



Doc H's Blog

Kentucky Education Commissioner
Terry Holliday



January 23, 2015

Grappling with testing questions

This is the second blog in a series on the reauthorization of the Elementary Secondary Education Act (ESEA), last reauthorized in 2001 as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). Last week's [blog](#) provides the overview.

Many will look at education reform from 1983-2015 as having four distinct waves. During the period from 1983-1989, several key governors and state legislatures led the way in education reform based on reports like A Nation at Risk. From 1989-2000, these governors were bolstered in their efforts by national legislation supporting the implementation of more rigorous standards for learning and development of optional state assessments and accountability. 2001-2011 was the era of NCLB. The fourth wave began in 2011 with the NCLB waivers made possible through executive action by President Obama and implemented by Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan.

We come now to 2015 and it appears Congress is finally serious about reauthorization of a law that was due for reauthorization in 2007. Last week, Sen. Lamar Alexander (who served as U.S. Secretary of Education under President George H.W. Bush) presented a discussion draft for a bill called the Every Child College and Career Ready Act of 2015. One of the key elements in the proposed legislation and discussion draft has to do with annual testing requirements.

NCLB required every student to be tested annually in grades 3-8 in reading and math and once in high school. Also, schools were required to test every student in science at least once in elementary, middle and high school.

Many supporters of annual testing say that it is a civil rights issue and a moral imperative. This concept was supported by the requirement in NCLB that every student make annual yearly progress and the public receive annual information on the progress of certain groups of students who were identified in NCLB. Supporters of annual testing also say that schools, parents and students need to know if students are learning and if they are not, then teachers, schools, districts, and states should be required to do something to address the learning gaps.

On the other side of the equation, there are many who say that annual testing has narrowed the curriculum in schools, led to reductions in the arts, social studies, science and other curriculum offerings that lead to a balanced curriculum. They focus blame on schools and teachers when the real issue is poverty. Also, many opponents of annual testing fear that the testing regiment has had a negative impact on critical thinking and other 21st-century skills.

Recent NCLB waiver requirements have received significant concern from both sides. Many critics say they support annual testing but do not support the use of test results for evaluation of teachers, principals or schools. Opponents of annual testing also promote more creative and innovative ways of assessing student progress and reporting the annual results of student progress.

Several education writers have said that NCLB worked so we should keep the component of annual testing. Others have said that NCLB did not work. Some critics say that states actually made more progress in 1992-2000 than after NCLB was implemented in 2001.

While many states did make significant reforms to education finance and education processes during the waves of reform, I want to highlight three specific states – Kentucky, North Carolina and Texas. Of course, Kentucky reform efforts were driven by the General Assembly through the passage of the Kentucky Education Reform Act in 1990. North Carolina certainly had strong leadership from Gov. James Hunt to develop and implement the ABC's of Public Education. Texas, however, was the state that became the eventual model for No Child Left Behind assessment and accountability provisions. Governor George W. Bush certainly championed the efforts in Texas.

I looked at national progress and the progress in KY, NC and Texas on the ONLY independent measure of student learning that we have as a nation and is respected as the Nation's Report Card – National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). NAEP is given every 2 years in 4th grade and 8th grade for reading and mathematics. I looked at scale score gains. One important caveat is that NAEP had adjustments due to implementing more accommodations for special needs students and increasing the percentage of special needs students taking the NAEP during this period.

In reading at 4th grade during the pre-NCLB era of 1992-2000, the nation lost 4 points in reading; KY gained 6; NC gained 10; and Texas gained 4. In 4th grade reading for the post-NCLB era of 2000-2013, the nation gained 9 points; KY gained 5; and NC/TX stayed the same.

In 8th grade reading for the pre-NCLB era, the nation gained 4; KY gained 3; and there were no gains in NC or TX. In the post-NCLB era, the nation gained 4; KY gained 5; NC had no gain; and TX gained 2.

In 4th grade math for the pre-NCLB era, the nation gained 8 points, KY gained 6; NC gained 19; and TX gained 15. In the post-NCLB era, the nation gained 18; KY gained 22; NC gained 15; and TX gained 11.

In 8th grade math for the pre-NCLB era, the nation gained 12; KY gained 15; NC gained 30; and TX gained 17. In the post-NCLB era, the nation gained 12; KY gained 11; NC gained 10; and TX gained 15.

I will leave readers to do their own analysis; however, it does appear that the nation has gained in reading and math during both eras. As is usually the case, schools are able to impact math achievement more than reading achievement.

I used the three states for comparison for a very specific purpose. NC and TX were both states that were implementing strong annual testing and accountability programs well in advance of NCLB. Kentucky had to be dragged into NCLB. The Kentucky Education Reform Act of 1990 pushed for more authentic assessment of student progress and Kentucky was leading the nation in development of performance-based assessment through a robust portfolio system. Of course, the annual testing was the route the nation followed due to validity, reliability, and low cost of a multiple choice annual assessment.

My key point – there are many methods that states could use to provide annual determinations of student progress and report the results for individual students, groups of students, parents, schools and districts. Annual low cost multiple choice tests are not the only answer. In the 1990s Kentucky made significant progress in providing more performance-based assessments that informed instruction, however, the efforts were lost because the performance assessments lacked the validity and reliability of multiple choice tests. Also, performance assessments are more expensive due to teacher training and assessment scoring.

My concern is that advocates of annual testing are trying to paint anyone who proposes an alternative model such as grade span testing with more formative assessments that drive instructional improvement as being an opponent of civil rights and equity for all students. This seems to be a false dichotomy since more formative assessment could better inform instruction and allow for earlier interventions for students who have learning gaps.

As states, our problems stem from our own lack of leadership in the pre- and post-NCLB era. Our track record in closing achievement gaps and pushing for higher standards has been mixed from state to state. Many believe that without federal requirements that states will go back to an era of “bigotry of low expectations.” They may be right. The debate will continue.

My hope is that all parties will engage in serious dialogue utilizing the rich research that we have built since the 1980s on education reform rather than engage in hyperbole and casting opponents in a negative light.

Terry Holliday, Ph.D.
Education Commissioner