Why Tests and Standards Can't Solve School Problems

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Tests, standards and accountability are being advocated as the solution to the problems of public school education. Those are such good words; why can't they do the job?
The testing system has been corrupted. Under the 1997 revision of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the school must give "appropriate accommodations" on every test to all "children with disabilities."

Accommodation means that the child can be given assistance by someone who can read the test questions to him, explain to him what was read, and even write the answers for him. An 8th grade reading test is ridiculous if the student can't read it himself.

In the settlement of a lawsuit this month, Oregon pledged to "broaden the current list of allowable accommodations" and allow learning disabled students to use spell-check software on their writing tests. Educators predict that this settlement will become a blueprint for other states to follow.

Allowing the schools or the states to assist learning disabled students, or even exclude them entirely, provides an open door to finagling the test results, and the states have figured out how to work this racket. Since schools receive additional federal money for every child labeled learning disabled, there is a financial incentive to increase the numbers.

The high stakes involved in test results virtually mandate that teachers will be required to "teach to the test." Teaching to the test means teaching only the small percentage of material that will actually be covered on the test.

Traditional teaching, on the other hand, involves presenting a considerable quantity of information to the students and then testing their knowledge by asking questions on items randomly selected from the total material. When test-taking takes priority over learning, this dumbs down education because a narrower body of knowledge is taught.

Teaching to the test contains built-in incentives to fraud since teachers' salaries, bonuses and jobs, the school's funding and even its existence, and the student's chance to go to college or get a job, are already being tied to performance on these "high-stakes tests." Some teachers have already been put through workshops conducted by state bureaucrats to train them in which items to focus on so their students will perform well.

Tests are now called assessments, which is a semantic clue to the large element of subjectivity that has invaded the questions and the scoring. The most commonly understood meaning of the word assessment is the tax-collector's assessment of our property, and we all know how subjective that can be.

Some of the answers are not right or wrong, true or false, and are scored by temporary workers who get rewarded for speed. More and more tests are burdened with the liberal/feminist dogmas called Political Correctness.

One Michigan test required students to write an argument for or against sending women into military combat. That topic will inevitably be scored on attitudes and values rather than on composition, grammar or spelling.

One National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) test contains three questions that ascribe unworthy motives to the white settlers who came to America, three questions that measure the student's support of radical environmentalism, and a question instructing students to write a letter to their U.S. Senators telling them which government programs the student wants funded.

Nationally, tests are planned to be given only in reading and math. This means that English, science and history will be given short shrift or even omitted, since tests will be all that matters in evaluating teachers and schools.

When it comes to the standards to which the assessments are tied, have we so quickly forgotten the uproar about the federally funded National History Standards of 1995 which omitted or downgraded some of America's greatest achievers and used obscure and third-rate figures to teach diversity revisionism? Those standards were so anti-American they were denounced by the U.S. Senate in a vote of 99 to 1.

Have we so quickly forgotten the national math standards, which were denounced by 200 prestigious mathematicians, including four Nobel Laureates, because they failed to teach basic skills? Their criticisms were published in a full-page ad in the November 18, 1999 Washington Post, but that had no effect on the U.S. Department of Education's determination to induce schools to adopt fuzzy math curricula.

Then there is the announced goal called accountability, a word that cries out to be followed by a preposition and an object. Accountability has no meaning unless one is accountable to someone or something.

It appears that the plan is to make the schools accountable to the U.S. Departments of Education and Labor. But what parents want is accountability to parents and local school boards, not to a federal or state agency.

The stated goal of the new proposals is to "narrow the achievement gap." Let's remember that the gap can be closed by bringing top and bottom together, not necessarily by raising the bottom to a higher level of achievement.