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What's Truly Improvement Hard to Tell

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Testing, testing, testing. In Arizona, that's not the drone of the emcee checking his microphone; it's the mantra of public schools statewide.

From the high-stakes Arizona's Instrument to Measure Standards, or AIMS, to the Stanford 9 - now being replaced by Terra Nova - and the National Assessment of Educational Progress, our children are being drilled on a seemingly perpetual basis.

Results of their efforts are intended for various purposes - to chart their progress, to highlight their strengths and weaknesses, to help teachers improve their learning and to compare them with others in Arizona and with "average" students across America.

Test scores also determine how the students school rates in the grand scheme statewide.

The matrix of tests, scores and methods of analysis are so complex that only education experts really can decode it all.

Thus we defer to the veritable wizards with the Arizona Education Policy Initiative, a collaboration of the University of Arizona, Arizona State University and Northern Arizona University that recently completed its second yearlong study of education issues in Arizona.

Among their myriad new policy briefs is a dissection of Arizona's testing scenario by Darrell Sabers, professor at the Department of Educational Psychology at the University of Arizona, and Sonya Powers, formerly also of UA.

Controversy erupted last year when Arizona scores differed considerably between the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and the Stanford 9.

The latter test showed achievement gains; the national test showed little or none.

The Stanford 9 increases smack of the "Lake Woebegone Effect," some researchers say, in which states' scores are predictably all above average and continuously climb.

But the improved scores also may reflect the reality of teaching and learning in this age of standardized tests. To wit: Teachers teach to the test.

Schools tend to focus hard on curriculum that will be tested in AIMS. After all, those scores will determine each school's achievement profile, whether "Excelling," "Highly Performing," "Performing," "Underperforming" or "Failing to Meet Academic Standards."

A school with three consecutive years of underperforming status is considered a failing school, and the state will restructure it. So much is at stake - with AIMS, especially.

This year, Stanford 9 will be replaced with Terra Nova for grades 2 and 9. And Terra Nova and AIMS will be blended to create a dual-purpose assessment for grades 3 and 8. Still, the experts note, that's no guarantee that discrepancies with NAEP won't recur.

The rash of testing has benefits and detriments.

We want to know how our next generation is faring academically, and tests seem the most straightforward measurement.

Besides, the federal No Child Left Behind Act mandates state and NAEP assessments to give some clarity to our national and state achievement levels.

But unintended consequences are inevitable.

Some teachers focus on test curriculum, so their kids have an advantage that other students don't.

Scores should highlight kids' strengths and weaknesses, but few beleaguered teachers have time to assess results from the previous year and address them in the classroom - especially when they're busy preparing kids for this year's tests.

And sometimes, focus on the narrow curriculum covered in standardized tests eliminates the layers and varieties of learning that could deeply enrich our children.

But the tests are mandated, so what's an educator to do? Here's what, the AEPI policy brief recommends:

Rather than teaching to the test, teach to state content standards. Instead of spending inordinate time preparing students for test questions they'll face and how to test, teach kids the content they need to know.

Since NAEP is a low-stakes test, teachers don't worry much about preparation for it and it is a more valid achievement index.

Sabers and Powers note, "It has become impossible to determine what is truly improvement in school, state and national education."

Indeed, the test taker's background, teacher's approach and amount of test preparation given all skew the results.

But the Arizona Department of Education can remedy the hollow nature of current scoring policies if it creates user norms for AIMS and Terra Nova for grades two through 10, then

uses them to provide a percentile rank for each score, giving new meaning to school achievement profiles.

When the state reports test results, it could compare schools using norms for the schools rather than for individual scores, including relevant demographic data on students and schools.

The Department of Education also should undertake a study to recommend how many curricula teachers should use as instruction guides.

If fewer curricula improve focus for instruction, the Legislature should consider eliminating the requirement for a national standardized test such as Terra Nova.

These are among the recommendations. Because the AEPI is sharing data with the state, positive changes soon may make testing a more productive process for Arizona.

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