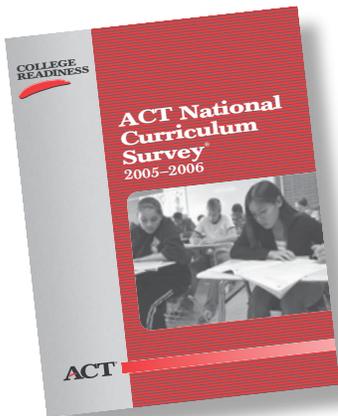


Looking At The ISSUES

April 20, 2007



National Standards and Testing: Is Ohio Leading the Way?

Therefore, we recommend the development of voluntary model national content and performance standards and tests in reading or language arts, mathematics and science based on NAEP frameworks.¹

In summer 2006, under Ohio's auspices, the nine states issued a multi-state Request for Proposals for the development, scoring and reporting of the ADP Algebra II exam, and awarded a contract with Pearson Education Measurement (PEM) in late March 2007.²

This past week saw a major announcement and the release of two major reports on standards and testing that pose many questions for policy-makers and educators. They speak directly to the heart of the standards and testing movement.

The Announcement: For the last two years, Ohio has been working on a new standardized testing scheme with eight other states that may usher in a new era in education and take the nation one step closer to national standards, curriculum and testing. The effort, targeting Algebra II, is the largest joint collaboration among states in history to develop a common assessment based on common standards.

Education activists have been pushing for a national test since the days of the first George Bush administration. The argument has been that such a test can help standardize skills and instruction, promote quality and even help lower costs. Yet, opponents argue that such tests would force a national curriculum which might even undermine democracy itself by giving too much control to the federal government in areas hitherto reserved for the states. While it is true that the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act has mandated testing at the high school level in reading and math, it has not dictated to the states which standards or what tests to use. Reauthorization may change this.

The issue then may no longer be whether or not national standards and testing will come about, but rather who controls their evolution—the states or the federal government. The consortium of states joining Ohio includes Arkansas, Kentucky, Indiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Pennsylvania and Rhode Island. The project also underscores the growing influence of the Washington-based Achieve, Inc. and its American Diploma Network (ADP) a group of 29 states educating nearly 60 percent of all U.S. public school students. It is estimated that 200,000 students in the nine states will take the test as early as 2008 and at least one state, Arkansas, is considering making the test a graduation requirement.³

For Your Information

What will the New Algebra II Test Look Like?

The end-of-course Algebra II test will be taken in two 45-minute sessions over two class periods (one of which will allow the use of calculators). It will include a total of 60 items with a combination of multiple choice, short answer, and extended response. Fully 30 percent of a student's score will be based on the short answer and extended response items. The test will be administered in the late spring and late fall/early winter of each school year, starting in May 2008. It will be available in pencil and paper as well as on-line (as of fall 2008). Results will be available within three weeks. Math high school teachers and college faculty from each state will be involved in reviewing test items.¹¹

Achieve was formed at the 1996 National Education Summit as a bipartisan organization to help the states raise academic achievement. It founded the ADP Network at the 2005 National Education Summit on High Schools to help states align high school standards, assessments, curriculum and accountability with the demands of college and work. Achieve provides policy leadership, technical assistance and other support to the ADP Network states.

Achieve argues that “the test represents a promising new model for multi-state reform efforts at a time when the overall lackluster achievement of high school students has fueled debates about the creation of national standards and extending No Child Left Behind Act to high schools.”⁴ Achieve also maintains that the test has three primary purposes: to improve curriculum and instruction; to help colleges determine if students are ready to do credit-bearing work; and to compare performance and progress among the participating states.⁵

Just exactly how Ohio will use the test is not yet known, nor is the additional cost.

The Reports: Achieve, Inc. backed up its support of end of course tests by looking at college admissions and placement tests in *Aligned Expectations: A Closer Look at College Admissions and Placement Tests*.⁶ The study seemed prompted in part by the growing number of states that have incorporated either the ACT or SAT into their state assessment systems.⁷ Achieve noted, “to be effective, states need to augment the ACT and SAT with additional test questions or with additional performance measures to ensure stronger alignment with state standards and to assess the more advanced concepts and skills.”⁸

One solution? Achieve argues that states should “consider using end-of-course tests to tap higher-level content and skills and place students into college courses.”⁹

As states and national organizations like Achieve consider ways to develop adequate assessments, another study by ACT, Inc. last week raised a different and even more fundamental question, “Do states have too many standards?” the findings of a major new study¹⁰—a national curriculum survey completed by thousands of high school and college instructors across the country by ACT, Inc.—suggest that colleges generally want all incoming students to attain in-depth understanding of a selected number of fundamental skills and knowledge in their high school courses, while high schools tend to provide less in-depth instruction of a broader range of skills and topics.

The problem identified by the ACT research lies more with the state education standards that high school teachers are required to follow than with the teachers themselves, according to Cynthia B. Schmeiser, president and chief operating officer of ACT’s education division. “State learning standards are often too wide and not deep enough,” said Schmeiser. “They are trying to cover too much ground—more ground than colleges deem necessary—in the limited time they have with students. As a result, key academic skills needed for success in college get short shrift. This is a serious problem that states must address to better prepare our young people for success after high school.”

In The News

On April 17th, the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services (ODJFS) announced that “*Focusing on Unique Transformations Using Resources Effectively*” (*FUTURE*) – which places emphasis on advanced manufacturing, bio-med, bio-tech, and alternative fuel and renewable energy development within 16 northeast Ohio counties – is one of only two regional partnership projects selected to compete nationally for Workforce Innovation in Regional Economic Development (WIRED) funds. The Stark Education Partnership and Stark County P-16 will be part of the implementation plan. For the complete article, go to: <http://jfs.ohio.gov/releases/r1041707.stm>

¹ Thompson, T. and Barnes, R., Co-Chairs (2007). Beyond NCLB: Fulfilling the Promise to Our Nations Children. The Aspen Institute, p. 127

² American Diploma Project Algebra II End-of-Course Exam April 2007. Available at: http://www.arkansased.org/communications/news_releases.html

³ See Nine States Agree on Algebra II Test, by Elizabeth Weiss Green, U.S. News and World Report, April 10, 2007.

⁴ Nine States Join Forces to Launch New Algebra II Test: Common Assessment Represents New Model For Multi-State Efforts to Improve High Schools, Press Release, Achieve, Inc., April 10, 2007.

Available at: www.achieve.org

⁵ Algebra II End of Course Exam

Available at: www.achieve.org

⁷ The Stark Education Partnership has studied this issue. See Advancing Ohio’s P-16 Agenda: Exit and Entrance Exam? at www.edpartner.org under publications.

⁸ Aligned Expectations: A Closer Look at College Admissions and Placement Tests, p.3.

⁹ Ibid, p.3.

¹⁰ (2007). Act National Curriculum Study. Iowa City: ACT, Inc. available at: <http://www.act.org/path/policy/reports/curriculum.html>

¹¹ Algebra II End of Course Exam