

Federal and State Policy Schizophrenia on the Role of Standardized Testing

Both Texas Commissioner of Education Robert Scott and President Barack Obama recently have come out with statements strongly critical of the role of standardized testing in our public schools. President Obama in his State of the Union speech said he wants American educators to “stop teaching to the test.” Commissioner Scott said in dialogue with the State Board of Education and in a speech to Texas school superintendents that we’ve seen a “perversion” of the intended role of standardized testing. State tests, he said, increasingly have become the inappropriate central focus of our schools’ efforts, not for the benefit of students but for the benefit of the educational-testing equivalent of the military-industrial complex—notably including the private companies that develop and score the tests.

These statements from people in high places certainly are heartening for teachers who see more and more of the time meant for teaching and learning displaced by narrow test prep and testing. However, the testing juggernaut just keeps rolling forward under the Obama administration’s policies and under the state laws enforced by Commissioner Scott.

For example, President Obama in that same State of the Union speech touted his Department of Education’s Race to the Top program, which uses the lure of federal grants to drive state policies in the direction of more, not less emphasis on standardized testing as the measure of student, teacher, and school performance. Just today the Obama administration also announced a new round of waivers of the No Child Left Behind Act that will have similar effect, because these waivers for 10 states are conditional on compliance with policy requirements that parallel the Race to the Top grant criteria.

On the one hand, as American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten commented today, “To receive flexibility from No Child Left Behind, the administration insisted states must focus on student learning, not simply on test scores, by requiring states to adopt plans to implement college- and career-ready standards to prepare students for a 21st-century knowledge economy. We also note that in announcing the waivers, the administration stated that teacher evaluation systems should include multiple measures—such as principal observation, peer review, student work, and student and parent feedback—and not be based simply on test scores.”

On the other hand, Weingarten added, “We remain concerned that some states may use these waivers to simply put metrics on top of poorly constructed and implemented evaluation systems, as well as use them as test-based sorting mechanisms for getting rid of teachers without legitimately discerning teachers’ effectiveness and how to help them improve their skills. That would reinforce, rather than move away from, the test-based culture that now exists in too many schools.”

The truth is that there’s a deep contradiction between the rhetoric of “not teaching to the test” and the urgent pressure the federal government is placing on states and school districts to use standardized testing to measure educational outcomes. And the same contradiction exists on the state level, where Commissioner Scott, like President Obama, correctly criticizes a test-driven accountability system run amok, while the Texas Education Agency that he heads up proceeds to intensify the focus on standardized testing with a new set of State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness.

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It will take legislative action on both the federal and state level to resolve this contradiction between policy inertia and dawning recognition of the need to correct the excesses of standardized testing. Meanwhile we are still waiting for actual federal and state policy to catch up with the common sense expressed by President Obama last year when he said at a town-hall meeting:

“Too often, what we’ve been doing is using these tests to punish students or to, in some cases, punish schools. And so what we’ve said is let’s find a test that everybody agrees makes sense; let’s apply it in a less pressure-packed atmosphere; let’s figure out whether we have to do it every year or whether we can do it maybe every several years; and let’s make sure that that’s not the only way we’re judging whether a school is doing well.”