



# SCHOOL TESTING, 1-2-3 GETTING IT RIGHT

BY KAREN KURZMAN

Increased student testing has stirred up intense feelings for years. There are those, like former U.S. House Education and Workforce Committee chair Bill Goodling, who believe testing has been overdone. “If testing is the answer to our education problems, it would have solved them a long time ago,” he once wrote.<sup>1</sup> Others believe needed improvements in education will come only through the accountability that testing can provide. William Bennett and Rod Paige, Secretaries of Education under Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush, respectively, hold that a national test can “go a long way toward assuring America a more well-educated population and a bright future.”<sup>2</sup>

But national testing is here to stay, and all but five states are collaborating to revolutionize how it is delivered and to ensure that it leads to better educational outcomes.<sup>3</sup> The 45 states include all those in New England.

## Deeper Accountability

Every few decades, it seems, an alarm is raised about our educational system. In the 1950s, the launch of the first Earth-orbiting artificial satellite, the Soviet Union’s Sputnik, suddenly made U.S. science and math

education look deficient. In 1983, a report called *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform* caused renewed anxiety.<sup>4</sup> In 2010, the OECD published an International Student Assessment comparing the knowledge and skills of 15-year-olds in participating countries.<sup>5</sup> It ranked the United States 14<sup>th</sup> out of 34 countries for reading skills, 17<sup>th</sup> for science, and a below-average 25<sup>th</sup> for mathematics.<sup>6</sup> Secretary of Education Arne Duncan reacted strongly: “This is an absolute wake-up call for America.”<sup>7</sup> Once again, the public demanded accountability.

## A Nation at Risk

*A Nation at Risk* led to the focus on national testing. A landmark event in U.S. educational history, it inspired reforms at all government levels for years, including the 2001 No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law.

NCLB requires states to hold schools accountable for outcomes. They must administer yearly tests to all students in grades 3 to 8 in reading and math. Science must be tested once in elementary, middle, and high school. There are consequences for states that fail to follow the requirements and for any unimproved school receiving the

federal Title I funds meant to improve the economic achievement of the disadvantaged.

When such a school fails to meet yearly progress goals for two or more consecutive years, parents may transfer their children to other schools. When it fails to meet goals for three or more consecutive years, students are eligible for state-approved supplemental educational services, including tutoring. If a Title I school fails for four consecutive years, the district must implement one or more corrective actions, such as replacing school staff, implementing a new curriculum, or appointing outside experts as advisers. Schools may demonstrate improvement through drop-out rates, goal setting, and the like, but NCLB relies heavily on the end-of-the-year test.

## Change in the Classroom

Even with NCLB, there is not as much standardized testing going on in classrooms as people think. (See “Frequency of Testing.”) A federal test called the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), which covers reading and math, is administered nationwide at grades 4, 8, and 12 only every two years. Offering data at the state level only, it provides a common metric.

Individual states may also test in subjects such as civics, the arts, economics, geography, writing, and science. States schedule approximately two weeks annually for assessments. Most are given in classrooms by classroom teachers, who are able to offer prompt feedback and further instruction to students if necessary.

In fact, classroom assessment is leading the way for improvements in evaluation methods. In the past, tests were given mainly as a summary of accomplishment: students learned content; teachers gave a test and a grade; the class moved on to more content. That is called *summative assessment*. Today testing is a means of informing and improving instruction (*formative assessment*). Teachers use assessments to check students' work every day, using observation, checklists, quizzes, writing samples—whatever provides insight into what the student has absorbed. Most important, teachers use test results to determine what they will teach next and to whom. Formative assessment drives instruction and is key to student achievement.

## New England Leadership

When No Child Left Behind came on the scene, the states of Vermont and Rhode Island were administering a common test called the New Standards Reference Exam. Officials realized the test would not meet the new federal standards, so they collaborated to find a test that would, agreeing to make it as formative as possible and as relevant and instructive as classroom-performance assessments. The states wanted students not just to do math, but to solve problems and explain their thinking. They wanted students to read good literature and be able to write

in a rhetorically effective way about what they had read. They wanted them to demonstrate superior skills and depth of content knowledge, not just superficial facts.

A drawback was that reading and scoring that type of test could not be done through a multiple-choice scanner. Rhode Island and Vermont knew it would take hundreds of people and thousands of dollars. To hold down costs, they encouraged the other New England states to participate. New Hampshire answered the call. The three states went forward, established common standards, and developed a common yearly assessment that included problem solving, mathematics, writing about both fiction and nonfiction, and composing a full essay at grades 4, 8, and 10. It was a huge change from prior state assessments.

An even greater transformation is ahead. With the advent of national standards called the Common Core State Standards, states are racing to ensure their assessments match up.<sup>8</sup> Two efforts to create common assessments for multiple states are being funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Race to the Top grants. The Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) consists of 26 states, including New Hampshire, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island. The Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) was formed from a merger of three consortia in January 2010 in response to the Race to the Top competition. Today SBAC involves 30 states, including Vermont, Maine, Connecticut, and New Hampshire (which joined SBAC in addition to PARCC).

Both groups are concentrating on developing innovative, state-of-the-art computer assessments that will provide common metrics for evaluating student performance in multiple states. The government has awarded each one \$176 million to accomplish its goals. The groups will offer the required summative exams twice a year. Additionally, SBAC intends to provide optional formative exams and extra tools for teacher use during the year to determine whether students are meeting the standards. The information is expected to help teachers understand what students are learning and not learning on a daily basis so they can adjust their instruction.

PARCC will anchor assessments in college and career readiness and will be constructed by higher-education leaders and faculty from nearly 200 two- and four-year colleges. Students will take parts of PARCC's computer-based assessments at key times

during the school year, closer to when they learn the material, which will allow educators to adjust instructional practices or give extra support to students who need it.

The upshot is that testing is going to evolve; it is going to look different. But it is growing because it is a critical tool for state, school district, school, teacher, and student improvement. Assessments provide information that can drive instruction and produce educational benefits at every level. With the current efforts to make testing increasingly beneficial to learning and school improvement, both the Bill Goodlings and Bill Bennetts will be satisfied, no child will be left behind, and our nation will not be at risk.

**Karen Kurzman** is co-principal at the Block Island School in Rhode Island and the owner of *Abecedarian*, which provides professional development in literacy. She is a founding member of the Vermont Writing Collaborative, a nonprofit organization dedicated to teaching the art of writing.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Bill Goodling, "More Testing Is No Solution," *Washington Post*, August 13, 1997, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/special/testing/stories/op081397.htm>.
- <sup>2</sup> William Bennett and Rod Paige, "Why We Need a National School Test," *Washington Post*, September 20, 2006, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/09/20/AR2006092001587.html>.
- <sup>3</sup> The new mandated testing comes under the Race to the Top assessment guidelines, which require states to develop an assessment system aligned with a common core of academic standards.
- <sup>4</sup> See [www2.ed.gov/pubs/NatAtRisk/index.html](http://www2.ed.gov/pubs/NatAtRisk/index.html).
- <sup>5</sup> The OECD is an international organization helping governments tackle the economic, social, and governance challenges of a global economy.
- <sup>6</sup> See the assessment at [www.pisa.oecd.org/pages/0,2987,en\\_32252351\\_32235731\\_1\\_1\\_1\\_1\\_1,00.html](http://www.pisa.oecd.org/pages/0,2987,en_32252351_32235731_1_1_1_1_1,00.html).
- <sup>7</sup> *Huffington Post*, December 7, 2010, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/12/07/us-falls-in-world-education-rankings\\_n\\_793185.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/12/07/us-falls-in-world-education-rankings_n_793185.html).
- <sup>8</sup> The Common Core State Standards Initiative is a state-led effort coordinated by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA Center) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO). The standards were developed in collaboration with teachers, school administrators, and other experts to provide a clear and consistent framework to prepare children for college and the workforce.

