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A New Kind of Testing

There's yet another testing criterion barreling down the pike--and this time researchers, consultant

By Julie Sturgeon
August 2006

Andy Dousis made headlines earlier this year when, as a member of the East Lyme (Conn.) Board of Education, he took his third-grade daughter out of elementary school during a two-week standardized testing period as a protest. However, this senior consulting teacher for the Northeast Foundation for Children, former elementary teacher and co-author of *The Research-Ready Classroom* (Heinemann, 2006) gives a thumb's up to daily or formative assessment.

"That's the kind that master teachers do in conjunction with the learning that goes on in the classroom," he explains. "The good ones know how to take that information and put together a plan for not only the class but each student."

Thousands of researchers, administrators and teachers agree with Dousis because the practice has little to do with traditional tests--and the evidence is mounting that this approach reaps serious results. To date, Vanderbilt University researchers Lynn S. and Douglas Fuchs cite more than 200 empirical studies published in peer-review journals as evidence of this approach's reliability and validity.

By the Numbers

America has had a national love affair with standardized testing during the last 60 years, with congressmen passing laws to ensure we keep collecting data. Rick Stiggins, executive director of the ETS Assessment Training Institute in Portland, Ore., refuses to badmouth the trend, even if he was at one point "a loser in the system," as he refers to his inability to read and make the grades by those standards. Test scores at the national level help politicians with policymaking, resource allocation and other 10,000-foot-level needs.

Principals, curriculum directors and teacher leaders need to know not so much how each student is progressing, but who is and isn't meeting standards. Every nine weeks or so, they need data to assess whether their programs are working or require adjustment. And that kind of information comes from tests.

Teachers at the classroom level need continuous information on every student--feedback to help them determine what comes next so that each individual progresses toward the relevant achievement standards. This, says Stiggins, is formative assessment, which he likes to call "assessment for learning." Others know it as progress monitoring or curriculum-based measurement. By any name, "it's absolutely essential if we are going to make sure that students are learning exactly what we want to teach them," says G. Reid Lyon, executive director and executive vice president for research and evaluation at Higher Ed Holdings and Whitney International University Systems in Dallas.



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Perhaps more important, Lyon was previously chief of the child development and behavior branch within the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development at the NIH and, as an advisor to President George W. Bush, helped develop the No Child Left Behind standards. When he talks about testing, folks pay attention.

Going Against the Grain

Neither Lyon nor Stiggins advocate tearing down standardized testing as a healthy direction; they both say the answer to testing effectively lies in changing the classroom attention. "We need balance; the system must work on

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all three levels," says Stiggins. "Historically, we've struggled because of our obsession with the once-a-year test, which isn't very helpful to teachers making decisions every three to four minutes. We need to make sure they have access to that dependable information every three to four minutes."

Even Dousis will agree there's a place in education for standardized testing, but says it should be done through a sampling. "If you want to know how many folks support the war in Iraq, you don't have to ask every person in the country," he says. "You take a sample. This is what good science does." Formative assessment, in his eyes, means the kids not participating in the sample test one year wouldn't necessarily fall through the cracks.

On the other hand, formative assessment isn't a magic pill to cure the pressure on teachers to make sure their students perform well on standardized tests. "But we do have compelling evidence that when that classroom-level assessment process is managed productively, student achievement skyrockets on the annual tests," says Stiggins. "Good decisions made continuously during the learning sets kids up for success."

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