

FairTest

National Center for Fair & Open Testing

MEASURING LEARNING DOES NOT IMPROVE LEARNING: Fact Sheet on Bill Clinton's National Testing Plan

The Clinton Administration Proposal

President Clinton is pushing ahead with plans for a national test of students in grade 4 in reading and grade 8 in mathematics. The test is advertised as both measuring basic skills and establishing high standards. The exams will be based on the test frameworks of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). The federal government will pay to develop the tests and for the initial administration. After that, states will have to pay for the tests if they want them. Individual results will be reported to parents, while results from states and districts will be made public.

Most of the tests' scores will come from multiple-choice and short-answer questions. Reading will be tested only in English; the math exam will be available in Spanish. Guidelines covering accommodations for special education students will be written. The administration has rejected placing controls on how the tests can be used, saying that is up to states and districts.

Reasons to Oppose the National Testing Proposal

National tests will not help improve U.S. schools. They are an expensive irrelevancy to many real educational needs and will distract attention from developing solutions to real problems. By focusing on so-called "basic skills," they will reinforce low-quality standards, curriculum and instruction that fail to engage and challenge students. In short, Clinton's tests will hurt, not help, efforts to improve U.S. schools.

The national testing proposal does not help solve fundamental educational problems. The two primary problems with U.S. students' learning are not addressed. First, international and national studies have shown that U.S. students in general do not do well at analysis, synthesis, evaluation, application of knowledge or problem-solving -- that is, at real thinking in subject areas. But a mostly multiple-choice, "basic skills" test will not address this problem. Indeed, for most students a lack of basic skills in reading and computation is not the problem.

In the most recent international assessment of reading at grade three, U.S. students came in second out of 32 countries, and eighth-graders finished fifth. Fourth-graders therefore would also probably score well. But for those students who do have trouble learning to read, a grade 4 test will not be much help -- it is too late. In math, U.S. students score in the middle, next to nations such as Germany. The major weakness is with more advanced thinking and using knowledge -- which will not be tested. The solution to this basic problem is developing curriculum and instruction that fosters thinking and problem-solving by all students, and assessments to match -- not administering Clinton's tests.

Second, about one third of U.S. students, disproportionately from low-income families and children of color, receive a really inadequate education. We know this from the more than 100 million standardized tests our children now take each year. Their schooling is already dominated by teaching to "basic skills" tests. Adding one more such test will not solve this problem, any more than previous testing did. Instead, the focus on testing distracts attention from solutions that might actually work.

"Tough tests" do not equal true high standards. The administration says its plan will measure high standards. But the proposed tests will not require students to think, use knowledge or solve problems, which true high standards require. For example, the eighth grade math test is advertised as "tough" because it covers algebra. But it probably does not matter to the US economy or the students' futures if they learn algebra in grade 8 or grade 9. More importantly, if students do not learn how to use algebra to solve problems, but just memorize formulas they may soon forget, then the tests will not support truly high standards.

The exams rely too heavily on multiple-choice. Multiple-choice and short-answer items cannot assess most areas of thinking. By basing most of the score on these methods, the test sends the message that schools can continue to ignore teaching students to think and problem-solve and still get a high score. The tests therefore will *lower, not raise*, standards.

The U.S. overtests its students. Most other nations do not administer outside exams until high school, but most U.S. states give external tests to students in several grades. States and districts are not expected to drop their current exams if they administer the national test. Adding another basic skills test will only force teachers to spend even more valuable classroom time on testing and test preparation.

The exams will not meet the needs of many students. By testing reading only in English, the exams may label as poor readers those students who do not yet know English, but who may read other languages. The test results will be largely useless to teachers of students with Limited English Proficiency. And it is far from certain that the test will be available in a meaningful and useful form for students with disabilities.

The administration refuses to include safeguards against test misuse. There has been a long history in the U.S. of misusing tests, such as making high-stakes decisions based on one score. The damage from such misuse has fallen on children of color, those from low-income families, recent immigrants, students with disabilities, young boys, and females of all ages. But the administration has chosen not to prohibit states and districts from misusing the tests.

Having more test results will not improve education. Simply knowing who scores highest does not provide useful information for school improvement. Having limited data or the wrong information will lead to mistakes. For example, tests that focus on lower-level skills dumb-down curriculum and instruction. Low-level curriculum in turn reduces students' interest in learning and their motivation to do well in school. The administration also claims that parents will act to improve schools when get the scores. But years of low scores on state and commercial tests have not produced effective parental or community action.

President Clinton's test proposal is just the first step to a national curriculum. The President has said he wants more national exams in the future, and he wants to use them to make high-stakes decisions. When tests are misused in this way, they end up defining the curriculum. What is tested becomes what is taught. What is not tested is ignored. The result is to bring a national curriculum in through the back door.

These are some of the reasons why a growing number of educators, advocates, and citizens from across the political spectrum oppose Bill Clinton's national testing scheme.