

Upholding Standards

Dan Domenech argues that formative assessment enables teachers to teach to standards, not just ‘to the test’

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) — the most fundamental education reform in the U.S. since 1965 — was founded on the idea of helping all children reach higher standards.

Those claiming success point to a recent report by the Council of the Great City Schools. Grade 4 math and reading proficiency scores for 67 major urban school districts climbed 15 percent and 12 percent, respectively between 2002 and 2006. Middle school students in those districts also saw gains, with Grade 8 students’ proficiency levels increasing by 8 percent in reading and 11 percent in math in those same years.

However, some have voiced concerns that federal requirements have placed too much emphasis on testing. These critics contend that teachers are now spending much of their time “teaching to the test” - i.e., focusing their efforts on preparing students for the end of year state exams - not providing “real” education.

Clearly our teachers want the best environment, tools, and support to educate our children. As someone who began his career as a teacher in a predominantly African-American and Hispanic community in New York City, and served as superintendent of Fairfax County, Virginia, the nation’s 12th largest school system before coming to work for McGraw-Hill Education, I have seen this issue evolve from several different perspectives, particularly as it relates to large, urban districts and the unique issues they face.

Urban and predominantly minority districts have greater challenges and fewer resources. Student populations in these areas have far more English-language learners and children who come from economically disadvantaged homes, according to a study done by the Council of the Great City Schools. Students in urban districts vitally need the

increased national focus and higher proficiency standards now required.

The fact is that the “teaching to the test” controversy may become irrelevant, as educators across the country are already shifting their emphasis away from summative testing to focus more on formative assessment and reporting. Whether accountability legislation remains in place or not, and my guess is that it will, educators are recognizing the effectiveness of data-driven instruction. Ongoing, formative assessment puts the emphasis back in the classroom — where it belongs - and provides teachers with diagnostic information and intervention strategies necessary to help individual students meet the proficiency standards set by the states and federal government.

When coupled with the latest in computer and web-based technology, ongoing assessment provides teachers with more time and better tools for helping those students who need extra help. It embeds ongoing assessment into the instructional process and allows teachers the luxury of time — time to help struggling students catch up and time to give advanced students more challenging tasks. At the same time, it allows teachers to compile reportable data in seconds and send it upstream to the school administration, the district superintendent or state education authorities.

This is why some urban districts, such as New York City and Rochester, are already taking steps to implement professionally developed assessment and reporting systems. Unfortunately, too many schools and entire districts - especially in urban environments - have to rely on outdated and cobbled-together tools in an attempt to implement ongoing assessment within tight budget constraints. They need to know that the latest assessment and reporting products are far



more efficient and cost-effective in the long run.

Superintendents need these tools as well, as federal requirements have vastly increased accountability for both superintendents and teachers in the last five years. The legislation says, in effect: “We want every student to be performing on established proficiency levels by 2014 in reading, math and science, and we are going to demand annual, documented progress to demonstrate that schools are working successfully towards achieving that goal.”

Even more important from the point of view of urban districts, it is now mandated that the results from minority, special education, economically disadvantaged and English language learner students be reported separately. “We are going to be looking very closely at those sub-categories,” was the message from the federal government, “and we are going to hold you personally responsible, Ms./Mr. Superintendent, for any lack of progress in narrowing achievement gaps.”

Charged for the first time with this level of accountability, superintendents quickly grasped that they could not use results from the NAEP or other large summative tests to adequately monitor student progress. By the time they received the scores from these tests the battle would be over. So they began encouraging teachers to start testing students earlier and more often, hoping to use the results to predict how the student body might perform when the large summative exams were given at the end of the year or term.

Ongoing assessment in the classroom is nothing new. Teachers have been giving pop quizzes and small weekly tests for decades. But those tools are specific to the individual classroom and teacher; they are not meant to be predictive. Teachers, as experienced and as savvy

as they are when it comes to dealing with their own students, are not trained in creating truly predictive tests for large populations. Nor do most have the technical experience necessary to develop software and web-based products that can do the job properly. At McGraw-Hill, for example, we have more than 50 Ph.D.s and numerous IT professionals on staff who are responsible for formulating and assessing the pedagogical quality of our testing materials.

Even if teachers did have the training to construct such tests, an ad-hoc system of many different and incompatible testing procedures is far from efficient. Four different chemistry teachers in the same school with four different testing and reporting procedures is useless for purposes of compiling information on the district or state level. Results need to be reported, compiled, compared and tracked together over time to be truly useful.

In fact, we are supporting one example of the kind of assessment partnership that is needed: the English Language Proficiency Collaboration and Research Consortium (ELPCRC), a group of six states that use CTB/McGraw-Hill’s LAS Links™ solution, an integrated suite of English-language proficiency assessments and instruction, as a common platform. The states are teaming up to assure a greater level of consistency, uniformity, and quality in their English as a Second Language programs. More information about ELPCRC can be found at www.elpc.org.

What is needed today is not an outdated discussion about “teaching to the test,” but a comprehensive and national effort to ensure that all school districts are furnished with the ongoing assessment and reporting tools they need to ensure that every student in the nation is performing at proficiency or above.