THE Center for Education Reform

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THE NEW GENERATION OF STANDARDIZED TESTING

High-stakes testing is one of the hottest topics in education today. Although most states use some form of testing, fewer than half administer tests linked to state education standards and goals, often called criterion referenced tests. Fewer still use statewide tests with high stakes for both the students enrolled in public schools and the public schools themselves. But in states that have adopted high-stakes testing, the results show that many students fail to meet basic, minimum standards for their grade level.

WHY TEST?

The standardized tests of the last ten years are unlike what most schools and students have been required to take before. One exception is the New York Regents Exam, which through the 1970s was required of every college-bound student to pass to receive a Regents diploma from any New York high school. The Regents tested in every subject and had significantly high standards. To receive a Regents diploma from New York State really meant that the student had mastered his or her school lessons. Then the Regents in 1979 became optional, eventually were watered down, and lost their appeal. In 1997, the Regents were resurrected, such that this year, all New York State high school students were required to pass the Regents English Exam in order to graduate. Next year's graduating class will also be required to pass the Regents Math Exam. Additional Regents Exams in American History, Global Studies, and Science will be phased in over time so that, by 2003, students will be required to pass a total of five Regents Exams.

So too is the case in more than a dozen states, where standards have been written and tests (or assessments as they're typically called) have been created or purchased to measure whether children know and are able to do what is required in the standards.

These tests are typically given in intervals of 3 or 4 years. Normally, they begin in 3rd and 4th, at which time it is believed a child should be able to demonstrate proficiency in the basics. Later, students are tested in 8th and then again in 10th or 11th or as a graduation requirement.

TYPES OF TESTS

Typically when one thinks of standardized testing, they think of the norm-referenced test. Norm-referenced tests are the most common and most comparable across district and state lines and include the *Stanford Assessment Test- 9th version* (SAT-

9), *Iowa Test of Basic Skills* (ITBS), *California Test of Basic Skills* (CTBS*), California Achievement Test* (CAT), and the *Terra Nova*. These tests offer a snapshot of how both the school and child perform on basic skills as compared to other schools and students nationwide. Because the student is ranked in relation to the performance of other students, these tests are limited in assessing the extent to which a student meets or falls short of a set standard. For example, a 70th percentile on a norm-referenced test means the student performed better than 70 percent of those tested, not that the child answered 70 percent of the questions correctly.

The new generation of tests are aligned to state standards and are known as criterion or standards-referenced tests. Unlike the norm-referenced tests, they are designed to measure how much of the content, item by item, a student has actually learned. With the ongoing development of state standards, these tests are an important accountability measure.

There are currently 20 states offering tests linked to established state standards in at least three grades, 14 of those have published their results for the 1999-2000 school year. Scores for those states are in the appendix of this paper, and the results say much about public education in their respective states.

For example, a review of students' test scores can tell us much about the progress of students relative to the education goals set by the states. These test scores also allow us to evaluate the effectiveness of teachers and the pedagogical methods they employ, the overall performance of schools, and the abilities of administrators to provide a high quality education to students enrolled at the schools they supervise. Over time, trends in test scores reveal how much progress schools have made in their efforts to maintain high scores or raise inadequate scores. When competition and innovation are introduced into a school district, test score trends can provide an objective means of evaluating the success or failure of the new programs.

WHY IS TESTING SO CONTROVERSIAL?

Despite strong public support, testing has received increasing criticism in recent months. As the transition from pilot tests to tests that count has occurred, many parents, teachers, and administrators in states like Virginia and Florida responded by criticizing the tests. Much of the criticism has centered around the insistence that students demonstrate their knowledge in a concrete manner, as well as requiring that teachers teach to the educational standards of their state instead of being free to pursue other areas whenever and however they choose. Testing has been blamed for poor teaching methodologies, creating incentives for cheating, and driving teachers out of the profession.

This is changing. The more information the public has about the quality of schools nationally and in their own backyard, the more intense their support for accountability becomes. According to The Center for Education Reform's *National Survey of American's Attitudes Toward Education and School Reform*, more than three-quarters of all Americans overwhelmingly feel our children are not receiving the education they need. National and international test results support this predominant view:

- The U.S. placed 19th out of 21 industrialized nations in math and 16th in science on the 1995 Third International Math and Science Study (TIMSS).

- The 1998 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores show that only 7 percent of 4th grade students read at the advanced level, 31 percent are proficient readers, and a whopping 62 percent of 4th grade students only read at the basic and below basic level- a skill they should have mastered by the end of first grade.

A *Public Agenda* survey found 73 percent of professors of higher education surveyed and 63 percent of employers believe a high school diploma is "no guarantee that the typical student has learned the basics." In a September 1999 Kaiser Family Foundation study, 69 percent of respondents said standardized tests should be used to determine student promotion or graduation. A *Public Agenda* poll two months later indicated that 79 percent of parents and 60 percent of teachers also favored high-stakes testing.

According to a report sponsored in part by The Center for Education Reform, 15 years after *A Nation at Risk* was released, ten million students have reached the senior level of high school without having learned to read at even a basic level. Over 20 million high school students cannot do basic math, and over 25 million high school seniors don't know the essentials of U.S. history. And yet most people reasonably expect that our children will not be passed on to the next level without gaining the knowledge and skills needed to succeed.

Thus the concept of testing to gauge student achievement has evolved to help redirect energies and programs, and to provide the critical benchmarks that students, parents and schools need to reach in order to know they have succeeded. These tests help identify weaknesses and forge effective strategies to help children learn. What makes the new breed of tests important is that they are aligned to state standards and have real consequences.

Americans want good public schools, as evidenced by the polls and the fact that even the presidential candidates are addressing education as issue number one. But the public's faith in the ability of public schools to deliver a quality education has been shaken by poor student performance as measured by state, national, and international tests.

Teachers, school administrators, and others who oppose testing must work harder to educate our children and we must continue to insist on objective measures to evaluate our public schools. Abandoning the tests that expose the shortcomings of public schools will not solve the problems in public education. Only by improving schools and using tests to measure the progress of improvement will we be able to provide our children with the educational opportunity essential to success in life.

THE SCORES

The following is what we know about achievement in the 19 states that test students in at least three grades and have released their latest statewide scores.

Together, these scores offer a baseline of student progress towards meeting their state's educational standards.

Of these 19 states, ten hold students to those standards by creating rewards or consequences for student or school failure: Florida, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Missouri, New York, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Texas, and Vermont. In Texas, for example, low-performing students risk mandatory summer school, being held back, or being unable to graduate. Meanwhile, in Florida, low-performing schools risk being reorganized or closed by the state, as well as losing their students, who consequently become eligible to receive Opportunity Scholarships to attend a public or private school of their own choosing.

It is worth noting that some states with tests but without a high-stakes plan to implement the high-stakes component to their tests in the coming years (Virginia will attach high stakes for students in the class of 2004, and for schools in 2007). Still more states, including South Carolina and Tennessee, are developing standards-based tests and their students will be seeing them soon.

While it's important to keep in mind that the quality and rigor of each test can vary from state to state, the evidence suggests that these tests are not excessively difficult and primarily measure the acquisition of basic skills and knowledge appropriate to each grade level.

Following is a listing of scores for the 1999-2000 school year. At the time this paper was written, some states had not yet released their 1999-2000 scores. We have noted when this is the case, and provide the latest scores available. In the case of New Jersey, a high stakes testing state, the scores for the latest round of tests will not be available until December 2000, and previous statewide scores were unavailable at the time this paper was written.

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THE 1999-2000 SCHOOL YEAR SCORES

The Scores listed below indicate the percentage of students who meet or exceed state standards.

Colorado
Colorado Standard Assessment Program (CSAP)

Grades*	Math	Reading
3	N/A	69 percent
4/5	47 percent**	62 percent
7/8	33 percent	58 percent

*Colorado most recently tested the 5th and 8th grades in math and the 3rd, 4th, and 7th grades in reading.
**Colorado last tested 5th graders in math during the 1998-99 school year.

Connecticut
Connecticut Mastery Test (CMT)

Grades	Math	Reading
4	64 percent	56 percent
6	55 percent	66 percent
8	59 percent	68 percent

Delaware
Delaware Student Testing Program (DSTP)

Grades	Math	Reading
3	73 percent	77 percent
5	62 percent	69 percent
8	41 percent	67 percent
10	36 percent	61 percent

Florida
Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT)*

Grades	Math	Reading
4/5**	22 percent	23 percent
8	23 percent	12 percent
10	28 percent	10 percent

*The percentages above represent the students who have attained the **Performance Level** of **4**, indicating "success with the challenging content of the Sunshine State Standards," or better.
**Florida tests 4th Graders in reading and 5th Graders in math.

Georgia
Criterion-Referenced Competency Test (CRCT)

Grades	Math	Reading
4	62 percent	65 percent
6	66 percent	71 percent
8	54 percent	75 percent

Maine
Maine Educational Assessment (MEA)

Grades	Math*	Reading
4	23 percent	49 percent
8	22 percent	44 percent
11	21 percent	51 percent

*All math scores listed are for the 1998-99 school year, as Maine did not test students in math during the 1999-2000 school year.

Maryland
Maryland School Performance Assessment Program (MSPAP)*

Grades	Math	Reading
3	39 percent	41 percent
5	46 percent	41 percent
8	49 percent	25 percent

*Scores listed are for the 1998-99 school year. The 1999-2000 scores will be released in December 2000.

Massachusetts
Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS)*

Grades	Math	Reading
4	36 percent	21 percent
8	28 percent	56 percent
10	24 percent	34 percent

*Scores listed are for the 1998-99 school year. The 1999-2000 scores will be released in October 2000.

Michigan
Michigan Education Assessment Program (MEAP)*

Grades	Math	Reading
4	75 percent	58 percent
7	63 percent	48 percent
11*	64 percent	67 percent

*Scores listed for 11th graders are for the 1998-99 school year. The 1999-2000 scores will be released in October 2000.

Missouri
Missouri Assessment Program (MAP)

Grades	Math	Reading
4/3*	37 percent	32 percent
8/7*	14 percent	32 percent
10/11*	10 percent	23 percent

*Missouri tests math in grades 4, 8, 10 and reading in grades 3, 7, 11.

New York
New York State Assessment Program*

Grades	Math	Reading
4	50 percent	33 percent
8	23 percent	N/A
11	81 percent	82 percent

*Scores listed are for the 1998-99 school year. The 1999-2000 scores will be released in September 2000.

North Carolina
[*Grade School*] End of Grade (EOG)*& [*High School*] End of Course (EOC)*

Grades	Math	Reading
4	83 percent	71 percent
8	73 percent	80 percent
10	61 percent	61 percent

*Scores listed are for the 1998-99 school year. The 1999-2000 scores will be released in September 2000.

Oklahoma
Oklahoma Core Curriculum Test (OCCT)

Grades	Math	Reading
5	85 percent	76 percent
8	71 percent	77 percent
11*	60 percent	75 percent

*Scores listed for 11th grades are from the 1998-99 school year. Oklahoma will implement a new 11th grade test, the End of Instruction test, in the 2000-01 school year.

Oregon
Oregon Statewide Assessment Program (OSAP)

Grades	Math	Reading
3	75 percent	82 percent
5	70 percent	73 percent
8	56 percent	60 percent
10	40 percent	51 percent

Texas
Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS)

Grades	Math	Reading
4	87 percent	90 percent
8	90 percent	89 percent
10	86 percent	90 percent

Vermont
Vermont Comprehensive Assessment System (VCAS)*

Grades	Math	Reading
4	47 percent	77 percent
8	46 percent	47 percent
10	38 percent	45 percent

*Scores listed are for the 1998-99 school year. The 1999-2000 scores will be released in September 2000.

Virginia
Standards of Learning (SOL)

Grades	Math	Reading
3	71 percent	61 percent
5	63 percent	68 percent
8	61 percent	70 percent
High School	65 percent*	78 percent

*Algebra I scores only

Washington
Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL)

Grades	Math	Reading
4	42 percent	66 percent
7	28 percent	42 percent
10	35 percent	60 percent

Wyoming
Wyoming Comprehensive Assessment System (WYCAS)

Grades	Math	Reading
4	27 percent	38 percent
8	32 percent	37 percent
11	37 percent	44 percent