



[Home](#) > [News](#)

Tools

TEXT SIZE AA - +

e-mail

- Newsvine
- Digg it
- Technorati
- Mixx

[New Search](#) [Return to results](#) [Printer Friendly](#)
About your archives purchase:
 Your purchase of articles expires on **12/31/2015**.
 You have viewed articles and have articles remaining.

advertisement

Milwaukee Journal Sentinel (WI)

Testing gives districts a tool to measure progress

BRUCE THOMPSON

Published: January 13, 2002

As 2001 drew to a close, Congress passed a massive new educational law. Reflecting the trend to name bills after campaign slogans, Congress called it the "No Child Left Behind Act of 2001."

Despite the bill's heft -- more than 1,000 pages -- most attention and controversy focused on a section that requires states to test students annually in math and reading or language arts.

Opponents of school testing often use cliches to make their case. I am indebted to a recent article in a publication called "Rethinking Schools" for a list of the three most often used cliches against standardized testing.

-- The first is that testing requires students to "remember random facts."

Most states and test publishers release sample questions to the public, often on the Internet. These questions give a picture of some commonly used testing strategies.

Testing mathematics is straightforward: a student is given a mathematical problem and a list of possible answers. A common reading strategy is to ask students to answer questions based on a story or essay. A language arts strategy asks students to pick the best correction for grammatical errors in a sample sentence. Whatever one may think of these strategies, none of them depend on knowing "random facts."

-- The second cliché is "you don't fatten a pig by weighing it more."

Test opponents are very fond of the pig-weighing analogy. Oddly, it is always a pig that is weighed, not some other animal. They never say, "you don't make a baby healthier by weighing her" or "a car's gas gauge does not fill the tank."

Yet all of these statements reflect a similar truth: By itself, information does nothing. The value of information depends upon how it is used.

-- The third common cliché is that standardized testing disproportionately harms students of color and poor students.

This line of thought says that those students, "on average, score about 10% lower than white children."

Like ancient kings who handled bad news by killing the messenger who brought it, testing opponents would handle the bad news brought by tests by getting rid of the tests.

Yet too many other indicators, from grades and drop-out rates to attendance in college and apprenticeship programs, confirm that the tests' bad news is real.

Again, whether the tests help or hurt students who perform poorly depends upon how the information is used.

Rather than lament the need for tests, a better focus is to concentrate on getting the most value out of them. Now that Congress has acted and the president has signed the bill, how will states like Wisconsin implement the new requirements?

The new law encourages, but does not require, states to develop a "longitudinal data system that links student test scores, length of enrollment, and graduation records over time."

With such a data system, it will be possible to calculate how much each individual student gains each year in reading and mathematics, from one year to the next. If properly used, gain scores will help in understanding which programs work and for which individual students.