



Testing, Testing

Does Georgia's Assessment Program Pass the Test?

BY LEE RAUDONIS, PHOTOS BY ROD REILLY

If you ask a Georgia educator what he or she thinks about our state's required regimen of standardized tests, you are likely to hear phrases such as "too many," "too late" and "too confusing." Whether you ask teachers, principals or local school superintendents, you quickly discover that there is a great deal of frustration with the number, design and use of standardized tests.

"Sometimes I feel that we are teaching children at the lower levels of Bloom's Taxonomy where comprehension and knowledge are weighed so heavily that evaluation, application and synthesis of new learning goes by the wayside," observes Kathy Corwin, a National Board Certified first-grade teacher in Camden County. "It can be compared to teaching children how to be successful on the game show 'Jeopardy.'

"I feel that we need to limit the number of tests that students take," Corwin continues. "We can over test children to the point where they do not take the tests with a serious mindset. I also believe that we are losing valuable teaching time. Many teachers are so concerned with teaching test-taking skills that authentic learning loses its place in the classroom."

Decatur City Schools' Glennwood Elementary Principal Jan Goodloe has similar concerns.

"We spend a lot of valuable instructional time—two or three weeks each school year—on testing," explains Goodloe. "It is very frustrating to me that we are spending so much time preparing for and taking tests and even more frustrating that we don't get the results until well into the next school year. How worthwhile are six-month-old test results?"

As the principal of a school designated as a High Priority School by the Office of Education Accountability, the veteran Decatur City educator is also concerned about the use of standardized tests to assign schools letter grades for accountability purposes.

"This is a small school with only 172 students from pre-K through grade 5. If just one class doesn't do well, the whole school could be judged to be failing. This past year, we made a lot of progress, reducing the percentage of students not meeting standards in all subject areas, but it wasn't enough to earn our way off the list of low-performing schools. Such labels have a negative impact on morale, even in a school with a lot of very dedicated and dynamic teachers."

Dalton City Schools' Superintendent Allene Magill, former president of the Georgia School Superintendents Association, regrets the confusion that the testing program is causing.

"For the most part, school districts believe in accountability, but we won't be able to improve instruction until we have continuity in our testing program," says Magill. "I am extremely disappointed that we can't provide our teachers with meaningful test data. Right now there is a lot of confusion over testing, including not getting the results on time and finding that some of the results are wrong when they do arrive. This makes it very difficult for teachers to stay focused."

Many of the complaints of teachers, administrators and parents regarding the state's testing program arise from highly publicized failures by testing companies to deliver test materials and accurate



results on time. In the 2000-2001 school year, scores on the state's norm-referenced test (Stanford 9) were delayed by several months, making the results too late to be used for instructional improvement. And in the 2001-2002 school year the scores were delivered on time, but they were unusable. Likewise, the 2002 CRCT scores for grades 1, 2, 3 and 5 were not available until late September because of the standard setting process. This caused difficulties for schools that use the scores for placing students into programs such as the Early Intervention Program (EIP).

These are serious problems, Corwin explains. "The value of standardized tests is only realized when teachers can use them as a tool to remediate students. We have not as yet received last year's results. How is that enabling us to teach to the needs of the students? Stanford 9 has been a headache due to problems in scoring and the hours that went into taking that test—at least three days. Our students missed out on some valuable instruction time."

The Seven Required Tests

State officials are confident that production and scoring difficulties will be resolved soon, but even if the testing program runs without a glitch, there still will be those who question the sheer number of tests given. Here is a description of each test required by the state, including when it became part of the testing program and the rationale behind it. You can judge for yourself whether there are too many tests.

Currently, there are seven different tests required under state law.

Georgia Kindergarten Assessment Program (GKAP-R) — Since 1990, this test has been used to assess all children enrolled in Georgia public school kindergarten for first-grade readiness.

Writing Assessments — The Quality Basic Education Act, as amended in 1991, requires that writing assessments be administered to students in grades 3, 5, 8 and 11. The Middle Grades Writing Assessment is now used by the Office of Education Accountability.

Norm-Referenced Tests — From 1985 to 1991, the Quality Basic Education Act required norm-referenced tests at grades 2, 4, 7 and 9. From 1992 to 1995, the law and testing rule mandated that students in grades 3, 5 and 8 be administered a survey battery of the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS). In 1996, the state law changed from a survey battery to a complete battery. Between 1996 and 2000, grades 3, 5 and 8 were administered the complete battery of the ITBS. In 2000, the Stanford 9 replaced the ITBS as the state's norm-referenced test. The purpose of this requirement is to assess how well Georgia's students are performing in comparison to students nationally.

Georgia High School Graduation Test — The 1991 General Assembly established the requirement that all students seeking a Georgia high school diploma must pass a new set of tests. The new Georgia High School Graduation Test (GHSGT) differs from the previously required Basic Skills Test in that they



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include not only the areas of reading, writing and mathematics, but also social studies and science. The GHSGT is currently used by the Office of Education Accountability.

National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) — As provided for by law, the state assessment gives participating states the opportunity to assess fourth- and eighth-grade students in public and private schools in reading and mathematics and, funding permitted, 12th-grade students. The state-level assessment began in 1988 on a trial basis. Georgia is one of more than 40 states, territories and the District of Columbia which have participated in each biennial cycle.

Criterion-Referenced Competency Tests (CRCTs) — Georgia law, as amended by the A+ Education Reform Act of 2000, requires that all students in grades 1 through 8 take the CRCT in the content areas of reading, English/language arts and mathematics. Furthermore, students in grades 3 through 8 will be assessed in science and social studies. These tests are used by the Office of Education Accountability.

End-of-Course Tests — These tests are being implemented as part of the A+ Education Reform Act. Beginning this year, students in grades 8 through 12 will take end-of-course tests in Algebra I, geometry, physical science, biology, economics, U.S. history, ninth-grade literature and composition, and American literature and composition. These tests are designed to help standardize and improve the rigor in the state's curriculum. They will also help teachers and schools assess their progress and will be used by the Office of Education Accountability.

Whether or not there are too many tests may depend on the student and grade level. Some students take only the CRCTs in certain years. Others take many more tests. For example, students in grade 8 are particularly hard hit. All eighth-grade students take the writing test, the CRCTs and the Stanford 9 battery. An eighth-grade student enrolled in Algebra I will also have to take the end-of-course exam for that subject.

Better Days Ahead?

As a result of the problems in getting test scores back on time—and concerns over the total amount of testing—the state Board of Education is recommending to the General Assembly that future administrations of norm-referenced tests be optional for local school systems. This could greatly reduce the total number of hours used for testing each academic year.

Dr. David Harmon, director of research, evaluation and testing for the Georgia Department of Education, is also hard at work trying to reduce testing problems. He believes there are better days ahead.

"For testing to be worth the time and money, it must go beyond accountability and be fully utilized in the classroom," Harmon acknowledges. "I know there have been problems, but I am con-





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fidant we are on the right track now. We are very close to signing a six-and-one-half year contract with Riverside Testing, a company that served Georgia well for many years. (Another testing company held the contract to produce Georgia's curriculum-based tests from May 2000 to Sept. 30, 2002.) With this contract, I believe we will have the continuity needed in order to build the best testing program in the country.

"When the testing program is fully implemented, teachers will be able to use the information to help inform instructional decisions," he explains. "The data will be based on Georgia's curriculum and provide an incredible opportunity for teachers and schools to track students on the basis of what they are supposed to learn."

To illustrate his point, Harmon explains how fourth-grade teachers will be able to look at item-analysis information to determine which test items students got right and which ones they missed. They can then determine which concepts were missed and where in the educational process those concepts should have been taught. For example, they might discover that more work needs to be done on concepts taught in the second grade.

Harmon also believes that Georgia now has the correct mix of tests.

"The Criterion-Referenced Competency Tests (CRCTs) for elementary school and end-of-course tests—primarily for high school subjects—are the centerpiece of our accountability system, and they are built with teaching and learning in mind. We will also continue the writing assessments in grades 3, 5, 8 and 11 and the High School Graduation Test until the end-of-course tests are fully implemented. The State Board's decision to make the norm-referenced tests optional—pending approval of the General Assembly—provides greater flexibility for local systems. And now that the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) tests have been expanded (reading and math every other year), we should be able to make national comparisons without the battery of norm-referenced tests.

In spite of the difficulties encountered along the way, Harmon is pleased with the overall progress that Georgia has made and is confident that teachers and administrators will find a lot to like

about the state's testing program once it is fully operational.

"Despite our difficulties, we are far out in front of the rest of the nation in building our testing program," he explains. "I certainly would not want to be in the position of just now submitting a request for proposal (RFP) at the same time that 30 other states are trying to respond to 'No Child Left Behind.'"

"We are fortunate to have a head start, and I firmly believe that teachers will soon appreciate the power of our testing program."

The DOE's assessment director is excited about the amount of information that will be available online once the entire CRCT testing contract is fulfilled. Teachers and administrators will have access at their fingertips to information that will enable them to:

- track student progress over time;
- analyze strengths and weaknesses within individual classrooms;
- develop school improvement plans;
- provide parents with better information about their children's academic progress; and
- evaluate the effectiveness of school-based programs.

Harmon also predicts a much quicker turnaround for schools receiving test results.

"If districts send documents in the proper form, they should get the results within two weeks from the time the testing contractor receives them," he says, "and when the online testing technology improves, the turnaround will be two days."

Most teachers seem willing to give the testing program a chance but hope that other concerns are addressed as time goes on.

"I believe that the CRCT has its merits, especially with third-through eighth-grade students," says Corwin. "However, when I gave the CRCT to my first graders last year, I was very concerned about some of the ways that objectives were tested. I felt that some test items were not presented in a fair format. A few of the items were also presented in a very abstract context. Young children are not ready to be tested on abstract concepts. If I am to be accountable for teaching the objectives, then the objectives need to be tested in a way that first graders can truly demonstrate that they have mastered it."

Jacqueline Heard-Fields, an English teacher for 30 years at Frederick Douglass High School in Atlanta, believes that testing is both necessary and valuable in her urban school system and hopes that end-of-course tests can bring greater uniformity to the curriculum.

"In the City of Atlanta schools, we must utilize standardized tests to measure our progress and raise student achievement," she says. "Hopefully, the end-of-course tests will be useful in bringing greater uniformity in our curriculum and in making sure that things are taught when they should be. For example, I have students in my senior English classes who haven't had the material they should have had in the 11th grade. I believe that will change when the courses become more standard."

Even teachers who are not great fans of standardized tests, such as Dr. Mark Melton, an English teacher at Washington-Wilkes Middle School, concede the need for some testing.

"The only tests that we should give up through the eighth grade are the CRCT and the writing assessments," he says. "With the CRCT, the students are being tested against an established curriculum. Not only does this reflect on the students but on the teachers as well. We should put emphasis on what a teacher does with a child during the time that student is with the teacher. In one school year, we should expect the student to progress at least one grade level.

"The writing assessments are also useful," he continues. "One



of the vital skills in employment today is the ability to write. Our writing assessments provide an indication of whether students are mastering writing skills.”

Melton also believes that the end-of-course tests are an improvement over the High School Graduation Test.

“Although I teach middle grades, I am concerned with high school testing. I am glad to see Georgia moving toward the end-of-course assessments. These tests are much more productive than 11th-grade exit exams (graduation test). With the exit exams we are asking students to remember information that they may have learned two or three years before the test is given. The end-of-course assessments come at the end of the period when the student has just learned the information.”

Another teacher supportive of end-of-course assessments is Ken Russell, a history teacher at Dalton High School. He has recently participated in workshops to evaluate these tests.

“The overall idea of end-of-course exams is a good one,” he explains. “In a mobile society such as ours, it is good to have courses more standardized. The challenge, however, is to make sure that the tests fairly evaluate the curriculum and that the curriculum is close to the test. For example, a lot of us found the economics test to be very difficult, and it led us to the conclusion that Dalton High should move its economics course from the ninth grade to the 12th.

“It will definitely be a fairer assessment of students once our Quality Core Curriculum and national standards are together, and we have tests closely aligned to a more standard curriculum.”

This support of the testing program should be music to the ears of Cathy Henson, chairwoman of the state Board of Education and a strong advocate of accountability.

“Our end-of-course assessments will give us, for the first time, the ability to measure all students by the same yardstick,” she explains. “Right now, two students taking Algebra I—one from Mr. Smith, the other from Ms. Green—might both get a grade of 90, but we cannot make any assumptions about the relative amount of knowledge that each student has.”

Henson points out another reason why teachers should support accountability and the testing program.

“When our testing program is working properly, teachers will know from the first day of school where their students are academically. It will also mean that the eighth-grade math teacher will



Ken Russell, a history teacher at Dalton High School, admits that the standardized tests have helped evaluate curriculum. “It led us to the conclusion that Dalton should move its economics course from the ninth grade to the 12th.

be more accountable to the ninth-grade Algebra I teacher and the second-grade reading teacher will be more accountable to the third-grade reading teacher. Surely teachers want their students adequately prepared by the preceding teachers.”

Like Harmon, Henson acknowledges that there have been difficulties implementing the testing program, but she is optimistic about the future, including the revision of the state’s Quality Core Curriculum. The timeline for the QCC revision has already been set:

- In the current school year, the curriculum will be revised to make it less broad, but deeper and more manageable to teach.
- In the 2003-2004 school year, there will be intensive staff development on the new curriculum.
- In 2004-2005, the new curriculum will be implemented and Criterion Referenced Competency Tests (CRCTs) realigned to the new QCC.

What would Henson, a former seventh-grade English teacher, like to say to Georgia’s teachers if she could speak to them directly?

“I would tell them that there is absolutely nothing to fear about testing and accountability. Once implemented, our assessment program will help us target assistance to those who need help most—both students and teachers. It will enable teachers to focus on mastery of our curriculum.”

Few teachers would disagree with these goals, but for many Georgia educators, standardized tests will never be the total answer to measuring their students’ progress.

“Standardized testing gives educators one, and only one, indicator of how their students are doing,” explains Melton. “We need to realize that a standardized test does not reflect the entirety of a student. For those students who do well with paper and pencil tests, the standardized tests should serve them well. However, for those students who have other types of learning modalities, standardized tests may not serve them well. There are many ways of learning and many ways of showing what is learned.”

Does Georgia’s assessment program pass the test? It may depend on whom you ask, and it may be too early to tell. ■

