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Testing all students is only part of education equation

Lurking below the surface of the new school reform law's sweeping testing provisions lie two deep and troubling problems.

The first is the cost of the multiple layers of standardized testing; all schools will be required to administer annual math and reading achievement tests in grades three through eight.

The second is the disregard of the benefits of rigorous, day-to-day classroom assessments, ones that provide students with feedback on what they need to do to reach educational goals.

Standardized testing's history dates to the 1940s, when multiple-choice college admissions testing began. The SATs continue to serve as a basis for ranking states and judging school quality.

In response to demands for accountability, district-wide testing began in many places in the 1960s. That expanded to statewide testing in the 1970s, a national assessment program in the '80s and international assessments in the '90s.

Each layer has been added on top of the others. Once in place, no layer has been removed. Each was supposed to accomplish what the others did not: improve schools.

Across the levels and over the decades, we have invested billions of dollars to ensure the accuracy of the scores produced by these tests.

And now, on top of all of this, we add President Bush's national "every pupil" assessment system.

As an expert in assessment who has consulted in the implementation of assessment systems nationally, I wonder where is the evidence that these layers of testing have improved Oregon schools and helped students learn more. We need an accounting.

Meanwhile, the accuracy and effectiveness of teachers' day-to-day classroom assessments is ignored in both state and federal policy.

This kind of assessment has a profoundly positive impact on student learning. It has been shown to yield unprecedented achievement gains, with the greatest increases coming to perennial low achievers. This application offers the potential of closing achievement gaps between low and middle socioeconomic students, between minority and nonminority students.

This kind of assessment involves greater communication between teacher and student: frequent feedback, in terms that the child understands, of how he's progressing and what he needs to do to improve. This kind of student-involved classroom assessment boosts students' desire to succeed.

Teachers who assess to support learning become crystal clear about their achievement expectations. They transform Oregon standards into the classroom-level achievement targets that set students up for success on state assessments. These teachers also transform their expectations into accurate classroom assessments that yield dependable information about what has and has not been learned.

Further, these teachers know when and how to involve their students in regular self-assessments over time so those students can watch themselves improving. They prepare their students to communicate effectively about their own achievement with their classmates, teachers and families. These teachers help their students feel in control of their own success.

Unfortunately, these achievement-boosting classroom assessment tactics are not applied in the vast majority of Oregon classrooms: Teacher preparation programs have not included assessment training in their curriculum and there are no resources for ongoing professional development.

Imagine if we discovered that our physicians were not trained to conduct and interpret laboratory tests or that airline pilots were not trained to read the airplane's instruments. That is exactly what we have been doing to teachers for decades in Oregon and across the United States.

But not to worry. We have in place the best local, state, national and international standardized tests that money can buy, with our president adding more. We can spend billions on that but we cannot guarantee that the other 99.9 percent of the assessments that happen in students' lives — those conducted moment to moment in the classroom — are accurate or are used effectively to help them learn.

We need to invest in Oregon teachers, not in more test items. We need to provide them with the professional development opportunities in classroom assessment. This requires leadership at the state and local level. It requires the balanced allocation of our assessment resources between classroom and standardized assessment, a balance that has been lacking for decades. Achieve that balance and watch test scores go up and achievement gaps close.



IN MY OPINION

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