

Preface

Standardized Testing in Schools

Standardized tests are so ubiquitous in today's schools, it must seem to many that they have always been around. In fact, their often intrusive presence is a fairly recent event. Imagine that not long ago there were no test drills, no gut-wrenching questions about lost booklets, no faculty terrified that student performance on "the test" would not meet state or district standards. Today, however, some form of high-stakes standardized testing exists in almost every public school in the United States. Moreover, it is not an exaggeration to say that in many of these schools, conventional educational processes are frequently suspended in deference to test preparation activities. Furthermore, the stakes are so high and the pressure to perform so intense that students, teachers, and administrators are often pushed to the psychological and ethical breaking point.

Almost all would agree that the pressure generated by standardized tests is often counterproductive. Nevertheless, the reality of modern schooling in this country is that these tests are widely used to make significant educational decisions. For example, in most accountability programs, whether the focus is on students, teachers, or an entire school or district, the performance of students on standardized tests is a key component. For students, these tests may determine if they will be promoted from one grade to another or if they will receive their high school diplomas. For teachers, the pressures are equally great: Students' outcomes on standardized

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tests are often directly linked to annual evaluations and merit pay raises, may impact the relationship a teacher has with his or her colleagues and administrators, and can lead to reassignment, transfer, or even unemployment. For administrators, these tests are events which largely determine the reputation of their schools. They can be the basis for public rewards or the justification for demoralizing sanctions.

Why This Book

Criticisms of standardized testing in schools have been vociferous, frequent, and, in some instances, effective. However, President George W. Bush's No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation represents a major shift by the federal government toward those who favor a more, not less, prominent role for standardized tests in schools. In the wake of this legislation, the question is not *if* there will be standardized testing in schools, but rather, *how much*? Given the financial backing of the federal government and the explicit calls in the legislation for annual assessments and increased test-based accountability, this law has the potential to expand testing as never before. It is quite likely, a decade from now, that school accreditation and funding, teacher certification and employment, and perhaps the licensure of school administrators will have an unprecedented dependency on student outcomes on standardized tests.

With the stakes associated with standardized tests being as high as they are, it behooves school administrators to take the steps necessary to ensure that their students will perform as well as possible. The danger, and there is plenty of evidence to support this, is that efforts to prepare students for high-stakes tests may lessen the quality of teaching and learning occurring in schools (e.g., see Haladyna, Nolen, & Haas, 1991; Johnson & Johnson, 2002; Mehrens & Kaminski, 1989). This book describes and illustrates a model for preparing students to do well on standardized tests while not disrupting the normal teaching and learning process. This book is *not* a collection of recipes and strategies for defeating test items or

misleading graders of exams or performances. Instead, I describe a series of steps which guide school administrators through the process of isolating and addressing problems which interfere with student performance on the types of standardized achievement tests which are the backbone of most state and local accountability programs. The model described in this book is based on common features of widely recognized school improvement programs (Effective Schools, Accelerated Schools, the Little Red Schoolhouse, etc.) and although components of the model may sound familiar, I hope the reader will find their explicit application to the issue of test preparation of practical use. The presentation is brief and concise—I expect that anyone thumbing through the pages of this text is looking for ideas and answers to practical problems, not a protracted discussion of historical or theoretical import. The material and samples are based on experience and reflect those practices I have found to be most useful.

Audience and Purpose

This book was written for school administrators and leaders. It should be used to either evaluate the process a school uses to prepare students for standardized tests or to design a comprehensive strategy. It is likely that most principals and other school leaders will recognize some features (good or bad) of their current test preparation process in this book. It is my hope that they will find ideas discussed in this text that they have not yet considered or addressed.

Organization of the Book

There are eight chapters in this book. Chapter 1, “A Review of the Nature of Standardized Tests,” presents a foundation and overview of standardized tests. The assumption of this chapter is that the reader may have some prior knowledge of the subject but may not be well versed on these topics. I present a brief history of the standardized testing movement in this country and turn to a discussion of the nature and

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variety of standardized measures most frequently used in education. I end the chapter with a review of the ways in which standardized tests can be used to aid the educational enterprise and a discussion of the competencies school administrators and teachers need to effectively make use of their potential. Several technical terms (e.g., reliability) are introduced in this chapter.

Chapter 2, "Standardized Test Preparation for Schools: A Model," presents the school test preparation model that is at the heart of the book. It begins with a discussion of organizational change and the need for administrators to adopt a schoolwide approach to improvement and change. Next, several school improvement and change movements in education are discussed. These include Accelerated Schools and Effective Schools, among others. The common features of these models are highlighted and the process of adapting these principles to test preparation is then discussed. Finally, the basic four-step model is briefly described. The remaining chapters of the book are devoted to explaining and illustrating the steps of this model.

Chapter 3, "Adopting a Systemic Approach to Improvement and Change," describes the steps administrators can take to effect a systemic change in the way their school prepares students for standardized tests. For each of the steps described, specific guidelines are developed and examples provided.

Chapter 4, "Aligning the Educational Process With Desired Outcomes," describes the process of understanding the target for change: the standardized test. The process includes several steps, which start with gathering information on the structure and content of the target examination and end with procedures for identifying and prioritizing problem areas.

Chapter 5, "Aligning the Educational Process With Inputs," describes the steps the reader can follow to ensure that the test preparation process of the school aligns with the characteristics of the students, faculty, staff, and community in

which the school is located. Various techniques for gathering and analyzing relevant data are described.

Chapter 6, "Creating Positive Change," focuses on synthesis of the information gathered in previous steps. The intent is to identify and connect problems noted in previous steps. From this, goals, objectives, and benchmarks are set. Procedures for accomplishing this are discussed and examples provided. The chapter also includes a discussion of strategies for implementing and monitoring the intervention.

Chapter 7, "A Case Study of an Elementary School," written by Dr. Leslie F. Jones-Hamilton, describes a case study of an elementary school in which the model was adopted and applied. Although the name and location of the school are fictitious, the data reflect realistic patterns. The purpose of this chapter is to give the reader a step-by-step example of how the model developed in this text can be employed.

Chapter 8, "Conclusion," reemphasizes the central idea that this is a systemic change model which involves a long-term commitment. The philosophy and logic of the model are reiterated and suggestions for next steps are offered to the reader.

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This book is the product of many years of workshops, presentations, and a variety of other activities all focused on one objective: improving the performance of students on standardized tests. Over the years I have learned a great deal from educators concerned about student outcomes on standardized tests. Many of the ideas I had about test preparation two decades ago have changed dramatically. This book reflects what I learned from sincere and honest educators who struggle valiantly to help students succeed. I owe a great debt of gratitude to them, one and all. I also wish to thank the reviewers of an earlier draft of this manuscript. Their encouraging,

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