

Tests! The word has always evoked apprehension among students, but more and more it is teachers and school administrators who become anxious when the word is mentioned. Changes in federal law over the past few years have increased dramatically the stakes attached to state tests. No Child Left Behind (NCLB) made test results in mathematics and English Language Arts the primary determinant in deciding if a school makes Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), and the Race to the Top federal grant program puts a premium on states that used student test scores or other measures of student growth as a “significant” factor in teacher evaluations.

While policy makers are assigning more and more weight to student test scores as a way to measure school and teacher effectiveness, many teachers are skeptical. In a Public Agenda poll of teachers conducted last year, only 25% felt that, “it’s very important to use test scores to monitor student progress,” while 75% responded that, “student test scores are less important than a lot of other measures.” Some of the issues that concern teachers include:

- Valuable instructional time spent teaching test taking skills and other test preparation;
- Teaching to the test eroding good instruction;
- Narrowing the curriculum to only tested subjects;
- Tests that are not aligned with the standards or curriculum that teachers have been asked to teach to; and
- “Dumbing down” the curriculum because the tests only require low level multiple choice responses.

To address some of these concerns the Obama administration has set aside \$350 million to award grants to consortia of states interested in developing better student assessments. Last month three state consortia submitted grant proposals for a portion of this funding. The SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium, which consists of 31 states, and the Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers, or PARCC, which consists of 26 states—are each applying for \$160 million of the funding to develop comprehensive state assessments. A third consortia, the State Consortium on Board Examinations Systems has submitted an application for \$30 million to design end of course or end of grade high school assessments by adapting high School board examinations from other countries to the new Common Core Standards <http://www.corestandards.org/the-standards> . The assessments are scheduled to be ready by the 2014-15 school year.

Education Week reviewed the proposals and found that the two consortia developing comprehensive assessments are both planning to go well beyond end of year “bubble in”

tests. Both proposals include the development of “performance assessments” that will be administered and scored during the course of the year as well as more traditional end of the year standardized assessments.

Performance assessments are measures of how students perform on complex measures of student achievement that require students to perform a task, or even at times function on a group project. These more “authentic assessments” have long been sought after by test developers but are difficult to score. The proposals envision the assessments being both administered and scored through interactive activities performed on computer.

PARCC will also use for their end of year tests “computer adaptive assessments” that generate different sets of questions either more or less difficult for students based on how they responded to earlier questions in the assessment. This methodology can, with relatively few questions, establish a student’s performance level particularly for skills that are sequential in nature. The two comprehensive grant proposals also include development of formative assessments to assist teachers in knowing during the course of instruction if students are on track to do well on the final assessments. Teachers may find this type of additional information very helpful particularly if the results are delivered quickly so the information can be used to help teachers customize and target their teaching more specifically to the needs of their class and individualize instruction for the needs of specific students.

So far so good, the new assessments could give teachers a valuable tool to help them improve their teaching as well as a more accurate picture of what students know and are able to do. As Christians we should support improved measurements because all Christians are called to use accurate measurements in their trade: *“You shall do no wrong in judgment, in measures of length or weight or quantity. You shall have just balances, just weights, a just ephah, and a just hin: I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt (Lev 19:35-36).* But what about using the improvement of students on these assessments to evaluate schools and teachers and perhaps even to base teacher pay on how well students perform on the standardized tests?

The biggest problem in overly weighting student improvement on test scores as a component of teacher and school evaluation is what the assessments do not measure. These new assessments are not intended to measure all of the important things that you do for your students every day. Providing students a model of integrity and character; insisting on high expectations for academics and behavior as well as a helping hand when they fail to reach the bar; helping students navigate difficulties in their personal lives and mentoring them in their social interactions are just a few things that these assessments will not measure. Many of these types of supports that Christian teachers provide their students have a long lasting impact on the lives of children that may not bear fruit for many years.

Most of us would hope that these types of efforts will be taken into consideration when we are evaluated so it is somewhat intimidating to see test scores dominate the current policy debate and be viewed by many as a silver bullet solution to all of education’s problems.

The pressure to increase test scores will increase pressure on teachers to spend time only on those classroom activities that they believe will show short-term improvement on student test scores despite the long-term impact on a student's development. And there will probably be more incidents of teachers gaming the system to achieve the expected results. But Christian teachers have always had a higher standard than the opinion of men to respond to: *"Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ."* (Col 3:23-24)

Most frequently the skills and values that a Christian teacher brings to the classroom will have both a long-term positive influence on students as well as helping them to perform better on tests. On occasion the two interests may be at odds with each other.

Hopefully as this latest testing movement matures common sense will prevail and the values that Christian teachers bring to the classroom will be recognized as important for children and factored into evaluations of schools and teachers. But if not, we can take ultimate solace in the fact that our Lord measures us by a perfect standard. If teachers do what they know is in the best interest of their students, in spite of the impact on them personally they can look forward to our heavenly father's approval, *"Well done, good and faithful servant."* (Mt 25:21)

If you have comments or questions about this column or about federal education policy, direct them to [WashingtonWatch@ceai.org](mailto:WashingtonWatch@ceai.org).