered in the assessments.¹ In addition, statewide tests only assess a small portion of the curriculum, further constricting the breadth of material to which students are exposed.²
- ▶ Standardized achievement tests are designed to provide general information about student performance, but lack the depth of information required to inform instructional practice.³ Specifically, most statewide assessment items are aligned with state standards, but the assessments do not describe what students must know and be able to do to master the skills associated with each standard. As a result, teachers receive little useful information to help them adjust instruction to increase student performance.
- ▶ Most statewide assessments are given to students at the end of the school year and data from those tests are not released until the academic year is over. As a result, these assessments cannot be used to support student learning.

Educational experts and researchers have proposed alternative approaches to standardized high-stakes assessment for more than a decade.

- ▶ In 2001, the NEA and four other education organizations convened the Commission on Instructionally Supportive Assessment to address the lack of useful information in statewide high-stakes tests. The commission developed nine requirements for instructionally supportive statewide assessments.⁴
- ▶ In keeping with the the American Educational Research Association's assertion that high-stakes decisions should not be made on the basis of a single test,⁵ a number of experts suggest the use of a "network of assessments," or multiple measures to assess student learning, including formative assessments, site visits, observations, end-of-course examinations, and portfolios.⁶
- ▶ Others suggest the use of performance assessments to enable schools to focus their instruction on higher order skills, provide more accurate measures of what students know and can do, facilitate deeper student engagement in learning, and provide more timely feedback to teachers, parents, and students in order to make appropriate adjustments to instruction.⁷

A number of examples of alternative testing methods and practices currently exist.

- ▶ Given the limitations of high-stakes tests for assessing student learning and informing classroom instruction, some schools have developed assessment frameworks to collect information about student skills and understanding that cannot be obtained by administering traditional standardized achievement tests. Examples of successfully implemented alternative assessment frameworks follow.
 - The **New York Performance Standards Consortium** is a cluster of 28 public high schools that rely on project-based learning as the foundation for the curriculum and use "practitioner-designed, student-focused" assessments. Four required performance-based assessment tasks (PBATs) allow students to express what they have learned in multiple ways by: 1) analyzing a piece of literature, 2) using mathematical principles to solve a problem, 3) writing an analytical paper organized around an historical idea or principle, and 4) conducting an original scientific experiment and then writing a research paper based on the study. Students defend all written work orally and the work is reviewed by an external expert panel. Schools may choose supplemental PBATs to assess student learning in the arts, arts criticism, and foreign languages. Internships are viewed as a vital part of student learning and are assessed via student presentation. Educators and external experts use rubrics as guides to determine the quality of students' work.⁸
 - The **Learning Record** provides a framework for documenting student achievement through the use of multiple measures that include caregiver interviews, observations, and samples of student work across five dimensions: 1) confidence and independence, 2) knowledge and understanding, 3) skills and strategies, 4) use of prior and emerging experience, and 5) critical reflection. Teachers assess student progress toward agreed-upon goals by collecting evidence that demonstrates what students know and can do in a variety of activities.⁹
 - The **Work Sampling System (WSS)** is designed for use with children in prekindergarten through 3rd grade and employs observations to measure progress across seven content areas: 1) language and literacy, 2) mathematical thinking, 3) scientific thinking, 4) the arts, 5) social studies, 6) personal and social development, and 7) physical

development. The WSS has been researched extensively, has been deemed both valid and reliable, and is already used by a number of school districts across the nation.¹⁰

Preliminary evidence suggests that schools that emphasize and assess deeper learning skills provide important benefits to students.

- ▶ One study of the New York Performance Standards Consortium, for example, suggests that students who attend Consortium schools are less likely than other NYC public school students to be suspended from school, and are more likely to graduate, enroll in college, and complete a college degree. In addition, early-career teachers in Consortium schools have lower rates of turnover than teachers in other NYC public schools.¹¹

¹ The Commission on Instructionally Supportive Assessment. (2001, October) *Building Tests That Support Instruction and Accountability: A Guide for Policymakers*. Retrieved February 18, 2015 from <http://www.testaccountability.org/>

² David, J. L. (2011, March). Research says.../High-stakes testing narrows the curriculum. *Educational Leadership*, 68(6), 78-80.

³ Supovitz, J. (2010). *Is High Stakes Testing Working?* Retrieved February 3, 2015 from <http://www.gse.upenn.edu/review/feature/supovitz>

⁴ The Commission on Instructionally Supportive Assessment. (2001, October) *Building Tests That Support Instruction and Accountability: A Guide for Policymakers*. Retrieved February 18, 2015 from <http://www.testaccountability.org/>

⁵ American Educational Research Association (2000, July). *Position on High-Stakes Testing in Pre-K-12 Education*. Retrieved February 24, 2015 from

<http://www.aera.net/AboutAERA/AERARulesPolicies/AERAPolicyStatements/PositionStatementonHighStakesTesting/tabid/11083/Default.aspx>

⁶ Nichols, S.L. & Berliner, D.C. (2007). *Collateral Damage: How High-Stakes Testing Corrupts America's Schools*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

⁷ Wood, G. H., Darling-Hammond, L. Neill, M., Roschewski, P. (2007, May). *Refocusing Accountability: Using Local Performance Assessments to Enhance Teaching and Learning for Higher Order Skills*. Retrieved on February 26, 2015 from <http://www.fairtest.org/refocusing-accountability-using-local-performance>.

⁸ Performance Standards Consortium (unknown). *Educating for the 21st Century: Data Report on the New York Performance Standards Consortium*. New York, NY. Retrieved February 24, 2015 from http://performanceassessment.org/articles/DataReport_NY_PSC.pdf

⁹ Barr, M. & Syverson, M. A. (2014). *What is the Learning Record?* Retrieved February 24, 2015 from <http://www.learningrecord.org/intro.html>

¹⁰ Meisels, S. J., Marsden, D. B., Jablon, J. R. & Dichtelmiller, M. (2013, July). *The Work Sampling System, 5th ed.* Washington, DC: Pearson Education.

¹¹ Performance Standards Consortium (unknown). *Educating for the 21st Century: Data Report on the New York Performance Standards Consortium*. New York, NY. Retrieved February 24, 2015 from http://performanceassessment.org/articles/DataReport_NY_PSC.pdf