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A Pendulum Swing On Education Reform

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The current education reform movement is built on the belief that setting high standards and holding educators and schools accountable will lead to improved student performance. I am one who holds that belief. However, if our goal is to bring all students to a level of proficiency that reflects depth of understanding, the measures we use to assess progress must be of sufficient quality to give us more than a general sense of what students know. They have to be diagnostic tools, enabling educators to accurately assess individual student needs and curricular strengths and weaknesses.

There is a significant difference between testing systems used to monitor performance and systems that provide diagnostic information on individual students. Diagnostic tests are both more elaborate and more expensive than tests used to monitor because they have to provide a finer grain of analysis on the understanding individual students have of particular concepts. For example, a high quality diagnostic test in math has to provide educators with detailed information on individual student understanding in such subcategories as number sense, computation skill, algebraic concepts, geometry, data analysis, measurement, etc. Diagnostic information also has to tell us how students improve over time, what growth in understanding they've made in these particular areas, and what value specific educational programs and services have added to that growth.

To date, the instruments we've used to assess school improvement have been relatively crude and have focused primarily on monitoring performance rather than providing diagnostic information. In addition, the consequences of our overuse of these instruments have detracted from our larger educational mission. For the past decade we have continued to assess the quality of our schools on tests that compare this year's students with last year's students rather than tracking individual improvement over time. We also provide schools with only limited diagnostic information on student understanding in particular subcategories. As a result, we only know how schools are generally performing rather than how much value our schools and our interventions are adding for individual students. Instead of improving the diagnostic quality of our assessments, we have layered more tests on students and teachers who already feel over-tested.

For the past 39 years the Gallup Poll and Phi Delta Kappa have tracked public attitudes about public education. This year's results reveal a growing dissatisfaction among the public, and particularly among parents, with testing and accountability as the primary focus of reform. The results are a warning of a pendulum shift. Sixty-eight percent of those surveyed believe that the federal No Child Left Behind law, which requires testing and consequences for school failure, is either "hurting" or "making no difference," with only 26% believing that it is "helping." Fifty-five percent of those who are knowledgeable about the law hold an unfavorable opinion of it. In fact, 49% indicated they would blame the law rather than schools for schools failing to make "adequate yearly progress."

The reasons for dissatisfaction are serious ones. Fifty-two percent believe the curriculum is being narrowed to what is tested and important areas of learning are being neglected. Only 36% believe it hasn't narrowed the curriculum. Fifty-two percent of parents believe there is too much testing, up from 32% in 2002. The public also finds unfair how non-English speakers and special education

students are required to meet the same standards as other children. Seventy-nine percent believe non-English speakers should pass an English proficiency test before their scores count toward a school's performance. Seventy-two percent believe it unfair to expect special needs children to meet the same standards as other students.

The very standard of measure -- the percent of students in a school reaching proficiency -- has come under question. Only 16% believe this is the best way to measure a school's performance. Eighty-two percent prefer measuring student improvement over time.

These results have important implications for the future of reform and the improvement of Kentucky's school assessment and accountability system. First, we need to move toward a growth model of assessing performance, assessing each student's growth for each school year. The Kentucky Instructional Data System (KIDS) project, which will allow schools and districts to look at students' progress from year to year, is a modest start in this direction but more needs to be done to align tests across years so we can track individual performance over time. Second, the Commonwealth Accountability Testing System (CATS) needs to become more useful as a diagnostic tool by releasing more test items along with detailed item analyses so we can precisely assess students' strengths and needs. Third, we need to carefully weigh the amount of time schools spend on local and state testing with the need for high-quality instructional time, and then begin to limit the amount of time devoted to testing. Finally, we need to further develop and give greater credibility to authentic measures of assessing student performance such as portfolios, exhibitions and extended writing samples that are better able to reveal higher-order thinking.

The Gallup Poll makes clear that the public remains invested in reforming public schools rather than looking for such alternative solutions as privatization, vouchers and charters. In fact, the public's preferred solutions to the problems confronting low-performing students and schools are consistent with those of many educators--providing more instructional time and assistance, expanding access to preschool and kindergarten, reducing class size and increasing funding to education.

With so much attention focused on accountability, we need to be careful that the measures we use don't become ends in themselves. The tests of life rely more on intellectual well-roundedness and an ability to perform in real situations than on our ability to perform on multiple choice tests. To produce life successes, education must include the breadth of the curriculum from the arts to the humanities, civics, world languages, global issues, and technology, to name just a few within the full range of subjects we want students to study. Our primary goal, after all, is for students to become thoughtful, responsible adults who are active and productive members of our community.

As the NCLB reauthorization debate continues in Washington and as we deliberate on the next steps in Kentucky's accountability system, it is time to enhance the sophistication of our assessment system so schools can focus on depth of understanding while ensuring that students become well-rounded individuals. There is an old saying that the cow doesn't get fatter by weighing it more often. If we want to realize real instructional gains from our assessment efforts, we need to focus our attention on better diagnostic tools that enable us to advance individual student performance. In addition, we need to think beyond assessment and seriously invest in the solutions the public and most educators believe will effectively move education reform and student performance forward -- small class size, early childhood services, additional instructional time, and increased funding for schools.

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