Using Assessment and Accountability to Improve Student Learning

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Americans assign unprecedented importance to the task of reforming public education so that all children are prepared for college, for the workplace, for participation in the nation’s civic life, and for lifelong learning to keep up with the rapid pace of change in the 21st century. Achieving this goal requires an educational system that focuses first and foremost on learning and achievement. Solid measures of academic achievement are essential to such a system.

Measuring academic achievement is crucial to transforming education into a performance-oriented enterprise, rather than one focused on inputs and rules. CED Trustees, accustomed to managing complex organizations, are convinced that we cannot improve what we do not measure. We strongly support efforts to specify academic standards, measure improvements in student learning, and hold educators and students accountable for results.

CED’s policy statement Measuring What Matters describes why testing and accountability are indispensable to education reform and guides readers through the issues involved in using them responsibly while continuously improving them.

KEY RECOMMENDATION

Tests should be used and improved now—rather than resisted until they are perfect—because they provide the best means of charting our progress toward the goal of improved academic achievement.

ADDITIONAL FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Tests are a means, not an end, in school reform.

Tests can contribute to the ultimate goal of school reform—raising educational achievement—in three ways:

1. They can help improve teaching and learning by guiding day-to-day instruction and by enabling researchers to evaluate the effects of different educational reforms so that effective ones can be further implemented and ineffective ones discarded.

2. They can provide a means of holding students and educators accountable for improving educational outcomes, relying on incentives rather than rules to spur achievement.

3. They can provide a means for monitoring the progress of the educational system and for reporting to the public.
Real educational improvement requires changing what goes on in classrooms. Policy makers must do more than just identify what students know and can do. They have to tackle the much tougher job of helping educators address inadequacies in student learning and overcome conditions that stand in the way of high academic achievement.

The press and the public too often use test scores to compare schools and districts and identify “winners” and “losers,” when what matters more for educational improvement is what scores tell us about how much students know and whether their achievement is improving over time. More weight should be put on comparisons of performance from year to year than from school to school.

Assessment and accountability must be accompanied by greater efforts to develop the teacher capacity necessary to make full use of new information about student learning and translate it into improved instruction. Staff development and workforce retooling are important investments in the future and deserve increased support.

Assessment and accountability systems are works in progress and must be continuously reviewed and improved.

Educational standards on which assessment systems are based are not yet uniformly rigorous and substantive. There is more work to do in designing assessment instruments that can measure the rich array of knowledge and skills embedded in rigorous and substantive standards and that can accurately portray the performance of students with special educational needs.

Policy makers should respect professionally developed testing standards when designing and implementing assessment and accountability systems, including using tests only for purposes for which they have been validated.

Assessment systems are most useful in educational reform efforts when they are tied to (“aligned with”) the standards that states and districts have set for what their students should know and be able to do.

Accountability is a key link in the chain of standards-based reform because it provides a badly needed incentive for students and educators to meet the standards. If performance does not have meaningful consequences, tests will be much less useful in improving instruction.

Students must be provided with adequate academic preparation for tests tied to promotion or graduation and with intensive instruction if they initially fail.

Accountability systems that reward and sanction educators (either individually or collectively) must be designed carefully to get the incentives right. Holding teachers and schools accountable requires distinguishing their contributions to student learning from factors outside their control. Accountability models that aim to make such distinctions must be accurate and reliable if rewards and sanctions are to be fair and effective. There is still much to learn about how the particular features of accountability systems affect their accuracy and reliability.

Standards, assessment, and accountability provisions should be regularly reviewed, using independent evaluators to help identify problems and best practices and to monitor the intended and unintended consequences of policy changes. The results of outside reviews should be readily available to the public.

A performance-based educational system built on measuring student achievement requires new investment; it can’t be constructed on the cheap.

Such a system requires good measurements and test administration procedures, information systems that make results available to educators in useful formats, training in how to use performance data to improve instructional practices, and assistance for poor-performing students and schools.

Few states currently have standards-based testing systems in all grades and major subjects. Few have either the assessment or data systems that allow individual student performance to be tracked over time and progress measured from year to year.

Supporters of a truly performance-based educational enterprise must acknowledge the costs involved and advocate the necessary funds to build and implement measurement systems that support and hold schools accountable for instructional improvement. Without such investment, policy makers will find that state testing systems are less effective than expected in helping teachers improve instruction and holding educators accountable for the performance of their students.