

A sample white paper.

A white paper supports a position and provides relevant background information.

A Solution to Excessive Testing in Schools

Everyone wants to know how their children are doing in school. Citizens also want to know that students are experiencing quality teaching in a quality school. This article suggests how evaluation of student learning can be accomplished in a more powerful way than spending large amounts of money on testing and re-testing students for many class periods. As a professor of education with extensive experience as a teacher, mathematics specialist, and a school administrator, I see the testing problem from multiple perspectives. The purpose of this white paper is to suggest alternative ways for determining the quality of teachers and schools.

Many teachers and educational leaders appreciate the **Common Core State Standards**. These are standards and not a curriculum. There is plenty of opportunity for states and districts to decide how to teach within these standards. The standards are an attempt to build a K-12 educational program so that students graduating from high school, wherever they live, are ready for work or post-secondary education. The mathematics standards, for example, provide clear guidelines for improving the trajectory of mathematics learning. In the past, American schools have covered as many as 68 topics in one year in a typical middle school math or science classroom. This mile-wide and inch-deep curriculum is very different from many higher performing schools in places like Japan and Singapore where the focus is on 6 to 8 topics a year which are taught in a way that kids gain deep understanding of key concepts.

The problem lies in government having connected the standards to accountability and requirements for excessive testing every child. The amount of testing in place robs teachers and students of time for learning, as well as taking a large part of the educational budget. Continuous testing is like taking a temperature over and over again without focusing on what can be done to improve the temperature. There are different ways to assess the quality of schools and teaching beyond testing frequently on standardized tests.

One kind of evaluation is program evaluation. If we are interested in knowing if a school or a district is providing students with a quality education based on student learning, **we do not need to test every student**. We can randomly select a much smaller number of students (say 25%) and give them an already existing reliable and nationally-valid test, the National Assessment for Educational Performance (the NAEP). This is a test which is already used to measure student performance across the United States. This kind of random assessment of students to take the NAEP is much less costly than the current testing of all students and provides summative data on how the school is doing.

Testing every child frequently is not practical and not good educational practice. Why not take the money that can be saved by not engaging in continuous testing to provide teachers with job-embedded professional development that helps them engage in **instructional assessment** while teaching and learning are happening. Aren't we more interested in how a student is learning in real time than what students remember from what they learned in the past? Such

efforts will require stronger teacher pre-service and in-service education programs carried out in collaboration between schools and universities and other service providers.

This sounds simpler than it is. Teaching is a highly professional activity and requires teaching content in a way that all individual students can learn it, even is increasing in U.S. classrooms. Differentiated instruction is what is required by professional teachers. Doctors do not give the same medicine and treatment to all of their patients. Teachers are honored as high level professionals in other countries such as Finland, where only the top 25% of college students can enter professional education schools. In Japan, teachers work together as professionals to design and re-design lessons based on student learning, a process called Lesson Study.

Currently, there is a battle between accountability which is driving excessive testing, and teacher professionalism. What kind of teacher do you want your student to have? We are still caught in an industrial age factory model where educational experts, including textbook companies, design what teachers are supposed to teach, as if teachers were factory workers on an assembly line. The frenzy over testing is just one example of a superficial understanding of learning and teaching and a desire to preserve a hierarchical model of school management controlled from the top. In other countries teachers are treated as professionals, and evidence from international assessments indicate their students are learning more.

The problems of excessive testing can be solved by a combination of school evaluation and engaging teachers as professional evaluators of their students. Teachers know a lot about what a student is learning or not learning yet we haven't tapped the best resource in the classroom, the teacher.

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