

FairTest

National Center for Fair & Open Testing

A Better System for Evaluating Students and Schools

Polls show that most Americans agree we need a better way to assess students and evaluate schools. The question is, what should we do? Any new system must provide reasonable accountability and include assessments that support high-quality learning and school improvement. It must get us out of the downward spiral of producing a nation of children who mostly learn how to fill in bubbles on multiple-choice tests.

FairTest and our allies propose a healthy assessment and evaluation system that would include three key components: limited large-scale standardized testing, extensive school-based evidence of learning, and a school quality review (SQR) process.

Large-scale tests. Many nations with better and more equal education outcomes test only one, two or three times before high school graduation and largely avoid multiple-choice questions. Better tests would help, but based on criteria set by the Department of Education, the next batch – to be developed by multi-state consortia – aren't likely to be much better. And we'd still waste time and money testing too many grades. Congress should require statewide tests once each in elementary, middle and high school. States could cut back to what many did before NCLB, when school improvement was faster than it is now.

Local and classroom evidence of learning. If you want to find out what kids know and can do, look at their actual work. This is what many other countries do. By focusing on the classroom, we can assess important learning standardized tests cannot, such as research projects, oral presentations, essays, problem solving and using computers in real situations. This enables us to evaluate higher-order thinking skills and deeper knowledge than do standardized tests. High-quality assessment improves teaching and learning.

Building the system on local evidence means trusting teachers. Some need to improve how well they assess, so ensuring teachers can work and learn together is important. This is what high-performing nations have done.

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To ensure quality, some other countries have systems where samples of student work from each classroom are re-scored by independent people to verify a teacher's initial score ("moderation"). This has been done well enough to ensure local quality and provide comparability across a state. Schools would explain their results in an annual report.

School quality reviews (SQR). The SQR is the central tool for school evaluation in places such as England and New Zealand. Instead of test results, their systems focus on a comprehensive school review by a team of qualified professionals every 4-5 years. This leads to a report describing the school and recommending actions for improvement. Schools that need extra help would be reviewed more frequently.

Countries with a more balanced, comprehensive, improvement-focused assessment and evaluation system produce better educational results with fewer harmful side effects than does the U.S. (See FairTest fact sheet, Multiple Measures). In FairTest's proposal, the core of the system is local evidence. This is cross-checked and verified by limited statewide testing and periodic school quality reviews. It is a system that trusts but verifies, that enables comprehensive reviews, that combines quantitative and qualitative information, and that frees and supports educators to do their jobs well while holding them accountable in a fair way. Our nation would get better assessment, adequate comparability, helpful accountability, and stronger guidance for improvement efforts. These changes will help all schools, especially those serving mainly low-income children since those schools are now most likely to narrowly focus on standardized tests.

Real school reform requires a lot more than assessment and accountability. But without healthy assessment and evaluation, the reform enterprise will fail again.

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- Published on The Answer Sheet blog, June 24, 2010, <http://voices.washingtonpost.com/answer-sheet/standardized-tests/a-better-way-to-evaluate-stude.html>.
 - A more detailed version of this article is available at <http://www.fairtest.org/better-way-assess-students-and-evaluate-schools>.
 - The idea of a three-part evaluation system was developed by the Massachusetts Coalition for Authentic Reform in Education, of which FairTest was a part; see <http://www.fairtest.org/call-authentic-state-wide-assessment-system>.
 - See also related FairTest fact sheets on the web at <http://www.fairtest.org/fact+sheets>.