

Test knowledge, not thoughts

Political correctness threatens national standards

By Robert Holland and Don Soifer

Standards mean little without assessments. High-stakes testing will drive the national curriculum.

Parents might well prefer that assessments objectively measure their children's factual knowledge while also showing how their schools stack up against comparable schools by tracking individual student growth on standardized test scores.

But every indication is that America's families stand to receive something far different. Kids in every state adopting the national standards and national test will be subjectively scored by teams of anonymous evaluators on how they respond to open-ended questions with any number of real right or wrong answers.

Multicultural activists will be pleased, even if everyday parents probably won't be. For decades, they have been advocating replacement of fact-based multiple-choice testing with an evaluation of students' cultural competence and commitment to global world views.

While the standards-writing consortium was advertised to be a state-led voluntary effort, high-powered and politically driven policymakers already are laying the groundwork for what they are touting as "next-generation assessment systems," which, they assert, will be an authentic gauge of student ability to work in teams and solve real-world problems.

The 800-pound gorilla

The federal government is rapidly becoming the dominant force in this drive toward a national curriculum.

After promising states an edge in winning a slice of the \$4.35 billion Race to the Top fund if they signed on to Common Core standards, President Obama recently said he now wants to require

states to adopt these standards as a condition for receiving aid from Title I. That \$14.5 billion program is the centerpiece of the No Child Left Behind/Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Recently, Obama released a blueprint for his hoped-for 2010 congressional reauthorization of ESEA.

Next, the Obama administration has committed another \$350 million to produce the national test linked to those standards. A major first step came when the Council of Chief State School Officers and National Governors Association—the organizers of the Common Core standards push—unveiled a paper by Stanford University education professor Linda Darling-Hammond laying out the vision for the new assessment.

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Linda Darling-Hammond

Darling-Hammond, candidate Obama's highest profile education adviser and also a leading critic of standardized testing, described a vision for American public education by which "high-achieving [school] systems seek to implement their standards with assessments that measure performance in authentic ways and with intensive teacher engagement throughout the assessment process, as teachers work with others to develop, review, score, and use the results of assessments."

A sample question cited by advocates comes from Connecticut's assessment for high school students: *Figure out how to build a statue that could withstand the effects of acid rain, then describe, analyze and discuss your findings.*

That might be a nice project in a science classroom; however, opinions of evaluators could differ widely on how well students tackled the problem. Other questions could be loaded with political correctness. The results would not



provide the same useful comparisons of knowledge levels that machine-scored multiple-choice tests do.

Buyer beware

Buyers should beware: None of this is really new. Authentic assessment was all the rage in the 1990s when President Bill Clinton and first lady Hillary Clinton were fruitlessly hawking national standards and a national test. Statewide pilots for portfolio assessments as school accountability systems in Vermont and Kentucky were ultimately abandoned as a result of excessive costs, questions of consistency, and other implementation struggles.

The movement ultimately tanked because of parental opposition as well as independent research showing that this form of testing did not provide a valid basis for comparing one student's or one school's or one district's achievement to that of other students, schools, districts or states.

Squishy twenty-first century skills

Darling-Hammond, a leading advocate of retooling schools to teach soft "twenty-first century skills" of collaboration as opposed to core knowledge, now argues (on the basis of scant evidence) that the federal assessment teams can design cost-effective forms of open-ended assessment. Even if that could be done, parents would have good reason to question the consistency of an assessment regime where children are measured subjectively by evaluators who may well judge student thought processes according to their own politically correct agendas. ■

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